

The chips are set to fall

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Stats:

The chips are set to fall

by [icopythefax](#)

Summary

At the 2017 All Star Weekend, Ilya takes fate into his own hands to produce at least one out MLH player by the end of the season. Thus begins his part-time side hustle as community organizer, mastermind, and Commander-in-Chief of the Gay Hockey Army.

Notes

During 2017 All Stars.

A little bit canon divergent. Frankenstein's monster of book, show, and fandom canon. Inspired by Book-Ilya's constant lurking bisexual presence whenever a queer hockey player leaves the house and impeccable gaydar.

This chapter has been [translated into Russian](#) by Tumblr user @zotyye !! The entire work is being done by @SavArt20, linked above!

edit: I meant for this to just be this chapter, a fun little one shot about Ilya being a chaos puppy, but it has turned into six seasons and a movie. You can still just read this chapter as a standalone, or you can come on a journey with us.

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

- Translation into Русский available: A work in an unrevealed collection
- Translation into Русский available: [Как карта ляжет \(The chips are set to fall\)](#) by [SavArt20](#)

Chapter 1: 1

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya has no idea what to expect from this weekend. He's sitting in a hotel bar in Tampa, nodding to various MLH All Stars as they filter in.

Scott Hunter is the first to actually greet him, if you count a sarcastic “nice shirt” as a greeting. Ilya puts on a mock-insulted face to defend his Hawaiian print button-up. Hunter settles into the barstool next to him. As much as they hate each other, their paths collide more frequently than any other two players. And Ilya is pretty sure they've clocked each other.

The impossibility of his situation with Shane has been weighing on Ilya for months. He is positive if there were openly gay players in the MLH, things would be different for them. Or, Ilya tells himself that's a factor. They can't be anything, Ilya knows that. But today, he's blaming it on having to hide. He's blaming Scott Hunter.

If there were out players, their last conversation wouldn't have been so coded. Shane would have been comfortable preferring men, and admitting it. He would have stayed when things got too real. He wouldn't have had a panic attack— ok, he definitely still would have— but they might have talked it through. There would be no Rose Landry.

They would probably have made plans this weekend, not just vague hopes. Shane would have texted when he booked the plane tickets instead of Ilya studying flight schedules and guessing that Hollander's plane should be landing right about now. Shane would have texted when he landed and again when he got in and he would sneak up to a room before anyone saw him arrive so that Ilya could ravage him before they had to socialize at all.

Instead, Ilya is here, clueless and just hoping Hollander does not bring a fiancée. He shudders into the silence between him and Scott Hunter. Hunter looks over inquisitively, so Ilya decides to share the part that he *can* share. The part he has autonomy over, no one else.

“How long are we going to do this?”

“What?” Hunter asks. Though hearing loss can be a concern with men of Hunter's advanced age, Ilya knows he heard the question. He knows what Ilya means, too. “If this is a retirement joke—”

A light laugh escapes Ilya, “No. But you *are* old, I love that it is on your mind.”

“Asshole.” And after a pause, “Then what do you mean?”

Ilya glances around. There's no one paying attention to them. Even the bartender is far away.

“This. How long are we going to do *this*?” Ilya can't imagine Scott Hunter, of all people, is going to make him say it out loud.

“Rozanov.” Hunter is wary and gives a threatening glare. “Are you... *propositioning* me?”

Ilya takes a second to remember that word, but then a smile splits his face, “No!” He laughs, “God, Hunter. No. No. I am allergic to dust, would not be able to suck you off. Sorry.”

“Ok, disgusting. And mean. And...” Hunter trails off, trying to understand if Ilya is serious about being the one sucking the dick in this scenario. Ilya just watches as he puts together the subtext. The puzzled, amused, cautious expression on his face is all the confirmation Ilya needs.

“The league, moron. How long will we let the league think everyone is straight?”

Scott’s face falls and he glances around nervously. “I—” He stares at Ilya and swallows. “I mean... No one wants to be the first.” His voice is low and his eyes dart around the room in a way that actually makes their conversation *more* noticeable. Idiot.

“But just one would get everyone else to do it,” Ilya says, knowing it’s not true. He and Shane are impossible, no matter what. Shane would probably rather marry a woman than come out. But if there were a lot of others... if it were *normal*...

Hunter nods in agreement. “Probably. I don’t know, I guess I would if there were others.” Then he gives Ilya a sideways glance. “Someone has to be first.”

“I have thought about this.” Ilya is careful. He trusts Svetlana’s opinion, because she’s never been wrong about the final four teams in the playoffs. She has Hunter’s Admirals to win the whole thing this year. “I will make you a deal. If you win the cup, you have to go first.”

“And if you win you’ll be first?” Scott smirks a little.

Ilya swallows. “Fuck it. Yes. I will.”

Scott puts out a hand. Ilya shakes it.

Ilya chugs the rest of his beer and stands up. “I am off. If you see Price, I am looking for him.” Scott’s eyebrows raise, and Ilya shrugs boyishly. “I will get others to make the same deal. Maybe three more? To increase our odds just a little bit.” He leaves with a wink. There’s an hour before Shane arrives. He thinks he saw someone useful by the pool.

Why not? This side quest will at least take his mind off whatever fresh emotional hell Hollander has in store for him.

Worst case scenario, he gets decked for assuming someone is gay.

Who is he kidding? Worst case scenario, Hollander shows up married.

With Scott Hunter out of the way, Ilya has three other pretty good guesses among the 50 odd players here for the weekend. Convincing them to take the deal and agree to come out will be a whole other challenge.

Victim #2 says yes that evening. He, like Hunter, thought Ilya was hitting on him. Maybe he should change his strategy a little.

#3 agrees, but definitely thought he was about to be hate-crimed. Ok, so Ilya could stand to be a *little* friendlier.

Nope. Too friendly— he finds #4 by staring too long in a bathroom trying to guess. The man threw himself halfway across the room toward him before Ilya could finish his sentence, making the rest of the conversation very awkward, but ultimately successful.

During the skills competition, #2 has no qualms telling him all about his suspicions for #5. Ilya had never heard of the guy, but after meeting him, he silently agrees with the assessment. When he finds out what team he plays for, Ilya almost doesn't bother asking him. This game is for people who might actually see the cup finals. He asks him anyway, just to include the poor guy.

All five say yes to his wager. If their team wins the cup, they will come out. Ilya knows this is just a safety net. Hunter will win. Hunter will be the one to break the ice.

Five teams, not including his own. The weekend is winding down and he has one left, probably the hardest to convince.

“Shane,” Ilya says the name, just because he *can*. “Would you ever come out?”

They're in heaven, and they're fighting sleep. Shane has to get off of Ilya's chest and leave at some point but right now, they're having the first moment they've ever let themselves enjoy. Tonight was the cherry on a perfect weekend.

“I've thought about it.” Shane nods. “But I can't be the first. And it can't be...” Ilya understands. It can't be with *him*. He heard Shane loud and clear earlier. Being gay is one thing, fucking your arch rival is another.

“But you can come out without handing over a list of all the men you are fucking, no?”

Shane scoffs a little. “I guess. Why?”

“If I win the cup, I will come out.”

Shane extracts his cheek from Ilya's chest and props himself up. “Are you serious?”

Ilya is happy he sat up, glad to see his face again. God, he is so fucked.

“Make me a deal,” Ilya says quietly. “Do the same.” He strokes a thumb across Shane’s cheek freckles.

“Ilya... I can’t promise that.”

“Because you don’t think you will win the cup?”

“No, fuck you. We’re winning this year.” Shane’s face turns competitive and Ilya’s heart just fucking stops beating for a second. “That’s *why* I can’t make a promise. I can’t be the first.”

“It will be your third cup. Third in a *row*! I don’t think many people would mind.”

“It would be my third in a row.” Shane’s eyes lose focus dreamily at the prospect. “Ok. Ok, yeah. If people have an issue with a 3-time cup champion... yeah. I’ll do it.”

“Perfect.” He draws Shane’s head back to his chest and closes his eyes happily at what he’s created. Montreal doesn’t have a shot. Shane’s not at risk of having to come out. Ilya knows he wouldn’t have agreed otherwise.

Six teams plus his own. Shane was the 7th awkward conversation he’s had this weekend, and by far his favorite. Ilya also pats himself on the back for a 6 out of 7 gaydar. He could have *sworn* he saw Troy Barrett check Shane out once. But the guy nearly spat in his face when Ilya carefully brought up the subject of homosexuality.

He didn’t tell anyone except Hunter that there are more than two people in the bet, that he is collecting the queer players like infinity stones. There’s no sense in starting a witch hunt.

But he considers telling Shane. He wants Shane to know if it’s not them, it will be someone. The best teams this year are the ones with the queer players. The odds are now quite good that on the night of the cup finals, the league’s dam will be broken.

Shane finally leaves, to both of their dismay. It’s late at night but he checks his phone. He has two texts from an unknown number, received hours ago.

Unknown: Hey it’s Scott Hunter

Unknown: How many did you get?

It’s too late at night to respond now, right? The old geezer has been in bed for hours. Maybe he’s actually up by now, swimming laps in the pool before a fiber-full breakfast. Ilya texts him back anyway.

Ilya: We have 7 teams.

Ilya: Good teams.

Ilya: This is happening this season.

Weirdly, Hunter’s answer comes in quickly, despite the absurd hour.

Oldest Man Alive: Christ, Rozanov.

Oldest Man Alive: 7???

Oldest Man Alive: How did you know who???

Oldest Man Alive: Don't tell me.

Oldest Man Alive: What if we all just did it at the same time?

Ilya scoffs at the old man. The Admirals are favored to win this year, it's not just Svetlana saying that. It must be sinking in, and Hunter's getting cold feet already.

Ilya: Betting is more fun

Ilya: If you change your mind you can always throw the cup

Ilya: I am sure Dallas Kent will love being first.

Oldest Man Alive: Dallas Kent???

Oldest Man Alive: No.

Oldest Man Alive: You're joking.

Oldest Man Alive: You're joking?

Ilya: And Commissioner Crowell was only sad he has no team so he can not be included

Oldest Man Alive: lol fuck off

Oldest Man Alive: But 7 guys.

Oldest Man Alive: Holy shit.

Ilya: I know

Ilya: 7 guys is your dream.

Ilya: There are more than 7.

Ilya: But I need only one per team. I have 7 teams.

Ilya: If you chicken out let me know

Ilya: I have backup Admirals on the bench

Oldest Man Alive: You're joking

Oldest Man Alive: Damn, now I can't tell if you're joking

Ilya: Shower with one eye open 😊

Oldest Man Alive: You can't make homophobic jokes if you're the diplomat of queer hockey

Ilya: Then you should win the cup.

Ilya: You don't want me to represent you.

Oldest Man Alive: I will. We have a good team this year.

Ilya: Good night Hunter. Take the dentures out before bed.

Oldest Man Alive: 🙌

And, because it makes him a little nauseous to end his perfect day like that, after Shane just moved his whole world off its axis, he texts Shane too.

Ilya: Good night Shane.

The response comes immediately.

Jane: Good night Ilya

Nothing left to do but wait.

Chapter End Notes

If you want a fun activity, make a list of those victim numbers! I promise this activity will not get out of hand and lead to three spreadsheets and heated arguments in the comments 😊 (This is the "optional solve-along logic problem" from the tags)

Chapter 2: Mafia

Chapter Summary

2017 Cup Playoffs; Beginning of 2017-2018 season

Chapter Notes

I was fully not done with this idea, I wrote 6 more chapters and I'm up to 2019, so I figured I'd start posting.

Disclaimers: 1) There are some homophobic slurs and some references to violence typical to hockey.

2) A lot of these people/events are taken from the books (and some are completely made up!) so they could be minor spoilers.

3) Ilya Rozanov is morally gray, but the ends justify the means, I promise!

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

Spring 2017

Of course, Ilya can't just sit and wait. Once he starts actively looking for players, it's hard not to see them. Sure, it would have been cool to only have elite All-Star players in his pact, no embarrassing benchwarmers or second-strings coming out to be the Face of Gay Hockey, but Ilya would rather increase his odds with more people. He secures 5 more guys after that weekend to add to his roster of 6 All-Stars, and by the time playoffs start, with Ilya included, there are 12 teams with a gay or bisexual player ready to come out if their team wins the cup.

He doesn't need to stop there. He has more in mind, and backups he could ask from a few of his twelve teams. But he's got some of the best teams, and he's pretty confident he already has the cup winner in his ranks. Because he's got Scott Hunter. And Scott Hunter is going to win.

Sure, Ilya is a little pissed when his own team gets defeated in the second round of playoffs, but the anger that would normally hatch from this loss is quickly replaced with relief that he won't have to come out. He can barely look sad for the post-game interviews, and there are only a handful of people watching who know exactly why.

He watches the playoffs with bated breath as his players win game after game. They whittle down the straight teams with ease. In the conference finals, Los Angeles beats the last team

without one of Ilya's men. That settles it: this thing is happening this year. Ilya is still waiting, though. He can't let himself believe it until he sees it.

This started as a way to make it easier for Shane to come out some day, feel less alone, make them a little less impossible. But slowly Ilya realized how much he needs it, too. He's been holding Shane at an arm's length and this representation, the dam breaking, is going to change things for him. This whole project already has, but he needs to see it actually work. He needs to see gay hockey publicly normalized.

Scott Hunter's Admirals easily advance to the finals as predicted. They'll face Los Angeles, where Ilya has a very attractive Swede in his bet. It was his 11th successful awkward conversation, fittingly at the 11th hour. This was the last person he asked before playoffs and now Ilya is glad he did. After playing a very risky, high-stakes game of "Gay or European?" Ilya had approached him and got a reluctant yes to the cup deal.

When he checked in with #11 last week, just to see if everything was still happening, the man sounded like he had nothing but contempt for the league. Apparently a meeting with his agents didn't go well when he told them his plan to come out if L.A. wins. He was advised against it and if he did come out, "start looking for homes in Sweden."

This sent a chill through Ilya's bones. He's here on the same visa. They need to stay employed to avoid being sent back home. #11 isn't a generational talent, he's expendable. Ilya could see a team not re-signing him for any number of reasons, why give them another?

Ilya also checked in with Scott Hunter last week, who, despite his age, actually has a cell phone and has been texting Ilya pretty consistently since All-Stars weekend. He seems to be really into the idea, and honestly he would make a great Face of Gay Hockey, not that Ilya would ever admit that out loud. Aside from Ilya and Shane, who are in a league of their own, Scott Hunter is one of the best players in the league. He's is morally unimpeachable. He's a great captain, the cornerstone of his team, and firing him would have serious repercussions for his franchise.

So tonight, for hundreds of reasons, Ilya is rooting for Scott Hunter's Admirals, and it's a close game. Ilya doesn't know if he'd be able to compete under these stakes like #11. The temptation to throw the game would be pretty strong, but the Swede is putting up a very convincing effort, despite his literal residency on the line.

Still, as predicted, the Admirals take the win. When has Svetlana been wrong about anything?

Ilya is still waiting though, with eyes glued to the television, not just for the buzzer to ring out the Admirals' win, but for Hunter to actually *do* something. Everyone agreed to a 24-hour window to make good on the deal, but Hunter never gave him his specific plan. Ilya is ready to watch like a hawk for 24 hours.

The confetti drops and the team celebrates. When the Admirals greet their opponents, the camera catches Hunter hugging #11. Hunter says something in his ear and #11 pulls back and grins in recognition, looking peaky but relieved, not like someone who just lost the cup. #11 pats Hunter's shoulder and though there is no microphone on them, he clearly says "Good

luck.” Ilya smiles from his couch. He never told them each other’s names, just that he had someone on both teams, but he knows exactly what conversation just happened. Scott Hunter’s gaydar might not be so bad.

The opposing team exits and the families of the victors start making their way onto the ice. Ilya waits, not really knowing what he’s waiting *for*...

Until Hunter does it. He points at a man in the crowd. All Ilya can do is watch, clutching his phone in his hand, still waiting. He knows Shane’s texts are coming in, but he can’t look away. He has to see it happen, and it looks like it’s happening.

Ilya can’t help but notice this cute little Canadian-Tuxedo man wasn’t in the corral with the WAGs and families. Hunter made the poor thing walk for it. Maybe that’s a fun sex thing for them. Maybe he thought he’d lose and didn’t want to introduce him to the team families for no reason. Or maybe, Ilya thinks this might be the worst option, Hunter was on the fence. Ilya can’t decide if he would feel angry or guilty if he found that out.

Even as Scott starts kissing the man, Ilya still waits, his phone screen crackling under his tight nervous grip. He waits until there’s no possible way the media could spin this. No way Hunter could say this was a joke. No way this denim salesman could slap Hunter and say he was a stranger. No way the camera could cut away to deny it. No way this is a brother or friend or son...

A slip of tongue in the kiss? Ok, that should do it. Game on.

“I’m coming to the cottage.”

By the start of the 2017-2018 season, Ilya is Shane Hollander’s boyfriend. Shane tells him that Scott Hunter coming out made things different for him, and for them, and Ilya actually *feels* his plan working. It feels a lot like Shane’s parents texting him good luck before a game, and Shane’s things at his place, and phone calls, and texts good night, and everything they didn’t let themselves have for years.

And Shane is giving *Scott Hunter* the credit. Pfft.

Ilya knows Shane would want to be left out of this weird project. Now that they’ve had the conversation 800 times, their plan is still to gradually build a public friendship and come out after retirement. In the meantime, talking about other potentially gay hockey players just seems to make Shane anxious, and coming out right now seems like Shane’s worst fear. Ilya knows their situation is different than the other guys. They have more to lose by coming out. No one else’s partner is in the league, and certainly none of them are rivals. None of them are Russian citizens (Ilya has some guesses but hasn’t approached these riskiest gambles). None of them are at the same level of celebrity, save Scott Hunter.

So if Ilya wants to keep up the crusade to normalize gay hockey, it’ll be just for himself, for fun, to prove there are other queer players. If it happens to shave a few years of secrecy off of

their plan, that would just be an added bonus. One out player got them into a relationship. It might take a few more to get them any further.

But the pact itself is not having the domino effect he and Hunter thought it would. Hunter is still the only one out after spending all summer doing interviews and appearances, mostly to good press. What happened to the dam breaking? The glass, or ice, ceiling? Ilya reaches out to all his guys, asking if they have plans to come out now.

Some say they agreed to his deal without ever thinking they'd win the cup. Others chicken out after asking an agent or a coach what would happen. #2 and #9 just fucking retire, which is no help to Ilya at all, and he has to start eyeing rookies like a predator to get his numbers back up.

But #7's response is keeping him up at night: *"Nah, I want that Scott Hunter moment."*

Ilya basks in the warmth of that idea, and re-ups his bet with everyone for this season, and heavily implies the deal is on for every season going forward. Every time the cup is lifted from now on, a member of that team will come out.

The pessimists on bad teams agree the fastest, thinking they're safe. They don't know Ilya is leaving Boston at the end of the season and isn't above joining a team for a year just to win them the cup. Again, his players are very good. Two on one team would be unstoppable. That's why the Admirals won.

And now that Scott Hunter is out, Ilya turns to his other Admiral to place the cup bet. #12 agrees pretty quickly, but is surprised Ilya clocked him. Ilya thinks it's weird no one else *has*. Sure, the guy is married to a woman, but still. He's one of Hunter's best friends, but it turns out Hunter's gaydar is worse than he thought. Ilya is always amused when Hunter stealthily asks who the other Admiral is. He wants to remind him that bisexuality exists, but that would give him a clue, and Ilya doesn't give clues.

Scott still tries to wheedle names out of Ilya all the time. He says he doesn't see the big deal in one extra person knowing, especially when that person is Scott Hunter, First Ever Gay Hockey Player. He sees it as his reward, or entitlement, for being the sacrifice. So Ilya starts telling his guys, "Go call Grandpa Scott, he is very lonely in his old age and would love to hear from you." He doesn't know how many actually take him up on it. Except #7, because he tells Hunter those words verbatim and Ilya doesn't hear the end of it.

Some guys start to learn there are anonymous others, some don't pick up on it. Ilya doesn't try to hide it; he phrases things as "we" to imply that this is a group. When he adds two rookies to replace the retired players, he makes sure they know there are others, without naming names. #14 reminds him of Shane at that age, and it makes him wonder if this might have changed their trajectory when they were rookies. If he knew there were over a dozen gay players two weeks into the first season? That the older players had a plan to normalize gay hockey? If they had, Ilya might be married by now.

Once games start in earnest and Ilya is interacting with all the other teams, he starts expanding the group wherever he can. There are paper lists, spreadsheets, notes on his phone with every player he still needs to approach and their chances of going to the cup. He starts

talking to benchwarmers on good teams. He talks to good players on shitty teams and pushes them to sign to somewhere better. For some reason that Ilya has never questioned along the way, people are actually listening to him and trusting him. It's weird— everyone has always thought he's an asshole. But when he advises them to save their boyfriend's number under a girl's name, or to hit someone who chirps slurs at them, or to retweet Scott Hunter's boyfriend's post, all of the sudden he's Bisexual Mother Theresa. To these guys, all of his words are sage wisdom. To the rest of the league, he's still Ilya Rozanov, Certified Annoying Asshole.

By midway through the Fall, Ilya's list has doubled. He now has almost enough names to create an MLH team roster solely of dick enthusiasts. He doesn't make too many mistakes. His gaydar is keeping a rate just brushing 90%.

He's starting to think it's actually higher than that. He approaches a rookie in a Buffalo bar after a game there and asks some of his routine subtle questions.

"No! *God*, no!" The rookie exclaims. "Not that there's anything wrong with that. My roommate is gay... But god. No."

"You have roommates?" Ilya cocks his head. "Your contract is like... one zillion dollars."

"Yeah, just the one. He's my best friend, we've lived together since high school." Hmm.

It's ok. The kid would have been a backup for Buffalo, and they aren't about to win any cups.

A week later, Ilya receives a social media DM saying his conversation got the rookie thinking and, wouldn't you know, he just finished banging his live-in best friend. He quickly agrees to the cup deal when Ilya proposes it and becomes #25. The roommate also DMs Ilya to thank him.

Ilya can't be... *creating* gays, can he?

The guys vent to Ilya a lot because, in most cases, he's the only other queer player they know, unless they want to out themselves to Scott Hunter. One day, #4 texts him after playing Carolina, a team known for their infamously obnoxious, bigoted, violent star forward.

#4: Just got off the ice and the fucker is back at it

Ilya: Who? Tiny Dickman?

#4: LOL is that what you call him?

#4: he was like berating our poor rookie all game with the worst shit

#4: faggot, cock sucker, I think there were some sexual threats...

Ilya: you are not the first to say this

Ilya: and I have seen this

Ilya: guy should be in prison

#4: and the refs did fucking nothing, obviously

#4: sorry lol can't exactly go to my team with this really just ranting

It's not the first time Ilya has heard this about Tiny Dickman. He's seen it firsthand, too. If the refs aren't going to do anything about hate speech and threats, someone should. Ilya checks Carolina's game schedule and sends out a few texts.

For the next two weeks, poor Tiny is brutalized in every game, no matter who he plays. Ilya watches Carolina's games with glee. Sometimes even straight players are ganging up on the guy, too, and there's probably only one or two people on the ice who truly know why. He laughs picturing the pre-game locker room conversation, his players justifying the strategy to target this one guy without giving the real reason: that Ilya's queer mafia put a hit on him.

Carolina had one of Ilya's guys, #3. He gets traded halfway through the Fall without much public reason, but he tells Ilya confidentially that the whole team is toxic and he tried to call it out. With none of Ilya's players left on the team, Carolina is still doing very well and, though it's early in the season, they're favored to win the cup. Svetlana has them making it to the finals, at least.

Ilya is a little worried about the pact now that he has no one on the top-seeded team of notorious assholes. He eyes every Carolina player carefully and gets nothing. He even sends out a call to all his guys asking for any leads. "We do not have anyone on Carolina... Right?" No one picks up any vibe. Some say Tiny Dickman himself is probably gay, but Ilya would rather not get murdered for approaching him with that. Some who haven't heard the trade news yet tell him they think #3, and Ilya has to stop himself from saying, "No, he got traded," as that could confirm what might have just been a suspicion.

He would never even hint at any of their names to anyone, but sometimes he wishes he could just fucking publish his list to all the guys. Or get them all in the same room. Or even text all of them at once instead of copying and pasting messages to each one individually and acting like a carrier pigeon when they have ideas. He also kind of wants to set up #14 with #13.

Instead, he has to worry about the future of his annual cup deal in only the second year. Last season, two teams with his players made it to the final matchup. This season, a team with no gay members might actually take the 2018 cup.

Chapter End Notes

Edit: ok fine I will help you out by including a list at the end of every chapter

#2 Retires

#3 was on Carolina, traded bc of the toxic locker room
#4 (one of the ones who) tells Ilya about Tiny Dickman
#7 wants the Scott Hunter moment, also ratted Ilya's chirp out to Hunter
#9 Retires
#11 Swedish player for LA 🙄
#12 Hunter's best friend on the Admirals, married to a woman 🙄
#13 Ilya wants to set up with #14
#14 Rookie, Ilya wants to set up with #13
#25 Buffalo rookie who Ilya turned gay (lol)

Coming up: Shane

Chapter 3: Lois Shane

Chapter Summary

Early December 2017

Chapter Notes

Yes, I have a running list of identities for the numbers! Most of them will have to be OCs obviously (if they were all canon we wouldn't be able to hit these kinds of numbers) but hopefully you've already recognized some from the books. Ilya doesn't have a number, he is 0. Also, when a player retires, their number doesn't get replaced. Any new people just get the next number up.

Anyway, none of that really matters as much for this chapter.

Let's see what Shane's up to! POV alternating between them.

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

Early December 2017
New York City

A charity event in the middle of a season is always annoying, but Shane has to be here. He's trying to network in philanthropic circles so it's not such a shock when he starts a foundation with his boyfriend next year. Well, so that the *charitable* part of it isn't a shock. The rest definitely will be.

These events make Shane feel like he's doing something to make his relationship less impossible. He's proud of the mastermind behavior, secretly already working on the third step in their long line of dominoes: Move Ilya to Ottawa, become public friends, start the foundation, retire after fruitful careers, and hopefully end up with a small tasteful wedding when they're in their 40s, away from hockey, when no one will care if they ever find out. Ilya should be trying to do these events too, but as far as Shane can tell, charities stopped inviting him to things because he's too much of an asshole on the ice. It's ok. Shane doesn't mind doing all the work for their plan. It was his idea, anyway. Ilya will give up a lot by signing with Ottawa. Shane can take care of the rest.

Tonight is the worst kind of charity event: tuxedos and a terrible guest list. Shane likes it when there are no other players so he doesn't have to socialize, or when there are tons of

them so he probably has a friend. The worst case scenario is just one other player, especially if that player is Scott Hunter.

Hunter always makes Shane a little nervous. Not only has he looked up to the guy since he was in Juniors, he's pretty sure Hunter has clocked him. The awkward email Shane sent after last year's cup probably didn't help that.

But here's Scott Hunter, cozying up to Shane at a standing table in this opulent ballroom because they're the only two players. After some quick niceties, Scott lowers his voice.

"You uhhh..." Scott's eyes dart around the room and land back on Shane's face, "...you *talk to Rozanov*, right?" His voice is quiet, almost a whisper. There's a look of secrecy on his face. It's kind of dumb. Anyone looking at him would know he's trying to be stealthy.

But the question itself catches Shane off guard. Scott said '*talk to Rozanov*' like it's code for something. Shane isn't great with trying to guess at double-meanings. He wishes people would just say what they actually mean.

Even if he takes the question at face value, he still doesn't know how to respond. He and Ilya are famously rivals. They're not set to announce their friendship for another year. Scott shouldn't know that they "talk"... unless he knows they do much more than that. Shane pushes that idea out of his head. Hunter probably doesn't know about them. Right?

"We— Not really. Why?" Shane's confusion is probably obvious on his face.

"Huh." Scott furrows his brow. "I just thought..." Again, Scott is asking Shane to fill in some imaginary gap in his head, and Shane just doesn't know what to do with it.

"Sorry, I don't know what you mean."

"No, I've just been talking to him a lot," Scott looks like Shane will interrupt him with the correct response any second, "and I thought he was... *in touch* with you."

Oh god, the subtext is getting unavoidable. Scott Hunter knows about them. Also, since when do Ilya and Hunter talk a lot? "Umm yeah, I mean, we've talked, like, a few times I guess." And then, because he can't help it, Shane adds, "Why are you asking? Did he say something about me?"

"No! Not like that!" Scott looks... relieved? "He's never told me about you, or if you're... He's very careful about what he says. No, I just kind of... got a vibe?"

Shane looks down. He could deny it, but it sounds like it would be a lost cause. If Scott and Ilya really talk enough for him to have caught a "vibe" when Ilya talks about Shane... the damage is done. "No one is supposed to know about us," he says quietly.

"Yeah, I think only we do." Scott nods. "Everyone has been really good about keeping a lid on it."

"Everyone?" Shane looks up.

“Yeah.” Scott looks a little confused. “Rozanov’s players. Ilya’s Angels, Ilya’s Army, whatever you call it. All of Rozanov’s guys.”

Shane’s eyebrows shoot up. “*All of Rozanov’s guys?*” He feels a little lightheaded. They maybe could have been clearer about what “boyfriend” means... Shane assumed it was exclusive but...

“Am I way off here?” Scott shakes his head. “You said “us” like you know the—” His eyes widen. Shane does not like the look of this. “Holy shit... You said “*us*” but...” He brings a hand to his mouth. “You and *Rozanov*!?” He loudly whispers the name.

He didn’t know? “I thought you knew! What the fuck were you talking about then??”

“Wait. Give me a second.” Scott breathes. “So you... and *Ilya Rozanov*... are...”

“Keep your fucking voice down!” Shane whispers.

“And you don’t know about his weird group of gay avengers?”

“No, and you keep making this sound worse. What are you talking about?”

“Oh my god.” Scott glances at the ceiling, “I think this is something you two maybe should talk about? There has to be a reason he hasn’t told you about it.”

“No, I would like to know now.” Shane steps closer as if he’s blocking Scott’s exit, never mind they’re in the middle of the room. He’s going for intimidating but probably coming off as desperate.

Scott scrubs at his face. “Jesus. Ok, it’s not a big deal. There’s just a group of gay and bisexual players that Rozanov knows and... organizes.”

Shane steps back. “What does that mean?”

“Like,” Scott thinks for a second, “Remember when that forward from Carolina got pummeled for like two weeks straight?” Shane nods. They haven’t played Carolina in a while, but he *had* noticed that asshole getting targeted. “That’s because he kept using homophobic chirps and threats. Rozanov just, like, coordinates us.”

“Holy shit.” Shane feels like he maybe should be passing out about this. Maybe he would, if he weren’t so... impressed. “How many people?”

Scott shakes his head, “I can never get an answer out of him. He wanted one from every team, so when a team wins the cup, they can have a player come out. I won the cup, so I had to come out,” he adds with a trace amount of bitterness in his voice.

“Wait— he had *me* make that deal.” Shane pales. He didn’t really take it seriously at the time. Montreal’s chances weren’t great, so he felt safe saying yes. Who else did Ilya make that deal with? Shane knows their conversation must have been at least a little different. At least, he *hopes* none of the other guys were naked in bed, post-coital when Ilya had that discussion with them.

“Everyone agrees to the cup deal, I think that’s like the barrier for entry. So you’re in it.”

“I guess. Is it like 3 guys or like, 10?” Shane gives an outlandish number with a weak laugh. Imagine, 10 gay players in the league.

“No, more than that.” Scott looks like he’s seriously considering it, and Shane is ready to faint. “I’d say he’s got about 12 teams, maybe 18 guys total with duplicates on some teams. He says he has other Admirals, but I haven’t heard from any.”

Shane gapes at him. “18 players!?”

Scott eyes Shane carefully. “It’s an important community for everyone, not that there’s a lot of engagement between players, but just knowing there are loads of us and working against common enemies... it’s powerful stuff. Guys have told me it’s making a difference for them.” Scott cringes and adds, “This is really going to hurt to say but... In a few years, we’ll probably have Ilya Rozanov to thank for a lot of progress.”

“What the fuck,” Shane breathes. They stare into space for a few seconds, quietly reeling in their own revelations.

“Ok, so now all of my questions are completely different.”

Ilya’s phone lights up with Jane’s name late at night. Shane was supposed to be at a charity thing in New York while he’s there to play New Jersey, so Ilya’s a little surprised he’s not tired of socializing by now. Usually Shane would want some peace and quiet after something like that.

“Hey. Weird story,” Shane dives right in. He sounds like he’s walking. It couldn’t wait until he got to the hotel? Ilya gets a sinking feeling he knows where this is going, and it’s not somewhere sexy. “Scott Hunter came up to me tonight.” Nope. Not sexy, unless...

“He was propositioning you?”

“No, Ilya, *god!* He’s so old.” Ilya loves this man. “Plus, you’re the one who thinks he’s hot.” Ilya hates this man.

“Lies.”

“Right. Anyway, he asked if I had talked to you. He looked like it was a secret and—” Ilya gets a text.

Oldest Man Alive: You and SHANE HOLLANDER??

“Ah.”

Shane barrels on, rambling, “So I figured he knew, right? Why else would he secretively ask me if I had talked to you?”

“Right. Well what *did* he want?”

“Well, tonight I learned about something called Ilya’s Apostles or something—”

“He called it *what*??”

“Ok, so you definitely know about this.” Shane sighs. “Ilya, do you lead a group of gay men and command them when to come out and when to physically abuse other players?”

“...If I say no right now—”

“God Ilya, what the *fuck*??” Shane cries.

“I didn’t want to tell you! I did not think you would be... into it.”

“No I—” he sighs and is quiet for a few seconds. “Ok. I kind of love it. Including the fact that you knew not to include me. But you could have at least *told* me about it so I don’t out us to Scott fucking Hunter.”

“He is blowing up my phone.”

“You’re *texting* with Scott Hunter. God.” Shane is silent for a moment. “How many guys? Hunter didn’t know.”

“I can make a full roster and still have some reserve. Have been thinking of team names. What do you think about—”

“Stop. There are over 23 gay men in the league?”

“Very much over. I am cautious, though. I have to... expose my own self to ask them. Is risky.”

“Yeah, I’m not crazy about that either,” Shane says. “Wait— expose yourself how?”

Ilya laughs, “Yes, sex is included in the hazing.”

“Ilya.”

“Shane! Fine. I am kidding. I only have sex with the two best hockey players in the league.” Ilya grins. “A lot of it is masturbation.”

There’s an audible sigh on the other end of the line, followed by Shane grumbling, “It better be.”

After the initial shock about Ilya’s underground operation, Shane is reacting generally positively. Ilya is relieved— his new backup for Montreal is a mess. Shane doesn’t mention the deal they made last year or how it might apply to this year’s cup. It’s ok. Shane doesn’t need to make the deal. It really looks like Carolina will take it. Still, Ilya is glad a backup just got traded to Montreal, taking some of the pressure off Shane, even if he doesn’t know it.

Ilya: Yes, I heard you ran into him tonight.

Oldest Man Alive: I did. What the fuck?

Ilya: please do not proposition my boyfriend again

Oldest Man Alive: Oh my god no!

Oldest Man Alive: I always thought he liked men.

Oldest Man Alive: So I was just touching base with him to make sure you got him.

Oldest Man Alive: But he took that wayyyy differently.

Ilya: do not touch his bases.

Oldest Man Alive: You are a rich tapestry of the most batshit surprises.

Oldest Man Alive: ...How the fuck did you land him??

Oldest Man Alive: And when??

Ilya wants to respond with something funny and mysterious, but he gets a text from #11 asking if he's spoken to the third-line forward for Nashville. Ilya needs to watch a few interviews, stalk some social media, check when he'll see the guy next... So Hunter can wait. His city needs him.

A week later, Shane is at Ilya's place in Boston after their game. Only a few more of these hasty meetings here before Ilya moves closer and they can have more time. At least now Shane knows he has the full night, not just a quick intentioned visit before returning to his hotel, always feeling like he's leaving something behind. They can take their time. So after reuniting for an hour or two, Shane finally gets the nerve to ask what's been eating him alive since the charity event.

“So? Ilya's Infantry?”

Ilya sighs and leads him to the home office. Shane has never really been inside this room. It's kind of a guest bedroom with a desk in the corner, and Shane has never needed to use either during their quick visits.

Shane is immediately impressed by what he sees, and then, as the scale of the thing dawns on him, a little weirded out. “Do not look at names. Cross your eyes.” Ilya warns, but Shane is a little too shocked to take in many of the words he's seeing anyway.

The focal point is a map on a hanging cork board. It has pins on each MLH city and most of the pins have a slip of paper or several attached.

Below that, there are handwritten lists taped to the wall that go on for pages, each new page stapled neatly to the bottom of the one before it. Shane carefully does not read any of the items on the lists.

But his eyes cannot ignore the word GAYDAR written on a post-it on the wall. There are two columns on the post-it: The left side is full of tally markings, the right side has just two tallies.

On the wall next to it, there's another list of all the teams' logos with numbers written next to each one. Shane's brain reflexively finds the Montreal logo and sees #6 and #13 are written next to it. Fuck, he shouldn't have looked. But his jersey number isn't on there. In fact, there's not a #6 jersey on the team. He bites back the question. He shouldn't have looked. Are there really other people on his team? He really shouldn't have looked.

Next to the laptop on the desk, there's a legal pad with illegible handwriting in a mix of Cyrillic and Latin alphabets, an old-timey rolodex, a stack of index cards 4 inches high, a stack of papers that look like the calendar for each team in the league.

"What the fuck." Shane barely whispers, taking it all in, and turns his gaze back to Ilya, who is looking at the scene with pride.

He starts pointing and listing, "I have my master roster, my maybe-list, my straights, and my assholes. I have only one non-binary player but there are more. That list will go here." Shane isn't looking where he points, he's still staring in shock at Ilya's face. "I have players by team and team rank, there is all my contact informations, division standings are over there, fucking *Carolina*... and one index card for every player in the league." He picks up the stack and rifles through it for a moment. He pulls out a card with the top corner colored in green.

#6 SHANE HOLLANDER

Team: Montreal Voyageurs

Orientation: Super gay

Status: ~~single~~ *In a relationship*

Certainty: 100%

Evidence: begs for it

Approached: ✓

Cup deal: 2017— ✓ // 2018— ?

Army activities:

Connections: ←→ #1

Notes: LOML.

Ilya looks at the card fondly. "I drew this little heart..." he mutters. Shane takes it from him lightly and inspects it. Ilya carefully splits the deck and finds another with a green marking. He hands it to Shane.

#1 SCOTT HUNTER — OUT

Team: New York Admirals

Orientation: Gay

Status: In a relationship (*Kip Grady*)

Certainty: 98% 100%

Evidence: constantly checking out men; *made out with boyfriend on TV*

Approached: ✓

Cup deal: 2017— ✓ (*won*)

Army activities: ✓ ✓ ✓

Connections: ← everybody // → #7, #11, #26, #6

Notes: dead mom club; *Kip Grady— smoothie salesman, Brooklyn fan, has gay friends*

“Ilya...” Shane starts, but he’s being handed another card. This one has a blue mark where the other two had green. There is a series of symbols at the bottom that Shane can only assume is Ilya’s short hand for any number of things.

HAYDEN PIKE

Team: Montreal Voyageurs

Certainty: 98%

Evidence: reposted #1’s coming out post, attended Montreal Pride with daughters

“No, Hayden’s straight,” Shane blurts out.

“Ok,” Ilya says skeptically and gives him a Look. “But anyway, not what blue card is. Blue is safe.”

Shane is a little touched. Ilya hates Hayden, but he’s still here, calling him safe. Also maybe implying he’s not straight, and Shane tries not to think about the Gaydar post-it’s ratio too hard. But that’s not why he has him, he has him as an ally. Shane eyes the deck in Ilya’s hands. Most don’t have a color on top, but there’s one with red peeking out. As if he’s reading his mind, Ilya rifles through and finds one with a red corner he doesn’t mind showing to Shane.

DALLAS KENT

Team: Toronto Guardians

Certainty: 100%

Evidence: verbal and physical; definitely assaulting women (*#10, #18*)

Complaints: ~~1-4-6-11~~ 14

Army action: *Scheduled Dec/Jan 2018*

He knows Ilya hates Kent. Most reasonable players do. He’s obnoxious and cruel and Shane is not surprised at all to see that Ilya has good reason to believe he’s assaulting women. He doesn’t have to ask what the red signifies.

“Ilya...” Shane is still reeling. He shakily hands back the last three cards and Ilya files them neatly into the pile again. Shane holds onto his own card and stares at it. He lingers on the Notes line, at ‘Love of My Life.’ His chest tightens and his eyes well up. He couldn’t agree more. He whispers, “I love you so much.”

Ilya pulls him by the waist so they can stand side-by-side and survey the masterpiece that is

his office. “It’s for you.”

Shane doesn’t want to think about what he means by that, or if Ilya’s been working on this for them while Shane has been distracted by their official 15-year plan. He keeps his blurring eyes focused on his card where there’s a blank next to 'army activities,' and a question mark next to the 2018 cup deal. Shane shakes his head and points to them. “Put me down as a yes. To all of it. Whatever you need.” He puts the card down on the desk and kisses Ilya deeply. “Fuck, I love you so much.”

The rest of the night, Shane tries to help by spouting off names at random intervals. Ilya probably already has all the people Shane has clocked, but it’s worth a shot. Ilya nods and says “Ok” to each one, like he’s considering it. Shane knows Ilya can’t tell him whether or not he already has them, and Shane doesn’t really need to know. He just wants to help. He knows he wants to be a part of whatever it is Ilya is building. Seeing the office made him realize that Scott was right last week: in a few years, a lot of people might credit Ilya with turning things around.

As they’re sitting side-by-side on the couch, idly watching TV and scrolling, just existing together, Shane tries not to think about when he was on this couch a year ago. He’s trying to distract himself with the task of running through every MLH player he can think of.

“Fredericks!” Shane blurts out his fifth name of the night. The defenseman from Carolina has always given him a vibe, though if pressed, he wouldn’t know what to write under 'evidence.' “He’s Carolina’s, too!” Shane knows Ilya doesn’t already have him because he doesn’t have anyone for Carolina, and they’re favored to win the cup. That’s a big one. Finally, Shane feels like he contributed something useful.

Ilya gives him another “Ok” but this time he clamps his lips together like he’s trying not to say something. Or worse, trying not to *laugh*.

“What?”

Ilya shakes his head, still trying not to smile. He’s looking at Shane with fondness, the scene so reminiscent of what scared Shane to death last year. Tonight, Shane can appreciate the expression on Ilya’s face, instead of running from it. “You were very lucky I forced myself on you.”

“You didn’t f—” Shane starts to object. “What do you mean?”

“Zero for five.” Ilya lets the smile take over as he says it.

“Zero??” Shane exclaims and sits up. “How can you be sure?”

Ilya shakes his head and the affectionate half-smile nearly melts Shane’s heart. “Zero.”

Next chapter: Your fave is problematic, straight people, moral ambiguity, 2018 cup finals.

I'm hoping for every-other-day updating? 🙌

Edit: and because I am being nice, I'm including the list of numbers we heard about:

#1 Scott Hunter

#6 Shane

#7 is in touch with Hunter

#10 says Kent is assaulting women

#11 provides a lead for a Nashville player, is in touch with Hunter

#13 Montreal backup (recently traded to Montreal)

#18 says Kent is assaulting women

#26 is in touch with Hunter

Chapter 4: Council of Straight Elders

Chapter Summary

Still 2017-2018 season

Chapter Notes

This chapter might get me in a little trouble because all your faves are problematic.

There are more canon characters, but just a fair warning: NO ONE is a good guy here (including me). Except Wyatt Hayes. We love Hayes in every universe 💙 Everyone else has no defense. There's a lot of moral gray area.

There's a very vocal contingent of apologists on this site for one guy so 🙄 but remember he doesn't get better for another year, and then two more until he's actually better-better.

Don't worry about remembering names you don't recognize.

Warning: there are (gay) slurs, racist imagery, and normal canon-typical hockey violence in here.

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

The next official action for Ilya's artillery is dealing with Dallas Kent. He's got a reputation for homophobic and racist taunts. Two of Ilya's players have also heard stories from his teammate, Wyatt Hayes, about some unsavory interactions with women. So just like they did with Tiny Dickman, Ilya's thugs start waging war. Unfortunately for Kent, there are now twice as many teams on Ilya's roster. Unfortunately for Ilya, Kent's teammate and best friend, Troy Barrett, seems to pick up on the pattern.

"Why are all these faggots coming for Dallas?" Barrett spits at Ilya as they wrestle on the ice a week into the onslaught. Ilya's position as captain means his team doesn't think twice about targeting Kent when he asks. He frames it as a good strategy: Kent is the best shooter on the Guardians. So Boston's enforcer is currently beating the shit out of Kent and everyone else has roughly paired off for the brawl.

Ilya nods at the enforcer, "You think he is gay?" and punctuates it with a shove. "I think you might hope."

“You know what I mean.” Barrett has sparks in his eyes as he shoves back. “Kent’s had a fight every game this month, and it’s usually from guys like you.” Ilya wonders how Barrett knows they’re all gay, and how he noticed that pattern. He remembers tactfully getting a read on Barrett at the All Stars weekend last year, and Barrett aggressively turning down the accusation. That conversation was short and scary. Ilya implied heavily he thought Barrett was gay, that he’s also somewhat of a gay himself, and Barrett returned some choice words steeped in anger. Ilya really thought he’d be getting socked that afternoon.

“You notice the guys?” Ilya asks. The refs are slowly breaking things up. Normally, Ilya would back down at this point, but normally he is fighting over someone getting tripped or a cheap shot, not something so personal. He knows it’s just a few seconds before they’re broken up, too, so he has to act quickly. It’s risky, to basically come out *again* to one of his red-marked-cards, but Barrett also has a green-marked-card that Ilya made just in case. “I think you would have more fun joining us.”

Barrett stills for a second before landing a good punch to Ilya’s jaw that has the referees sailing over and even some teammates grappling for their arms. Oh well. When Barrett is ready, maybe he’ll be in touch. Worst case scenario, he tells people Ilya is gay. But Barrett and Kent call everyone gay, so it wouldn’t actually matter all that much. Plus, Ilya has a decade of public womanizing to keep his reputation mostly clean. In this way, it’s to his advantage if society forgets bisexuals exist.

For another week, Ilya’s forces get to keep up the clobbering on Kent. Unfortunately, Scott Hunter texts Ilya one afternoon.

Oldest Man Alive: I just had my monthly meeting with Crowell.

Ilya: you meet monthly??

Oldest Man Alive: Mostly kidding.

Oldest Man Alive: That’s just about how often I’m called in.

Ilya: jesus

Ilya: am worried he has crush on you

Oldest Man Alive: He asked if I knew anything about what’s going on with Kent.

Ilya: maybe he has crush on Kent

Ilya: did you say your homosexual biker gang wants Kent dead?

Oldest Man Alive: No, because I value my fucking job.

Oldest Man Alive: I said no, that he’s probably got some personal problem that’s making his chirps too mean and getting under peoples skin.

Ilya: yes he has personal problem

Ilya: called being an asshole

Oldest Man Alive: Crowell is pissed because social media noticed the pattern.

Ilya: good for social media

Ilya: they are usually so dumb

Ilya: sorry this must be hard for you

Ilya: social media is a group of websites and applications young people use to communicate

Ilya: you can ask Kip to show you when he is there to give your meds

Oldest Man Alive: Fuck off you'd be lost without me.

They can't be found out, especially by the commissioner of the league. Ilya doesn't know if what they're doing is legal or not, but it's definitely not *great*. When he's done trying to bait Scott Hunter into an overdue retirement, he writes up the text:

Ilya: Crowell suspicious. Pausing Kent-Pocalypse for now. Unless Kent says something to you. Then kill the fucker.

He copies it and sends it to 26 contacts separately. The replies start coming in, all in individual texts. Ilya expects his phone to be chaotic whenever he sends a mass message like this, but this time there are more responsible voices interspersed with the chaos.

#18: God dammit i didnt even get a chance!!

Oldest Man Alive: Oh my god you can't text everyone to "kill the fucker"

Oldest Man Alive: That's a threat! I think? Or at least could be used as evidence??

Oldest Man Alive: I don't know. You just don't do it.

#17: lol but he did nothing when Carolina fans hung a doll of their (Black) division rival by a noose in the stands ok

#10: Wish Crowell would get suspicious of the date rape allegations

Jane: oh my god you sent this to all of them??

Jane: you can't tell people to kill anyone!!

Shane and Scott are buzzkills. They are also probably right. So he sends 26 follow-ups:

Ilya: Mr. Hunter has informed me this is not a good message. Do not actually kill anyone. Even if he deserves it.

#15: Tell Hunter to lick my balls

#15: please

Ilya: TELL HIM YOURSELF

Ilya: [Contact info: **Oldest Man Alive**]

#15: No stop giving me his number I like this better

The next week, Scott texts Ilya again.

Oldest Man Alive: lol Crowell is asking why the attacks stopped the day after we talked.

Just can't fucking win with this guy.

Luckily Kent's Toronto Guardians aren't at risk of winning the cup. But Carolina, the current frontrunner, is especially villainous this season. They are killing it on the ice, but the whole organization should be burned to the ground, in Ilya's opinion. Not only are they still using hate speech and threatening players during games (to no penalty from the refs), their fans are being racist and their coaches are allowing shady playing tactics. Their goalie has about half a dozen DUIs. One of the benchwarmers was just charged with animal cruelty. And the team management hasn't said one word about any one of these issues. No statements, no apologies, no firings. Only positive social media posts, proud of their band of violent criminals and bigots.

With the playoffs looming in a few weeks, and Carolina still at the front of the pack with no queer players, Ilya sits up late one night in his office, going over his cards and lists. He feels so helpless, despite having so many names. Most have no notes yet, but even of the ones that do, he can only use a fraction of them. There's a missing piece here, and it's a big oversight.

As Mastermind of Gay Hockey, he has the goals set out for his groups:

Green marks: come out of the closet, normalize gay hockey, marry Shane Hollander, win 12 cups, live happily ever after

Red marks: get destroyed, lose career, go to jail, contract painful genital warts, die from the warts, penniless and lonely, in a swamp where no one will find the warty body. The warts rejoice.

But these blue cards—the straight allies—he has no goal for them. That's a mistake.

He texts one of his teammates, a 97% cool-with-gays certainty score

Ilya: lunch tomorrow?

Cliff Marlow has been Ilya's friend since he was drafted. They've been through a lot together, and Ilya appreciates him, though he keeps him at arm's length. It's weird to think he's now closer with Scott fucking Hunter than this man he's spent most of his professional life with. Now they're here at a diner in Boston and Ilya is ready to let him in.

“Marly, are you good at keeping a secret?” Ilya frames it this way but he already knows. He gave him a test secret a few months ago. Nothing crazy, just something little to ensure he could be trusted if he ever needed him. Sure enough, Marly can hang.

“I like to think so.”

“I run an underground mob of gay and bisexual hockey players.”

Marlow nods, “I figured it was something like that.” Ilya’s jaw drops. In the stunned silence, Marlow continues, “Look, you kept telling us to lay into those sexist guys. Then I noticed other teams were doing it, but not every team. I figured you were in some kind of woke anti-asshole group. To be honest I thought it was the captains, not necessarily the... gay players.” Ilya wants to name just how many captains he has in his ranks, but he doesn’t actually need to. “Though I guess it *is* some captains, between Scott Hunter and I’ve always thought Utah’s captain and I’m assuming, you?”

Ilya wants to come to the defense of his #23, but refrains and keeps the conversation on himself. “Am bisexual.” At least Marlow didn’t mention Montreal’s captain. That would have made it harder to keep a poker face.

“Also figured that. We share a wall in, like, all our hotel rooms. I’m pretty sure you like women.” Marlow’s brow furrows. “Or... actually? That hasn’t happened all season. You ok?”

Well, fuck. Ilya has always seen Marlow as a kind of hockey ape, but the fact that he is so perceptive might be helpful here. He ignores that last revelation altogether.

“Then I have a small favor.” Ilya pulls out and unfolds a list of names and phone numbers. The blue marked names with higher than 95% cool-with-gays-certainty are Ilya’s next step. Sadly it’s fewer people than the queer corps. But Ilya really can’t risk anything in this first round draft, so it’s only guys he really trusts. “I need a group chat with all these guys. Need a convincing message without giving too much away.”

Marlow scans the paper. “Good list. How did you get all of their numbers?”

Ilya just shakes his head. These names mostly came from his players’ anecdotes of people being helpful and those players usually had the number to give him. But even if they didn’t... Ilya doesn’t have the words to explain his layers of connections. He could get the phone number, home address, dating history, probably credit card number of any player in the league at this point. He should probably keep that under wraps, though. “Unimportant.”

Marlow helps craft the message, checks Ilya’s grammar, offers better word choices. They finally get a text they like. Well, four texts, that Ilya sends rapid fire so they don’t get interrupted. This many people in a group chat might be a mistake.

Ilya has started a group chat.

Ilya: This is Ilya Rozanov. You do not know this, but there is an organized group of over 20 MLH players who are gay or bisexual. You are all in this group chat because 1) you are straight and 2) you have been deemed Cool. If you are not Cool, please remove yourself from this group chat. If you are not straight, I can send you over to the other group.

Ilya: You may have noticed some very awesome targeted campaigns against known assholes this year. The leader of the gay group has asked me to find more straight players to be on reserve to help with any such future efforts. Correcting the homophobia in the league helps the gay players feel more welcome to eventually come out, and some straight allies will be helpful.

Ilya: You would need to refrain from speaking about this group to anyone else. The other group has been able to keep secret for some time. This is a risk they are taking, please let's not disappoint them.

Ilya: Also, a 20-person group chat is not ideal, so be respectful. And say your name so people have the number.

Marly: Marlow, Boston. I know I'm sitting next to you but 👍 I'm in.

Pike: ???

Pike: Is this real? I'm in, obviously just... wtf

Pike: Hayden Pike, Montreal

Vaughan: Vaughan, ny

Vaughan: hang on

Pierce: Pierce, Columbus. sounds good. Can't believe there are that many LGBT players in the league

Ilya: very few L and T, mostly G and B.

Marly: lol

Vaughan: I just asked Hunter and this is real holy shit.

Vaughan: he said to just listen to Rozanov??

Vaughan: he also said "that guy is going to be league commissioner one day"

Vaughan: not fucking joking

Vaughan: [screenshot]

Becker: Becker. Chicago. In.

Ilya: Hunter would know. He has been in the league for 125 years.

Hayes: yeah I'm down but this is wild

Hayes: Wyatt Hayes. Toronto (sorry, I know, and tell them good work on Kent)

Hayes: but jesus imagine the group chat of 20 gay players seeking vengeance on assholes
lmao thats so cool

Hayes: superhero shit

Woodrick: Woodrick. Houston

Woodrick: you think they just talk about which of us they would bone?

Hayes has removed Woodrick from the group chat

Ilya: 5 points to Hayes.

Ilya: I think there is no group chat, they cannot be out.

Hayes: oh dope, there's a points system here??

Sullivan: even to each other? That's so sad. 😭

Sullivan: oh im so down btw Sully. Phoenix

Pike: sorry, and I'm totally on board and this is a great idea but

Pike: why the fuck is it Rozanov??

Pike: still hung up on that

Becker: hard agree

Sullivan: you'd think at least it would be Hunter

Vaughan: Scott's really busy all the time with press

Pierce: maybe they didn't want to use a gay player?

Pierce: still a weird choice.

Pierce: no offense Rozanov

Ilya: ok glad you are all on board. Meeting adjourned. Send me names of other people who are Cool and they might get added. Western conference especially. Do not add anyone without me. Remove any assholes.

Pike: so we can remove you?

Pike: kidding, please don't kick me out I really like this.

The straights continue to chat like this late into the night and Ilya stops checking it when they get far off topic. Every few minutes, he gets private texts with suggestions for players. Some have a common problem.

Pike: Shane Hollander would be good in there

Pike: I know you don't get along but like

Pike: we don't either lol

Ilya: only one per team for now.

Pike: ah ok sorry

Ilya will have to think of a solution. He wants to expand the straights to more than one player per team. Ideally, he wants hundreds of people in that damn group chat.

The next morning Ilya notices they whittled it down to 15 members overnight, and he knows he got the right guys in there. Even if they are a talkative bunch and clearly desperately

craving positive masculine friendship with known non-assholes.

He's a tiny bit grateful he isn't able to put his queer camarilla into one group chat. This may be even more chaotic than his individual texting system. A little more fun, though, admittedly.

As the playoff picture starts shaping up, ten of Ilya's teams are still in contention, which means six teams in the playoffs do not have a gay member. Two don't even have an ally member. The Carolina Assholes, led by Tiny Dickman, are still poised to win. Just in the last two weeks, he's received 4 complaints from his guys about Dickman running his mouth with insults and threats. The team does nothing, and in most cases, they laugh or join in. Carolina can not win the cup, and it's no longer just about Ilya's cup deal failing in the second year. From the fans to the management, the franchise is the worst in the league.

In any other year, Ilya would feel shitty about his own team knocked out before the playoffs, as he won't get a chance to take the assholes out himself. But now, with dozens of men in his various bisexual brigades, Ilya has a little more power. In fact, he has the power to do something a little... not *illegal*, just... immoral? Is it immoral if it's for a good cause?

Ilya can rig it. He can rig the cup.

His first message to every single one of his men in both armies is simple: "Carolina can not win." Ideas start pouring in.

"We could give them food poisoning."

"Convince the WAGs to go on a sex strike."

"Do you have any refs in the army?"

Oldest Man Alive: Maybe try being the better team and getting them out of the playoffs the old fashioned way.

Ilya: You know a lot about old fashioned ways

Oldest Man Alive: I walked into that.

Oldest Man Alive: Don't do anything dumb.

Ilya: tell Kip. He does something dumb every day.

Ilya: isn't he like, very smart? what is he doing with you?

Oldest Man Alive: You're an asshole.

Ilya: oh, sorry is he not putting out?

Oldest Man Alive: Way too mean. Rein it in.

Hmm. Scott Hunter, spokesperson for kindness and sportsmanship, inadvertently gives Ilya an idea that is not kind nor sportsmanlike. See, Ilya has only ever been affected by one chirp. It was a benign "your mama" joke, which are usually fine, and Ilya can brush them off. But this one landed on his mother's actual birthday, and he had already been feeling profoundly sad about that. He was so distracted that he lost the puck to the chirp. Ilya files this idea away.

Although his men have some good ideas, and Ilya jots down "WAG army" and "refs" on his legal pad for future use, one strategy seems most feasible. It's not a new idea for this group: They could kneecap Tiny Dickman. He's the highest point scorer on the team, and if Carolina does win the cup it should be without him. That becomes the strategy they go with, fuck Crowell's suspicions about the campaign against Dallas Kent. It's completely legal, and it's not terribly obvious, because it would be a good strategy for each team to take individually anyway. So he spreads word to his relevant playoff teams and now his ally army teams: impair Dickman.

This is what he tells the guys, as Ilya starts secretly working on research for below-the-belt chirps to dole out to each of Carolina's opponents privately during the playoffs. He thinks this will be their atom bomb, the pièce de résistance. That is, until another unexpected option appears one evening just before the first round of playoffs. Ilya gets a notification from a new group chat with just Pike, Vaughan, Hayes, and Marlow.

Pike started a group chat.

*Pike renamed the group chat **Council of Straight Elders***

Pike: hey i have an idea but didn't want it in the big group.

Hayes: clutch small group actually

Marly: best of the best

Marly: why is there no dabbing emoji?

Ilya: Pike just had his first thought ever, can we hear it?

Pike: fuck you

Pike: what I'm about to say doesn't leave this chat

Hayes: 😊

Pike: I have a friend on Carolina.

Pike: we were in Juniors around the same time and he's a chill dude

Pike: I just texted him gg and he was complaining about the team

Pike: he said he doesn't even want them to win.

Vaughan: this is more of a story and less of an idea.

Marly: Pike's typing dots are giving me a headache

Hayes: seriously this is taking forever the suspense is killing me

Pike: I may have like... asked if there was a way we would be able to beat him if we have to play him, and he said he could give me their plays. Literally just offered that to me, their full strategy doc. He could also probably be convinced to self-sabotage and give me minor injury lists. I'm not sure how he is with LGBTQ+ issues or politics or anything, but he seems to really fucking hate the team and doesn't really want to see them win the cup.

Hayes: holy shit

Pike: so it really depends on how bad we want it.

Vaughan: Pike what the fuck

Pike: yeah it's dumb sorry so illegal

Ilya: do not do that.

Ilya calls Pike. None of this should be in writing. Pike picks up on the first ring, and Ilya doesn't waste any time on a greeting. "We're doing it."

Chapter End Notes

Next up: 2018 cup 🤨

This chapter's list, because you have a benevolent overlord (I've gone back and added similar lists to the last two chapters too):

#10 wishes Crowell took the allegations seriously

#15 likes Ilya being carrier pigeon to chirp at hunter for him

#17 takes issue with Crowell's silence on racist fans

#18 wishes he had a chance to hurt Kent

#23 Utah captain

Chapter 5: 5

Chapter Summary

2018 Cup Playoffs and Finals

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for being on board with my morally gray Ilya and Pike, and being vehemently against my morally fucked Carolina team.

We get some OC details and some canon gays here (whether you remember them or not is a different story lol a lot of people didn't clock the last minor book-gay).

I couldn't find any canon info for the 2018 playoffs, so I made it all up. Yes, I created a complete playoff bracket for this and ensured all of the divisions and conferences make sense and align with canon, why do you ask? That's not a normal thing to do??

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

Hayden Pike does not disappoint. Within two days, Ilya is in possession of Carolina's plays and strategies document. Pike's guy also lists all the players' weak spots: Tiny Dickman has a bad knee from their onslaught earlier in the season, the good defenseman has bruised ribs, the starting left winger just had shoulder surgery. There's usable intel on about 12 of Carolina's players here.

For his own contribution, Ilya starts to research Carolina's players' lives. What will actually *hurt* them? He looks at court documents, divorce proceedings, recent obituaries, anything that will give them chirp fodder that won't just annoy, it will distract, disarm, even paralyze. It's below the belt, for sure, so he makes sure the guys on the receiving end deserve it. He doesn't want to traumatize some innocent rookie with a chirp about his brother in prison just because he got drafted by the wrong team. For those more neutral, non-odious players, he finds innocent but freaky facts: their third-grade teacher's name, their mom's favorite brand of wine, what instrument they played in high school. Weird enough to startle them and give the opponent the advantage. The referees might dislike some of this stuff, but if they do it out of earshot, or the chirping player is expendable, the payoff could be worth the risk.

He is cautious. Only one team plays Carolina at a time, so the intel is limited to that team. He spreads it carefully between gays and allies so no one player has it all. Luckily the first series is against New Jersey, where Ilya has two gays (well, #19 is gay and #7 is bisexual) and an ally, Brophy. It's a little frustrating; Ilya can't even tell his three guys that there's someone

else on the team with other information. But if one of them approaches another queer player with a cheat code, they're going to get inadvertently clocked and outed. Finally he comes to the best conclusion, which is just telling the two Queer Council members that there's another on their team and if they don't want to be clocked they should be careful with the info. God bless New Jersey, they are both amenable to coming out to each other. They could have done that to begin with and saved Ilya a lot of stress. He tells them the ally member will also have separate instructions.

The information is dispersed strategically. The highest-ranking person should get the leaked strategies and plays, but if that person is a goody-two-shoes, it will go to the shadiest. Luckily, as an Alternate Captain, #7 is the highest-ranking *and* he is adequately shady. Enforcers and defensemen, like Brophy, should get the injuries list. Offensive lines get the chirps. He doesn't send the original document out, and everything in writing is carefully coded. To an outsider, it could just look like a player giving another player helpful tips. The outsider would not be aware of the phone call preceding those tips with all the context. Even if they get caught, the only one in real trouble is Pike's traitorous Carolina friend, but Ilya does what he can to protect that nameless, faceless person anyway.

Ultimately, it's up to each player. If they want to use the resources Ilya is offering, they can. If their personal moral code can't stand it, he's not pressuring them. Shane, for example, probably wouldn't be open to these kinds of ideas. But Ilya won't have to worry about that unless both of their teams advance another two rounds. Even then, Montreal's backup, Ilya's #13, is a corrupt little loose cannon with zero moral qualms. So Shane could probably be persuaded to take some of the more benign chirps, while #13 and Pike take the serious stuff.

The New Jersey players are not only game to try the tactics, they gently inform their teammates, each agreeing to take credit for Ilya's intel. It's a lot less suspicious to say "It seems like Gordon is favoring his right foot," or "I looked it up and the goalie hit a pedestrian during his last DUI," than to say "Ilya Rozanov told me dozens of horrible secrets about every member of the team, each worse than the last."

All Ilya can do is watch from his base of operations in Boston, where he has moved many of the lists and documents in front of the television to keep track of which details are used. Repeating the same chirp, being too obvious about targeting the same injury, or blocking the same play could give them away.

In the first round, New Jersey does pretty well with the information. They are able to hold their own and push 6 games against what should be the best team in the league. Ilya's #7 could have been less obvious about tripping that defenseman with the bad ankle, but it ends up a moot point. In game 6, they fail to catch up in time and let Carolina advance. There's a bright side: Brophy targets some pre-existing injuries and by the end of the series, two of Carolina's guys are out for the playoffs.

NJMLHLGBTQFOIR group chat

#19: Sorry cap we tried

Ilya: the fuck is this group name

Ilya: FOIR?

Ilya: all three of you are here?

#19: New Jersey Major League Hockey LGBTQ Friends of Ilya Rozanov duh

Brophy: I told them the chat name didn't really apply bc you and I aren't gay

Brophy: but im cool with it if you are

#7: RIP to my Scott Hunter moment

#7: At this rate, I'll never be Rozanov And Scott Hunter's Yearly Coming Out Club King 🙄

#19: Stop trying to make RASHYCOCK happen.

#7: just wait. it will spread.

Ilya: you got two asshole starters out

Ilya: is good first round

#19: we're taking Broph to a gay bar tonight to mourn our loss

#19: it's his role as cultural ambassador to come with us

#7: lol like you live in gay bars? you JUST turned 21 and your bf still has a fake ID

Brophy: im going to feel like a predator

Brophy: Roz I heard you went to a Scott Hunter night at a gay bar last year, any tips for a straight dude?

NJMLHLGBTQFOIR (minus Brophy) group chat

#19: wait what does Brophy think is happening?

Ilya: he thinks i am spokesperson for straights

#7: sorry WHAT?

Ilya makes a note that #7 and #19 can be texted together and shortens his mass text list by one. For a moment, he thinks maybe he can convince his other teams to do the same. Most of his players would still not be ok coming out to even the other queer members of their team, but he wants to work toward it. That is, until the New Jersey group chat continues throughout their bar night. After several hours of "where did you go?" and "are you two leaving?" Ilya is once again counting himself lucky. Individual team chats of 3-4 people would be way worse than his current system.

RASHYCOCK is catchy, though.

Montreal is also booted out of the running in the first round, by Buffalo. It's great because Shane is now with Ilya all the time. It's terrible because Ilya needs to orchestrate the largest maybe-not-legal game fixing in MLH history with Mr. Rulebook sitting next to him on the couch. Ilya loves that Shane is so supportive of his enterprise, but he would not be as accepting of *all of it*. So, he tells Shane the bare minimum: he's doing work for his flock. Shane's usually not around 24/7 so maybe he thinks this amount of work is normal. That said, when Shane first arrives, Ilya doesn't look at his phone for almost 24 hours. The man is only human.

In the second round, Ilya's Washington player and the ally are not as comfortable with the idea of physically taking advantage of someone's injuries, but they do come through with the chirps. It's fun to watch from the couch with Shane. Occasionally #14 will be fighting against the boards for the puck and Carolina's player will just freeze, shocked at whatever they just heard. Washington forces a 7th game and for a second it really looks like Carolina is finished but unfortunately, they still rally and advance to the conference finals, the penultimate round.

Carolina beats Buffalo pretty handily in the conference finals, but there is a big consolation. In the last game of the series, Tiny Dickman is injured beyond repair by the Buffalo enforcer, Ilya's #8. Ilya's phone blows up with joyous texts, and some of his members suggest getting shirts or even tattoos of #8's fan slogan. Ilya knows the guy would probably hate that. Still, he sends him everyone's gratitude for vanquishing their biggest enemy. Carolina will move onto the final round without their star forward.

Ilya is ecstatic, obviously, but he's also a little disappointed Tiny Dickman didn't make it to the final. There was supposed to be a grand finale for Tiny. Ilya had contacted Dickman's ex-girlfriend and she was happy to be forthcoming with some *very* personal information. He was really looking forward to that.

The moment Carolina clinches a spot at the cup finals, it feels like everything stops and a panic sets in. Ilya was so concerned with stopping Carolina at any point during the playoffs, he never thought they would actually make it to the final and have to play the Western Conference team. Ilya stopped paying attention to non-relevant playoffs when it was clear every team in contention had someone to come out if they won the cup. But over on that bracket, some kind of miracle was happening in Vancouver.

Vancouver has always been a pretty shitty team, and the fact they made it to the playoffs at all this year was impressive. It was a combination of luck, timing, and opponents' injuries that led them to the cup finals. Not skill or strategy or anything that would make a team good.

A smart mastermind would have been paying attention. He would have instructed a better team to advance. He wouldn't have let *Vancouver*, of all teams, make its way into the most important series in the history of professional hockey. Well, maybe that's dramatic. But at the moment, it certainly feels like it.

Vancouver's landmark season has become a real underdog story. It seems every hockey fan is rooting against Carolina. Even if he wishes a better team made it through, Ilya will not let

them be disappointed.

To everyone's surprise, Vancouver wins the first game of the series in a shut-out. Carolina is playing hard despite losing their star, but Vancouver's goalie is incredible. He's blocking shots as if he could predict each shooter's next move.

And if it looks like that, it's because he can. Vancouver's goaltender is #5 of Ilya's army, an early recruit from that first All-Star weekend. Turns out, you only really need to give the plans to the goaltender. #5 told his defensemen some vague advice based on the plans, but mostly he just knows where the shots are coming from, so he can stop them. He's not even trying to make it look believable. The man is fed up with the league and is cheating like he has no fucks left to give. In combination with Ilya's vicious chirps, always new material, and the Carolina roster scraping the bottom of the barrel with all their injured players out, the next two games go largely the same way. Carolina is only able to put up 1 goal in each. The hockey world is abuzz with the Cinderella story of Vancouver, their incredible defense, and the teardown of the best team in the league.

In the fourth game, when Vancouver could win it for the sweep, Ilya doles out his most atomic chirps, the grand finales for the rest of the douchebags on the team. It's also... *interesting* to see one of Carolina's linemen make three passes to blocked players. Interesting. Just... interesting. That's all.

Ilya is watching the game with Shane and his parents at the cottage. "I bet Carolina is missing Reinhold Glickman right about now," Yuna says. "It must be awful to have your captain injured right before the finals like this."

"Yes. Awful," Ilya deadpans.

"Mom, Ti— Riney Glickman is like, the worst guy," Shane says. "No one feels bad for him."

"He's a good player, though, and look, they kind of suck without him! They need to use their backup wing? This guy is terrible. This is a massacre!"

"Good for Canada, though. Vancouver deserves it," David contributes what he can.

After the third intentionally-sacrificed pass from Carolina's traitor, Ilya's phone lights up with a call from Scott Hunter. His stomach drops, because he already knows he's about to get scolded. He gets up to take the call, definitely not wanting to have this conversation in front of anyone. The fewer people who know how this happened, the better.

Shane calls after him, "Hurry, there are only a few minutes left!"

"Ok. If Carolina scores three times, come get me." Ilya says as he steps onto the patio. He closes the door behind him and answers the phone, "Happy 2nd Annual Scott Hunter Homosexual Awareness Day!"

"Ok. Ignoring that." Scott cuts right to the chase, "What did you do?"

"It is that obvious?"

“Rozanov, I’m watching a clinic on rigged games.”

“Not *rigged!*” Ilya argues. “Well... what is rigging, really?”

“God damn it.” Hunter sighs. “How bad is it?”

“Just some leaked plans... a hit on Tiny Dickman—”

“—*Tiny Dickman??*” Scott stifles a laugh.

“—And, I think probably self-sabotage now from that little wing boy.”

“But he’s not one of ours?”

“No, he is a... friend of a friend. You could say. I think. Probably.” Ilya actually doesn’t know who Pike’s friend is but... it’s getting pretty obvious.

“Ok. Actually, I’m not asking anything else about that. I want plausible deniability.” Scott is quiet for a moment, “Who do we have on Vancouver?” Hunter is always so fucking nosy.

“I told you, #5.”

“Yeah. Again. As I don’t live inside your brain or your spreadsheet, I don’t know who that is.”

“Am surprised you know spreadsheets, is there a computer class at the senior home?”

“Come on,” Scott whines, “there’s like three minutes left. Kip and I have a bet.”

Ilya looks through the wall of windows to the TV. The game is almost over and Carolina is still way behind. Maybe it would be safe to tell him. Earlier today, Ilya called #5 to check in, and he knows exactly how this is planned to go down. The man’s fiancé is ready to hit ‘Post’ on a statement for him when the game ends and then walk out with the families. The fiancé has probably already been coming out to the WAGs and answering awkward questions for hours. There’s no real way it’s not happening, so Ilya lets Hunter in. “Goaltender,” he admits as he watches #5 block another shot through the window.

“No kidding.” Scott breathes. “Huh.”

“Do not be excited, you are still lonely. He has to retire.” And then, for the first time ever, Ilya decides to let Hunter further in and share more than expressly necessary, because this is killing him and he has no one to talk to. “Not just because he is ancient, maybe older than you. Contract renegotiations stopped because he told his coach. Just to invite the asshole to his fucking wedding. Now no other team will take him.”

“Oh my god, Ilya.” Hunter doesn’t often use his first name. “That’s... what the fuck?”

Ilya relates. Part of the check-in before the game was to make sure the goalie wasn’t being pressured into giving up his career just for the cup bet. Ilya wouldn’t be able to live with the

guilt. For the fourth time since the series started, Ilya was assured it was the plan anyway, and then he even talked to the fiancé, who basically thanked Ilya for giving his man the last push needed to retire. The management's response made the couple hate hockey, and they can't wait to be done.

"He is fine."

Neither man can say anything else. There's nothing fine about this.

Scott laughs a little, "Did I just hear a loon? Where the fuck are you?"

"Yes. I am outside, am going back in now. Happy Carolina Loses day!"

"A Happy Carolina Loses day to you too. You belong in prison."

That reminds Ilya to also quickly text Pike while he's outside. He is emotional with gratitude for the two armies behind him.

Ilya: The Gay Cabal thanks you.

Ilya: someone is coming out after the game because of your work

Ilya: maybe mob boss is good job for you?

Ilya: hockey is not.

He gets back to the couch in time to see Vancouver win the cup. The second the buzzer sounds, Ilya refreshes the goaltender's Instagram. He doesn't even read it. He saw a draft of it last night. Instead, he shows it to Shane.

@Baldwincouver

[image: Baldwin stands arm-in-arm next to a rugged older guy in front of a log cabin, holding up a ringed hand.]

I have loved just about every minute of my career, but it is time for me to step back, plan my wedding, and settle into the role of the trophy husband. I love you Joshua, can't wait to spend the rest of my (very unoccupied retired) life with you. 🌈 Proud of my team, and proud to accept the 2018 SCHUMEM Cup Award.

Shane looks up from the screen with tears in his eyes, because the man cries at a slight breeze, and pulls it up on his own phone for his parents. Ilya's phone is already blowing up with texts and most have a similar question.

Oldest Man Alive: SCHUMEM Cup Award?

Ilya: SCott HUnter MEMorial

Oldest Man Alive: Oh go right ahead and fuck yourself with that.

Oldest Man Alive: I can't believe Baldwin agreed to that name.

Oldest Man Alive: Memorial?? I'm not dead!!

Ilya: it will be easier than changing the name in like two years

He sends the queer army the mass text he already had drafted in celebration of the... 2nd Annual Scott Hunter Memorial Cupping Out Day? ...SCHUMEM Cup Award? He included #7's title, RASHYCOCK, Rozanov and Scott Hunter's Yearly Coming Out Club King, as a reason to workshop the name. He immediately gets some responses to that brainstorming request.

"I like the Memorial part. Scott Hunter Memorial Yearly Cupping Out Club King SHunMYCOCK"

"The winners could be Agents of the S.H.E.I.L.D: Scott Hunter award for Excellence In Loving Dick. Works if you don't know how to spell."

"I think we should be the Scott Hunties or Scunties."

"PHOODS. Professional Hockey's Order Of Dick Suckers"

"Most Vagina-less Peen? Men's Venereal Player? Massive Veiny Penis?"

"I still like Friends of Rozanov"

"Ashcock sounds like it could be an actual award."

"Are we not doing Ilya's Avengers anymore? Ilya's avenger of the year, IAOTY?"

"Shouldn't we have settled on a name before Baldwin posted this?? Schumem is dumb."

But unfortunately, the bad name example backfires and a lot of them actually like RASHYCOCK. These texts get progressively worse and one thing becomes clear: they are never going to settle on a name. Shane just shakes his head at every response Ilya shows him. Because they are in front of his parents, and Ilya is not open about his role as executive of the queer cartel, Shane texts him.

Jane: These are so bad. It should be simple and clear. Alliance of Gay and Bisexual Hockey Players.

Ilya: AGBHP? AOGABHP? what does this spell?

Jane: it doesn't have to spell anything!

Ilya: you are so boring.

Jane: you can't put RASHYCOCK on a coming out post!!

On the TV, Baldwin's fiancé is walking onto the ice with the other WAGs and families. There's no big Scott-Hunter-style tongue kiss, because not everyone is an exhibitionist, but the two men hug and Baldwin celebrates with his team and his teammates' families with an arm around the man's waist.

"Kind of an annual tradition now, huh!" David Hollander remarks. He has no idea.

"If you won the cup, would you do that?" Yuna asks the room, even though they all know the 10-year plan.

"At this point? I think I would have to," Ilya says honestly. He can't tell if he is relieved that this will never happen with his upcoming move to Ottawa, or if he wants that moment more

than anything in the world. Either way, if Ilya himself didn't uphold the cup bet, there would be a mutiny.

Shane noticeably avoids the question and instead whispers, "Baldwin was my last guess for Vancouver." Ilya just has to laugh at his boyfriend's terrible gaydar as they cuddle on the couch next to his parents, watching the scene he set.

Chapter End Notes

I think the constant workshopping of the name will continue, so if you have any suggestions I might include them and name a Gay after you.

#5: Baldwin, goaltender for Vancouver, now retired (minor canon book-gay)

#7: New Jersey Alternate Captain, originator of RASHYCOCK

#8: Enforcer for Buffalo 🐾, takes Tiny Dickman out of the playoffs

#13: Montreal's backup, corrupt

#14: Washington player, ok with non-physical harm

#19: New Jersey younger player

Coming up: MLH Awards, more ally army, Scott Hunter Attention Whore™

Chapter 6: Pike-Shane Problem

Chapter Summary

Between the cup and the MLH awards

Chapter Notes

Heavier on the plot, lighter on the dick jokes.

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

After Baldwin's coming out post, Ilya's ally syndicate gets to work fighting trolls on social media. They post their own supportive messages, some even with pictures of themselves in Baldwin jerseys. Once they do it, others start doing the same, and Ilya sends private messages to those others to recruit them. It's a big step, showing the world that the players can get on board with queer teammates. Baldwin isn't as big of a star as Scott Hunter, yet there are already more hockey players sharing support for him than for Hunter this time last year. Ilya can't help but think his plan is to thank for that.

He wants to keep building the ally army, but the problem thus far has been keeping his queer members safe from being recommended for the group. At first, he told the allies he only will take one member per team, which protects most of his guys. But now that Pike's Carolina traitor has joined up, he has one person from every team in the league in the group chat. Technically, it should be capped out with these 32 members. According to them, it's just the 32 of them.

Except, that number is a lie. Ilya actually has another 80 straight people he has been texting individually. He started with the first few after he made up the dumb one-per-team rule to get Pike off his back, and now any team duplicates get a private message. It's annoying, and he hates it. So, he makes a *second* ally army group chat for those not in the first. This one is too big for standard message threads, so he moves it to a messaging app.

The second group allows him to inform everyone that there are levels with no overlap. It makes it seem like maybe if a guy isn't in the group, he could be in the other one. But everyone is sworn to secrecy, so they could never ask in real life.

But Ilya finds himself overwhelmed. Now with the extended ally chat, and the 32 allies from each team, and his queer squad, he is the sole leader for groups that make up about a fifth of the league. The gays are terribly complicated to lead, because he can't ask anyone else for help without outing everyone. The logical idea would be Hunter, but Hunter is constantly

swamped with interviews and appearances, being the only out current player. Baldwin wants very little to do with professional hockey. Ilya can't even ask Shane to do it. If they both openly like men, and are close enough to be sharing this responsibility, the group will start putting things together. Especially if they then start a foundation together this fall.

So in the sheer volume of straight-army chaos, he sees the opportunity to delegate a little. Ilya makes a series of decisions.

Council of Straight Elders group chat

Ilya: wanted to admit something

Hayes: fucking finally

Ilya: I run both groups.

Ilya: I started the gay army and I also started the straight army.

Ilya: a benefit of being bisexual

Ilya: no one knows this so obviously it is something I would like to keep secret between us

Ilya: and I guess also the 30 guys who also know this about me from the gay group.

Ilya: and my boyfriend's parents.

Ilya: and one friend.

Ilya: and also Marly knew.

Pike: wait are you for real?

Hayes: he was literally making decisions for them all the time, you didn't notice?

Vaughan: I kind of figured this when Scott told me to just trust you.

Vaughan: with Scott now btw he says hi

Marly: I just want to point out how good I kept the secret

Pike: Am I the only one??

Ilya: 0/10 gaydar Pike

Ilya: [image: Gaydar post-it with tallies.]

Ilya: this is mine. I got back above 90% recently

Hayes: Jesus Christ.

Hayes changed the name of the group chat

Council of (Mostly) Straight Elders group chat

Vaughan: Scott just confirmed the gaydar numbers.

Vaughan: says Rozanov is a freak of nature

Marly: but you're probably only asking if you're like 100% sure, right?

Marly: It must be scary to just walk up to a random hockey player like hey u gay?

Pike: I feel like Rozanov could get away with it.

Pike: I would get hit.

Ilya: you have hittable face disease

Ilya: only one person ever hit me when i asked

Vaughan: you got hit??

Ilya: when he comes out in 5 years I will tell you who it was

Ilya: he does not yet know he is gay

Vaughan: you just have like... a crazy life huh

Ilya: anyway I started the other group last year. It was 3 people and then it was 7 and 12 and it is getting out of hand with 30 now.

Ilya: It is just me and sometimes Hunter. One other guy helps a little.

Ilya: confession number 2:

Ilya: the ally army is too big. 115 guys total.

Ilya: and the gays need individual messages and that is overwhelming

Ilya: so was wondering if I can stay out of the straight mess and trust you to keep them in order?

Ilya: would be very appreciated.

Hayes: 115???

Ilya: people were being nice to Baldwin

Vaughan: yeah i can step up

Vaughan: Scott says he doesn't help at all, it's just you and maybe the other guy

Ilya: no the other guy does not help much

Ilya: actually sometimes makes things harder

Hayes: Don't worry Roz you're good.

Hayes: We'll take care of it.

Pike: still fucking shocked that Rozanov has a boyfriend???

Pike: but yeah whatever you need

Ilya: Ok so. We break it up by division? Vaughan will take Atlantic, Marly Metropolitan, Hayes Central, and Pike Pacific. You can add or remove whoever you want.

Ilya: for entry: they need to actually DO ally stuff. Not just ignore bad stuff. Do good stuff.

Marly: 😊

That's his actual solution to the Pike-Shane problem. The barrier for entry isn't only Cool-With-Gays, you have to actually do something beneficial. So it's not just avoiding

homophobic jokes, these guys actually call them out. They're wearing a rainbow sticker or attending a pride parade or shutting down locker room shenanigans. Some are even sperm donors for lesbian couples, officiating their gay brother's wedding, attending Scott Hunter nights at gay bars. Candidates have to actively do something *good*. Not just react neutrally or give off safe vibes.

This seems to protect all the guys who want to stay in the closet. The guys who are adamantly closeted aren't using rainbow tape on their hockey stick or objecting to homophobic slurs in the locker room. They're trying to fly under the radar.

Like Shane. Shane has, for years, kept any trace of homosexual evidence out of his life. In fact, that's what gave Ilya the idea to begin with. Ilya has been hinting at this excuse with Pike for months. So it should come as no surprise when Shane says something about it at the cottage in the week after the cup finals.

"I think Hayden might know I'm gay." He announces as he looks at his phone, "He keeps dropping hints."

Ilya furrows his brow. Pike fully thinks Shane is straight. Just yesterday, Vaughan said Pike suggested Shane for the straight group and Vaughan told him to come back with evidence, which has been Ilya's response, too. He specifically didn't put anyone in charge of their own division so they couldn't just add their friends without screening. "What hints?"

"Maybe I'm overthinking or being paranoid or... like he sent me the link to this LGBTQ charity and told me he donated and that I should post it on my page. It was weird. And then lately around the team, when like, Comeau would make a joke about someone being gay, he's has been looking at me for a few seconds before he shuts it down. Like he's expecting me to react somehow?" *Or shut it down yourself*, Ilya mentally fills in. This is making Ilya feel a little bad. Pike has been so honest. At any point, he could have just said Shane did one of these things to get his way. He doesn't know Ilya talks to Shane. He's trying to go about it the right way, getting Shane to do something to prove his allyship. "And just now, he invited me to come to the Pride parade next week. Luckily it's the same day as the MLH Awards, so I have an excuse."

"Maybe he is just being a good ally." Ilya tries, but Shane isn't convinced. "Why don't you tell him?" This would solve the problem for Ilya. None of the other allies are as adamant about one person as Hayden is about Shane. Most take no for an answer once. Hayden has been relentless.

"I will." Shane swallows. "In the fall. I'm going to tell the team, and I have to tell him first. But... in the fall."

Ilya sighs. He hates exposing just how deep he's gotten into this community-building. Shane always worries he's over-exerting himself, and this won't help. "Ok. You know I have this big gay army?"

"Yeah?" Shane looks confused.

"Ok. I also have this big straight army."

Shane rolls his eyes and heaves an exhausted breath, “Of course you do.”

“Is bigger than the gay one, by a lot. And Pike, he... is asking.” Ilya pulls out his phone to demonstrate.

“He’s in it?” Shane asks as Ilya scrolls through to find him.

“Yes. But I told him you cannot be in it because you are not an active ally.”

“What do you mean? I could be an ally!”

Ilya laughs, “You go around stopping locker room talk and wearing rainbows?”

“No, that would make it a little obvious!” Shane looks perturbed.

Ilya just gives him a hand gesture like he can fill in the rest of the blanks. Shane does, eventually.

“So he’s trying to get me to prove I’m an ally.”

“Is up to you, what you want to do about it now.”

“Fall. In the fall, I’ll tell him.” Shane looks at his phone. “For now I can just kind of... imply the gay stuff makes me uncomfortable.”

It’s perfect. Hayden will think Shane is a little squeamish about gay people, which will stop him from wanting Shane to join the group. So Shane’s reputation with Pike takes a hit for a few months. It will recover when Pike learns the truth. And then it will take another hit when he learns it’s Ilya. They’ll cross that bridge when they come to it.

Between the Council of Straight Elders and the 32 original guys who become representatives for their teams, the straight army becomes a mostly self-governing body. If anyone gets a whiff of homophobia (or misogyny, or racism, or any other intolerance, which Ilya did not ask for but appreciates anyway), they are booted. It's nice, when no one's identity has to be hidden, everything runs a lot smoother. So Ilya can focus on the gay fleet's issues.

And there are some big issues. The Tuesday before the MLH awards, Baldwin texts Ilya and Scott Hunter.

RASHYCOCK winners + Roz group chat

Baldwin: you want to hear something crazy?

Oldest Man Alive: Literally always!

Ilya: Hunter you are so nosy

Oldest Man Alive: He's offering!

Baldwin: apparently the league handed Vancouver the playoffs to make the cup easier for Carolina

Baldwin: and they're suspicious of our performance but they can't do anything about it without admitting they fixed the Western conference playoffs to get us there to begin with.

Ilya: wait this is true?

Baldwin: yeah Crowell just had me and our captains in a meeting with some other execs and they let it slip while they were asking us how we did it.

Baldwin: basically "you guys were so bad that's why we tried to get you to the final, what happened?"

Oldest Man Alive: they asked you how you did it??

Baldwin: Yeah. Um roz should I break off into a private message? Not sure who knows what.

Ilya: no it's fine Hunter knows everything

Oldest Man Alive: So that's just in writing now.

Ilya: there was nothing illegal. I asked Mr. Rulebook. Hypothetically? is that the word?

Ilya: the refs didn't call unsportsmanlike on the chirps

Ilya: they can't do it after the game so we are safe.

Ilya: and plays were leaked not stolen

Ilya: all injuries were legal

Ilya: none of us had any money on the game

Ilya: no one did anything bad

Oldest Man Alive: Ok "bad" and "illegal" are two different things

Oldest Man Alive: So he knows about all this too?

Ilya: no. again, hypothetical.

Oldest Man Alive: He's not dumb.

Ilya: no but i am very hypothetical.

Baldwin: who are you talking about?

Baldwin: anyway I didn't tell them anything.

Baldwin: I told them it sounds like a smear campaign on the newly out gay guy.

Baldwin: I said it wouldn't be a good look to accuse my team of anything.

Ilya: damn retired Baldwin has balls?

Ilya: Ballwin?

Baldwin: what are they going to fire me?

Baldwin: they were never putting me in the HOF anyway

Baldwin: and maybe they won't ask me to do dumb shit like other retired players.

Baldwin: win/win

Oldest Man Alive: wow so 1) the league was literally rigging the cup

Oldest Man Alive: and 2) Rozanov's Regiment out-rigged them.

Ilya: We are better than them at most things

Oldest Man Alive: They asked me to give a speech at the awards about my first year out.

Oldest Man Alive: Probably to say how great they've been about it, like Crowell hasn't actively threatened me like 10 times this year.

Baldwin: they probably don't want you to talk about how I couldn't get another contract after I told my team.

Oldest Man Alive: Nope. I bet they don't want me to say anything about that at all.

Oldest Man Alive: Or Rozanov's queer death squad.

Ilya: I would also not like you talking about that.

Ilya: you said yes to making a speech?

Oldest Man Alive: Yeah I'm doing it.

Oldest Man Alive: But now that there are so many of us, we can try to use it to maybe say something.

Oldest Man Alive: Can you see about getting everyone together?

Oldest Man Alive: Would that be insane?

Oldest Man Alive: Maybe the night before the MLH awards next weekend? We'll all be in the same place.

Ilya: not everyone is invited to the awards.

Baldwin: I wanted to be as far away from the MLH awards as physically possible.

Baldwin: but I could make the trip maybe for that.

Ilya: people might come to Vegas if I tell them to

Oldest Man Alive: God how do you have these guys so whipped?

Oldest Man Alive: Hang on...

Oldest Man Alive: Do they think this is blackmail?

Ilya: they just love me 

Ilya: will see what I can do

Oldest Man Alive: Assemble your gay hockey militia and let's have a damn meeting about this.

Ilya: some of us are bi

Chapter End Notes

I had to break this chapter up, so *still* coming up: MLH awards

Chapter 7: State of the Gay Union 2018

Chapter Summary

2018 MLH Awards meet-up

Chapter Notes

Just mafia doing mafia shit (like hanging out, maybe some light whistle-blowing as a treat)

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

The trouble with getting dozens of closeted hockey players in the same room is... literally everything about that sentence. Ilya asks them to come to Vegas with different personalized strategies. Some are into the idea of a meet-up already. Some he tells it's just to meet one-on-one, and casually drops if there are others, maybe they could meet up. Some he knows it would be easier to convince in person when they get there. A few decline Ilya's invitation outright.

Upon Shane's suggestion, he tells them if there will be someone else from their team. For some reason that's freaking Shane out, so he downplays the meeting to #13, Ilya's other Montreal guy. Ilya's a little disappointed; he really wanted the rookies to come, make sure they see and believe there are others. Plus, #14 will be there, and Ilya wanted to introduce them and watch them hook up. Not *watch* them. Well, if the opportunity arose to— it doesn't matter. Shane doesn't want to come out to any teammates yet, and Ilya would much rather have Shane there.

As for the closeted portion, everyone in that room needs to be real ok with keeping secrets. Ilya thinks this one is easy. They're closeted gay hockey players. They're good at keeping secrets.

And everyone in the same *room*? Discreetly? They can't exactly rent out a hall or ask for a committee event at the awards. Maybe someday, but for now they have to do this in the shadows.

So that's how Ilya, Shane, and Scott Hunter end up in a hotel room on the outskirts of Vegas the evening before the MLH awards, pushing the bed against the far wall to make room for— again— *dozens of professional hockey players*. The three of them already feel compact. Ilya arranges some bottles of alcohol and mixers on the desk. He briefly worries if he should have gotten food. But it's late, people should have eaten already...

Shane rubs his back to comfort his anxiety. Scott shakes his head at the gesture, “There is no way you guys are staying secret.” They both turn to glare at him and he raises his hands. “I’ll do what I can, but this,” he gestures at them, “is not subtle.” Ilya squeezes Shane’s hand one more time at the first knock on the door.

Baldwin gets there first. “Can’t believe I’m—” he looks at Shane, and then back to Scott and Ilya. “Are you serious? With Hollander, you three are the top scorers in the league.”

Ilya laughs a little, “We can tell everyone that sucking dick gets you better at hockey.”

“Crass.” Scott says, at the same time as Shane says “Stop.”

“Hang on. Are you Mr. Rulebook??” Baldwin asks. Shane looks confused between Ilya and Scott, who both nod. “You might want earmuffs for this then.” He turns to Scott and Ilya. “Before there’s more of us, I gotta say I don’t think we should tell anyone else about the meeting with the commissioner and my captains.” He eyes Shane. “I take it not every guy knows the full story, and I’d prefer if we kept it that way. I kind of like my reputation untarnished, thanks.” He’s speaking vaguely, but Ilya gets it. He doesn’t want to be known as the guy who used *totally legal information* to win a cup. Even if it means exposing the league rigging the playoffs.

“It’s cool.” Scott says, “I wasn’t planning to say that in the speech, but we’ll talk tomorrow about what I can say about your retirement. I want that in there.” They both look at Ilya.

“We have to make the situation public at some point.” Ilya says, a little disappointed. He has no idea how they’ll use that blackmail on the league if they can’t expose how they got it. “But we will figure out a way to do it without...” He waves a hand through the air. There’s no way he can finish that sentence with Shane here. “Later. It does not have to be this weekend.”

Scott and Baldwin glance at Shane nervously, and Shane says nothing in response to any of this. Ilya is not surprised. Between the closeted players and the informants, Shane has always understood there’s a lot of privileged information, and he knows not to ask. Ilya is struck with appreciation for his boyfriend and already feels an acute withdrawal from being able to touch him. This might be a long night.

Slowly, men start to filter in. It’s so awkward, Ilya kind of forgets why this was a good idea. Was it ever?

Each newcomer has the same reaction: a sheepish, nervous, shy nod to Ilya, Scott, and Baldwin before their eyes greet Shane Hollander and widen. One even says “*Shane Hollander??*” and Ilya chuckles to himself. Even if your gaydar was absolute shit, you should be able to get Shane. Fucking *Scott Hunter* got Shane, and he’s scraping 60% now.

Maybe they're surprised that such a huge name is gay, or willing to be seen here. Many of them had the same reaction to Ilya at first, and they're over it by now, more annoyed by him than anything else. But tonight, it's more obvious than ever: The league's three biggest stars are in one room, and it's the gay room. In fact, with each new arrival, he sees the recognition on all of their faces. It's not just the three superstars, it's everyone. Maybe it's because they're at the awards, so the best would already be here, but... These are *all* good players.

Gay hockey players are better at the sport, but it's becoming clear they're also more fun. Any air of awkward silence dissipates when they get enough guys to stop noticing the new ones come in. People stop craning their necks to see who else is here. They just start to laugh and, importantly, commiserate. Some guys chicken out and they end up with 12 people.

"This isn't even my first time in this hotel," #7 laughs and gets a couple other chuckles. The hotel is a little notorious for keeping secrets on the outskirts of Vegas, and everyone in the room knows something about that life. They discuss some similar grievances and strategies and every guy has a look of relief on his face to finally hear and say these things out loud. The camaraderie is quickly worth the insanity Ilya has been feeling. Shane's eyes are welling up. The man cries so easily.

Shane and Ilya stay pretty far away from each other, and Scott has been put on "heart-eyes" duty to throw a wet blanket over any visible affection pouring out of either of them. Even this open-minded group of their peers wouldn't accept the rivals in a relationship for, depending on how you measure, almost a decade. Scott doesn't even know that part. It's another reminder for Ilya that their situation is impossible, if they're in this room of the only people in the world who might understand, and they're still unable to be a couple.

"I'm surprised you guys are ok in such close quarters," #16 comments, his eyes a little too suspicious for Ilya's liking. "Don't you have beef?"

"We don't hate each other." Shane responds. Some guys look confused. "With this group you'd think you could imagine being one way in public and another in private." He doesn't tell them anything else, but everyone should know they get along. In a few months, they are scheduled to tell the world they are friends and start a charity together. This could be a test-run for that.

"Rivalry sells well," Ilya adds with a flippant gesture, "Keeps us competitive. League would be boring if I had to play against just losers like you all. But we are cool."

"Actually? Can I just say," #11 speaks up, leaning against the wall, "This would make a fucking killer team."

"The league should make the CHODE into an actual award." #15 suggests, "Probably have better players than the Conn Smythe."

"Ok. I'll bite," #23 sighs. "CHODE?"

Ilya giggles, "You will bite CHODE?"

“Champion of Hunter’s Order of Dick Enthusiasts.”

#7 shakes his head in awe, “It’s genius. No RASHYCOCK, but nothing ever will be.”

“I like OLDSHAFT.” #16 offers, “Ones Like Daddy Scott Hunter And Friends Tribe.”

Ilya giggles again, “Hunter, he likes OLDSHAFT, you should go for it.”

Shane rolls his eyes. “Ones, Friends, and Tribe all mean the same thing. It’s redundant.”

“It should just be simple.” #14 agrees, “Gay and Bisexual Professional Hockey Union.”
Shane nods aggressively.

“GABPHU? That doesn’t even make any sense.”

“Ooh Professional Hockey Union of Cock Kings!”

“No, if we can get RASHYCHODE to—”

“Ok.” Scott objects, “That’s about as good a time as any to get started.” It turns out, Scott has asked them here for a reason, and surprisingly it’s not to think of genital acronyms that include his name (potentially twice). He explains how he is scheduled to give a speech tomorrow at the awards, that the league wants him to tell everyone that his first year out has been great, and most importantly, that the league has been welcoming for him. He tells them his plan to talk about Baldwin’s contract instead. After an unintentional moment of harrowed silence following Baldwin’s story, they read what Scott has written so far.

“But this part about the league itself being ok is bullshit,” #18 sits on the bed with Scott’s phone in his hand. “Didn’t Crowell basically threaten you?”

“Oh, yeah.” Scott nods.

“Are they going to make you do this every year?”

Ilya interjects, “This is why we need people coming out.” He gestures around the room, “No one needs to hear Hunter give annual State of the Cock-Sucking Union speech.”

“Why not?” #15 laughs and adds on, “He could tell the audience that year’s advances in fellatio.”

“Rozanov, you seem like you’d be the next up,” #16 declares.

“If I win the cup, ok.” These guys don’t know he’s heading for Ottawa, where he’ll likely never even see the *playoffs* again. “But uhh my situation is... complicated.”

“Yeah. Whose isn’t?”

“No.” How does he explain this without outing his relationship? He starts sputtering. “Is *bad* complicated... like... It—”

“Russia.” Scott looks at Ilya like he’s dumb. “I mean. It’s *Russia*, guys.” He shifts his gaze between Ilya and the other guys. Why didn’t Ilya just say that? Maybe he *is* dumb. The

players murmur in sympathy and move on. “Anyway, is it still really going to be just me all year?”

“I want people to know there are more of us,” #14 says, “but I can’t come out right now.”

“Fucking great.” Shane grumbles sarcastically and the poor rookie looks devastated to have offended Shane Hollander. The kid probably grew up with a Shane Hollander poster and is on whatever diet because Shane mentioned it once in an interview. “So no one wanted to be the first and now no one wants to be the next?”

Ilya furrows his brow, “What if we all come out?”

Now *everyone* looks around like he’s dumb.

“No.” Ilya palms his forehead. How does he explain this with the amount of CTE in this room? “What if we came out... what the fuck is the word for this?”

“Anonymously?” Shane guesses correctly.

“Yes, thank you. Anonymously.” A few guys look between the two, like maybe one of their faces will tell them how Shane just read his mind. Hunter just looks defeated.

“How the fuck do we do that?” #16 asks.

“Hunter can say it in his speech,” Ilya looks at Scott. “He can talk about the 29 of us.”

“29!?” The room kind of gasps in unison. Shane even looks surprised, which helps anyone who might have thought they were telepathic. Or involved.

Ilya rolls his eyes. “Yes. Only 29. Out of how many hundreds of players...?”

“736.” Shane mutters.

“Nerd.” Ilya says with a little more vitriol and less affection than he would at home.

“Fuck off,” Shane spits back, “It’s 32 teams times 23 players. Everyone should know that.” He knows Ilya is fully aware of the exact number. They have that number of index cards sitting on a desk in the temporary office at the cottage. But it’s a little fun to fight with Shane in front of everyone, knowing what they’ll be up to later. Ilya tries to not look visibly aroused when Shane scowls at him.

“More than that, if you count the 90 potential reserve players per team,” #14 says, maybe trying to win Shane’s good favor back with hockey numbers.

#18 scoffs, “Yeah, like it would matter if one of them came out.”

Ilya makes a point to ignore them. “So yes, 29. This is probably not even half, though.”

“You know that reminds me.” Scott says with a furrowed brow, “Baldwin and Lundin, you both said the same thing, that Crowell tried to talk you out of it, and told you there are no

other players, or that I'm the only one. I wonder how many other guys he's said that to."

Shane scrunches his face. "That's so fucking cruel, when he knows there are others? He just lets everyone think they're alone?"

"I'd love to shut him up," Scott's smile twists darkly.

"Tell the whole room tomorrow, we have you and 28 others. After that, he will not be able to say that to anyone else."

Council of (Mostly) Straight Elders group chat

Ilya: hello friends

Ilya: hunters speech tomorrow is going to say how many gays there are, so news will start witch hunt.

Ilya: Plan of action for 120 straight people?

Vaughan: run and hide not an option?

Marly: all 120 of us come out and say we're gay

Hayes: That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard

Hayes: I love it.

Pike: ok what if we all post the same exact message. Something about how it doesn't matter who's gay

Pike: once 120 people post it, everyone else will too they'll just think it's a trend

Pike: maybe other people will join in and we can recruit more members?

Hayes: boring but probably more logical

Vaughan: yep this is the play.

Vaughan: "Hunter told you about the 30 in his group, but let us tell you about the hundreds in ours." or sth

Hayes: sucks we don't have a cool name like Justice League or X-Men or anything.

Ilya: the gays don't have a consistent name either.

Vaughan: yeah we've been switching between Rozanov's guys, Ilya's avengers, Ilya's army, and the Queer Corps.

Ilya: fewer dick jokes than the gays suggestions

Pike: they have dick jokes in their names??

Marly: still think we should all be seen like holding hands with other dudes

Marly: I think that would do it

Marly: confuse the hell out of the press

Ilya: brother Marly do I need to move you to the other group?

Ilya: tbh this would work

Ilya: but I can not ask 120 straight men to be seen with men holding hands and kissing in public.

Hayes: ...but can WE ask them?

“Ladies and gentlemen, and hockey players, and everyone in between... I’m here to give you an update on how wonderful my life is.” Some murmured laughter comes from the crowd at the awards. Scott continues from the podium, “The league has asked me to say a few words about how this year has been for me. And actually, my life *is* wonderful. I’m openly gay with the love of my life and most of my coworkers have been great. Never been happier. Thanks for asking.”

He makes a show of folding the paper he was reading and unfolding another. “That’s as much as I’ll say for myself tonight, and instead I’ll speak for a community. See, I am part of a much larger group than you would think, and I mean that quite literally— There’s actually a group. Some day we’ll be able to thank our ringleader publicly, but for now you just get me. I’m the face of this group because of a very fair process that decided who would be *it*... and do *this*,” he gestures to the podium, “for the rest of his life. Be the first, be the sacrificial lamb. It’s been a terrible hazing ritual. I don’t recommend it.” There is some awkward laughter from a crowd that doesn’t really know what to do with this information, unsure where this is going.

“I share this podium with— Christ... *twenty eight*...” he says the number like he still can’t believe it, “...of my closest friends, most of whose identities I don’t even know. Because they’re not even really out to each other.”

Some whispers of “*twenty eight?*” are scattered in the room.

“Here’s the thing— You know a player like us. You’ve played against one, and you’ve played on a team with one. They’ve checked you and knocked you out, they’ve stolen the puck from you, they’ve passed to you. They’ve taunted you on the ice about your mother, or your wife, or your face...” *or your age*, Ilya can hear the restraint in Hunter’s voice to not call him out specifically. “And, as we all found out after this year’s cup, some have blocked your shot from the goal.” People are looking around for Baldwin, but he wasn’t invited.

“The group is working hard to improve conditions so more guys feel comfortable coming out and joining me up here. Having vocally out players is the best way to make that happen. But we can’t have out players if they are removed from the league as soon as they come out. So the list might be more difficult to grow than we thought, because it turns out the league doesn’t want us. Let me tell you a story that only about 30 people want me to tell.” Scott breathes deeply, clearly gaining courage from the inhale. “Before Baldwin came out, Vancouver expressed interest in re-signing him, and he even had interest from other teams. After coming out to his team management, Baldwin’s contract renegotiations stopped, and no

other team picked them back up. He knew this would happen. He knew coming out would effectively be a forced retirement from the sport. We all know this. Other players have spoken to their coaches, agents, management, and received the same advice: It's a career killer. You'd be out of the league. *I* received that advice, but not everyone is the captain of their team." Earlier that day, Scott sat in Ilya's hotel room with Baldwin to write this speech. These are all words he chose.

Scott continues with his own words, "Imagine waiting until you're retired to live your life, loving someone in secret your entire career." Ilya spots Shane a few tables down, who is looking down at his glass and rubbing his thumb across his own hand. "But this summer Baldwin is finally getting married, and we couldn't be happier for him." Scott smiles and then asks the audience, "Right?"

None of them could have predicted the standing ovation that starts to filter through the room at this question. Ilya jumps to his feet when he realizes what's happening, and stands with the rest of the room to cheer for Baldwin, who wasn't even invited to the stupid event. Ilya sneaks another glance to see Shane is glassy-eyed with tears, obviously. He needs to pull it together if he wants to appear not-personally-affected-by-this. Because they are telepathic, Shane squares his shoulders off and schools his facial expression as soon as Ilya thinks that.

Ilya carefully picks out who is not standing. Some are standing out of peer pressure and not clapping. Some have a look like Shane's, like maybe they are personally affected. He memorizes those names, too. He makes a mental note to watch the crowd shots tomorrow with a pen and paper. Through a gap in bodies, he sees Commissioner Crowell seated, fuming and staring daggers at Scott Hunter on the stage.

As people resettle in their seats, Hunter continues. "So if you want the 'Gay State of the Union', thanks—" *Rozanov* really almost slips out of Scott's mouth. "You shouldn't be asking about my life, because I'm the minority. I have a lot of advantages that allowed me to come out and keep my job. For everyone else, it's awful. The league isn't ready for us all to come out, regardless of whether the fans, our teammates, or our personal lives would benefit. There is still a culture of bigotry; players can use slurs and get away with them, and teams can effectively excommunicate a player for liking men." Scott looks toward Crowell's table. Ilya noticed he's been avoiding looking at that section of the room, but for some reason now he's facing the commissioner, "But in the meantime, it's been far from lonely, and we want everyone to know we're working to make it better."

He smiles a little. "So you can keep asking me to do this every year, though after this you probably won't, and I'll continue to tell the truth as agreed upon by our committee. And we promise to keep trying to add to this list of out players every year, as much as we are allowed."

I just realized as I was posting this that tonight is ACTUALLY the (United States) State of the Union address. Scott Hunter will always be my president, this is my State of the Union speech.

Numbered guys at the meetup:

#7

#11 (we already kind of know him? I think I can say he is a minor book-gay and gets his name called out in this chapter)

#14 (sad he made Daddy Shane mad 😞, wants a boring acronym, likes hockey numbers)

#15 (CHODE supremacy)

#16 (likes OLDSHAFT)

#18

#23

(#13, Montreal rookie, wasn't there)

Up next: The group meeting directly following this speech; Scott Hunter gets another close friend (it's not Bennett why are so many people saying Bennett in the comments??)

Chapter 8: After Party

Chapter Summary

Same night, after the MLH award show

Chapter Notes

Your favorite character is about to get their long-anticipated redemption arc!!

No, not Troy Barrett you fucking psychos, he's not even dating men yet. I'm talking about Shane Hollander's gaydar!! ...that's not everyone's favorite character? Why not?

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

Six guys head from the award show ballroom to Ilya's hotel room. It's risky for them to be gathering in the same hotel as the event, but their jitters are getting the best of them, and they jog up the stairs and through the hallways. When the door closes behind the last guy, Ilya breathes a sigh of relief. "Is a rush, yes?" He looks around and smiles at Shane, but it seems like no one notices.

At least they had the foresight to put away Shane's clothes when he left to go back to his own room this morning. That could have made things awkward.

The five guys who came just for the queer congress and not for the MLH awards quickly join them. Apparently they all had a viewing party at a bar nearby, so they're all a little drunk and Ilya is honestly jealous. He pulls out the bottles of alcohol leftover from the gathering the night before and people help themselves.

A knock on the door brings Ilya back to the peephole. "Hunter!" He squeals, letting him in. "You said so many words tonight!"

"Thanks? Downstairs is buzzing, guys." He turns to Ilya, "I have like 300 journalists to call back. They're asking about the group which... we kind of knew they would, right? What do we do?"

"Ok. Maybe we write a statement or something?" Ilya furrows his brow. He's not sure how much of this should be made public, with so many sensitive moving parts.

"Well it's not like you can give an interview!" Shane snaps at Ilya, looking a little distraught at the prospect.

Scott shrugs, “I mean, *I* could.” Ilya can tell he’s fighting an eye-roll.

Ilya looks around to get someone else’s opinion, but the group just has more questions. #16 asks, “Isn’t there gonna be a witch-hunt?”

“Oh for sure.” Hunter says, “When I said 28, every reporter in the room started numbering a list.”

“#28plusScott is trending on Twitter.”

“Is there a plan for that?” All eyes turn to Ilya.

“I am bisexual.” Ilya smiles. “I also have a straight army.”

“Of course you do,” Baldwin sighs, replicating both Shane and Scott’s reaction when they heard that news.

“Actually, I think I’m in that.” #18 says.

“You are.” Ilya confirms. At one point, #18 verbally assaulted a troll on Baldwin’s coming out post, which was enough to be let in.

They chat for a few minutes about guys who could be trusted in the straight army. Ilya finally gets to ask them if they’d prefer to just be in the chat than suspiciously absent from it. Shane eyes him cautiously, and Ilya knows he’ll have to answer one hundred million questions later. If he could get Shane to do something ally-worthy and just join the group, it would get Pike off their backs.

“Speaking of gay armies... can we talk about how Ryan Price fucking murdered that asshole from Carolina?”

“We do not say names here.” Ilya corrects, “But yes, to answer the question, it was awesome.”

“Price is an open secret, I thought.”

“I saw him on Grindr once.”

“He had a boyfriend in New Jersey.”

“Does not matter.”

“You’re telling me you don’t talk about any of us?” #11 asks, “not even with Hunter? Or...” he looks at Shane and then furrows his brow as if he’s wondering why he thought Ilya would talk to Shane.

“No, he really doesn’t.” Hunter says, “pisses me off, too, because I’m nosy as hell. Sometimes he gives me a number. Like, I’m 1, Baldwin is 5, Hollander is 6... That kind of thing. He’ll say ‘*you will never guess what 10 did today!*’,” Scott puts on a terrible Russian accent, “But I don’t fucking know who 10 is!”

The group laughs, and everyone asks for their numbers. Ilya considers it but declines to tell them. “I’ll tell you when you come out. Is just the order I asked.” He shrugs and deliberately doesn’t look at Shane for a reaction to that. He’s probably pissed he’s 6th. Maybe later he’ll get jealous-possessive-Shane instead of million-questions-Shane.

“Anyway, Price is getting traded.” Baldwin announces.

This time, Ilya is too shocked to correct the name usage, “Again?”

“Yeah, apparently he freaked out and had another meltdown about ending Riney Glickman’s career.”

“—Tiny Dickman.” #7 corrects and there are some giggles from people who aren’t still shocked or concerned for Price.

“And that’s not even the worst part.” Baldwin continues, nonplussed by the group’s attention deficit and obsession with genital puns, “You know who needs an enforcer? To protect their star forward? Because he was recently brutalized by a hoard of gay musketeers?”

Half the room groans. “He is going to Toronto?” Ilya asks to confirm. He pulls out his phone to text his #8. This can’t be happening. He knows from Hayes how shitty the Toronto team will be for Price. And protecting Dallas Kent seems morally worse than damaging Tiny Dickman, so Price’s mental health probably won’t be any better there. But maybe he’ll convince Troy Barrett to come out. The room murmurs similar sentiments, maybe without the speculation about Barrett.

“Holy shit did you guys see this?” #14 turns his phone screen to the guy next to him. “Fredericks, from Carolina, just posted on Instagram.”

Ilya joins everyone else in the room in pulling up Instagram. The picture is of the huge defenseman holding a tiny rainbow flag.

@fredericksandhockeysticks

Actually, @ScottHunter, you have 29 close friends. Being married to my beautiful wife doesn’t make me less bisexual. The guys (and ladies) I disappointed before marriage would say the same. Looking forward to the next gay agenda meeting. Or if there’s a newsletter or something, can you sign me up? Thanks. Love you for everything you’ve done (as much as you can love a division rival). 🏳️‍🌈🏳️‍🌈🏳️‍🌈

Ilya’s mouth hangs open, astounded. The research to find mean chirps should have uncovered affairs with men. But all he found for Fredericks was an embarrassing karaoke video that Ilya told his guys to quote at him during the playoffs. Fredericks had never done anything bad enough to warrant a really nasty chirp, but Ilya had some stuff prepared about his sister in rehab just in case. No one got a chance to use anything against him in the actual games, and now Ilya is glad for it.

“No one clocked this??” They all look dumbfounded at each other.

Shane, though, is grinning. “How’s that gaydar, Rozanov?” Ilya realizes with a cold rush that Fredericks is the man Ilya roasted Shane’s gaydar about. Ok. So Shane is 1 for 5 from that night in Boston.

Ilya wants to lick the smug smile off Shane's face. “You could not even clock *yourself*, Hollander, I had to—” Ilya stops himself. “Rose Landry had to tell you.”

“Wait, what?” Scott looks amused.

“Is that true?” #14 asks.

“Which part?” #16 grumbles, obviously referring to whatever Ilya was about to say before catching himself.

Shane turns a little pink. “This isn’t about my— Point is, I said Fredericks last year and Rozanov said no and roasted me for it.”

Hunter can clearly see how easily this could turn into foreplay and pointedly tries to save the moment. He says, maybe *too* loudly, “Well, either way, looks like we’ll have another active player out after all.”

Ilya ignores Hunter’s attempt to keep them civil and keeps up the tirade on Shane’s life: “...Because you also said four other guys who I will not even name, they are so embarrassing for you.” It’s probably dangerous to be goading Shane on like this in front of everyone. At some point one of them will give away that this exact kind of argument *is* foreplay.

Now fully in contest mode, Shane's face is angry, “No, now I kind of want to know about those guys too. I bet I was right!”

“Ok, who was it?” #18 challenges. Ilya and Shane are harshly reminded that other people exist, and some of them might start realizing that they are side-characters intruding on an intimate moment.

Shane looks warily at Ilya. Even speculation shouldn’t really be allowed in front of other people, and he knows that. “Go ahead,” Ilya waves his hand, “You are so wrong you are not at risk of outing anyone.”

Shane sheepishly rattles off four names to increasingly loud laughter in the room. “Ok!” He snaps, “That’s what you all would have said about Fredericks an hour ago!”

“Hollander, that’s just a list of hot men.” #15 points out, “This is a wish list, not good gaydar.”

It’s true. They are all Shane’s type and he probably didn’t even realize he had crushes on any of them, so Ilya joins the group laughing at him. Shane glares at his laughter and says, “Fine. I’ll just shoot my shot with them and let you all know how it goes.” He probably thinks that would make Ilya mad, but it's doing the exact opposite. It had never occurred to Ilya to use Shane as bait to lure people into admitting they like men. But now that it has, Ilya is grateful for his dark suit pants not giving away his growing predicament.

“If anyone could convince them, it's probably Shane Hollander.”

“Can we put money on this?”

“I am so curious what Hollander’s flirting game is like.”

“I would watch that straight bait porn.”

Ilya needs everyone to leave the room for what he wants to do right now, and Scott actually steps forward like he might have to get between them. “Ok, Shane, you do that. In the meantime, can we call Fredericks? I have his number from a charity thing we did a while ago.” He holds his phone practically in Ilya's face so he has to tear his eyes away from Shane. They will have to pick this back up later, he laments. He tries to not look super obvious about shaking himself out of it.

Ilya punches the numbers from Scott into his own phone and calls. He puts it on speaker phone and shushes everyone.

“Hello?” A voice picks up.

“Hello, Fredericks! Congratulations from twelve of your new family.” Ilya makes a gesture and the room awkwardly mumbles greetings to the man on the other line.

“What— is this the *group*? Who is this?” He laughs, “It does *not* sound like Scott Hunter.”

“I’m here, though.” Hunter responds.

“No, it is Ilya Rozanov and... friends.”

“Fuck off.” Fredericks says, and does not elaborate. There’s silence, or as much silence as there could be in a room with 12 grown men, before he says “You’re serious?”

“Uhh yes. Am sorry, can put you on with Hunter if you want.”

“Or Shane Hollander.” Someone mutters.

“What?” The voice on the line sounds actually confused about that.

Shane rolls his eyes. “Hey Fredericks, it’s Shane... Hollander. Welcome aboard. Thank you for doing that tonight.”

“What... in the *fuck* is going on?” Fredericks sputters. “Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander are in the same room? The same, *gay* room?”

“It’s weird for all of us.” #16 says, laughing. Ilya doesn’t know what he means by that, but ok.

“How’s the announcement going for you?” Scott asks.

“Could be better. Crowell wants to meet with me.”

“Yeah, he wants to tell you to say it was a joke. Or a mistake.” Scott shakes his head, “He wants you to think there’s no one else out here.”

“I didn’t think there was.” Fredericks says. “I looked at my wife when I heard your speech and we decided, fuck I probably need to be doing that. I’ve got some leeway, being married to a woman. I hope it just makes it easier for the guys who maybe can’t do that.”

“Carolina’s locker room sucks though, right?”

“Yeah. I told them I’m putting in my trade request as soon as I can.”

Everyone looks around uncomfortably. If Baldwin couldn’t find a team that wanted him once he was out, it might be an issue.

Ilya chooses to ignore the issue and claps Hunter on the shoulder. “We got two this year! Next year three.”

As the group starts making plans to head to the actual, MLH-sanctioned, heterosexual after-party, Shane says his goodbyes and leaves their mini after-party. No one is surprised; it's well-known that Shane Hollander doesn't stay out late. Ilya is very careful not to look at him in any way as he leaves. Once the door closes, though... who thought it was a good idea to put a dozen catty gays in the same room? Well, that's a mean stereotype. But at least five of them actually *are* catty and ready to read Shane to filth.

“Ok I know I’ve had a day to sleep on it, but I’m still like... *Shane fucking Hollander is gay?*”

“Probably bi. What was that about Rose Landry, Roz?”

“Oh my *god* Rozanov are you gonna hit that??”

“What?” Ilya sputters. “No, I— can you imagine.” He doesn’t have to imagine, he can remember this morning. He actually probably will hit it again tonight.

“It was hard *not* to imagine with you two smoldering at each other.”

“For real, warn us next time there’s an event with a splash zone.”

“The room physically cooled ten degrees when he walked out.”

“We don’t *hate* each other, but he’s still—”

“You can’t be seriously saying you wouldn’t get in that man’s pants,” #16 argues.

Scott exhales a tired sigh, “I think anyone would.” Ilya has to restrain the glare he wants to shoot at Scott Hunter’s stupid fucking face, but Hunter is speaking to #16, “Why don’t you go for it? I think Roz is seeing someone.”

“Are you?”

Ilya shrugs in confirmation, begrudgingly grateful for Hunter continuing to bail him out.

The men all take this into consideration. Finally Baldwin says, “It would be hard, anyway. To date another player.”

The room murmurs in understanding.

“Who would even want to? Hockey players are disgusting.” #23 quickly corrects himself, “No offense.”

“True. Plus, it would be impossible to stay a secret,” #11 admits.

“It would be worse for Rozanov and Hollander,” says— wait, *Scott*? Back stabber! “Can you imagine the media circus? The accusations? God, no thank you.”

“True. Rozy, you should probably stay away from that.”

Everyone agrees. Some of them look like they’re piecing things together, others are two concussions away from not being able to drive, so they’re just imagining the hypothetical.

“It would be hot though.” #15 says, and the room brightens with laughter.

People file out slowly, some opting for a gay bar instead of the heterosexual afterparty. Soon, Ilya is just left with Scott, Baldwin, #7, and #23. They’re all a little older and probably haven’t been to a club since a disco in 1977.

“Fredericks, huh?” Baldwin says into his drink, “Who would have thought?”

“Hollander, I guess.” #7 says, and Ilya scowls at him.

“Does Fredericks even count? I mean he’s married to a woman.” #23 whines.

Ilya throws an empty plastic cup at him. “Bisexuals are real, asshole.”

“Ilya?” Scott furrows his brow. Uh-oh. If Hunter is using Ilya’s first name out loud, there’s something up. “Are there other guys like that in the group? Married to women?” There’s not much Ilya could say here to protect the identity of Scott’s own teammate, so Ilya just confirms with a nod and his best innocent *why-are-you-asking* face. Scott hums and takes a long swig of his drink.

“Yeah, those count. We can’t be picky,” Baldwin doesn’t pick up on Scott’s potential realization.

They sit and drink for a while, talking through the weekend’s events, sharing hopes for the future of the group, gossiping about the other guys (though Ilya just listens and doesn’t partake in that). Ilya, #7, and #23 share some of their obstacles to coming out, within reason, and commiserate. It’s so cool to be able to have this kind of conversation and Ilya easily loses track of time.

#23 is talking about his Mormon family's objections to his sexuality when there's a knock on the door. Ilya curses and gets up from his spot on the carpet. He opens the door ready to warn him, but the scolding starts before he has the chance. "Are you just not answering your fucking phone? It's almost midnight, I've been—" Shane makes his way into the room but stops at the sight of Scott and #23 on the small couch, Baldwin on the cuck chair, and #7 on the floor leaning against the wall. "Hi," Shane says like the wind was just knocked out of him.

#7 and #23 look at each other with twin shocked, amused expressions, open-mouthed smiles invading their faces. Baldwin asks, "Hollander?" The rest of the question hangs in the air. *What are you doing here? Didn't you go to bed? Why are you in pajamas? Why do you look like you've been waiting to get railed?*

"The rest of them went to the club or to the party downstairs." Scott smoothly tries to give him an out, as if Shane had come back looking for everyone, and not just one person. But this is dumb, Ilya thinks. It's just Baldwin, he's not even an active player anymore. #7 and #23 are cool and they've all just shared enough for Ilya to have blackmail for years. If Shane leaves now he might not come back before he goes to sleep.

Plus, it's a little hard to deny what's happening here— Shane is out of his awards show suit and is wearing sweatpants. His hair is damp from a recent shower.

"Shane," Ilya draws out the name in a whine, "Just..." He gets a ginger ale from the minifridge, hands it to Shane, and gestures at the bed. He goes back to sitting on the floor, leaning his back against the bed. These guys can know that they are maybe more than civil with each other.

Shane stands uncomfortably holding the can, clearly trying not to panic. Finally he rolls his eyes, "Fine." He sits on the edge of the bed so his feet are next to Ilya on the floor. Baldwin's eyebrows are high and Scott grins.

"Ok," Baldwin finally breaks the silence, "So you like, *actually* can't come out." It's unclear who he's talking to, but it doesn't matter, it's true for them both.

"You missed it," Ilya looks up at Shane, "They talked about us after you left. They said it would be hot."

"And poor little Rivera looked like he was going to die picturing it," Scott stays smiling.

"Do you mean Little-Shane?" Ilya grins. The relief of being able to talk about these guys is overwhelming, and he's not sure he'll ever get over it. #14 *did* look like he was going to keel over after the older guys brought up the prospect of Ilya-Shane sex.

"What are you talking about? He's not little-me!" Shane protests, "He clearly has a giant crush on you."

"And...? So do you." Ilya looks back up and folds his hands out. Shane nudges Ilya with his knee a little. "So, he is Little-Shane."

“You knew about this?” Baldwin takes that tiny hint as a chance to look at Scott and gesture to Shane and Ilya. Scott nods.

#7 is still visibly amused and shakes his head, “Why do I get the sense the league would be more mad about this than all the... other stuff we've been doing?”

“You’re not wrong. This rivalry sells a lot of jerseys,” Scott responds bitterly. “They’d be pissed.”

“Are you going to, like, stop being rivals?” #23 asks, his face still shocked, “Now that you’re... well I guess... when did...?”

Scott leans forward and Ilya can almost see him salivating for the gossip.

“Don’t give them anything, Hollander. Hunter is so nosy.” Ilya looks back at #23 and deadpans, “Yesterday. Last night it started.” Shane laughs.

Scott turns to #23 to correct the record, “I found out in December, so obviously before then.”

“Yeah,” Shane smiles, “It was the night before that.” Ilya giggles. He doesn’t really get the chance to hear Shane interact with people like this, and it makes his heart feel warm. He wraps his arm around Shane’s calf, tilting his head to rest on Shane’s knee. He’s a little worried the PDA might make Shane uncomfortable until he feels a hand tuck into his hair.

Baldwin takes in that familiar gesture with a more concerned look, “So it’s like... for real? What, are you *dating*?”

“This is my other question,” Scott nods.

“No.” Ilya says from his position making as much contact with Shane’s leg as possible, “He is just a warm mouth to me.”

“Yep, it’s just convenient.” Shane plays with a curl on Ilya’s head. Ilya doesn’t have to look up to hear the smile in his voice. “Simple, really. No strings attached.”

“Zero strings.” Ilya nuzzles his head into Shane’s knee a little more and hugs his leg with his other arm, too. #7 and #23 laugh.

“I expect that kind of joke from Rozanov,” Scott shakes his head, “but not *you*.”

“I have rubbed off on him.” Ilya says with a wink, “Actually, earlier today I—” Shane pulls his hair and nudges him with his leg.

“So?” Shane changes the subject, “Are we talking about all the secrets?”

“We probably should.” Baldwin and Scott nod in consent. Ilya looks up at Shane seriously. “I will tell you but you can’t ask how we know this.” Shane also nods. Ilya looks at #7 and #23, too. They look a little curious but follow Shane’s lead. #7 was in on the group’s playoff strategy, so he might be able to guess how they acquired this information. “The league rigged the playoffs so Vancouver would play Carolina. So Carolina would win.”

#23's eyes widen again. The poor guy had just gotten over the shock of Shane and Ilya, now this. "What? Why would they do that?"

"Money?" Scott shrugs, "I can't think of any other reason."

"You think they had money on the game, or someone paid them or..." Shane asks. He looks like someone just shot his childhood dog. Ilya knows he still has a lot of faith in the league and this is probably shaking his core.

"No clue."

"If we do anything with the information, which again, *I don't know where we got it*," Baldwin says with emphasis, "I think we should give it to a journalist. They'll know how to do something about it."

"I have a couple of reporters who were good to me about everything," Scott says, "I could ask around. Lots of people would kill for that scoop."

"Might distract them from trying to guess 28 names."

#7 looks grim for the first time tonight, "I thought Baldwin's contract was going to be the shittiest thing the league could do."

Scott shakes his head. "Never underestimate how shitty this league can get."

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: fun off-season summer shenanigans, some Fall 2018 ones too.

A list for you:

#7 now knows about Hollanov

#8 is getting traded to Toronto to protect Dallas Kent 🙄

#14 Ilya thinks is Little-Shane, has a name now (not canon if we didn't know that already)

#15 thinks Hollanov would be hot (who doesn't?)

#16 would get in Shane's pants (who wouldn't?)

#18 was already in the ally army

#23 now knows about Hollanov, is Mormon?, thinks hockey players are too gross to date (who doesn't?)

Tumblr user @the-witch-of-the-wandering-ways [drew this scene for us!](#)

Chapter 9: Underground Journalism and the other kind

Chapter Summary

Summer/off-season 2018

Chapter Notes

A “social media chapter” in which there's a lot of talk about social media and then we don't actually see any of it, sorry. Help from journalists, allies, and Ottawa.

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

In the days and weeks following Scott's speech, Baldwin and Fredericks coming out is secondary news to most people, which Ilya considers a win for normalized gay hockey. Some serious journalists even ignore the whole “30 people” of it all and focus on what Scott actually said: The league forced a gay player into retirement. Scott has a favorite journalist, Kavita Kingsley, from his own media circus last year. She's a senior MLH reporter at a high-profile sports magazine who has been kind to Scott and tough on the league. Ilya agrees to be in contact with her on the condition of anonymity.

On the same condition, some of his players provide quotes for her. They confirm what Scott said in his speech: they would be more likely to come out if they felt like their jobs were safe, and there are instances of homophobia that don't get penalties out on the ice. Ilya instructs them to say nothing about the cup bet, the group itself, or its sordid activities, and they listen, for some reason that Ilya has given up trying to figure out. But because she is a good journalist, Kavita does put together that there's a tradition about the cup to be upheld here, at least.

Kavita doesn't know this was just a test. Once the article comes out and it's clear she's a trustworthy and thorough journalist, Ilya and Scott decide they can disclose the bigger scandal. They inform her they have reason to believe the league rigged the cup playoffs. They can't inform her exactly what happened for the same reason the league can't accuse Baldwin of anything. The public shouldn't know they were *also* trying to rig the cup. As much as Ilya wants it to be public knowledge that he is better than Crowell at basically everything, he cares about his group more.

She says it's a big accusation, but since their other story was a good lead, she'll look into it.

Meanwhile, the journalists who *do* choose to focus on the 30 people make the summer actually pretty entertaining. Between the absurd task of trying to name 30 gay players in a league of 700-plus (where are Shane and Little-Shane for this figure?) and Ilya's straight army confusing the rumors and muddying the waters, all sorts of things can happen unnoticed.

Following his speech, 10 players message Scott Hunter asking for admission to the Gay Hockey Club. With their permission, he forwards them to the ringleader, who now has all but 6 teams collected like Pokémon. Ilya didn't even know half these newcomers existed aside from writing their names on a card once a year ago. Some of them are backups to the backups and will probably never see ice during gameplay. Still, he watches what interviews he can find, inspects their social media, and gauges them carefully to try and make sure they're not lying to infiltrate the ranks or anything like that.

Scott also forwards him some heartfelt messages from retired players who never saw this kind of representation during their careers and would have liked a group like this. Ilya is honored, obviously, but he's also a little pissed. Not that he can blame the guys, but he can't help but feel resentful. He could have had what his rookies have. The culture could have been shifted enough to make his and Shane's lives easier from the beginning. Each time he hears from them, he tells them that they can organize, and it would be helpful to have a fleet of retired players at the ready. But he gets the feeling if he doesn't organize them himself, it won't be happening, so he jots each name down on a new list. Still, any negative feeling is completely erased by the positive messages. One player has spent 10 years of retirement quietly transitioning. She has to stay out of the news, and has basically erased herself from professional hockey circles, but she sends her support and thanks them for helping the next generation.

Messages like that carry the group through the shitstorm of negative feedback, even from their colleagues. Dallas Kent starts a trend of about 8 assholes. #22 starts calling them the Axis powers because of how hard they work to prove they are not Allies. They "come out" as straight to mock the whole movement and try to get eyes on the people who aren't doing the same. It's undermined by how many straight players Ilya has, and mostly just tells the public who the assholes are. #7 starts a trend when he posts that he is "coming out as an asshole" to really drive the point home.

Dallas Kent's best friend, Troy Barrett, has never been active on social media, so it's not weird when he doesn't post anything. Ilya laments that this isn't happening during the season when they are all interviewed daily, and Barrett would have to give his opinion. Ilya thinks Barrett is probably glad for that same reason.

The straight players take their job seriously, and their efforts are sowing the chaos needed to distract the witch hunt. A surprising number of them are on board with Marlow's plan to confuse the public. They muddy the waters by posting pictures of themselves holding hands and kissing other guys' cheeks. It catches on beyond the 120 members, and Pike (of all people, for some reason) gets a dozen messages per day asking to be added to "whatever group is organizing this." They create another tiered group for these newcomers until they can sort out whether they're actually good. They delegate four members of the second tier

and Pike to sift through them. When everyone can know each other's identities, the power structures can be a lot more smooth.

The allies' campaign means Ilya can post the picture of himself kissing Shane's helmet at the 2017 All Star game where this whole thing started. He lets the paparazzi take pictures of him holding hands with Marly, because that boy really seemed like he just suggested the plan out of a need for affection. Shane posts the same picture of them, one hugging Hayden from behind, cheeks smushed together, and one arm-in-arm with Scott Hunter from the MLH awards. These aren't statements, really, because they land in a sea of similar pictures from hundreds of players. But after that, Shane has no choice but to join the ally chat. Most of the gays enter the group in the wave of new members. Only some real seriously closeted guys remain completely silent on the issue.

A few players from Ilya's gay fraternity attend Baldwin's wedding. There are so many hockey faces there, no one really registers that any one of them could be attending because they are gay. Ilya and Shane share a brief slow-dance that maybe exposes them as an item to the other henchmen at the wedding, but to anyone else, in the current confusion, it comes off as a continuation of the straight army's statement. They both make sure they're photographed doing similar stuff with other guys, too, but for a few minutes it feels like heaven. Ilya tries to catalog every single detail to memory. He is dancing with Shane in public. His plan is *working*.

At the end of the summer, after the frenzy has died down, #11 is still posting pictures with a VERY handsome man, effectively soft-launching his sexuality.

That one deserves a phone call.

"You could not wait to win a cup to do this?"

"Oh, sorry. I didn't tell you. The Swedish league heard what was happening over here and made me an offer, so I moved back home. My team wasn't going to have me. Crowell said I should never come out. I'm just safer here, I can live my life a little."

Ilya's heart breaks at that, for so many reasons, so he lashes out. "So this boy from Instagram, he is here in US lonely?"

"I heard you danced with Shane Hollander at Baldwin's wedding?" #11 retorts pointedly.

"Have a great season!"

"That's what I thought."

@LundinHockey

For the 2018-2019 season, I am happy to announce that I am heading back to the Swedish Hockey League. Thank you to Los Angeles for everything! Because Scott Hunter took away my only chance last year, I will also inform you that I am the 11th #FRIEND 🏳️‍🌈

RASHYCOCK winners + Roz group chat

Oldest Man Alive added Lundin to the group chat

Oldest Man Alive: Welcome Lundin!

Baldwin: can I object to Lundin and Fredericks being here because they didn't technically win a cup?

Ilya: FRIEND? What does this stand for

Oldest Man Alive: Not everything has to stand for anything

Oldest Man Alive: It's probably just a Friend of Rozanov or one of my "close friends" thing

Lundin: Fellowship of Rozanov's International Elite Nancies and Dandies

Oldest Man Alive: I hate every person in this organization.

There are public whispers about every player in the league being one of the 30 close friends, but Ilya's name in those conversations is overshadowed by his sudden move to Ottawa. It's not subtle to the avengers who were suspicious at the MLH awards or at Baldwin's wedding. But to the public, at least, it's a bigger mystery than anyone's sexuality and actually helps the whole hockey world move on. No one is smart enough to figure out that Ottawa and Ilya's sexuality are actually related.

Before he signs the contracts, he tells the general manager. Not that he is the infamous "ringleader" in Scott Hunter's speech, but that he will probably publicly come out during his tenure at the organization. It's terrifying, knowing what happened to Baldwin, that they could tear up the contract and no one else would pick it up. But he needs to know if this team is more like Hunter's New York or Baldwin's Vancouver. And for whatever reason— if they are supportive of gay hockey or just ecstatic to have Ilya Rozanov— the general manager embraces it. He vows to keep the secret between them and even says Ilya should let him know if anyone in the franchise is bad about it. It's a load off Ilya's mind to have management behind him.

Just a few years ago, the move to Ottawa would have killed Ilya. Shane's parents have been great, the Centaurs are a cool group of guys, and obviously seeing Shane more often is ideal, but he knows he isn't going to win any more cups. He realizes that at some point in the last year, his priorities changed. He wants his legacy in professional hockey to be an actual,

lasting impact. He still wants to win every game and score every goal, because he is still Ilya Rozanov. But he recognizes that his name might go down in history for something other than a point record. This idea might have sent his younger self spiraling, whether for his father's approval or his own expectations for himself, but now it's a hopeful, warm thought. Before now, he's never felt like he could contribute much outside of hockey prowess. Now, hockey prowess is the means to make his other endeavors successful.

During his first week in the Ottawa facilities for preseason practice, he is called into the social media office. Harris Drover, the weird little social media guy who also just started with the team, sits him down for an orientation. The team's PR people are concerned that Ilya's reputation on social media is a bit... chaotic. Ilya likes to engage with fans, which is great, but he has a tendency to overshare and ragebait. In short, he is a social media director's worst nightmare. He and Harris both see this as the first in a long line of stern meetings.

After a long discussion about what is and is not "on brand" for the Centaurs' star player to be commenting and posting, Harris finally makes a declaration with an air like he's been biting his tongue. "Ok, you've been staring at this Pride flag this whole time." Harris is still settling into his office, but already has a small rainbow flag on his desk next to the computer. "Is this going to be an issue for you?"

"Is rare to see one in a hockey building." Ilya explains, but he's surprised by how direct Harris is about it. They're both in a new workplace, and while Ilya has been cautiously testing waters all week, Harris is already comfortable calling out potential bigotry.

"Oh," Harris laughs, relieved, "I guess it is."

Ilya breathes. The way Harris immediately wanted to get this out in the open put Ilya on the back foot, like maybe he needs to prove himself somehow. But could he really be so reckless in sharing secrets with someone he just met? He's had this conversation approximately one million times now; his sexuality is well known among the queer players, and probably an open secret for many others. He's never thought of expanding out to a hockey *staff* army, but if he does, this is the guy to—

"Does it mean something to you?" Harris asks quietly. Ilya realizes he's still staring at the flag.

He nods. Sure he's come out to 50 different guys at this point, but his non-player list is much shorter: The Hollanders, Svetlana, and the Ottawa general manager. And the guys he's hooked up with... but Harris would definitely fall more under "friends, family, and work" than "potential new hookups."

"You remember when Scott Hunter came out?"

"Of course." Harris says, "I cried." Ilya is not surprised by this fact.

"I did that. Was me." Ilya has never been this bold in claiming credit for that evening, but it's true. Harris just looks confused so Ilya continues. "We made a bet, whoever wins cup needs to come out. He won, he comes out."

Harris's jaw drops. "He came out because of a *bet*?"

Ilya smiles and nods. "First year, there were 12 of us in the bet. 2018 cup there were 29. Now I have 40 for the 2019 cup."

"*You*?" Harris's jaw drops. "You're the *ringleader*!"

"I am." He smiles shyly.

"*Ilya*!! I've been *obsessed* with finding out who the leader is! That's incredible!" Harris's eyes are wide. He gets up and closes the office door, which Ilya should have probably done before outing himself. He sits back down at his desk, his eyes sparkling with fascination. "How does it work?"

"I text 40 guys every time we have to do anything. I decide who wins the cup. I decide when we attack. People come to me with league corruption... that stuff."

Harris laughs like Ilya is kidding about any of that. "They need to make a documentary about this."

He considers Harris for a moment. "If you ever wanted to start something... like this but for staff, I would help." Really, Ilya wants to do it himself. But he's already stretched so thin with the barracks he has. "It is not as much risk to be out as the players, but we also have the ally army to help us... Staff army might be good, with the corruption."

"I might have to think about that." He narrows his eyes a little bit. "You said corruption?"

"Yes. There is a lot of it."

Harris thinks about this for a minute and fills in a blank for himself, "But you can't call it out without outing yourself."

Ilya nods and shrugs. He's used to this reaction, the '*that's so sad*' when people realize how shitty any aspect of this situation is. But usually people don't have solutions. Harris looks like he has a solution.

"Have you heard of Rogue POTUS Staff?" Harris asks and judges Ilya's blank face correctly. "After Donald Trump took office in the U.S., a few government agencies started anonymous Twitter accounts to highlight issues in the administration. It was a good use of social media because no one knows who runs an account. It's very easy to be anonymous. You could start an account to blow the whistle on... whatever you're talking about."

Ilya sits back to think. He initially laughed at the idea of social media directors, he kind of thought it can't be a real job. But now he quickly sees how this kind of insight would be helpful for any kind of organization, including his own. "Is not a bad idea."

"I would help, obviously. You're on Twitter 24/7," he laughs, "You have a very recognizable style."

"Ok." Ilya points to the computer, "We can set it up."

“On a work computer?? Are you *trying* to get caught??” Harris balks and then shakes his head. “How did you survive this long without me?”

After that, Ilya makes the executive decision to let Harris in. He hasn’t known him long, but it seems like he can trust him and the expertise is desperately needed. He tells Harris about the league fixing the playoffs, but not about their own group doing the same. Harris is floored, like everyone is when they hear this news, but says they have to build up a following and credibility before dropping any huge bombs like that. So they make a few calls to get permission from Baldwin and start with something low-stakes.

@RogueMLH

5 teams vied for Baldwin’s contract, then dropped interest when he came out. 3 signed goalies with lower goals-saved averages.

@RogueMLH

Here is the list of those teams...

“Ilya,” Kavita Kingsley calls Ilya two days later, the day before before the season opener. “We need to talk.”

“Hi Kavita, how are you Kavita?” Ilya mocks the direct lack of greeting. But maybe she’s taking that tone for a reason....

“I have some good news and bad news.”

“You are journalist, I hope you have both.”

Kavita pauses and Ilya can tell she’s trying to be serious and not laugh. “I found evidence on the league execs. Someone was gambling money on the cup. I’m not sure how much Crowell himself knew but it’s definitely illegal.”

Ilya feels like he could dance, “Oh this is fantastic!”

“Yes. But Ilya?” Kavita sounds less than enthusiastic. “I’m rewatching the games to find out how they did it, and I can’t help but notice a few... issues... in teams that played against Carolina.”

“This is off the record?” Ilya learned that phrase recently and he’s been loving it.

“No, Ilya, I have a job to do. What can you tell me about Baldwin’s performance? And Litterick?”

“Who is Litterick?” Ilya is genuinely asking. The name rings a bell but he is so bad with names. “Oh!” It’s Little Dick. “The little wing boy from Carolina. Nice guy.”

“Yes. Were you aware he threw the cup? Or, at least, his performance during it? I’ve counted six instances in the final series where he sees an open player, looks at them, and passes to someone else.”

“He is not gay, if you are asking.” Ilya doesn’t like how close she is to getting this, or that she said they couldn’t be off-the-record.

“I wasn’t. But now it’s pretty public knowledge that there is also a coalition of straight allies. Do you know anything about that?”

“What do I say here? no comment?”

Kavita sighs. “If you’re not doing anything wrong, it’s just a great story. Huge amounts of people team up to fight bigotry at the MLH? I love it. But if there was a coordinated effort to illegally win the cup, it’s a very different story. Not much better than Crowell.”

Ilya wants to argue this point. It *is* much better than Crowell, as they were fighting for a moral correction, not a payout. “There was nothing illegal. I cannot stop you looking at it, but our names stay private, regardless?”

“Yes! Of course, I’m sorry if that wasn’t clear. I get why you wouldn’t tell me but it just makes my job harder.”

“If you wait... five? years, I will give you full story.”

Kavita laughs, “Yeah, I can’t do that. Let me know if you want to tell it sooner.” Ilya grumbles a confirmation. “My second question is about Rogue MLH, is that you?” The twitter account has gone viral in the two days since they started it.

“I can’t say.”

“Right. *Now* we can be off the record. Do you have a lawyer?”

Ilya’s heart races with fear. “No? You need lawyers to be on Twitter?”

“Ok, then let me just give you a public whistleblower 101. You can’t post anything without knowing for a fact that it’s true, preferably with hard evidence. Libel laws are serious stuff. Then, you can’t post any MLH-branded content without their express permission. They can get you on copyright stuff, too. I even had concerns about you— or whoever—” she adds dubiously, “using MLH in the handle, but I spoke with our legal department and they said it was fine.”

Fuck. Maybe they *should* get a lawyer. This is all getting a little big, but at the moment he’s just grateful for the weird hodgepodge team he’s been putting together. “Thank you for telling me. Or— I will pass that along if I know who... I’ll let them know. If anyone tells me it is them. Hypothetically.” He sounds out each syllable of the word.

“Hypothetically,” Kavita responds, her smile audible through the phone. “I’ll text you some names who can advise you.”

“Thank you, Kavita.” Ilya singsongs like a kid. She seems like she’s wrapping up, but he and Shane have been planning their press conference, and he’s been meaning to call her anyway. “I wanted you to be the first journalist I invite to a press conference I am holding with Shane Hollander in November.”

Kavita is quiet for too long. Maybe there was a better segue into that invitation. “You and... Shane Hollander?”

“—are hosting a press conference. Yes.”

“To...” Kavita hopes he’ll fill in the blank. It probably sounds like they’ll be announcing this group, or their sexualities, or god forbid, a relationship.

“Joint project. Nothing related to this, sorry. But I will send you the date so you have it early.”

He finishes the call and immediately dials Scott Hunter with the update. He cautions Hunter not to speak with Kavita about the group’s part in last year’s playoffs. He and Hunter draft and then send a mass text to his men about not speaking to anyone about the group. The texting list is a little smaller now despite the new members; he has the 12 guys from the MLH awards in a group chat, which is great, but feels like a tiny victory amidst everything else balanced precariously, ready to fall. Ilya hangs up with the familiar feeling that this thing is getting out of hand, just in time for the season to start.

Chapter End Notes

No cool fun list for you this time, I don't think, just the one.

#11 is Lundin (minor book-gay) but we maybe knew that already. And now he is out! but also out of the league.

Coming up: Montreal is shitty (surprise!), the league is shitty (surprise!). And somewhere in there, they start a foundation, because clearly Ilya doesn't have enough on his plate. This poor boy needs to get off his grind 😭

Chapter 10: Shane's backup

Chapter Summary

First week of the 2018 season

Chapter Notes

Glad to see we all survived the AO3 outage (that I maybe caused by bragging on Tumblr about how close we were to 20,000 works)

I was going to try to Russian-Doll an elaborate Hayden-Finds-Out into this but it seemed like a tangent. Someday when I'm ready for that oneshot to also turn into 20 chapters and a [Hallmark original movie](#), maybe I'll publish it.

Serious question, at what point do I need to add a "Shane Hollander cries easily" tag? The boy is a geyser. Anyway, this chapter bounces around a lot but we get a lot of Shane (some POV shifts) featuring everyone-is-an-asshole

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

"What you're looking at is collective bargaining, like a union." Cooper Lee, the lawyer in the laptop, says, "And there is already a players' union."

The voice echoes into Ilya's new living room in Ottawa where he and Scott Hunter are hunched over the laptop. Hunter had a day off after playing Montreal's season opener, so he convinced his coach (and Kip) to let him fly back separately a day late. He's so nosy, Ilya would have to recount the whole meeting to him again anyway, so it's good he's here now. Ilya gets why they're doing this, he knows objectively it's the best thing to do.

But it's so *boring*.

"Ehh, no. Is not like that." Ilya corrects the lawyer.

"Forming a union, or getting involved in your existing union, would privilege you with protections under collective bargaining laws. You could organize strikes, participate in contract negotiations, and maybe establish some firmer anti-discrimination statutes." Cooper explains, "Make it so it's illegal for a team to drop contract renegotiations over sexuality." Scott looks over to make sure Ilya is understanding all the fast English legal-speak. Honestly, he's not. But he gets the gist.

“No. The league cannot know about our group.”

“Mr. Rozanov, I’m sorry to tell you, but I think the league already knows about your group.”

Hunter agrees, “I *did* tell them about it in front of 300 people and about a million watching at home.”

“Fine.” Ilya sighs. “They may know about us. But they cannot know about me. Or the other players.”

Cooper looks frustrated with him already, and it’s only 20 minutes in. Ilya described the group at the beginning of the meeting, but not anything about any actions they have taken. Ilya halfway wonders if he even *should*. Can they trust this guy? But then he remembers Kavita’s voice saying he needs a lawyer. He knows the Canadian and United States legal systems prevent lawyers from squealing, and at some point he has to trust someone with this. Shane keeps saying this will make him feel less anxious, but right now *all* he feels is anxious. And bored.

“I think we could work around the represented class being anonymous, but the leader would have to be known. Mr. Hunter, would you be comfortable being the public leader of the group?”

Ilya answers for him, “Of course he would, Hunter is attention whore.”

“Fuck off,” Hunter says under his breath so the laptop might not pick it up. “Yes, it would be fine with me. That’s basically been my role, providing press interviews and liasoning with the commissioner. But I kind of agree with Rozanov, I’m not sure we should go the union route.”

“You’re in direct contact with the commissioner?”

“Yes, he calls me in to meet occasionally.” Hunter shrugs, “Because I’m in New York, it’s easy. I’m not sure what he would do if I were on any other team.”

“What is the nature of these meetings?”

“Ummm...” They haven’t told Cooper Lee about their strikes against homophobic players yet. “Just what I should and shouldn’t be saying to the public. Basically, whenever I give an interview that disparages their name. Then...” Hunter looks at Ilya, who nods. “Asking whether I know anything about particular underground homosexual militias.”

“Ok. We’ll circle back to that. But Mr. Hunter, you need to stop having those meetings without counsel present. Or a union representative.” Ilya begins to speak, but Cooper rolls his eyes, “An *actual* union representative.”

“Gladly. If I don’t take the meetings, though, he’ll be pissed. There’ll probably be consequences.”

“They can’t terminate your contract over that, and your team has shown they are supportive. Call me when he asks for the next meeting.” Cooper flips a page in his legal pad off screen.

“Now. Why are we calling it a militia?”

Ilya and Hunter look at each other, Ilya takes a deep breath, and they tell their new lawyer everything.

When they’re finished, Cooper no longer thinks they are a worker’s union. “It’s almost like you don’t *want* to keep your jobs.” He shakes his head, “You’ve actually been relatively smart about things so far, and haven’t broken any laws, or even any MLH rules, but you’re walking a fine line. My general advice for both of you is to not piss off your teams. New York and Ottawa are keeping you safe. There are no rules broken but some of these things could be used to break your contract.”

“If New York didn’t think it was worth putting up with my shit, they would have canned me last year.” Hunter laughs.

“This is true.” Cooper nods. “So, going forward... I have a feeling if I told you to include me in the planning, I wouldn’t hear much.”

Scott starts to refute the statement, but Ilya is quicker to say, “Accurate.”

“Then I’ll just say this. Just tell me when you’ve done something and I’ll let you know what kind of trouble you’re in.” He sighs, “Obviously I’d prefer if you asked beforehand, but I’m starting to get the sense that’s not going to happen.”

“See?” Ilya turns to Scott and points to the laptop. “He gets me.”

Hunter shoves Ilya a little. “I’ll try to give you a heads-up before anything happens. If I’m even privy to it.”

They agree to keep an open line of communication and Cooper agrees to look at any tangential legal questions they or their players have. Shane and Kavita were right. Ilya feels a little more at ease.

“And just as an aside,” Cooper says more casually before they hang up, “I loved hockey growing up but lost interest because of stuff like this. All my favorite players were not great role models. They were assholes. I’m selfishly glad you called me, just so I can be one of the few who know about this effort. I don’t agree with some of the methods, but you’re doing the right thing. You’re definitely not assholes.”

Pike: you asshole

Pike: you knew??

Ilya: ???

Pike: not really. Just.

Pike: I know you couldn’t say anything.

Ilya: again

Ilya: ???

Pike: oh sorry Shane just came out to me

Pike: wait

Pike: fuck

Pike: oh my god

Pike: he's on your roster right?

Pike: right??

Ilya: Shane HOLLANDER ???

Ilya: is gay???

Ilya: what about Rose Landry???

Shane inspects his red-rimmed eyes in the mirror in Hayden's powder room and dabs a towel over his face. He knew his best friend would be good about this, but Shane ended up crying anyway. They finally got to a break in the conversation so he could go pull himself together. Now, he would really like to go back into Hayden's kitchen and never talk about this again, if possible.

No such luck.

Shane rounds the corner to a panic-stricken Hayden.

"Fuck, Shane, I'm so sorry I..."

Shane's heart pounds. It took thirty seconds for Hayden to out him to the entire internet? Did Hayden have a sex tape of Shane and Ilya's that got out? No, that's crazy, there's no sex tape. Did he tell his parents? Wait, they already know. Did he tell the *team*?

"While you were in the bathroom I texted Rozanov because I figured you..." Hayden waits for Shane to fill in the imaginary blank. He really wishes people would stop doing that to him. "He didn't know about you. I figured he would, he has a list of all the gay players and ___"

"He didn't know about me?" Hayden hands him the phone with the text conversation. Shane smiles at it. His surge of relief could power a city. Hayden looks like he just killed someone, which makes this significantly less funny. "Hayden. He knew about me. He's messing with you."

"*God* that guy is an asshole." Hayden puts his face in his hands and leans on the counter. "I'm having a freaking heart attack, why are you laughing?"

"No he uhh... definitely knows." Shane knows his smile is probably giving too much away. But he scrolls up in their text messages. Turns out, Hayden and Ilya text all the time. Maybe the news that it's Rozanov wouldn't be the worst thing in the world at this point. Hayden

snatches the phone away when he sees that Shane is scrolling through. That's fair, it sounds like there was important straight-army business in there that Shane probably shouldn't see. "So you two talk a lot?"

"Umm. Yeah, I'm in the straight... or, ally? group thing. I feel like an idiot, I kept harassing him to let you in. He was just trying to be a good guy, covering for you, too... Ugh. I don't want to like him but he makes it hard." Shane smirks. Hayden doesn't know the half of it. But ok, maybe there's some respect there. Maybe he could tell him. As he opens his mouth to do so, Hayden laughs and shakes his head. "So bizarre that *Rozanov* knew before I did, but I get it." He wants to tell Hayden that Rozanov knew before he knew it himself.

"Actually, he's known for a while." Shane figures that's about as good of a lead-in as possible. "Actually—"

Hayden takes this at face value, nodding, and continuing before Shane can finish his proclamation. "You know he has a boyfriend? Am I allowed to tell you that?"

"Yeah I do know that." Shane swallows. It's an even better opportunity. "It's—"

"Lucky guy," Hayden mutters. Shane's eyebrows shoot up. Hayden puts his hands up in surrender, "I'm not going to pretend he's not attractive! And now that we know he's ok when he's not being a shit bag? I mean... you won't tell anyone I said that, right?" That's one thing Shane can promise. Ilya's smug, stupid, hot face if he knew his gaydar was right about Hayden is something Shane never wants to see in his life.

Shane nods and begins the confession. "So—"

Hayden interrupts him again. "It's a shame he's taken, but he's not your type anyway."

"What?" Shane abandons his admission and smiles, "What exactly is my type, Hayden?" He wishes he recorded this entire conversation. He wonders if he could stealthily call Ilya so he can overhear this. "Because until 20 minutes ago, you thought my type was female."

Hayden looks at the TV playing the muted Admirals game. "Like... Bennett. He's your type." He points at the goalie.

"Ugh, Hayden he's so old." Shane does a double take at the goalie on the screen. He wonders... no, Bennett has a wife. Right? But so does Fredericks, and Shane was right about him. Shane still thinks he was right about all five of his public guesses. He pulls out his phone to text Ilya two words: *Eric Bennett*? He knows Ilya can't tell him, but he just wants Ilya to know his gaydar is better than everyone at that stupid meet-up thinks. He can even guess guys who have wives.

"Ok bad example. Because he's probably pretty straight, too."

Shane laughs. "That's my type, *probably pretty straight*." It might come off as sarcastic, but Shane can't help but think about how accurate that is. Hayden is finally quiet for more than five seconds, reminded that the game is on and now watching it. Shane takes advantage of the silence. "Hey, didn't you think Rozanov was *probably pretty straight*?"

Pike: ok now I am actually a little pissed.

Ilya: ?

Pike: you want to explain why Shane just told me he loves you and you moved to Ottawa for him?

Ilya: Shane HOLLANDER???

Pike: shut UP

Pike: am I fucking oblivious???

Pike: how did I not see this coming.

Ilya: 0/10 gaydar

Pike: relationshipdar

Pike: what do you want to bet when the Council finds out about this they'll all pretend they knew

Ilya: 100%

Ilya: they probably do know

Ilya: we are not sneaky

Pike: don't gaslight me!

Pike: you are so sneaky!

Pike: Shane just walked me through all the ways you kept it private

Pike: he also thinks you put all this together for him.

Ilya: I did.

Pike: man don't make me like you

Pike: I don't want that.

Council of (Mostly) Straight Elders group chat

Marly: why isn't Pike talking at all today

Ilya: Hollander was at his house

Ilya: and Pike is mad at me 🤔

Hayes: thank god

Hayes: can we say it now??

Vaughan: oh fuck yeah

Marly: I'm not going to be the first one to say it

Pike: ??? All of you!?

Pike: how???

RASHYCOCK + Roz group chat

Fredericks: idk who to go to with this

Fredericks: Rozanov as group leader still doesn't really feel right.

Fredericks: did anyone catch any of my games yet?

Fredericks: There's a weird pattern and I don't want to sound crazy but my wife said i should tell you guys

Ilya: only highlights why?

Ilya: we are only a week into the season what pattern

Fredericks: can you watch this and tell me if i'm crazy?

Fredericks: watch what the ref does here

Fredericks: [\[link\]](#)

Oldest Man Alive: Holy shit.

Oldest Man Alive: Are you like ok?

Oldest Man Alive: That was a bad hit, you went down hard.

Baldwin: that wasnt a legal hit.

Baldwin: but the ref did nothing?

Ilya: he sees this happen. watch his face at 03:12

Ilya: ref is watching and then turns away.

Fredericks: yeah im fine just spent a while getting xrays, nothing is broken and they already said i'm going back out on the ice for tomorrows game.

Fredericks: bruised ribs

Fredericks: but yall this was the fourth game of the season and it's been every game

Fredericks: i dont want to sound like a conspiracy theorist but ive had illegal hits on me in every game

Fredericks: none of them got called

Baldwin: where is your team not protecting you or calling this out

Fredericks: lol have you met my team?

Fredericks: Carolina would probably burn me alive on center ice if they could get away with

it

Fredericks: they won't be protecting me from shit

Baldwin: theres another one at the beginning of that clip but you knock the guy back

Baldwin: youre lucky youre freaking huge

Oldest Man Alive: the illegal hits are weird AND the refs are weird.

Oldest Man Alive: Roz?

Ilya: finding Carolina or other team video of this posted on social media

Ilya: I want to make a fucking fan edit but we cant

Ilya utilizes some of his allies on these offending teams to ask why Fredericks is getting targeted. Each offender responds with some homophobic "he has it coming" kind of nonsense. So Ilya is starting to think the illegal hits aren't an orchestrated effort, just rampant garden-variety bigotry. He publishes the names of the delinquents to both armies, ensuring the assholes won't know a minute's peace on the ice for weeks. The refs, on the other hand...

Oldest Man Alive: Talked to my boy Hal, the ref at tonight's game.

Oldest Man Alive: Asked him what was going on with all this.

Oldest Man Alive: Nicest man on earth.

Oldest Man Alive: Says "Keep your head down Hunter, it's not you."

It's one thing for bigoted players to take advantage of hockey's violent nature to commit hate crimes, but the concerted neglect from the referees, even good ones like Hal, suggests this thing goes further. Kavita thinks so, too, and is frustrated that between this, Baldwin's dropped contract, and the league's gambling scandal, her entire workload is sourced by Ilya Rozanov. In posting on RogueMLH, they all hope someone else might pick up the story.

@RogueMLH retweeted **@BrooklynScouts**

Notice the ref at the Fredericks hit at 03:12 #FrederickRefFail

@BrooklynScouts

Intense power play from the Scouts! Capitalize on that and take down Carol-whinea!

[[Video](#)]

@RogueMLH retweeted **@MinnesotaNomads**

Notice the ref at the Fredericks hit at 01:56 #FrederickRefFail

@MinnesotaNomads

Highlights from tonight's game @ Carolina! [[Video](#)]

@RogueMLH

We cant post MLH clips directly, but you definitely dont want to notice the ref at the Fredericks hit vs. DET at 15:35. #FrederickRefFail

@RogueMLH

Would be tragic if you also noticed the ref at the Fredericks hit against Columbus at 12:01 in the 2nd period #FrederickRefFail

@RogueMLH

4 illegal hits in 4 games. Refs see it, say nothing? Let's keep an eye on Fredericks tonight in MTL, shall we? 🙄 #FrederickRefFail

Their posts land just after the Carolina-Montreal game gets underway. Montreal players take two or three strikes on Fredericks, including an illegal hit to the head, and in the second period, the refs finally start calling them. Unfortunately, the last bad check breaks Fredericks's arm, and he texts the RASHYCOCK group with that news by the end of the game. He'll be out for at least 6 weeks. Harris is on the ready with Ilya's phone to get the update and relay the news, on top of his normal, official Ottawa social media job responsibilities. It's helpful if these tweets go up when Ilya is playing, so he couldn't be suspected of posting them, but it also helps their credibility to be the first "news source" to have the scoop.

@RogueMLH

Fredericks out for at least 6 weeks with a broken ulna thanks to MTL's Comeau. #ToldYouSo #FrederickRefFail

Ilya made sure Kavita would be watching the game. He and all his really trusted guys are playing tonight, so she chronicles the game via text as if Ilya won't be watching the recording as soon as he gets home. She notices something interesting: the refs only started calling penalties after first intermission, when they might have gotten a chance to hear about RogueMLH's posts. Something fishy, and coordinated, is going on with these refs.

After the Carolina game, Shane sulks on the bench in the Montreal change room.

This could have gone worse. It could have gone a lot better, too. The team is subdued as they recover from a tough game, followed by an even tougher conversation. Actually, that's not right. A conversation has more than one participant.

Shane fixates on his phone and he texts Ilya to let him know what happened. Not just that three separate douchebags had fucked Fredericks up with no better explanation than "just don't like the guy," but what came after that.

"You can't check Fredericks for being queer when you have a gay captain." Shane had said. *"I've been quiet about this, and I'd like it to stay that way, but it's time you knew. Especially if you're pulling shit like that."*

Most of the team said absolutely nothing after Shane made his announcement. He can't blame them, necessarily. It's gotta be a big shock. Still, he wishes they had said *something*. "Not a big deal" or "we support you" or "if you have a boyfriend, bring him around" or

“you’re still our captain who won us two cups and brought us back from nothing and reliably scores every game and sells more jerseys than anyone in the history of the franchise.”

Hayden broke the initial silence with “We’ve got your back, cap.” But no voices joined in agreement. One whispered “holy shit” in the back somewhere and JJ had clapped him on the shoulder. Shane breathes and reminds himself that they didn’t kill him, or worse, immediately demand his resignation as captain. So that’s a positive.

His eyes well up as he replays the last twenty minutes. He wishes he didn’t cry so easily because now he can’t show the room his face, opting to stare down at his phone, even though the screen went black. It’s several minutes before he gets himself calm enough to safely pick his head up.

Now Shane can tell the silence in the room is due to a lack of people. Apparently while he was seething, everyone left for the night, and no one stopped to say bye or offer support or love or even “good game.” Just Hayden and the Melnyk kid, last season’s trade-in rookie, are left. Hayden jingles his keys and pats Shane on the shoulder. “You’re gonna be ok?”

“Yeah, sorry, I zoned out.” Shane looks down and realizes he still hasn’t changed out of his clothes from the game. He lowers his voice a little so Melnyk doesn’t hear. “How do you think they took it?”

Hayden shrugs. “I tried to get some support going and they didn’t take me up on it. So maybe not great? I don’t know.”

“Yeah. It’s fine. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Hayden waves at the kid across the room and heads out. Shane gets up. He hates feeling dirty but he can shower at home. He just wants to be out of here.

“Hey cap.” Melnyk sits on the bench by Shane’s bag.

“Uh hey.” Shane fumbles with his stuff, not meeting the kid’s eye. This could go one of two ways, and Shane is preparing for the worst. This kid is arrogant and occasionally mean. Shane really doesn’t want to hear whatever homophobic shit is going to—

“You’re *friends with Rozanov*, right?”

Shane stills. He’s heard that tone once before, from Scott Hunter. Shane briefly has to remind himself of the layers to that question, and remember he’s probably not asking in a literal sense. This is a code that Shane knows.

“Yeah.” Shane says, studying the kid. Melnyk has a hint of something serious on his default amused face. All at once, Shane has to admit Ilya has a gift. How did he clock Melnyk? Shane never would have guessed this loud, abrasive, cocky little shithead likes men. He’s a defenseman who’s not good enough to talk as much shit as he does. Shane doesn’t know much about his personal life, just that he’s part of the younger group that goes to clubs after their games. Shane always kind of assumed he picked up women there, but maybe he likes both. “Umm... you?” He doesn’t really know the script here at all. And he’d rather this not

turn into a pornography. Melnyk is objectively hot but he's like 20 and Shane has a Skype date with Ilya tonight he would rather be doing than anything or *anyone* else.

"Yeah. I was early." Melnyk announces this fact with pride. "Like, Fall last year. I think my number is under 15." This kid will brag about anything. It's so annoying that Shane finds it loops all the way back around to endearing.

Shane doesn't really know what's supposed to be secret, but he knows the other Montreal guy was #13 on Ilya's list. If his timeline is right, that's Melnyk. "You're under 15." Shane confirms with a smile. And then, because Shane is *also* a competitive asshole, he adds, "I'm 6." The look on Melnyk's face is delicious. Shane battles with himself, wanting to earn more of that addictive victorious feeling. He could do it easily by telling the kid about the headquarters in Ilya's Boston home office, that there's a makeshift battle station in his vacation home, that the last text in his phone is their beloved Ringleader telling him 'I love you so much, can not wait to see your dick on my phone tonight.', but decides against any of that.

"Holy shit! Yeah, I guess that makes sense. You've known Rozy like your whole career right?"

"Yeah." Shane knows that one syllable doesn't give anything away, but it's still weird to admit. They're supposed to give a press conference in a month that will announce their foundation and friendship, so he's been trying to sow those seeds into his conversations. "He's not a bad guy. The rivalry is mostly fake."

Melnyk is quiet for a minute. "That could have gone better today, right?"

"Yeah," Shane is reminded of the events that led to this conversation, and lets himself deflate for the first time, showing more disappointment than he showed Hayden. Something feels different about another queer person confirming it for him. "It really fucking could have."

"I think when I do it I'll put it on the Jumbotron during a playoff game, what do you think?" The kid laughs, "maybe I'll spell it in boogers on Comeau's locker? I could probably seduce his dad, let him catch us in the act. Or maybe I'll set a flaming turd on Crowell's porch? Not to tell him I'm gay, just always wanted to do that."

Shane laughs hard at this, despite having the worst day of his life.

"You have someone, right?" Melnyk asks. It's strange to see this immature asshole so concerned and actively working to cheer Shane up.

"Yeah." He doesn't elaborate. Even if the kid knows about both of them individually, he can't know about Shane and Ilya as a couple.

"Well good. Go home and get some." Shane must look sad at that because he corrects himself, "...Or call him? I don't know man, whatever you're into."

"I'll call him." Shane smiles again.

Chapter End Notes

I miss writing Haydenov texts, can you tell?

Again, only one number this time, but I like this one.

#13 : Montreal's trade-in rookie from last season (we already knew this), now has a name (Melnik), and Shane and him know about each other now.

Coming up: Irina Foundation, the referees, Hayes gets transferred.

An FYI if you are worried about our mains from the books. I'm trying to drop hints about them where I can but just so we're all clear

BOOK SPOILERS:

Right now is Fall 2018, so we're in Tough Guy territory, RP/FS just started up. EB is getting a divorce by the end of the year, TB starts dating his first boy in December.

Chapter 11: Pick 6

Chapter Summary

November 2018-January 2019

Chapter Notes

Sorry I'm a little late on this. I've been trying for every other day but I'm catching up to what I've written already so it's a little more than just edit-and-post now. Plus I keep trying to fix plot-holes and factual errors and that's having weird butterfly effects. Not complaining, they're fun lol.

This is also scattered and everywhere because too much happens in the books in Fall 2018! And then I had to go and add things that happen, too, because I hate myself I guess, so we're just all over the place 😂

Can we start with some Pike fluff? Ok!

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

After a 30-minute lecture about ground rules, Ilya is having dinner with Shane and the Pikes. This probably would have been a disaster a year ago, but something about burying a body together makes hockey rivalries seem insignificant. And Pike and Ilya buried a big body. The 2018 cup was rigged, and Ilya and Pike were responsible. Really only a handful of people know even a hint of what happened during last year's playoffs, and only the two of them know the extent of it. Even the Council of Straight Elders don't know for a fact that they actually pulled the trigger on it. Only the players who were up against Carolina got to hear about the leaked plays. Scott Hunter figured it out, but being the Founding Father of Gay Hockey does entitle him to privileged information. He doesn't know Pike was involved, though.

So only the two of them really know the full story, and it gives them the respect needed to be civil. Ilya didn't know much about Pike before they collaborated on their ethical lawlessness, just that Shane loves him and he seemed boring. He *is* boring, but surprisingly committed to good causes, a little entertaining, and fun to mess with. So Ilya is enjoying his boring dinner. It doesn't hurt that the kids are cute, Jackie Pike is funny, and whenever Ilya says something nice to Pike, Shane looks like he'll be handing out rewards later.

After dinner, Ilya steps outside to smoke and Pike follows him.

“I kind of wanted to check in about... what we did.”

Ilya wants to respond with a joke but he also knows this is deadly serious. What they did, while not *technically* illegal, could lose them their jobs. They shouldn’t even be talking about it. But Pike needs some kind of reassurance? Ok.

“No one knows. Scott Hunter and our lawyer.” Ilya keeps his voice down. “You are safe.”

“We fucking rigged about twenty games, including MLH Cup final, dude. There’s nothing safe about that.” Pike says. He’s quiet for a second and then continues. “Not that it’s weighing on me— because it’s not... And I would do any of this regardless... hell I *did* do all of it without knowing...” He trails off.

“Pike. Make sense.”

“Finding out about Shane made it worth it.” He blurts out. “Seeing him comfortable, with me at least, that’s... I wasn’t feeling *guilty*, per se, but Shane’s whole thing makes me actually happy I did it.” Pike looks down, “Is that so shitty? I should be doing this regardless, even if I’m not best friends with—”

“No, you are right. You did it regardless. You did this before you knew about him. You did it to be a good person, not just for him.” Ilya puts out his cigarette.

“Eh, I guess I’m complaining at someone who literally just moved to Ottawa for Shane.”

“Who’s moving to Ottawa for me?” Shane and Jackie pop out onto the deck.

Ilya ignores how close they were to Shane overhearing something worse, “We were saying how much Pike has done as leader of the straight army.”

“What?” Shane looks at Pike, “You’re *leading* it? I knew you were in it but...” Pike squirms a little.

“Pike is Captain Straight.” Ilya informs them seriously. Jackie snorts a little and Pike glares at her.

“Sorry!” Jackie giggles, “That just makes him sound like he’s the straightest guy in the league!” She raises her hands in surrender, “...Don’t look at me like that when I can quote your hallpass list! And a surprising number of them are on this deck!”

Ilya laughs and Shane looks queasy. “Hollander, you are back under 30%.”

Once Shane is out to his team and the rumor starts spreading to other players, Shane and Ilya’s relationship becomes the worst-kept secret in gay hockey.

When they announce the Irina Foundation (and their friendship) in November, almost all of Ilya’s queer battalion put it together immediately.

Ilya comes away from the press conference with 30 separate text threads blowing up.

“Friends!? Lmao”

“Wait did you become friends because of the Man-love Militia? That would be adorable.”

“A press conference to announce a friendship I have seen nothing gayer.”

“You owe me a bottle of champagne. I popped one too early bc I thought you two were coming out together.”

“God, does he speak French like that in bed? I wish I had someone I could ask 🙄”

“What does IRINA stand for? Ilya Rozanov's Intentional Nothing-to-see-here Alibi?”

“If you’re not hitting that, I will.”

“So is the foundation like a beard or...”

“If Hollander is gay then you are in trouble.”

“Hope this foundation finds a cure for terminal eyefucking.”

“He is literally touching your arm??? I’m dead Rozanov you have to be kidding.”

“The French portion of his speech better be saying “I fuck women, never any men, I have sixteen bastard children and am getting head from a woman under this table.”

“Did you do this whole group just to meet guys? And then you land fucking Hollander? Godtier manifesting, guy.”

“Did you have to pay to only get blind reporters in the room or...?”

“Brave to open the floor to questions. I have one: is it kinky? Another: is it huge?”

“Sorry about your mom but 10/10 job bagging Shane Hollander.”

He responds to each one with the same copy-pasted message: “Each joke is \$1000 to the Irina Foundation.”

The jokes keep coming, but one thing he’s learned about his cabal is that they keep a deal. The foundation gets a strong start that day with their donations. This is good; the foundation will benefit these guys in ways they don't even know yet.

Council of (Mostly) Straight Elders group chat

Hayes: are we watching this press conference?

Hayes: lol

Vaughan: lol

Marly: lol

Pike: I'm here in the room.

Pike: I'm worried we don't have a single functional journalist on the continent.

Pike: This is making me doubt my news sources.

Bad Falls and Bad Calls

Kavita Kingsley

Reputable Sports Magazine

December 5, 2018

Last month, large-scale neglect by referees caught the attention of many hockey fans as Carolina defenseman Alfred Fredericks was routinely attacked on the ice by his opponents. Fredericks posted on social media this summer to announce he is bisexual, joining Hunter, Baldwin, and Lundin as the league's only openly queer players. He and Hunter are the only two still on team payrolls.

Evidence of discrimination in the MLH is increasing with the record number of LGBT players. Earlier this season, we reported on the circumstances regarding Baldwin's retirement and Lundin's relocation to the Swedish national league. However, this is the first time the MLH has seen a seemingly coordinated systemic effort to discriminate.

In the first four games of the season, Fredericks was subjected to illegal and unnecessarily rough hits. In all four games, the referees did not call penalties on the excessive behavior. Tweets from RogueMLH, an unverified anonymous Twitter account, highlighted the referees' reaction to these hits. The Twitter account also found a very similar hit on Marcel Houde in October that earned Liam Casey a match penalty for illegal injury, highlighting the similarity between that instance and Fredericks's by saying "I thought referees were allowing that kind of hit now? What's the difference? Oh." The unspoken implication accuses the referees of discrimination against Fredericks's sexuality.

Fredericks played just five games in October before he was placed on Long-Term Injury Reserve (LTIR) with a broken arm, a result of a bad check from Montreal's Gilbert Comeau. Now, Fredericks says he has healed and is ready to reenter gameplay, but Carolina's management is keeping him on LTIR. When asked about Fredericks's status, a member of the anonymous group of queer players said, "I wouldn't be surprised if they're keeping him on reserve until his contract expires and then letting him go. Like Scott Hunter said, we all know this is the most likely possibility when we come out."

In response to our request for comment, Fredericks told us, "I expected a little of this when I came out, but it's a lot. The homophobia in the league is no secret. I wish it were a little less physically violent." He believes his unwelcome reception is due to his coming out of the closet this summer. "It's a sad thought, but if I were on the ice, I might be asking for trouble. I have mixed feelings about being kept out of the game, if I'm honest." It is unclear if Carolina's motivation to keep Fredericks on LTIR is concern for this possibility or, as the aforementioned anonymous player speculated, something more nefarious.

RSM can exclusively report as of yesterday, one referee has chosen to resign over alleged interference from the league. Speaking on the condition of anonymity, he told us the referees were asked to "let things handle themselves" in regards to Fredericks, a tacit order to

overlook the players' homophobic aggression. The referee inferred the league knew Fredericks would be subjected to hate violence, that his team would not protect him (unlike Scott Hunter's Admirals) and the referees should look the other way.

The league has declined to comment on these allegations.

Things are looking grim by mid-December. It's no secret Carolina is using Fredericks's injury as an excuse to keep him off the ice until his contract expires, luckily just at the end of this season. Ilya and his posse are back to just one out player. He should be discouraged, but Ilya is bolstered by his ranks as they all start gently inquiring with their teams about signing Fredericks. No one seems to have any luck. Even Ottawa's management tells Ilya they have enough defensemen, and Fredericks is about the same caliber as the guys they already have. If he were a forward, or a goalie, it might be a different story. So Ilya finds himself fielding calls back and forth to find a home for Fredericks, as if he is the man's agent.

He has enough on his plate. It would be wonderful if Ilya could keep to his gay legion and not give a shit about anyone else. Unfortunately, just before Christmas, that choice is taken from him.

Wyatt Hayes calls Ilya in the middle of the night. He doesn't really talk to Hayes outside of the ally army, so this is strange. His gut reaction is to check the news before even answering the phone, as this probably means someone has been outed or there's some other disaster somewhere in Gayland.

Apparently there *is* a disaster, but this time it's in Straightland. Hayes heard a girl crying at Dallas Kent's Christmas party and called the police. The police couldn't charge Kent with anything, and now management knows Hayes was the one who reported it. Luckily the rest of the Toronto team seems not to know about the whole incident, but after that, it's obvious Hayes can't stay there. The team is already floating trade options. But, like Baldwin and Fredericks, his vocal activism online makes him toxic to a trade deal.

First thing the next morning, Ilya makes his way to Ottawa's General Manager's office. The door is already open, so he passes the secretary and goes straight in. He forgoes a greeting.

"Wyatt Hayes is about to go up for trade. We need goalie, we take Wyatt Hayes."

The GM looks at Ilya and considers his face. He tells his secretary to grab two guys. They come in and the GM repeats Ilya's request.

By the end of the day, Wyatt Hayes is a Centaur.

After Christmas, Ilya hosts a welcome party for Hayes at his new house. It's been a few months since joining Ottawa, and especially now with Hayes in the mix, he couldn't have asked for a better team. He thinks about how they would react if they knew who he really was, and it's not a tight panic in his chest like it was in Boston, wondering whether they'd be supportive or... like Shane's team. Here, he knows they would be good. They already know he runs the ally army, and they love that, because more than half the team is in the group. They

pat Hayes on the back for the circumstances that led to his transfer. They talk about the 30 "close friends" of Scott Hunter with reverence for their bravery, not trying to figure out who is on the list. Homophobic, racist, or sexist language in the locker room gets you shunned for weeks. It truly is just a different place. Ilya wonders seriously whether he could pull enough strings with the GM to transfer out any remaining neutral or bad guys and have a team exclusively of the most gay and accepting players in the league.

Ilya sits at a table with Scott and Kip at the Kingfisher just after the new year. Ottawa is in New York for the night, and Ilya is still a wildcard to his teammates. Sometimes he comes out, sometimes he doesn't. They're very nice but they expect him to be a sort of party animal. He gets the sense they go clubbing because they think he wants to, so when he can make the excuse to do something away from them, he does. When Scott invited him out to the gay sports bar, Ilya jumped at the opportunity.

"Nice to see you off the internet." Mr. Smoothie Salesman says, "Look, I know you have to keep up appearances, but if that could happen without you roasting me online, that would be great."

"Alright." Ilya smiles. Kip is one of his favorite targets for cyberbullying.

Scott opens his mouth to speak, but Kip isn't done: "For example. You cannot comment 'The denim store loves to see this man coming.' on every single one of my posts."

Ilya nods seriously, "Only on ones you wear denim." He doesn't see much wrong with this.

Kip rolls his eyes. "You can't ask if Scott's health insurance is paying me to be there as a senior health aide."

"This one is about Hunter, not you."

"On every picture of me and another man you say, 'see? there are people your age.'" Kip shakes his head, "You have to know that's not ok, right?"

Ilya looks at Hunter, "I thought I was here to meet with you, not talk about Instagram comment section." He's mostly kidding, he really doesn't mind this conversation. Now that he knows what Kip is most affected by, he can hone his trolling skills even better.

"He insisted. Probably for that reason." Scott gestures between them. "Anyway. I have news." Kip leans back against the booth, clearly seeing he is no longer part of the conversation. "I took Lee's advice, I've been telling Crowell to schedule meetings through his law office now. So I haven't heard much from him since this summer when he chewed me out for that speech."

"—Which was so brave and we're staying positive about it." Kip gently reminds the table.

But Scott sinks down in the booth. “But I guess last time we met, I did something stupid.”

“—but it’s ok because Ilya Rozanov is not your boss—”

“—Am kind of his boss.” Ilya grins and Kip shoots him a death glare.

“I told him we had all but six teams. It came up because he was surprised at the number of players. So I told him.” Scott looks apologetic, “But now he’s asking me *which* six teams. He left me a voicemail about it. I don’t know if I should tell Lee about this or just ignore it.”

“Why does he want to know?”

“He says he can help find members on those teams, or get people traded so there’s a member on each team. He says he wants to help.” Scott pulls up the voicemail and holds his phone so Ilya can hear the devil's voice on speakerphone. He feels himself getting angrier as the man talks, saccharinely acting like he is pledging allegiance to them. After it ends, silence hangs in the air while Scott waits to see how Ilya will react.

“Bullshit.” Ilya sees exactly what Crowell is doing. “He is rigging the cup. Again this year. Kavita, over the summer, says publicly we have cup bet, so he thinks if our teams do not win, no one will come out.”

Scott shakes his head, “No, that would never happen. My theory is he's trying to out the gay players and this narrows it down.”

Ilya doesn’t care what Scott thinks. He knows he’s right. He makes eye contact with the cute bartender walking past the table, “Kyle? May we have a pen please?” Kyle hands him a pen and Ilya sings flirtatiously, “Thank you, Kyle.”

“How do you know his name?” Kip cocks his head.

Ilya ignores this, pulls a clean napkin from the holder on the table, and thinks.

If he could choose a team to win the 2019 cup, who would it be? Ottawa, if he’s honest. He writes Ottawa on the napkin. It’s unlikely Crowell will take that option.

Montreal? Shane wants the cup so badly, he would be pissed if he knew Ilya is making this list and he didn't include Montreal. But honestly, fuck those guys. Plus, Shane would have to come out. At the thought, Ilya’s stomach does a sort of weird turn that he does not want to inspect right now. #13 would come out on his behalf if Shane chickens out, though. There are already rumors about Shane that might have made it up to the commissioner's office by now, but they're probably still just rumors. Shane didn't tell his team management or anyone outside of the locker room. Ilya doesn't know why he's debating it with himself, he's always going to give Shane the chance to win the cup. Montreal is safe enough. He writes Montreal.

Utah. He has #23 and #30 there.

Anaheim, where he has #15 and #22.

Somebody from the Metropolitan division, Washington? That's safe. #14 and #27 are both serious about this.

One more... New Jersey. Why didn't he think of them first? #7 and #19 are both great guys. They might *both* come out if given the opportunity.

He looks at these six teams and pictures the scenario of each team winning the cup. They all have several options for players who are ready to come out, except Ottawa. But out of this list, Crowell will not choose Ottawa. There are five less suspicious options.

"This is the list of teams we don't have yet. Give him this." Ilya says. "Email it to him. In writing."

"Rozanov, even I know we have guys on these teams. *You're* on one of these teams."

"One of these teams will win the cup." Ilya pokes the napkin on the table. He's confident that's why Crowell is asking. He's confident one of these six teams will hoist the trophy at the end of the 2018-19 season.

Scott whines, "You couldn't have put the Admirals down then?"

"You are on the team. Can not exactly say it is gay-free."

"Yeah but we just say I don't count because I'm already out. You have someone else to come out right?"

Ilya considers this. He only has one other Admiral, #12, and he doubts he will ever come out.

"You know he's getting divorced?" Scott says quietly. Ilya's eyebrows raise before he can remind himself to hold his cards close to his chest.

"Who?" Ilya tries to look fake-confused.

"Your *backup Admiral*." Scott studies him suspiciously and Ilya narrows his eyes in return. It looks almost like Hunter doesn't actually know anything, this is a guess waiting to be confirmed.

"I did not know he was married," Ilya lies. Scott and Kip exchange a Look. "Regardless, my backup Admiral is not a safe bet. I have doubts he will come out, even if he wins the cup." Ilya has always suspected this about #12, but if he's really getting a divorce... Interesting.

On the walk home, Ilya texts his players from each of those teams. Without telling them why, he ensures they know they have to be particularly careful for the rest of the season. Don't get outed, don't go rogue, don't come out until the cup. If someone from one of these teams turns out to be gay before then, Crowell might doubt this is the real list. He gets a lot of sarcastic responses along the lines of "aw man I really wanted my sex tape to leak in April."

He calls Shane separately. “Do you know how I am so proud that you told your team about your gayness?”

“Ummm yeah?”

“Can I ask a favor and you do not ask me why? What is it... unconditional?” Ilya’s heart grows gradually throughout that sentence. With each word he understands how profoundly lucky he is to know already Shane’s answer.

“Of course. What?”

“Can you go five months? Just until the cup, do not say it again. Important that the commissioner does not know we have anyone for Montreal.”

Shane breathes a short laugh. “Trust me, it didn’t go so well last time. I wasn’t planning on saying it again any time soon.”

“Ok. Thank you, I love you.”

They end the call. He speed walks back to the hotel with no better way to burn off this energy. For the second year in a row, Ilya Rozanov could be choosing the winner of the cup.

Chapter End Notes

People nagging Ilya about making inappropriate comments on their instagram is my love language, and I love you all so very much, so I continue to offer you this.

We already knew most of this, but lots of numbers matching up to teams if that's what you're into:

#7 New Jersey

#12 NY, maybe getting a divorce? If Scott is right.

#13 Montreal

#14 Washington

#15 Anaheim

#19 New Jersey

#22 Anaheim

#23 Utah

#27 Washington

#30 Utah

Coming up: Book gays

Edit: FRIENDS!!! I posted this before going to work for five hours and came back to so many comments! I love you all so so much! I’m reading all of them even if I don’t respond and they all make my day and give me lots to think about. This is the only fic

I've ever seen where people are actively discussing with each other in the comments and I'm so in love with that it makes me cry. 🥰❤️🥰❤️🥰❤️🥰

Chapter 12: Shane Hollander, pick-up artist

Chapter Summary

Before, During, and After All-Star Weekend 2019

Chapter Notes

Lovers!

1) Some of the events here are directly from the Tough Guy book. If you were planning on reading it, maybe do so before reading this. It's not necessary to know what's going on, but some things might be spoiler-y.

1a) There is reference to a (very) minor character canon death. I'm not putting any TW because I go into exactly zero detail, I just say it's the same way Ilya's mom died and leave it at that.

2) A lot of fics overdo JJ's negative reaction to Shane coming out and/or Ilya. The fact that it's such a common trope in this fandom has a lot to do with racism, and a lot of people have talked about this (search on your favorite social media platform for more information). But @PinkLetterDay's comments pointed out that my story leaves JJ out/gives him an under-enthusiastic reaction, so it could be interpreted that he's that kind of asshole here. Really I just didn't have a reason to use his character. But he's not an asshole in this, and I'll work to clarify that. In my mind, he was likely one of the guys who posted pictures of himself with other men to add his voice to the ally statement over the summer, so he was invited in at that point. I'm not going to change any narrative to squeeze him in just for the sake of it but in this chapter, I'll namedrop some allies to make sure you know he's one of them (previously the ones in this chapter were unnamed)

2a) Why didn't anyone tell me Wyatt Hayes was white? lmao I very nearly embarrassed myself in a few chapters

2b) I hope it's clear that there are POC OCs in this story (and those identities occasionally do factor in) and every homophobe we've met so far has also been racist and sexist.

3) Shane POV halfway through the chapter. When we are in Shane's head, we hear names, not numbers.

Anywayyyy more plot, fewer dick jokes for you today

The Irina Foundation is the first step of Shane and Ilya's official on-paper plan... or, the plan that is presentable enough to show Shane's parents. The foundation is supposed to give them a reason to be seen together and a public softening of their feud. And now that it's clear it's not even really safe to be out of the closet and still playing hockey, this is still their best plan.

The small building that Yuna rented is in downtown Montreal, which provides a perfect cover story. If Shane is in Ottawa, the public can assume it's to visit his parents. Now, if Ilya is in Montreal, the public can assume it's for the foundation.

And the foundation provides the perfect cover story for Ilya's actual enterprise.

Cooper Lee walks Ilya through what he is and is not legally allowed to say is official foundation business, but there's a lot of wiggle room with a foundation like this. They worked with Lee to make the mission statement as vague as possible. The foundation is for mental health, they have to allocate funds to mental health organizations, and they plan to. Shane and Ilya are committed to run the summer hockey camps and donate that profit to charitable organizations that focus on mental health.

Other than that, the foundation can focus on advocacy. And the mental health of professional athletes is a related, virtuous endeavor, right? The mental health of the kids who love hockey but never see themselves represented with openly queer players? The mental health of Ilya Rozanov if he doesn't get to watch Roger Crowell lowered into his metaphorical grave? All very important undertakings.

Their names are tied to the foundation, so they can't be open about Ilya's federation being housed there, but his "player outreach" role at the foundation is exactly what it sounds like, and the whole thing starts to feel a little more official.

He needs one other thing. Fucking *help*.

The whole mechanism has gotten so complicated this season. With the rookies this year, the Man-love Minions have reached #41, though with players retiring and Lundin transferring out of the league, it's closer to 34 active players. Ilya has to watch each game for the six teams he chose for Crowell's rigged cup to see how those games might be fixed. He's still looking for a team to take on Fredericks when his contract expires at the end of the season. He's still recruiting new members. The Ally Accumulation of nearly 200 players is still waging war against the assholes who hurt Fredericks, actually pretty successfully—two of those assholes are now out for the season. Then there's a list of retired players that has been sitting on Ilya's home office desk for months, waiting to be mobilized. Harris has gotten some names for a staff army already but he thinks Ilya is wearing himself too thin, so he's not handing it over or doing anything with the list himself.

So in January 2019, just two months after they launched the foundation, Ilya and Shane are in the conference room at the Irina office with Yuna, their executive director. She has dropped everything to run the foundation. And to Ilya, the foundation is partially a front for his operation. So he and Shane decided they need to tell her at least a little of this.

"Mom, it's important that you don't tell anyone else what we're about to say," Shane starts. They planned this, and it's better if it comes from him. For how much Ilya loves to brag, he

doesn't like talking about what he's done here if he doesn't know how it will be received. Even though they've decided to tell her very little, Yuna's reaction could still go either way. "Remember Scott Hunter's speech last year? About the group? His 28 close friends or whatever?"

"Yes, and you told me you were in it." Yuna furrows her brow.

"We are. But also, Ilya... runs it."

"The ringleader..." She whispers in recognition. Her eyes light up as she looks at Ilya. He sinks down a little in his seat. "Of *course* it's you. That doesn't surprise me at all." She looks at him fondly, with pride, and Ilya feels uncomfortably loved. She shakes her face into gamemode. "Ok. How does it work?" It's different than how Harris asked. His question was about goals, but Yuna is asking for logistics.

Shane looks at Ilya as if to say *take it away*, so Ilya does. He tells her about his guys, the ally army, the lists of retired players and staff that he can't touch yet, the journalist, the lawyer... he stops.

He planned to tell Yuna the organizational parts, nothing more. She doesn't have to know about the dark underbelly of his group. Shane said she would be on board with everything, but Shane doesn't know Ilya rigged the 2018 cup with Hayden Pike, or that he's rigging it again in 2019 with none other than Commissioner Crowell. Yuna hates cheating.

"So the group is just the cup deal?" She looks dubious, like there's tons they're not telling her. Shane looks at Ilya like he thinks they should, which is admission enough to make it weird if they don't.

"Ehh no." Ilya rubs his thumb across his hand nervously. "When a player has an issue, they also come to me."

"An issue?"

"Yes. Baldwin's contracts, for example." Yuna can't be mad at underground journalism, right? "I run the RogueMLH account with Harris. Our social media director."

"The group has a social media director?"

Shane scoffs. "The Centaurs' social media director, Mom."

"Yes." Ilya is uncomfortable. Every instinct wants to shield Yuna from exposure to this, but they're in it now. "So we just tell everyone a little bit of league corruption. That stuff."

Yuna leans back in thought. "Rogue MLH was the one to point out Fredericks issue, right? When he was getting attacked every game?"

"Yes?" Ilya confirms. Every hockey fan knows this by now. Rogue MLH has become a household name and has spin-offs in the MLB and WNBA, both of whom are in contact with Ilya, through anonymous DM.

“I just...” Yuna sighs. And then she chuckles, “I guess you don’t want to hear what I would have done.”

Shane cocks his head, “Mom? What do you mean? What would you have done?”

“I shouldn’t... It’s just— if Fredericks were you? or Ilya? And I knew this list existed, and I knew no one else was doing anything about it...” Yuna trails off and looks at the wall angrily. “I would probably try to make the jackasses miserable.”

Shane and Ilya look at each other with horror and amusement, respectively. “Yeah?” Ilya says with a smile. An angry Yuna Hollander is terrifying, he’s learning today.

“Yeah. Actually, two of them are out on injury, so maybe people took it into their own hands,” Yuna says, still thoughtfully looking beyond either of them. Ilya squirms uncomfortably at this. “But I’d tell this... *group*... maybe be a little rough with them. A taste of their own medicine. They deserve it.”

Shane’s mouth is a little open as he stares at his mother. Ilya’s grin widens.

“Obviously no illegal hits, like they were doing— and getting away with! Can you believe that?” Yuna rants. “Just, a little rougher play than normal... you boys know there’s some space for serious injury out there. But I guess I would be a terrible leader,” she laughs.

“No, actually...” Ilya takes a resolving breath, “We have some good news for you, then.”

Shane was right. His mother can handle the vigilante justice. Still not the cheating, though, even if it’s completely legal. So they let her in, within reason.

When Ilya is done explaining, Yuna nods determinedly. “We can run it here,” she says in the casual, Yuna-Hollander-Has-Taken-Over kind of way.

“This is what the lawyer has said as well.”

“Shane, what’s your role?” Yuna turns to her son expectantly.

Ilya and Shane look at each other. They’ve never discussed Shane’s role here, but he’s been absolutely perfect anyway. Unconditional help when asked, and never asking questions. Maybe it’s good that she asked; Ilya has no idea what Shane thinks of all this. Suddenly, he’s curious to know if they’re on the same page.

“I’m just another member of the group. When it comes to this stuff, I’m not Ilya’s boyfriend, I’m just #6.” Shane looks at Ilya, eyes hopeful that he’ll agree. Ilya nods, so Shane continues at his mother. “So I just do what any group member would do. There’s a lot of things I don’t need to know, that aren’t my business. And I think maybe it’s best if you’re the same way. It works if everyone stays in their lane.”

Ilya would never speak to Yuna like that, but somehow she doesn’t mind. Maybe this is part of her unofficial role as momager, following instructions from her son/client. But concern hatches on her face as she asks, “And as his boyfriend?”

Shane looks down, “I just worry. We have a lawyer now, so he’s not going to get in any actual trouble. That was my big concern... And the stress, but that’s kind of where you might come in. Or anyone, really. He needs to delegate to people who aren’t on a professional athlete’s daily routine and road schedule.” Shane laughs darkly at this.

“So you’re a mob wife.” Yuna says matter-of-factly. Before Shane can object, she turns to Ilya, “You need a... mob mom. Because I agree, you’ll burn out. You need to delegate.”

That’s what they were hoping she’d say. So Ilya delegates and Yuna is now on the case. He decided before this meeting he can relinquish control to things he never started. He puts her in touch with Harris and within hours, Yuna has list of the MLH staff who are openly gay while Harris inquires with the ones who are closeted. Ilya still thinks he has a better gaydar than Harris, so he plans to make an excuse to visit different teams’ offices as much as possible during their away games. He also gives her the contact info for Hayden Pike, Scott Hunter, Kavita Kingsley and Cooper Lee and explains each of their roles. Yuna is energized and ready to lead her battalion. She is wholeheartedly obsessed with being a ranking General.

Shane orders a ginger ale from the hotel bar at the All-Star Weekend in St. Louis, feeling lonely. He misses his boyfriend. They haven’t been apart at an All-Star Weekend in... he doesn’t even know how long. Even before he used the weekend as an opportunity to tell Ilya how he felt two years ago, they always made sure to meet up and steal a few hours under the noses of their colleagues. It’s not the same being here without him.

But more than wanting Ilya here, Shane wants to be with Ilya. He’s at a funeral for Duncan Harvey, a player who recently died. Shane didn’t understand why Ilya would want to go at first—Harvey was an asshole. But when he heard the cause of death, just like Ilya’s mother, he understood. Shane didn’t want to say it at the time, but he’ll probably be the only hockey person at the funeral. Even Harvey’s teammates are here at All-Star Weekend instead. Shane wants to be there for Ilya, but it would be very suspicious if they both went. Plus, the league would definitely not let their two biggest stars skip the weekend, even if it was for another player’s funeral.

Shane has been trying to socialize and not spend all weekend sulking in his room, so he’s waiting for the bartender and scoping out where he should be mingling once his soda comes.

Across the room is a table of Scott Hunter with some guys from the group and another who must be a member Shane just didn’t know about. Shane could be brave and sit with them. He’ll probably go over and say hi but he can’t really mingle with them for too long without anxiety that he’s somehow raising suspicions. On the other wall, there’s a table of JJ, Brophy, and Pierce. It’s a weird grouping and Shane can’t help but wonder if they’re friends because they’re all in the ally army. There’s a table of obnoxious assholes in the corner, Troy Barrett laughing hysterically at Dallas Kent’s joke. Sitting at the bar alone is Chucky Rhodes, a

goalie for the Brooklyn Scouts. He was one of Shane's guesses the first night he learned about Ilya's army, one of the guesses that Ilya and the others laughed at.

Hunter is smiling up at Shane like it's obvious he'll go sit over there. Mat Rivera from Washington and Vinny Marcello from New Jersey were at the MLH awards meet-up, and Vinny already knows about Shane and Ilya from that night. Going over there would mean coming out to one person. Vinny looks over at Shane, and then to Rhodes at the bar, and waggles his eyebrows at Shane like he's still making fun of his terrible gaydar. Shane is surprised anyone even remembers his guesses, but practically the whole table is snickering like they've been talking about Shane and Rhodes at the bar this whole time. Laughing about his guess, like there's no way Shane could be right about this. A competitive burning strikes Shane's gut.

Shane looks at Chucky Rhodes, who is scrolling on his phone, sipping a beer. Shane will concede he's a pretty masculine dude... so maybe he's wrong. He's just always gotten a vibe, though, there's no way to explain it. Shane looks back at the group, who are now all watching him. They must have explained this to poor Richards, the only guy who might not have known Shane was one of them, because he seems just as invested as the rest of them. They look expectant. Are they issuing a challenge? What is Shane supposed to do? Two of them know he's in a relationship. He can't exactly take this guy back to his room to prove it to them. He doesn't want to.

Furthermore, he wouldn't even know *how*. He's never initiated anything with a stranger or really picked anyone up. The times he's hooked up, he was the one getting hit on. What is he supposed to say? *"Hello, I've noticed you've got a vibe about you. You might have noticed I also have a vibe. Does your vibe also mean you are interested in dick? No, I'm not offering, just curious. You see, my boyfriend, another very famous hockey player, would like to recruit you for a pact where you have to come out of the closet if you win the cup, even if you haven't come out to yourself. Which you probably haven't. That's not really why I'm here, though, I'd like to prove I was right to a group of catty gays who are sitting across the room. Yes, actually maybe one of them would be interested, you're very attractive."*

The thing is, Shane can't turn down a challenge, and he doesn't like losing. So despite not having any semblance of a plan at all, he walks over to Chucky Rhodes and stands next to him. How did he pick up Ilya?

"Hey, you had an awesome third period against Houston last week. What did you save, like 20 shots?" Shane does his best. The game was big news; there's a reason Rhodes is one of the only goalies here. Rhodes almost looks surprised that Shane is talking to him on his way to another table, but that melts when he remembers to be a puffed-up hockey player. Shane catches a glimpse at his phone screen. It's a dating app, and there's a woman's picture on the screen, waiting to be swiped on. Fuck, Shane is wrong.

"26, actually." Rhodes smiles at himself.

"26, whoa." Shane smiles back. It's an impressive stat. Vinny Marcello appears behind Rhodes, ostensibly to order another drink but almost definitely just to eavesdrop. Shane hopes he doesn't glance at the phone screen too, but it goes black before he can.

Rhodes raises an eyebrow at Shane. “You didn’t have a bad game yourself on Thursday, two goals against Washington? They’re a tough team right now.”

Shane is taken aback. This guy watched his game? Or even the highlights, and took in how many goals Shane had scored? Is he as into stats as Shane? It’s not like he was reading hockey news on his phone just now. Shane can’t help it, he trips over his words a little, “Wh — did you watch my game?”

Rhodes seems a little called-out. He looks down like it’s a confession and admits, “Yeah, I always try to record the Montreal games. You’re pretty good.” Shane catches Vinny’s jaw dropping in his periphery. He finally settles into that familiar feeling of victory, his first since the obstacle course challenge this morning. He needs more of it.

“Did you bring anyone this weekend?” Shane asks. If he’s raising his voice a little so Vinny can hear better, that’s really no one’s business.

“No,” Rhodes says and then smiles at Shane, “Why?” Vinny’s eyebrows jump up. Asking ‘why’ is as good of an admission as any. But now Shane has no clue what to do, and maybe Vinny sees that because he rounds Rhodes to join their conversation.

“Hey Rhody, nice job earlier today.” Duh, Shane should have gone with the event that Rhodes was in, not a creepy indication that he’s memorized the goalie’s stats. In truth, he memorizes a lot of people’s stats. It doesn’t mean anything, but did Rhodes take that as interest?

Rhodes looks... disappointed? that he is no longer just talking to Shane, which makes Vinny’s smile even broader. “Uhh thanks... Marcello?” He asks, trying to remember the name.

“No problem.” Vinny’s delighted face turns to Shane, “I’m supposed to grab you, Scott Hunter wanted to talk about your foundation.” In a final clue for both men, Rhodes turns away at the name ‘Scott Hunter’, as if being in a conversation that mentions the man makes him gay.

“Ah, ok, I should head over there then.” Shane is so grateful for the rescue. “Good to see you, man.”

“Yeah... uh, same.”

Shane sits at Scott Hunter’s table with a smug smile on his face. As the guys speak in hushed voices about what just happened, Shane pulls out his phone to brag to Ilya. But as it turns out, someone at the table beat him to it. There are already texts on his phone.

Lily: What is this

Lily: [photo]

Lily: why am i getting pictures of my boyfriend flirting with men at bars?

Lily: tell me everything

Lily: did you lead him on and then disappoint him?

Lily: call me in two hours.

The blurry photo from across the room shows Rhodes looking starstruck. The consensus at the table is that Shane was right, and they settle into an easy and fun conversation from there.

Was he always too distracted trying to sneak around with Ilya to socialize at these weekends before, or is the difference a group of people who know what it's like? Either way, for the first time all weekend, Shane is glad to be there, and he lets himself stay a little longer than intended before making his rounds.

Ilya puts his phone away. He'll text Rhodes later and see if he even knows he likes men. He might just have a feeling toward Shane that he can't put into words yet. Ilya can't blame him. Everyone knows Shane is the most attractive person in the league, maybe the world. He can't imagine walking into a room and *not* hitting on Shane. And as much as that's an endearing fact because Ilya knows he's the only one Shane wants, he has half a mind to catch the first flight to St. Louis to go mark his territory.

Instead, he's heading into a short funeral service where not another hockey player could be bothered to show up. Except— is that Ryan Price? He didn't even know his #8 *knew* Duncan Harvey.

After the service, Ilya asks Price to walk with him. Almost immediately, it's clear: Price needs to leave this sport. It's making him miserable and probably costing him his relationship. Selfishly, though, Ilya needs the players, especially one that is partially out. Now that Hunter is back to being the only out player, with Baldwin and Lundin gone and no one stepping up to take Fredericks's contract, some of the small group chats are starting to talk about a "coming out curse". An ominous alarm flares in Ilya's brain. Maybe this is his future. This is what Shane fears. It's really, really looking like you can't be gay *and* play hockey.

But Ilya can't ask Price to stay in the league just for the movement if it's killing him. Maybe he can support Price leaving the sport *and* use it to his advantage. If the public starts seeing this as a problem, that the league can't retain a queer player, they might start to demand action. More reporters might start taking their allegation seriously. If *everyone* who comes out then leaves the sport, there's a problem to be investigated. RogueMLH could highlight the Curse. Price could help by being another example in that long line.

So Ilya tries to convince Price to retire. It's not like it's difficult, he just asks maybe three questions about his mental health before Price's face falls into a sort of resolve that shows his decision. Ilya offers him a job at the Irina Foundation in Montreal. Honestly, he needs help to run the Army and Price would be the perfect person to do that under the guise of working for the Foundation. But Price declines, saying that he can help with the summer camps but he needs to remain in Toronto with his... Fabian. He looks sad as he doesn't know what to call his boyfriend. Ilya senses maybe they're on some kind of break. Yeah, this guy really needs to quit hockey.

Once again, that very strange thing happens: Price takes Ilya's opinion into consideration and actually listens to him. Ilya still isn't used to that. But when Ilya tells him to come out as he announces his retirement, Price says he'll talk to Fabian about it. Ilya almost asks for Fabian's number to try to work his magic on whoever that is, too, but remembers Price's initial hesitation and the fact that they are maybe on the outs.

He realizes with some regret that after all this, two full years of scheming, there is still only one out gay player. Lundin and Baldwin have left, Fredericks will likely have to leave, and now Price is leaving too.

Because apparently Ilya is a hypnotist, Price listens to him. Two weeks later, an announcement goes up on all of Price's oft-neglected social media. News outlets only pick it up when his boyfriend Fabian, who Ilya gathers is some sort of celebrity for Canadian Gays, reposts it.

@RyanPriceHockey

Thank you to the fans for everything, but I finalized my resignation today. Sometimes you take stock of your life and decide to make a change. I hate fighting for a living and my mental health is too important to me. Donate to the Irina Foundation, link in bio.

Because it's now customary to add this when you leave the MLH, I was #EIGHT 

RASHYCOCK + Roz group chat

Ilya has added Price to the chat

Baldwin: congrats on pulling a Baldwin

Oldest Man Alive: Good man Price!

Oldest Man Alive: I hate the push-and-pull of everyone coming out and then leaving.

Oldest Man Alive: But I get it.

Oldest Man Alive: Let's hear it, what is EIGHT?

Ilya: is the order number.

Ilya: is hard to keep up at your old age?

Price: thanks guys.

Price: just got tired of it all

Price: I'm so much happier already

Lundin: i don't want to hear about American league drama.

Lundin: i want to know what EIGHT is.

Ilya: 4+4

Oldest Man Alive: What does it STAND for?

Oldest Man Alive: Asshole.

Price: Eighth of Ilya's Gay Hockey Tyrants

Price: Fabian came up with it. He wrote the whole post, but he told me i needed to use one.

Price: something about building community or whatever

Price: couldn't use RASHYCOCK, I didn't win a cup

Oldest Man Alive: Yeah. That's why you couldn't use it.

News of Price's retirement brings more awareness to the mental health of players. It's good to see, obviously. Ilya is torn. On one hand, the original goal of the group was for gay hockey to be so normal that it is always the second headline, like this. On the other hand, he wanted the gay discrimination to seem like the reason Price is leaving.

On the third hand that no one should have, it leads to a ripple effect of bravery.

Unknown number: hey, I just saw news about Price

Unknown number: I got your number off Wyatt Hayes, hope it's ok

Unknown number: told him I just want to apologize but I also have to talk to you about something

Unknown number: it's Troy btw

Unknown number: Barrett

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Troy

For your spreadsheets:

Vinny Marcello is from New Jersey and knows about Shane and Ilya, so you can def match him up with a number. Shane doesn't know his number, so he calls him by name in his head.

#8: Price is out ☺ and out ☹

As always I love your comments and they feed me!!! There is just no way I can respond to all of them thoughtfully but I do what I can. Just know I read all of them and I love all of you!!

Chapter 13: Barrett

Chapter Summary

Spring 2019

Chapter Notes

I am prepared for you to kill me for this!

This is book-gay heavy again. Troy Barrett is the main character in Role Model, he is also in Tough Guy (where we are now) and The Long Game. It's not necessary, but if you're wondering what all the fuss is about, the first few chapters of any of those will do.

To put our boy into perspective here (this is spoiler for Tough Guy, but it all happens at the beginning of Role Model): he started dating men 2 months ago. In the books, it is almost two full years before he disowns being an asshole, gets dumped, gets traded, meets LOML. In this fic, one year ago he punched Ilya in the face for implying he was gay. *Last chapter* he's buddy buddy with Dallas Kent. So we (in Ilya's head) still don't like him. This chapter was never going to end the way you want it to, I'm so so sorry. If it's any consolation, everyone is an asshole today.

BUT! I will make it up to you with some closure on your actual favorite character 😊

Warning: ableist slur

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

Ilya is scared for his life. He didn't exchange many texts with Troy Barrett before agreeing to meet in this Toronto dive bar. It's a pretty safe spot. It looks like no one really cares who's coming and going, and it's the middle of a weekday, so it's practically empty. He sees Barrett already at a small table in the corner with a beer. Ilya gets one from the bar and joins him.

He waits for Barrett to speak because, to be honest, Ilya has no fucking clue what tone this meeting has, at all. Barrett could think this is a *date* for all Ilya knows. He does not expect the conversation to start with

"I have a boyfriend."

Maybe he overheard Ilya's fleeting fear that he agreed to a date? "Me too, Barrett. Am not interested."

But Ilya is actually *very* interested. See, he's got a philosophy after two years trying to collect gays. He knows now there are levels to this, and not just the Kinsey scale or spectrums in the literature that Kip sends and Ilya pretends to ignore to annoy him.

No, Ilya calls his theory the Shane Hollander Index. Some guys are queer as hell, know it, and act on it, or what Ilya calls 'Shane Now'. Others know they are queer and try to deny it or just date women, which Ilya calls 'Shane 2016'. Others hook up with some men occasionally and tell themselves it's a phase or fluke or joke, 'Shane 2014'. Others think about men but would never consider hooking up with one, 'Shane 2009'. And then some don't even realize that they think about men, 'Baby Shane'.

Before this, Ilya would say Barrett's Shane Hollander Index Total might be somewhere from Baby to 2009. And in the last year, since Barrett punched him in the face, Ilya has given up on those guys. Partially *because* Barrett punched him in the face. But partially because they're not even out to themselves, so they'd never come out to the world. For every Buffalo rookie who started dating a roommate after Ilya's conversation, there were probably three Troy Barretts who would never. Not very useful to a goal like Ilya's.

So it's news to Ilya that Barrett's S.H.I.T. has skipped right ahead to Shane Now. He knows he likes men and he's acting on it. Good for him. Still a douchebag.

"No, asshole." Barrett looks like he wants to flip the table. Or run. Ilya knows now that he just wanted to come out, and Ilya could be the bigger man and do the right thing here. But Barrett has been such a dick for years now, so he remains silent to let Barrett work his own way out. "I'm trying to say..." he waits for Ilya to cut him off. Now it's a point of contention. Ilya isn't going to say it for him. He needs to say it himself. "I have a boyfriend." He pleads, quieter.

"Yes. You mentioned him."

Barrett looks constipated. "I don't know how this is supposed to go. I'm... it's new to me."

Ugh, fuck Ilya's stupid weakness for baby gays. He's like a goddamn mother hen. "Ok. You are gay, and you are freaking out."

"Yeah." Barrett looks relieved.

"At some point in your life you will have to say that out loud."

Barrett looks uncomfortable about that, but he shakes it off and the icy macho face comes back. "Ok. You've been talking to me about this... group for years. What do you want to say?"

So he made Ilya come down to Toronto on a precious day off to give him a sales pitch? There must be more than that. Still, Ilya has that sales pitch down like muscle memory at this point. "There is a pact—"

“—The cup thing?” Barrett cuts him off, “Absolutely not. I can’t... do that.”

Ilya considers this struggling man in front of him. There are Russian citizens on his roster, people from religious households who would be disowned, people with conservative fan bases who might never sell a jersey again, people who aren’t talented enough or well-behaved enough or white enough for management to put up with their gay drama, too. People with a lot to lose. Barrett looks desperate like that, but why? Ilya doesn’t think any of those circumstances apply to him. He is better than Fredericks or Baldwin, he would actually have a shot at keeping his career. If Toronto doesn’t want him, he’s fairly tradable. Hell, Ottawa would probably take him, if Ilya could stand the guy for more than a half hour. So what does he have to lose by coming out?

Obviously there’s some story Ilya doesn’t know here, so he proceeds with caution. “There are about forty players. And for most teams I have multiple guys.” He doesn’t have to tell him he has someone for Toronto already, Price’s backup, or that Toronto isn’t going to win the cup this year because it’s rigged already. No, Barrett needs to agree with the actual assumption that he would come out if he won the cup. In fact, if Barrett isn’t willing to join them, he doesn’t get any privileged information at all.

And it looks like he isn’t willing to join them. “Yeah. I’m not agreeing to anything where I have to... Ever.”

The cup deal isn’t designed to force people into coming out. Yes, it ensures they have a consistent stream of names added to the list annually, but it’s also the union dues, the cost of entry, admission fee. Access to this community, hope, physical protection, legal protection, all the benefits it provides, are only attained if the group can trust a person. And the cup deal earns that trust.

If push came to shove and someone won the cup but really chickened out without a backup, it’s not like Ilya would publish their name or anything. They’d simply be out of the group. So if Barrett is saying no to the deal, he’s saying no to the group. And Ilya isn’t interested in working to convince him. If this were anyone else, Ilya has a list of strategies to get the agreement. But Ilya has watched Barrett laugh at a Fredericks joke this year. He’s not worth the effort.

This isn’t an introductory meeting anymore. It’s not a date, they’re not friends. Now this is just two queer assholes who don’t know what to do with each other.

“Tell me about your boyfriend.” Ilya tries. This guy might not have anyone to talk to about him. Ilya knows what that’s like, and he also knows the other side. When he can text Yuna or Scott bragging about something Shane did, it’s the best feeling in the world.

“No.”

Well, fuck. “Ok.”

“You tell me about *yours*.” It sounds like Barrett is issuing a challenge, like no one in their right mind would describe their boyfriend.

Ilya almost wants to do the same: Complete denial. It's what he *should* do. This is a stranger who shouldn't even know Ilya *has* a boyfriend. Plus, Barrett deserves rudeness in return. But Ilya heard the challenge in Barrett's voice, like he thinks talking about the man you love is a hardship. And Ilya doesn't miss an opportunity to talk about Shane, even in vague, shrouded language. "He is awesome. The best. The top of his field, hottest person on the planet, way too good for me. You know, the best, yes?"

"Yeah." Barrett looks off into space. "My... mine isn't um... And it would be a big deal if he was..."

This guy can't even say "out". Ilya is slightly less annoyed and more... *Who hurt him?*

"Ok. I also know this feeling. Mine is not out, not really. But am I not either, so I can not really blame him—"

"—It's Adrian Dela Cruz," Barrett blurts out.

Oh. Ohhh. Everyone knows that name. Ilya had to stop watching superhero movies when Shane dated Rose Landry, and that guy's superhero TV show was the next best thing. He is hot, Ilya has to give Barrett credit.

So Ilya and Barrett have very similar situations, dating famous men who the public thinks are straight. But Ilya can't reciprocate here at all. He can't say Shane Hollander's name back to Barrett in exchange. "That does complicate this, probably."

"No one knows that. Literally. We... no one knows about either of us, let alone... and it's only been a few months, like..."

Ilya puts up a hand. "Yes. I know. I have done this for ten years. I know what it is."

"You've been with Shane Hollander for *ten years*?"

"Wh— I am not— what?"

For the first time, maybe ever, Barrett does something close to a smile at Ilya. "Ok." He says sarcastically. But he becomes a little more serious, "I thought you'd understand. You're not out, Hollander isn't, really. I've heard the rumors but he's not public, right? You'd think the gay Lewis and Clark would be the first two out unless they were hiding something else. Like a relationship."

And fuck, that logic is hard to beat. He and Shane *would* probably both come out if they didn't have this relationship to hide. Ilya has just been wildly fortunate that neither of them have been close to winning a cup since they started this. He doesn't really know what either of them would do. Through all of this, he hasn't even given coming out much thought. Even this season, with both of their teams at a 1 in 6 chance of winning, Ilya hasn't let himself actually consider that as a reality.

"If I won the cup, I would come out."

"Fucking easy to say in Ottawa." Barrett scoffs, "Hollander won't."

And maybe that's a soft spot for Ilya, who has the same concern. Shane might chicken out, he knows this. Or, worse, he might feel pressure to do it before he's ready because of Ilya's bet. Whatever the case, it's a low blow, and Ilya's patience with this dickwad is running out.

"Why am I here, Barrett?"

"Ok, yeah." Barrett sighs, "How did you know?"

"What?" Ilya knows exactly what he's being asked. He can't really believe it, though.

"You had me figured out a long time ago. But now that I'm..." he trails off, "the stakes are much higher if I get clocked. I need to know, I need to be more careful."

Fuck this guy. He wants Ilya's superpower so he can stay in the closet better. To what, protect the most famous man on television? Ilya wants to deny this request but will also do anything to end this godforsaken meeting as soon as possible.

"You check out Shane. Every chance you get." Ilya says bitterly. Barrett stares at him for a long time and then the rare smirk comes across his face again, once again when Shane is mentioned, which Ilya notices and hates. "What."

"So the whole reason I'm here..." Barrett starts, "The reason I *came out to you*—"

"—ehh, you didn't, not really—"

"I'm here because I look at *Shane Hollander*?" Barrett smiles again, this time in disbelief. "Do you really not know?"

"Not know what?"

"Staring at Shane Hollander doesn't make you gay, Rozanov. I don't even think wanting to *fuck* Shane Hollander makes you gay. That's like, a default state for humans. *Dallas* wants to fuck Shane Hollander—" He cuts himself off, "I mean, don't go around spreading that," he considers it for a second, "Or, I guess you could. Because no one would be surprised. Or call him gay."

"Bisexuality—"

"It's not about that." Barrett shakes his head, still visibly amused. "Ask any straight man you know— do you know any straight men?"

"I know straight men." Ilya snaps. And he plans to ask them. He remembers Pike's wife's comment about hall passes. "So what, he is... exception? Hall pass?"

"Yeah, I guess. I can't believe that's it. You haven't seen every other guy on earth looking at him, too?" Barrett asks earnestly.

"No. I just... you were—"

“You were looking at *me*!!” Barrett barks. “Rozanov, were you checking me out in front of your boyfriend??”

Ilya’s blood boils. “Absolutely fucking not. You were... there was a pool... and it was—”

Barrett laughs at him. It’s not a teasing laugh like he gets from his friends, it’s cold and mean. Ilya is so rarely on the back foot like this. Last time was in Harris’s office, when he was getting called out for staring too long at the rainbow flag.

“So you were checking me out and noticed me looking at Hollander. Who, by the way, is not subtle about who he’s attracted to. I know from experience.” Barrett narrows his eyes, “Someday some guy is going to be brave enough to make a move, and Hollander will stop being so socially retarded and reciprocate.” Ilya has no idea how to respond to that, but it turns out Barrett wasn’t done, “I bet that’s exactly how this happened. You’re overconfident and whip it out for anyone, and Hollander sucked the first dick that appeared in front of him.”

Ilya hasn’t come close to hitting anyone off the ice in years, but his heart is racing like he might. “Fuck yourself, Barrett. To answer your question, is obvious to anyone with eyes you like men. You have big arrow over your head, 'insert dick here.'” It’s a low blow, and it’s not true, Barrett is pretty stealthy.

“No, what I’m hearing is that I’m safe,” he responds smugly.

“Yes, you are so safe in your fucking relationship where you cannot tell anyone.” Ilya hates himself as the words leave his mouth. He can’t believe he’s getting on this guy’s level, but he can’t seem to stop himself.

“Oh, like you can tell the world?”

“I have forty guys I can call at any time for anything.” Ilya brags, “You could too. But you want to have Dallas Kent who would probably out you, or—”

“—Dallas is a good guy,” Barrett starts, but Ilya is getting up. He doesn’t even know why he stayed this long.

“I have to give you the same opportunity as everyone, but I do not like it. You will call me when you are ready for cup deal, when you are ready to have non-rapists to celebrate your boyfriend with you. You will say nothing about what we talked about today, because you have the same secret, and I have made no promise to protect it without the deal.”

“Fuck you Rozanov,” Barrett spits, “I’m not joining your cock-sucking cult.”

Ilya walks out, hating himself a bit. He hasn’t been that self-destructive in years, but some combination of Barrett himself and what he was saying set Ilya off. Did he really just threaten to out Barrett? Ilya would never, but Barrett doesn’t know that. He wants to go back, text the guy, make sure he knows he’s not actually going to go to the press.

At the same time? Fuck that guy.

Ilya thinks about this for a while on the long drive back to Ottawa, and when he's done overanalyzing every other part of that conversation, he lets himself think about Shane. Is Shane really some sort of universal exception for straight guys? Do all straight guys know this and talk about this? Ilya has always exited locker room conversations when they broach the subject of Shane Hollander, so maybe he's missed them. Would Shane someday get hit on by someone hot enough that he would act on it? No. That's crazy. Not that he would get hit on, but Ilya knows he wouldn't do anything. He thinks back to the MLH Awards, when #15 said Shane's gaydar is more of a wishlist.

He hates how insecure motherfucking Troy Barrett made him feel, but he decides to call Shane on the drive. He has another hour to kill, and Shane just got out of practice.

"Hi," Shane says happily, calming Ilya's blood on impact. "I thought you'd be longer."

"No, I left." Ilya knows he sounds tired.

"...are you ok?" Shane is careful about what he can and cannot ask.

Ilya doesn't really give a shit about Troy Barrett.

"Troy Barrett knows about us."

There is silence on the line, and then, "Oh my god." Shane sounds like this is the worst thing to ever happen.

Oh, duh. He thinks Barrett is going to tell everyone. Because Barrett is an asshole. It's true, Barrett *is* an asshole, but he's an asshole with secrets. "No. He is not going to tell anyone."

"How do you know? He'll tell fucking Dallas Kent and together they'll—"

"I just know." Then, because he can't stop thinking about what Barrett said, "Shane, can I ask you about some guys and whether they like men?"

Shane laughs, "I don't think Dallas Kent likes men." Ok, so there's one.

"Brophy?"

"Uhh maybe? ...yes. Yeah, I think."

"Maynard?"

"No." He laughs, "Hard no."

They repeat this for another 15 names, Ilya interspersing his guys in with the others. Shane's guesses are... completely fucking random. Ilya has no idea what logic Shane is putting into this at all, except the one obvious answer. It seems like he's saying yes to the guys who he thinks are most attractive.

At the 15th name, “Rice on San Jose or *Jim* Rice on Chicago?” Shane gets frustrated, “— Actually, what are we doing? What is this?”

“So your guesses are just people you find attractive?”

“No! I— ok, they’re *more* attractive, I guess... but no, I just get a feeling?”

Shit. Barrett was right. If Shane showed any interest in these guys at all, they probably gave him a second glance. Shane thinks these guys like men because they like *him* and he’s only noticed because he likes *them*. The straight guys that Shane said yes to are definitely not gay, they’re probably not even really bi. Everyone has one exception, and it’s Shane Hollander. Sure, that’s on the spectrum of sexuality somewhere, but it’s not like they’re going to come out of the closet and uproot their whole lives because they would hypothetically blow Shane Hollander.

The information that Shane could have literally any man he wants is distressing, but Shane chose Ilya, right?

“You know I am better than any of these men, yes?” Ilya hates how insecure Barrett made him feel.

“Yeah, you’re the second best in the league, Ilya.” Shane says with a smile in his voice.

“No, not at hockey—”

“I know.” Shane reassures him, “I know what you mean. You know I love you right? What is all of this? ... Were you really meeting with Troy Barrett?”

Ilya certainly isn’t going to tell Shane what Barrett said, that any man would love to have him, so much so that it doesn’t actually count toward your sexuality to be into Shane. But, fuck Troy Barrett and his stupid closet. Ilya does something he’s never done.

“Yes. You won’t say anything?” Ilya doesn’t wait for confirmation, he already knows. “Barrett is dating some man, very famous, but will not make the cup bet.”

“And that’s important to be in the group.” Shane says by way of clarification. He doesn’t sound surprised that Barrett is gay, which Ilya realizes with some trepidation *means something* now.

“Is the most important thing. He just...” Ilya doesn’t have the words, maybe in any language, to describe how much he hated that interaction.

“It’s ok, the guy’s an asshole. We don’t need him.” Shane is so comforting, and only gets better. “You’re too far away for this. Come here tonight?”

Ilya makes the quick decision to drive the extra hour straight to Montreal for the night. It will mean waking up at 5am to get back to Ottawa on time, but this was the whole point of moving closer. At least one of their plans is paying off.

Council of (mostly) Straight Elders group chat

Ilya: do straight boys think about fucking Shane Hollander?

Marly: 100%

Ilya: asking about straight boys

Ilya: not whatever you are Marly

Vaughan: yeah gottta agree

Vaughan: 100%

Hayes: 100%

Pike: ugh guys that's shane come on

Vaughan: answer the question

Pike: no

Hayes: that's an answer

In mid-March, Ilya sits in bed, scrolling on social media with Shane next to him, reading a book. It's one of those beautiful mornings they always secretly dreamed about, when they get to just do nothing and be together. So when Ilya's phone displays an incoming call, he turns to Shane with the question. Sure, they're not doing anything, but this is still an interruption. Shane looks at the caller, smiles and nods. Ilya kisses him in thanks and gets up as he answers.

"Hello, Kavita." He walks out of Shane's bedroom and through to the small makeshift office they've created for Ilya at Shane's place.

"Ilya." She is straight to business, "I finished the league corruption article. I put together a ton of evidence but once I publish it, the feds will take care of the rest. I think there's enough to indict some of his cronies if not Crowell himself. Obviously it'll take years but—"

"So you are publishing this now?" Ilya's stomach sinks. If this article comes out, if the federal government is investigating Crowell and the league, they'll definitely back off this season's rigging and Ilya will never have proof. Rigging the cup for money is one thing, but Ilya wants the proof that Crowell didn't want a gay team to win this year.

"I just sent you the final draft." Kavita says proudly, "I was wondering if you'd check it over and make sure I'm not leaking any privileged information."

“Ah.” Ilya quickly decides it’s the worst possible time for this. “Please uhhh do not publish that right now.”

“What? That’s— Ilya, I’ve been working on this for months, I am absolutely publishing it the second my editor clears it. Which is for the next publication.”

“No.” Ilya can give her this. He lowers his voice. “They are doing it again. We are catching them in the act.”

Kavita is quiet. “Ok. Explain.”

“You can not say anything until after the cup— we have set this up perfectly.”

“I can’t promise that. But I get what you’re saying, let me just hear it.”

Ilya trusts her. Plus, he knows what he’s sitting on. “Crowell asked Hunter for the teams we had no one on. To help or... anyway. To rig the cup again. Definitely. So no one comes out when they win.”

“There are a lot of other reasons he could have asked for that list.”

“No.” Ilya is tired of people saying that to him. Cooper Lee had said the same, as did Hunter. “Anyway, we gave him a list. Do you want to guess which six teams we said?”

Kavita sighs. “If you’re right, I’m going to hurt myself. Are they the top teams in each division right now? Plus... I’m gonna guess Ottawa? And someone else?”

“That is correct. Washington and New Jersey are in same division, but they are one and two. Have not checked. I was uhhh... busy.”

“Washington won last night, so they’re ahead. Barely, it’s basically a tie. Everyone else in that division is so many points behind... actually all the divisions are like that... Ilya, are you fucking kidding me with this?”

“I wish.” Ilya smiles, “Actually, no. I do not. This is fun.”

She laughs a little, “Ok. So Crowell asked for the teams that have no one, so no one will come out upon winning the cup, and you told him... Utah, Anaheim, Montreal, Ottawa, Washington, and New Jersey? I’m assuming you have someone on each of those teams?” It sounds like she’s writing and she doesn’t wait for an answer before she laughs again, “He wasn’t suspicious how evenly they’re divided?”

“The man is not smart, Kavita. He was outrigged by Ilya Rozanov. Now twice.” Ilya realizes too late he has never outright admitted that to Kavita, even if she definitely knows already. “Allegedly.” He adds, pronouncing every syllable of the word.

“I’m starting to think Ilya Rozanov is a little smart, though.”

Ilya preens. “This is a fact. I thought you were journalist.”

“Ok. So I’m supposed to hold off on my article— that I’ve worked on for months— so you can see if the commissioner will rig another cup.” She sighs before Ilya can confirm. “I agree. I mean, if I publish this, they might stop whatever they’re doing... and *ugh* these rankings, Rozanov... they’re definitely doing something. I guess it’s better to get them on two cups instead of one.”

“Yes. Thank you for agreeing.” He adds, “I am glad that you know. I was having to watch Utah games, but now is your job to watch them for me.”

“Fuck you for making me watch Utah games.” They laugh for a second before she gets serious again, “If I’m not publishing this, I need a story fast. I have some things on the backburner but... do you have anything?” She asks expectantly. She is always doing this. Ilya knows she wants him to tell her everything, or give her permission to publish the privileged information she already knows. He usually responds, ‘*someday*’ but recently he has been angry with journalists. It’s not her fault, she can only do so much. But he still pokes at her with it.

“Write about how we can not keep two gay players at the same time.”

Kavita sighs. “Yeah, I have something like that. It’s no commissioner corruption, though. Or underground queer syndicate.”

“Sorry.” Ilya remembers where he is, who is waiting for him. “Am going back to bed.”

“Say hi to Shane for me.” She laughs, and then hangs up before Ilya can rebut. Just as well. As it stands, Ilya can tell himself she just has a suspicion, but if he had to stammer a contradiction, she would know for sure. God, are they really that obvious? For the second time in as many months, Ilya has to break the news to Shane that someone *else* knows.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: 2019 cup

No new numbers for you (No, Troy doesn't get a number just for talking to Ilya, sorry). There is a Toronto backup somewhere. I hope it's clear that Shane's guesses are not credible.

Update on updates: I've been aiming for alternating days to release chapters. The next chapter is the last one I have fully ready to go. I've been slowly catching up to myself, posting faster than I'm writing, so we knew this day would come. LUCKILY it is happening exactly at the time that I have a week off of work (next week) so at most there will be a day or two delay in chapter 15. I would rather delay than put out something half-written or bad. I'm hoping to use some of that week to finish the whole thing so I can go back to my normal edit-and-post schedule and focus on loving your comments. This has been a kind of experiment for me because I usually have everything completely finished before starting to post chapters, and honestly fuck these stupid

hockey playing boys for making me too excited to wait. Failed experiment lol I will not be doing it again.

I love you all so so so much! Your comments are so much fun and I'm almost sorry to end the debates about Shane's gaydar because they've been insane.

Chapter 14: 14

Chapter Summary

Playoffs and the cup 2019

Chapter Notes

We have arrived, folks. Hopefully we're all ok with talking about very fictional playoffs written by someone who doesn't know hockey that well. I have a playoff bracket if people think that might help follow along.

Someone spilled feelings in my hockey playoffs. Not enough immature jokes for my liking, but I promise thousands of them next time.

This has season-finale vibes.

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

Professional competitive hockey is different when you know the results are set.

The season progresses without much notable interference from the league, but Ilya knows it's there. Ottawa isn't ranked last in the division, for starters, and they definitely should be. Ilya's pretty sure some of the guys on the team had never played hockey before walking into the locker room. They just wandered in, off the street, and the GM liked their vibe. Other than Ottawa, all of the other six teams he chose are safely in playoff contention by a wide margin.

Hunter forwards Kavita and Cooper Lee the email to Crowell, along with Crowell's response, which thanks him for the list. So it's confirmed: the commissioner has the list and now these teams are doing well. One doesn't necessarily have to do with the other, but boy it sure looks like it.

But none of them know *how* the league is doing it. Ilya, Hunter, and Kavita pore over games to try to see what's happening, but the games seem to be honest, even when Ilya is on the ice playing for one of the teams, even when Scott plays against one of them. Sure there are some rogue hits, some weird plays, coaches thinking they'll "shake things up" at the worst possible time, some uncalled penalties, some stupid mistakes, but that's all pretty normal.

Ilya knows who would be able to solve this. But the highest hockey IQ, who also happens to be his own boyfriend, is currently playing for one of the teams who will benefit, and Ilya

can't risk the idea getting in his head. What if were distracting? What if he gave up and didn't play as well? Ilya can't stand the thought. He can't tell Shane.

In fact, Ilya doesn't want to tell *any* other player about this, on any team, afraid it will affect gameplay. If the players know the game is set, there's no point in trying. So he employs Price, Baldwin, and Fredericks to watch the games. He gets an angry text message from an unknown number starting with "I thought I was done with hockey in my life," and Ilya saves the number as 'Pricey's Buzzkill' alongside 'Hunter's Great-Grandson'.

Even though no one can figure out why, Utah, Anaheim, and Montreal are at the top of their divisions by a longshot. New Jersey and Washington are tied, eking out a small margin from each other occasionally, but they are practically tied. The Centaurs don't make the playoffs, but everyone already knew they wouldn't. The other five teams do. Only 4 of the 16 teams to start the playoffs aren't on Ilya's rosters. Even without the guaranteed win, Ilya's bet is fairly safe.

By the second round of playoffs, all five teams are predictably still in play. Utah and Anaheim are alone in their division, and Ilya has no doubt they'll win the divisional rounds. Montreal is still in it, their farthest playoff run since Ilya started dating their captain. They're playing Boston for the Atlantic division win. Ilya is glad to watch the games with David and Yuna because he doesn't know how he'd handle it otherwise. He can't escape the feeling that it should be him out there, leading the Boston team and getting front row seats to Shane at his most competitive. Watching Shane in the playoffs is enthralling. He's so *good*. Ilya knows this, of course, but Montreal is wiping the ice with Boston and it's healing something in Ilya to watch it. It's also confusing something in him.

"Is there something weird about this?" Ilya asks carefully. "Montreal is good, Shane is good but..." *Not that good* is left unsaid. David looks offended but Yuna nods.

"I didn't want to say anything," she admits. Then she turns on Ilya with a familiar expression. It's the dubious face she wore when asking if the cup deal is the only thing the group does, or if Ilya would leave Boston for Shane. "What do you think?" It's a challenge. She knows Ilya knows more than he's letting on, and she's gunning for that information. If Ilya has secrets about the league generally, that's one thing. She's been pretty good about keeping herself out of those. But it's another thing entirely if it's her son in a playoff run.

So, no. Ilya is not dumb enough to tell Yuna Hollander that he's been rigging the cups for two years straight. Especially not if Shane is going to benefit from it. Yuna and Shane have one religion and it is the rules of hockey. So Ilya denies it, "I think actually is nothing new for Montreal. They have been good all season." Yuna fights an eyeroll at the obvious lie and turns back to watch Shane score *yet another* goal while the commentators fawn over him.

"Shane Hollander on fire tonight!"

"Makes you think Boston misses Ilya Rozanov at times like this. This series could have looked a lot different."

They couldn't even begin to know.

Since they have two teams in the Metropolitan division, New Jersey and Washington play each other for division champion. It's strange, most games this season have had a clear winner. There have been a lot of shut-outs and lopsided scores. But this series is electric. The two teams are well-matched. By game three, no one is even talking about Montreal trouncing Boston, it's just New Jersey and Washington. Kavita texts him during one game.

Kavita: Wow.

Kavita: It is so clear when the game isn't rigged.

Kavita: But how were they doing it?

Ilya can't help but agree. The next Montreal/Boston game is a stark contrast. Now that he's seen an unrigged game for the first time in a while, it's clear something is different.

Ilya: brother what was that tonight?

Ilya: I leave and Montreal wins?

Marly: no clue

Marly: just super bad luck i think

Marly: id feel like we were on a roll and then coach would match us up weird

Marly: defense sucked

Marly: Montreal is too good

Marly: refs hate boston, nothing new

Ilya asks the other guys who played one of the chosen teams. Houston was playing Utah and San Jose was playing Anaheim. Houston's #16 says about the same as Marly. San Jose has no gay players, but his allies there say the same as well. Just a series of bad luck.

Washington and New Jersey's series becomes the stuff of legends, presumably because no one has seen unrigged playoff hockey in (at least) two years, but in the end, Washington takes the win to move onto the next round. Ilya is glad to see either of them win, but #7 really has been wanting to come out with a cup win for a while. Oh well, it's his fault for not being better at hockey. It's not like it's hard, you just have to win a cup.

As the last game of that round falls into place, Ilya feels like he can breathe again. For three years now he's spent the playoffs stressed about his plans. But by the conference finals round, the four teams left are all the ones Ilya chose, and he doesn't have to worry.

He's very tempted to ask someone to come out now, jump the gun just to show Crowell what he did because he can't wait. He would love to be in the room when the man finds out he's been foiled again.

Instead, Ilya is watching from Shane's parents' house. He offered to go to Shane's apartment in Montreal and just live there while Montreal is still in the playoffs, be helpful in whatever way he could, hopefully sexually. Shane declined the offer and David Hollander said it's for the best, that playoff-Shane is a level of neurosis Ilya might not be ready for. That makes Ilya

want to be there *more*. He tries not to think about it as he is once again on the couch with a bowl of ice cream and Shane's parents, watching Montreal and Washington in game six. Montreal trails with just 2 wins in the series, and if they lose this their playoff run ends on home ice.

Ilya's emotions run high. He's has spoken at length to the players left in contention. *Will you come out? How will you do it? Do you have any worries? Am I forcing you to do irreparable damage to your own life?* All the teams have two players, and they all know this. Washington and Utah have both confirmed that *both* of their players could come out, and Ilya is ecstatic about that. Two players, especially good players like the ones on those teams, will be harder to erase from the league. Anaheim's pair already decided between the two of them who will be the one. And Montreal?

He doesn't know. Ilya hasn't let himself ask. At first, he told himself he and Shane would talk about it if Montreal made it to the next round, and then they kept making it to the next round, and now here they are, two games from the final series, and Ilya doesn't know. #13 would probably do it if Shane doesn't want to, but he hasn't asked him either. It's almost like Ilya isn't letting himself think of the possibility. Shane could be just a week and a half from coming out of the closet. And what does that mean for Ilya?

Truthfully, Ilya is personally ready any time. He has no reason to go back to Russia voluntarily. The Centaurs have made it clear he's not going anywhere, and Cooper Lee has an immigration lawyer on the ready. He would be more secure if he were married but that's a different story. And stupid Troy Barrett was right, he probably would come out if it weren't for Shane.

These are the excuses he's had for years, but there's a big new one. His secret identity as Ringleader should almost definitely stay secret, and that would be hard if he were out. It would mean there is a 1 in 30 (according to the public) chance that it is him. That's the thought that keeps him wearing sunglasses and a hat leaving Shane's house in the middle of the night, keeps him checking any picture five times before posting it on social media, keeps him from telling each reporter who asks him any question how much he loves Shane Hollander.

But Shane isn't ready. He has brand deals and impressionable children to consider. Ilya is glad he never made morality part of his brand. The only companies who approach him for ad deals are those who would not be shocked to learn anything unsavory about him. He's never been dropped for an offensive tweet or fighting on the ice or getting caught in yet another tabloid with yet another brunette woman with freckles. His brand deals might hate him having gay sex, but it would be exactly who they signed up for. And children looking up to Ilya? They either don't exist or are so delinquent already that a healthy relationship would be a good influence on them. Shane has always sold a very clean-cut image. His spread in *Sinlessness, Honor, and Abstinence Monthly* or whateverthefuck magazine would definitely get cancelled if they found out he was a sham.

Shane is also just... not emotionally ready. Ilya saw the way he panicked when David walked in to find them. He heard the heartbeat from a meter away as Shane told his parents. If Shane ever came out, Ilya would need to keep him at the cottage, away from the world with no

phones or television for two full months until the world moved on. Not that Ilya would complain about that. And the two months after the cup are pretty free...

But Ilya isn't ready for Shane to come out, either. Not without him. Ilya still shudders at Barrett's words. Sure, Shane would be *very* popular, but it's not just that. Shane's parents would go down to the ice after the final game without Ilya. He couldn't be there like Kip Grady or Baldwin's rugged mountain of a husband. It might kill him to watch that from the stands or home alone. It also might kill him to be on that ice, surrounded by the Montreal team. Like, literally. They might kill him if they find out.

So, Ilya watches with Yuna at the edge of her seat and David idly fidgeting his hands. The cup itself would mean so much to them, and to Shane, Ilya feels terrible that he hasn't spent much time thinking about that. Coming out shouldn't factor into whether Ilya wants his boyfriend to win the cup. Of course he wants Shane to win. Shane is the best player in the league, he should win every cup.

Ilya lets that emotion win over every other. He wants to see Shane at his happiest. Even if it's not on the ice after the game like his parents. He would get to have Cup Champion Shane Hollander all summer.

Time is running out on the game, and Montreal is trailing by one point. Scott Hunter just texted Ilya, "*You good?*" and Ilya feels the tension in his chest crack a little at the idea that someone is checking in with him. Someone out there knows all of his complicated emotions about this game. Even if it's Scott fucking Hunter.

"Yes," Ilya types. Even if Hunter knows all of his emotions, Ilya doesn't have to show them. Shane gets possession of the puck again and takes another shot on the goal. It's swatted away by Washington's goalie to keep Montreal trailing in the score.

The clock ticks down. Ilya knows Shane is frustrated, and done, but when the buzzer sounds at the end of the game, it's still gut-wrenching to watch him crumble and rest his hands on his knees there on the ice.

Ilya is relieved, and he hates himself. Yuna looks at him with tears in her eyes. "It adds an element to the whole thing, doesn't it?" She hasn't talked about the cup bet affecting Shane either, and now Ilya can't tell if she's relieved or grieving. Either way, he feels the same. It seems like only David is fully mourning the loss. Though they've never spoken about it frankly, Ilya suspects David is hoping for them to come out.

"Ok." Ilya says, getting up. "If I leave now I can get there around the same time."

Yuna and David walk him to the door with hugs and tears, sending their best and some leftovers. Tomorrow, Ilya will think about Washington's players, about Utah who will face them, about how the league rigged this, about Frederick's contract ending. Tonight will be about Shane.

The commentators could *try* to sound interested in the most important game of the season. Shane loves a good hockey fact as much as anyone else. Well, actually... way more than anyone else. But these guys are citing facts to kill time. It's really sad. Not at all how hockey facts are supposed to be used.

Washington is playing Utah for the cup, and Shane is in bed at Ilya's house watching. They started watching it in bed with the idea that it would be more relaxed, that they wanted to stay here and not even migrate to the living room. But by the second period they were both sitting up against the headboard on edge, eyes glued to the television, and they might as well be on the couch.

Now that the third period is coming to a close, and Washington is 2 points ahead of Utah to close out the series and win the cup, it's basically a done deal. Utah is still fighting back, but Shane is almost right there with the commentators. The statistics they're talking about are much more interesting than the game at this point.

He doesn't know how Utah made it this far, because the team kind of blows. Nashville and Houston both looked better at the beginning of the season, but Utah beat them both handily in the playoffs. Shane didn't watch the games, he was a little preoccupied with his own playoff run, but from what he heard, Utah crushed them. It's hard to believe, watching this team now. He vaguely thinks about Ilya, Hunter, and Baldwin telling him about the league rigging the playoffs last season and wonders if anything similar is happening here. Ilya might know. Shane won't ask him.

Shane is suddenly pulled from his thoughts by the commentators.

"...You're right, Jim, and with the now-infamous coming out tradition... you just have to wonder if some guy on this ice is just a few minutes away from coming out of the closet."

"I think the folks at home have been speculating all game, but do you want to weigh in? You think the tradition will be upheld? Who do you think it'll be?"

"Not a chance." Both voices on TV laugh. *"But really, you wonder if it's worth it. Seems like the league can't keep them around once they come out."*

"Right, I'm starting to think Scott Hunter was onto something, if these guys are scared to lose their careers for coming out... Maybe that's a valid concern."

"It would be a little distracting if you're playing this game, to say the least." The puck approaches the goal, *"Iverson with the shot on goal and... it's deflected once again by Washington."*

The commentators pick back up as if nothing happened, just chatting because this game is basically finished. *"...I hope the tradition isn't affecting their gameplay, but you gotta assume with 30 guys, there's a strong probability that there's someone on both teams having this thought process tonight, could basically have their careers on the line right now."*

Shane wants to laugh. There are *four* guys in this game with that thought process right now. Shane already knew Mat Rivera on Washington and Jethro Young on Utah from the MLH awards meeting, but the other two are a mystery to him, still. Ilya won't tell him. He offered to guess, and Ilya glared at him.

Ilya has been adorably jealous since he met with stupid Troy Barrett, the asshole. Shane wants to kill that guy. Well, first thank him for the jealous-possessive-Ilya who came over after their meeting. But then kill him. Since then, Shane has been extra clear about who he wants next to him when he watches hockey, sleeps, eats, orgasms, wins, and loses for the rest of his life. Shane takes Ilya's hand into his lap just thinking about it.

"You get into some risky territory— would you rather win a cup or keep your career?"

"The temptation to give up would be very real, I imagine, for some guys... I hope no one on the ice is throwing the game."

Shane's blood runs cold. The thought had occurred to him in game 6, halfway through the second period. He didn't act on it, he still fought hard. But if it were the final? If he were actually two minutes away from having to come out? Shane has absolutely no clue what he would have done. He and Ilya haven't talked about it. Melnyk even asked Shane during their series against Washington, "Has Roz asked you your plan yet?" And Shane shook his head no, Melnyk looked confused and said, "Huh. Me either."

Maybe Ilya didn't think Montreal would win.

"I gotta disagree with you there, these guys train their whole lives for this. It would be an historic win for either team, I don't think you give that up because of a pact with your buddies. I'd give up the pact before throwing the game." Ilya shifts uncomfortably and Shane scoots closer to him.

"Either way, we're about 30 seconds from finding out if anyone on Washington will abide by that pact as they tick closer to winning the 2019 cup..."

Shane squeezes Ilya's hand for all 30 seconds. Ilya pulls up Rivera's Instagram page on his phone, ready to refresh it after the game. He looks at Shane with an understanding, saying, "I know."

It's hard, and neither of them have to say it. Shane has mixed emotions about Rivera coming out. Not only is he "Little Shane" in Ilya's eyes and is now going to be braver than Shane might ever be, he is taking Shane's reasons for staying in the closet and crushing them. Rivera is the first Puerto Rican player *ever*. All the pressure Shane feels from his minority status is probably tenfold for Rivera. The kid is adorable and clean-cut, and he has a ton of brand deals he'll definitely lose. Like Shane, his brand is what Ilya Rozanov would call "very fucking boring." Not only is Shane feeling inadequate, but he's scared for the kid. He's projecting all his own fears onto this 21 year old like if he worries enough he can protect him.

Earlier this week, he wanted Ilya to take it back, not make Rivera do this. But after being around for the constant check-ins with all the players, Shane knows now that Ilya makes sure they're all 100% on board. Plus, there's two players. Rivera could easily back out and the

other player would take his place. And they all know this. But no, Rivera is going to be brave and do it. He's actually *excited* about it. He even shyly asked Shane to read over his statement. It's funnier than Shane would have given him credit for, more personal and less formal than Shane would be. Shane's would be tasteful, a simple and professional statement about his goals in life, his gratitude to his family and —

Shane should not be drafting his coming out post in his head right now. Right?

Ilya is still looking at him expectantly, almost reading his mind, saying, "You still have time to steal his thunder, post real quick." There's a smile in his eyes but Shane thinks he's maybe only 90% kidding. Ilya would support any decision Shane makes about coming out, and that blinding fact compels Shane to just kiss his boyfriend in response until the television blares with the buzzer. The game is over, and Washington has won the cup.

Chapter End Notes

So Rachel Reid has apparently said in like a Discord comment somewhere that Washington wins the cup in 2019? I was kind of waiting for someone to have searched this and put it in the comments before now lol I thought I was not being sneaky at all.

Fuck numbers! We got a name!

Someone on Utah that Shane already knows is now named Jethro Young; #23 and #30 are Ilya's Utah players, and #23 was the one at the MLH meetup. If this is feeling like a logic problem to you, *good*.

We already knew Rivera (aka Little Shane, now not only because he has crippling anxiety about disappointing his heroes and likes boring acronyms but also because he is one of very few minority players and also because he is very cute and has clean-cut boring brand deals. They are different people though lol can't stress this enough)

#16 plays for Houston

San Jose has no players Ilya's queer roster

As discussed, I might take an extra day or two on the next chapter so I have time to get my shit together. I promise it will make the plot better. Starting tomorrow I have all the time in the entire world (one week without one of my jobs lol).

edit: There has been one Puerto Rican player in the NHL, [Boo Nieves](#).

Chapter 15: Bianca

Chapter Summary

Still the night of the 2019 cup finals, post-game

Chapter Notes

This picks up directly where we left off. I'm so excited for what I'm cooking up for you all! I'm still not where I want to be, but I have two more chapters rtg, now so I'm a little less panicked.

I heard no one ask for a wlw OC, so I'm obliging (myself) and giving you one anyway.

Content warning: homophobic slurs, murder threats, reference to heart attack.

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

There are two images on #14's Instagram post. The first is a team picture, posed on the ice. The second is #14 in a tank top with a rainbow flag, on a balcony in Washington, D.C. A pride parade passes visibly on the sunny street below him. Rivera has a wide grin, a distinctly different look than his typical shy smile. He is, indeed, very cute.

@MateoRiveraHockey

I'm so proud of my team!! These guys are my life, on and off the ice, and the cup couldn't go to a better group.

Because we won, I'm pleased to accept the 2019 #Schumem cup award. It's not really fair because I don't have a cute lumberjack husband or hot Swedish model or Kip Grady to come kiss me on the ice. I won't complain because our Ringleader threatened to find me someone and honestly, that sounds worse. But a deal is a deal, so here I am, a very single gay man. Looking forward to whatever comes next. 🏳️‍🌈🏳️‍🌈🏳️‍🌈 #14 #RC #PHPGBQU

The texts predictably flood Ilya's phone:

“RIP Rivvy's DMs”

“What the fuck is that messy-ass acronym??”

“Fuck me. I wouldn’t mind you outing me 🙄 please. Out my phone number too.”

“Ringleader Rozanov shout out!”

“He’s one of ours??? I was wondering who we had on Washington.”

“Are we still doing Schumem?? This guy is so fucking boring.”

“Holy shit can two hockey players fuck?? Would that be weird?? Ask Hollander for me.”

“I’m never coming out if only hot guys like Hunter and Rivera are out.”

“Just checked his contract and he is 100% locked in for a few years. They would have to go out of their way to kick him off the team.”

“Love how Kip Grady isnt given a qualifier like hot or cute.”

As the texts keep pouring in, Ilya is distracted from them by Shane’s question, “You said there were two? Who’s the other?”

“Ah. Still #27,” Ilya responds, “but I’ve asked him to wait... Is ok, he sounded relieved.” He adds, because Shane’s face had gone slack.

“Why?” Shane asks, and Ilya wonders briefly if someone is finally questioning why everyone seems to listen to him and obey. But no, Shane is asking about logistics. When it comes to logistics, Ilya is confident.

“Basically,” he sounds out each syllable, “If Washington decides they will fire Rivera, #27 will come out too, and they will have to fire both. They would lose two very big stars just to be assholes.” Shane looks at him like he’s a bogmonster. “It is a good plan, I promise.” He assures him.

“No, I know,” Shane whispers on an exhale. He shakes his head in disbelief, “Whenever you say something like that...” Shane looks like he’s a stranger, like he’s trying to figure him out. Has Ilya gone too far? Why this, why not any other time? “...I’m just so fucking glad you’re working for us... and hockey... And not the fucking Kremlin.”

Ilya laughs with relief. “Me too, lyublennyy.”

Shane looks at the check list on the clipboard on Ilya’s lap. “Is there anything I can do?” Ilya shakes his head.

“Just relax. Text this poor kid. He is probably waiting for his Daddy to tell him good job.” Ilya teases. “Look at him, checking his phone on national TV in the best moment of his life. Probably saying ‘Papa why haven’t you texted?’”

“Fuck off,” Shane gives him a small shove, “I think that’s his dad on the ice right there.” But he pulls his phone up anyway.

The next item on the list is checking on the ally army. At this point, they've initiated a split between social media and they've divided the army into four squadrons: Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and Facebook. A fifth special-ops small group takes on the trickier ones: 4chan, Tumblr, hockey forums. Ilya didn't even ask for this, the Council of Almost-Straight Elders came up with it of their own volition. He texts them a quick "*Go-time*" as if they don't already know.

Ilya had warned them there could be a racist component to this year's cup tradition, and the online trolls might be going after that, too. Ilya thanks his lucky stars that Carter Vaughan volunteered without Ilya asking—because Ilya had no idea how to ask for this—to work with Harris and put together a quick flowchart for how to deal with these comments most effectively.

Ferocious, uninhibited humiliation, it turns out. Ilya doesn't go onto the post but Shane is checking the comments on it and giggling every few seconds. "Brutal," he breathes a few times.

A call comes in from Scott Hunter. The joke, probably one about living to see another cup, dies in Ilya's mouth when he hears Hunter's tone.

"Rozanov. It's about Crowell." Ilya darts out of bed. He didn't expect Crowell's response so soon. Shane shouldn't hear about it like this, or maybe ever, that his team was favored to be in the final four for months. He gives Shane a sympathetic look and leaves the room for his battle station.

"What about him?"

"He's *mad*, Rozanov, what the fuck did you think would happen??" Scott sounds pissed, "He wouldn't let me hang up, the lawyer thing wasn't working... I'm pretty sure he threatened my life?"

"*He threatened Scott's life.*" Kip's voice in the background confirms.

Ilya settles at his desk, surrounded by his lists and maps, all moved and expanded from his original Boston guest room into a true military command center. He leaves the door open—anything on his end of the conversation will be fine for Shane to hear. Knowing Shane, he's probably covering his ears with his hands to avoid overhearing anything. God, Ilya loves that man.

"You recorded the conversation, yes?" Cooper has been clear about recording important conversations with the commissioner and management. It depends on the state, but in Canada and New York, it's legal, so they've discussed this a million times: record everything. They both have analog tape recorders *and* smart phones for this. Ilya's heart drops at the hesitation on the other end of the line. "You did not record the conversation."

“It was too quick! I didn’t even look at the name before picking it up. Reporters have been calling me all night for a quote, I thought it was...” He trails off.

“Ok.” Ilya would have liked to get the commissioner's recorded death threats, but... “What else?”

“Right. He was blaming me, so I said I was just given a list of teams.” Scott hesitates but continues, “And now he wants to meet with the Ringleader... he had some choice words for you, too—”

“Butt-fucking faggot, were the main ones, and some more murder threats.”

“Helpful, Kip.” Scott says sarcastically. “Obviously not *you*, Ilya, he doesn’t know it’s *you*, but he wants to meet. I don’t even think he has any reason, just probably the...”

“The murder thing.”

“Thank you, dear. And curiosity, maybe? It doesn’t sound like he has a plan. For murder or anything else.”

Ilya finally cuts back in, “Ok. Call Cooper Lee right now and tell him all of it. Before you forget anything. Record that, too. Record *everything*, Hunter.” Ilya hangs up and doesn’t have time to breathe before Shane quietly pads before the door and taps gently on the frame.

He whispers, “My coach is calling... it might be something bad.” Ilya starts recording. *He* knows how to follow rules, unlike stupid Scott Hunter.

“Speakerphone.” Ilya says quietly before Shane answers.

“Hello?”

“Shane! Sorry to bother you if you’re at the team’s watch party,” Coach Theriault’s voice echoes out on speakerphone.

“Oh, no sir, I'm with family in Ottawa.”

“Got it. I won’t keep you long. It’s a little awkward.”

“Sure.” Shane looks like he wants to puke, and Ilya can’t stand to see him so nervous.

Theriault stumbles on his words a little before landing on, “The GM wants me to ask you... it’s so dumb really... Are there gay guys on our team?”

Shane and Ilya can’t make a sound. They just stare at each other, incredulously. “I uh...” Shane starts. “I’m not sure that’s our business, is it?” Ilya would not have been so nice.

“Oh, God.” Theriault sounds perturbed at that, like a suspicion is being confirmed. “Ok. There are rumors, I just— Ok.”

Shane looks mad, “I told the guys after we played Fredericks, they can’t be beating up queer players.” As if that’s why Theriault is asking. As if he wasn’t looking for the exact opposite answer.

“Yeah. We know about your... speech. Ok.” The coach says. “Ok. Sorry to bother you, have a good night.” He hangs up without another word from Shane. Ilya stops his recording.

Just as Shane drops his phone to look at Ilya, both shellshocked, Ilya’s phone lights up with a call from Ottawa’s General Manager. Shane and Ilya giggle deliriously for a half-second. Before he answers, Ilya writes 23, 30, 15, 22, 7, 19, on a post-it and hands it to Shane along with his Rolodex of numbers. “Is an emergency. Text these players and tell them, record any call from their team. And Melnyk.” Shane nods and starts.

Ilya hits record again and answers the call. “Hello?”

“Hi Ilya! How are you? I have a strange problem.” Ottawa’s GM sounds strained.

Ilya has a thousand funny retorts, but this is his boss’s boss, basically. Not someone to be annoying. Not the time, either. He settles for, “Ok?”

“I remember very well our conversation before you signed to the team, and I told you... certain secrets were safe with me.”

Oh, God. “Yes. I appreciate this.”

“Only thing is— and I have to tell you I said no immediately— I got an interesting call from the commissioner's office just now, asking if anyone on the team is...” He trails off. “I said it wasn’t my place. I asked him why.”

“You should not have—”

“Obviously I’m going to ask why the commissioner needs to know if any of my players are gay. He shouldn’t be asking that shit.” The GM raises his voice.

“Ok... why did he ask?” Ilya tries to sound casual, but he’s dying to know.

The GM sighs, “Apparently, he is asking several different teams. He said Montreal and New Jersey let him know already.” Ilya’s heart sinks. Shane’s team definitely knows about him, so now the commissioner does, too. Fuck. He reaches over and crosses 7 and 19 off Shane’s list, carefully not making eye contact with him. “Again, I said it’s none of my business.” He pauses for a second, “And it still isn’t but... do you know why he would be asking?”

Ilya weighs his options carefully before saying, “It is not my business either, probably.”

“You don’t have to answer this, at all, but are you in this cup pact business thing?”

“I am.” Ilya admits. Shane looks up, perplexed, like why would Ilya tell his GM? But that’s easy. The GM knows he’s a queer player, and the public assumes every queer player is in on the pact. It would be weird if he *weren’t* in the pact. Then Ilya laughs, “But I did tell you there is a chance I will come out in Ottawa. I will win us a cup.”

The GM also laughs, “That’s not really my concern, though if you’re waiting to win a cup... eh I probably shouldn’t say that. We’re rebuilding the team around you, we’ll be champions in no time.”

Ilya probably shouldn’t but he chuckles at that, too, but then gets more serious. “Sign Fredericks. And anyone else who gets dumped. A different kind of champion team.”

“See, things like that,” The GM sighs, “...make me think you might be a little higher up than an average player.”

“I am not an average player. You know this.”

“Humble. You know what I mean.” There’s a beat in which he is probably expecting Ilya to fill in some blanks. When he doesn’t, the GM continues, “Anyway, I doubt Montreal or New Jersey or whoever else the office is asking will tell their guys any of this. So if you’re in touch with this.... Ringleader, or whatever, they might want to know Crowell is asking around.”

“Noted. I will let him know.” And then, for the thousandth time in two years, Ilya is struck with gratitude, “Thank you. For not telling him, and being good. Would be a different kind of legacy for the team but it is a better one, I think, yes?”

“Different. Better in some ways, I guess. It’s not really what you hope your team is known for, but I think it’s the best we could do right now. And hey, if the rumors out of Montreal and New Jersey that the likes of Hollander and Marcello are in the club, I’m starting to think the gay players are better.” Ilya closes his eyes at the confirmation that the commissioner knows about Shane, as the GM continues to ramble, “or... LGBT? I don’t think I can say queer, right?”

Ilya just laughs. “Yes, we are better. Well noticed.” He thinks for a second. People seem to be listening to him tonight, and if they suspect he’s influential enough to be leading this group... “I think we can sign Fredericks. No one else is lining up to do it, his contract is up now, and Carolina is not re-signing him. There are some bigots in our defensive line who do not fit the dynamic I have just decided you are trying to build.”

“Who?”

“Lorenzo. Miller. Wringham.” Ilya rattles these names off easily. Zane Boodram has complained about their little racist side remarks, and everyone has heard them objectify women. They’re gross dudes. Not the worst assholes to ever exist, but definitely not worthy to be on the best team in the league. If Ottawa is trying to attract the best gay players and allies, everyone on the team needs to be on board. Ilya doesn’t want to say Fredericks would be a step down in actual hockey quality, but he probably doesn’t have to.

“I’ll look into it. I hear what you’re saying. If we become a kind of Mecca for this stuff, we might get the Hollanders and the Marcellos, and I guess the Rozanovs, huh.”

“You would.” Ilya’s heart skips a beat at the thought. Shane could come to Ottawa. They could be on the same team. They would win one thousand cups together and, because the

team is amazing, they would both be able to come out with no ramifications. “I would make sure of it.”

“Ok. Let’s see what we can do.”

Ilya hangs up and sends a mass text to all his queer players: Record any conversation with team management. A few recordings have already come into his email from Shane's preliminary message.

Shane and Ilya look at each other for a long moment. Shane finally makes a joke, “You’re gonna recruit me for Ottawa, Rozanov?” and they laugh, but he doesn’t know just how serious Ilya is about that.

“Least they would not out you to the commissioner,” Ilya says gently.

“Yeah. Fuck.” Shane sinks down onto his lap on the desk chair, diligently not looking at the lists surrounding them.

“But.” Ilya lets himself feel happy for a second. “The league has two openly gay players now, and, for tonight, they both exist at the same time.” He leaves out the rest of the pipedream: The public will react well and Shane will be happy to come out and he’ll move to Ottawa and they will get to *have this*.

First they have to deal with the trolls, Crowell, prove the rigging... No. *First* first, they have to celebrate. Then maybe sleep.

Ilya doesn’t even notice a phone call at 2:15am from Yuna Hollander.

Bianca has been Roger Crowell’s executive assistant for nine years. She hates her job, especially on nights like tonight.

She is in the commissioner’s box at the Washington v. Utah cup finals. The smell of 3-hour old shrimp cocktail coats the normal sterile wealthy scent of these boxes, and she takes her last good breaths of that air as the commissioner lights a cigar. It’s a no-smoking box. Hell, it’s a no-smoking *building*. But the commissioner of the MLH really can do anything. Who is going to stop him?

Washington just won the cup, and Mr. Crowell is shaking hands with the Very Powerful Men he invited into his box to watch the game, usually in exchange for some kind of favor. The families of Washington’s team are pouring out onto the ice. At least they get to see their families tonight, Bianca thinks bitterly. She’ll lead Mr. Crowell downstairs in five minutes, just in time for him to present the trophy. She’ll attend the parties, order the scotch, take the business cards and file them away. She’ll stand around whispering names at him so he can

pretend he knows everyone. She'll keep his tie straight and wipe sweaty sheen off his face for the cameras. And at 2am she'll make it to the hotel, too late to even call home. This is her tenth cup celebration night. By now, she could do it in her sleep, and, as she checks her watch, she practically *is* doing it in her sleep. They have the routine down.

Except... the routine has changed a little in the last two years. There's a new step to this process, the step where Bianca's soul leaves her body and watches the world burn from above. It started with Hunter bringing an unauthorized guest onto the ice. It continued with Baldwin's authorized one. And now, like clockwork, as Bianca spots a rainbow flag coming out with the families, her soul departs.

First, because she knows the man across the box from her might have a heart attack.

Second, because she fucking *loves* this weird cup pact. And Mr. Crowell told anyone who would listen how it's not a tradition, it only happened twice, it wasn't going to happen again this season. Yet, here it is, against all odds. He really is going to have a fucking heart attack.

Bianca was excited last month when James in Winnipeg told her about a new network of LGBTQ staffers, put together by the same guys who organize the cup pact. She agreed immediately, and Bianca is pretty sure she's the highest-ranking staffer in the group. She can't imagine any of the executives are gay, right? She'll never know. If you are in the closet, the group keeps your name private.

It's a nice idea for Bianca, who is one person at work and another at home. She's never deliberately hid it from anyone at work, she just wears her wedding ring and Mr. Crowell has never once in nine years asked about her personal life. But when she meets another queer staffer, she lets them in.

So when James told her about the group, she was in. She was put in contact with a woman named Suna Dunham and described her executive assistant role over an hour-long phone call. The woman seemed happy to have her, reinforcing Bianca's idea that she was a *get*. She was told to report back on anything having to do with Hunter or the cup pact, and tonight she actually might get to report something for the first time. She's excited.

That will be a separate heart attack for Mr. Crowell, no doubt. She knows she'd at least be fired if he found out, but it would be nice if it killed him, too.

She tears her eyes away from the pride flag on the ice back to Mr. Crowell. He hasn't seen it yet, engaged in raucous celebratory laughter, entrenched in a cloud of cigar smoke. Mr. Crowell's work phone starts to ring, clutched tightly in Bianca's hand, where it lives. At the same time, texts and emails start to flood in. Bianca's own work phone and her personal one add to the cacophony. Mr. Crowell looks over, perplexed. Bianca must be white as a ghost, but she nods her head toward the Jumbotron, where an older Hispanic lady is now draping the rainbow flag around Mateo Rivera's shoulders. Mr. Crowell's eyes dart from the Jumbotron down to the ice where the live event is occurring, as if he doesn't believe the screen.

Bianca would describe Mr. Crowell's normal coloring as beet red. Now, his face is nearly purple. A few veins pop out of his forehead. Maybe a stroke would do it. Aneurysm?

Spontaneous combustion? She'll take what she can get at this point. He holds his hand out for his phone, which she presents without a word.

He goes to answer it but looks at her first. "Get me Scott Hunter. Tonight." Bianca heroically doesn't snort with laughter at how that sounds. She deserves a raise. She calls Scott Hunter.

Mr. Hunter picks up with "Hello?" which is unusual. Lately he's been responding with a terse '*schedule through my lawyer,*' if he answers at all.

"Hi, Mr. Hunter. Do you have a moment to speak with Mr. Crowell?"

"Bianca, you already know I have to do this through my lawyer." Scott sounds exhausted. Happy, but tired.

"I understand. He's very insistent that it be tonight—"

Mr. Crowell cuts in "—is that him right now? Give me this." She knows she can't stop that from happening, so she holds the phone out. She also knows to start her personal phone recording before slipping it into an outer pocket of her leviathan bag.

Chapter End Notes

Numbers are all ones we had already, sorry! But we got a new RASHYCOCK!

If anyone knows Ottawa's GM's name (or wants to give me a suggestion) hmu

Coming up: Aftermath, MLH awards

I liked two days in between posting. I think I'll do that.

Chapter 16: Dept. of Gay Agriculture 2019

Chapter Summary

Early Summer 2019, MLH awards

Chapter Notes

I can't believe it's been a year already, but I think it might be time for the 3rd annual State of the Gay Union address. Time flies!

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

The morning after the cup, Kavita Kingsley publishes her prepared article. It doesn't touch on this season's issues, as they still don't really know what happened, but it provides a clear story with ample evidence that the 2018 cup was unsuccessfully rigged for a gambling payout.

Unfortunately, because Kavita is a good and thorough journalist, it also mentions *why* the commissioner's rigging was unsuccessful.

"... if not for collective teamwork by Carolina's various opponents to prevent them from winning."

It could be much worse. In fact, Ilya knows there are a ton of things Kavita could have printed. Ethically, she only needs to keep the identity of her sources anonymous, so she could have written everything she knows about Rozanov Riders' involvement in the 2018 cup, aside from his name. But he also has the advantage of providing her with every good hockey news story there's been in the last year, so he gets the sense she doesn't want to offend him by printing anything bad. There's always the possibility he takes his next scoop to another reputable sports magazine.

Kavita will be busy with the fallout from that article, which is basically imploding the hockey world, so she's taking a break from investigating this year's playoffs. Luckily for Ilya, the playoffs are behind them so he can employ the brightest mind of this hockey generation.

Or, rather, Shane will employ himself. Ilya wakes up late the morning after the cup to find Shane already in front of the television, watching the games he missed while he was in the playoffs. He pauses the first Anaheim vs. LA game when Ilya comes into the room.

“Hey... I wanted to ask you something,” Shane says nervously. He couldn’t have been watching tape for more than an hour or so, how on earth has he already figured it out? “It’s really not my business, and I know I usually try not to even ask but... why did my team call last night? I feel like you know.”

Oh, poor Shane. He’s too distracted by the prospect of his team hating him to even pay attention to his hockey. “This is a long story,” Ilya sighs and sits on the couch with Shane. “I wanted to tell you after the cup, and ask a favor. It shouldn’t change your plans for the day, to watch hockey and have a lot of sex.”

Shane rolls his eyes, “I could have had other plans.”

“Did you?” Ilya smiles, and Shane gently shoves him.

“What does this have to do with my team?”

Ilya wants to be careful about this. It’s going to be a blow to Shane’s ego to learn that he was only in the final four because of the league’s puppetry. And that once the league stopped rigging things, his team came in 4th out of 6. But Ilya needs his help, and Shane is going to watch and rewatch every game from the whole season anyway, he might as well be put to good use.

“So, you know how there were some weird statistics this year?” Ilya hasn’t talked to him about it, but everyone noticed. The league wasn’t subtle. The chosen teams finished the regular season very far ahead. Except for fucking Ottawa, obviously.

“Yeah, really weird. Why?”

“Ok. Crowell picked six teams to do very well, so one of those six teams would win the cup.”

“Again? God.” Ilya watches Shane’s face as he turns this into a logic problem and does the math in his head, “Ok, so Utah and Washington, obviously. Anaheim? Us??” He stares at the ground and distantly mutters, “The whole final four... Fuck.” He looks dazed and then continues, recalling the season’s numbers, “Then I guess New Jersey and...” He furrows his brow in concentration. After a minute he admits, “I can’t figure out the last one.”

Ilya smirks, “Think hard. Another team did very well. Better than expected, even though their star center is the best player in the league, maybe the world. And very attractive, so distracting for everyone else...”

“Why would he— Ilya!!” Shane exclaims. “Did *you* do this?? These are all your teams! All our friends are on those teams!! And both of *our* teams! Why would the league— what’s going on?”

“They asked for suggestions?” Ilya shrugs with faux innocence. Shane is glaring at him, so it’s probably not a time for jokes. “Ok fine! They wanted to know the teams with no gay people, so we gave them... a slightly wrong list.”

“You gave them the gayest teams.”

“Yes.”

“The exact opposite of what they asked for...” Shane gets the look again, like Ilya is a mutant. Now he knows he can be flattered at the look, not terrified. “Knowing they rigged the cup last year and they would do it again.”

“Yes.” It looks like Shane is about to start extolling his strategy again, or like he’ll start thinking about his own team in relation to this plan, and Ilya would like to get off the subject before that can happen. “But. Me, Hunter, Price, Fredericks, Kavita... no one can figure out how they did it. There are fifteen thousand different things wrong, something else every game. Shane, you can’t know how badly I wanted to ask you. All season.”

“You want me to figure it out?” Shane’s expression is unreadable. “You want me to help you by watching these games and taking notes and looking for anomalies and...”

“Shane, are you hard?”

“Shut up! It’s just... it’s a good job for me. That’s all.”

“Are you sure? I could call Svetlana to do it, she would help.” Ilya says casually, maybe cruelly, knowing what it will do to Shane.

“No.” Shane’s brow creases, “I’m doing it.”

Ilya laughs and kisses his boyfriend. It actually hadn’t occurred to Ilya to call Svetlana about this... but no. Shane can do it.

He leaves Shane with a fresh notebook and pen and goes to the battle station. Ilya has to listen to some of the recorded phone calls that populated his email overnight. As suspected, the commissioner called every team Ilya told him. He is just fortunate that Utah’s #23 is the captain, so he was the one to get the phone call asking for any gay members. #23’s gut instinct, to deny it, was correct, as the coach went on a pretty horrific tirade. #23 and #30 never told their coach they would be coming out after the cup, and now they’re glad. Ilya keeps the recorded rant for a rainy day. Anaheim’s alternate captain is in the ally group, so Ilya is able to text and ask if they also received a phone call last night. They did. Luckily the captains, including his ally member, don’t know about their gay teammates. New Jersey’s #7 and #19, who were already pretty open with their team, were outed to coaching staff, if they didn’t already know, and thus the commissioner. Shane is in the same boat, but luckily #13 stayed safe.

All in all, the commissioner had a busy night, and achieved his goal of confirming at least three of the teams he was given were wrong. Ilya can see now why he was so mad when he spoke to Scott Hunter, why he immediately hung up and started this phone tree around the league. Just as Ilya is about to wish he could have been a fly on the wall, he opens the recording he received from Yuna at 2:10am.

Turns out, it’s a *very* interesting recording. The commissioner on a homophobic, murderous tirade, all but confessing to rigging the season on a call with Scott Hunter? This gets forwarded to Cooper and Scott and *almost* Kavita before Ilya realizes what he’s doing.

If this woman really took the only recording of the call, and Scott Hunter pressed charges for the death threats, and Kavita used it for evidence of rigging, this lady is out of a job and no longer of any use to them. Plus, again, she is *out of a job*. Ilya dismisses that concern; If he's the reason she loses her job, they will simply open an Irina office in New York for her to run.

But she is much more useful to them employed in her current station. Ilya sends quick follow-ups to Cooper and Scott carefully advising them *not* to act on this recording. They can save it for later.

Later that day, Ilya calls a very hungover Rivera. The poor kid sounds like he's trying not to disappoint his elder while simultaneously trying not to throw up. It actually seems like Washington isn't being terrible about it, and not much will happen to him.

Well, except the influx of eligible suitors. He has a date lined up for every day of the summer and two on Saturdays. Ilya isn't surprised. The guy is cute. But Ilya won't be making the same mistake this year. #13 *will* be at the MLH awards ready for Rivera and they *will* hook up. Even if Ilya has to be there applying the lube himself. Well, maybe not that far. If Shane is up for it, though...

No. Their first time together should not be with Shane, someone both those kids look up to like a father.

It's still happening, though. Ilya has won the cup, he has landed Shane Hollander, he has outsmarted the commissioner, he has built a community of over 300 people. He should be able to get two attractive 21-year-old gay boys to fuck and fall in love.

The deluge of men is not the only change in Rivera's life. He immediately usurps Scott Hunter's role as media darling. Some shows even had called Scott before the cup, and he was halfway relieved to hear them ask if they could preemptively book anyone who might come out. Scott was pissed at first—he's not anyone's agent. But now he's starting to realize it might mean a more laidback summer for him.

Scott briefs Rivera on how to deal with the media. He knows from experience that he's going to get some really disgusting personal questions, and Rivera gets to decide how much he is willing to share. Not much at all, he decides quickly. So they practice tactfully shutting down offensive or inappropriate questions: "Which other athletes do you think are gay?" "How many sex partners do you have in a year?" "Have you dated [other famous person]?" "Have you ever done drag?" All questions Scott actually got.

The media is going to hate this kid. He's going to say even less than Scott did. At least Scott had a partner they could speculate about him topping or bottoming with. Rivera is about to give them *nothing*.

Rivera also gets briefed on what he can and cannot say about their consortium in his interviews, because every single one of them will ask. Rivera was in the playoffs for the 2018 cup, too, and used some unsavory chirps against Carolina. So he knows a lot, but it's best if

he says basically nothing. No details, no activities, no numbers, *definitely* no names... It's good for Ilya and the group that the kid is so reserved.

Sure enough, two days after the cup win, Rivera is on some morning show, shyly smiling with an adorable sneak-up-on-you confidence that has Ilya looking over to make sure Shane hasn't run off to body swap with this little guy. He hasn't, he's right next to Ilya on the couch at the cottage at 6am to watch the interview. He's delaying his morning workout for this. Maybe he *has* been body-swapped.

The interviewer is intimidating with her straightforward questions, so far just about the cup and the subsequent celebrations. But Ilya turns the volume up when he hears, "Would you have come out without this annual pact? Without winning the cup?"

"Ummm..." Rivera falters, a strange thing to see from someone usually poised. "I was resistant to the idea. So yeah, in the end, the bet— or, sorry, the deal? gave me the kick to do it. I was terrified. Still am, obviously." He laughs nervously, probably alluding to the fact that he's currently sweating under media scrutiny, "And so far, I'm really glad I did. My team has been great, like Scott Hunter said last year, that's the difference. We're privileged to have the support of the coaching staff and management." Ilya grits his teeth. He definitely should not have said '*We*'. They have a very specific plan for #27, the other gay member of Rivera's team.

"And what can you tell us about the infamous group? Does it even have a name?"

"No, because the guys are pretty indecisive. My suggestion is always something simple but... that's not very popular with most of them." Rivera says with a smile. Ilya can see him getting physically more comfortable, like the thought of the group is calming for him.

"Scott Hunter alluded to the group's secrecy, even from each other. Is that true? What do you know about the other 30 men?"

"Some of them? Nothing. Some of the guys have to stay really closeted, even from the other members. But I know about thirteen or fourteen of them personally. We've met up a few times, but it's only the guys who don't mind being known by fellow players. We text, we're good friends. They've been great throughout all this."

"Has Scott Hunter reached out?"

"Yeah, he's been great since I joined the league, basically immediately. But it all felt real after the game, when I was added to the group chat of out players and the Ringleader and everybody. They're all a lot older, and they're coming from a league where this isn't normal. But... my rookie season was after Mr. Hunter came out, and I was approached for the group almost right away. I don't know the MLH without this community, and I'm starting to see how special that is now."

"You were approached? How does that work?" This sounds less like a prepared question, and more like the interviewer is latching on to an opportunity, a personal curiosity.

“Umm...” They hadn’t prepared for it to get this specific. “The uhhh Ringleader came up to me after a game, had me make the... pact. I said yes without even thinking it through. When you’re a week into your rookie season, the cup feels like something so outlandish. I didn’t think of it as a real possibility.” Good. They decided when in doubt, bring it back to hockey, and Rivera pulled it off.

Unfortunately the interviewer isn’t letting go. “Anything you can tell us about the Ringleader?” Ilya watches with bated breath. Rivera’s good though, and they went over how he can’t give any details.

“Of course not,” he laughs lightly, “But really, I wish I could. He’s a sweet guy, super professional and thoughtful about all this— he never outs any information without checking a million times. He cares about all of us so much... like a dad almost. Like, he’d do anything for any of us, no questions asked. It’s pretty inspiring. I just hope someday he’ll be able to be known for what he’s doing.”

Ilya can’t breathe. Someone asked this kid to describe him and *that* was his response? Professional and thoughtful? Caring? *Inspiring*? Ilya’s chest tightens. Is he really any of those things?

Nothing about his hockey skills. Not how many goals he’s scored, or his ability to outmaneuver defense. No, this kid— who, by the way, still has a huge crush on him— admires him for his *personality*? That’s Ilya Rozanov’s worst quality, according to literally anyone else on the planet. Again, there’s this idea that he will someday be known for this, not his average points per game. Not even being the second most attractive player in the league.

Ilya set out to make this league better and so far, it’s been a string of terrible news, making it almost scarier to come out than it was before. But here’s this kid, looking like Shane 7 years ago, talking about how much this has meant for him. Ilya has made it better, even just for this one crummy kid.

Shane looks over to see Ilya’s face. He kisses Ilya’s shoulder and rubs his back. “At least no one will suspect it’s you now,” he teases, but there’s no sincerity in his voice, his heart-eyes reflecting the same sentiments they just heard.

The moment is broken as the reporter asks “Who is the hottest person to slide into your DMs this week?” Rivera shuts that down and actually looks physically relieved when asked about being an ethnic minority in hockey, a more comfortable uncomfortable topic for him.

Washington keeping Rivera on the team gives the other Washington player, #27, a chance to come out. It’s becoming clear this group fucking loves a good tradition, so they’ll let it happen at the MLH awards, just like Fredericks. As for *how* he comes out, Ilya talks to #27 at length and they come to the best possible conclusion.

It's surprisingly easy to make sure Playoff MVP goes to the guy you want. Ilya doesn't feel bad about this, seeing as he hasn't rigged anything himself in a while. #27 scored a few goals in the playoffs, and he was in contention for the award anyway. MVP gets to make a speech and the league, predictably, didn't ask Scott Hunter to speak again. So what was Ilya supposed to do? They really left him no choice.

After just a few short statements thanking his team and family, Silas Wagner closes out his speech. "... And finally, I noticed you did not ask Scott Hunter to give his Gay State-of-the-Union this year." Some mild laughs echo through the hall, "Did you think that means you wouldn't get one anyway?" Wagner laughs, "Couldn't let you get away with it. I'll use this chance to tell you I'm gay, my partner Chris is watching at home— Hi! Love you! So yes, I'd be qualified to give this crowd an update, but I am not as handsome as Scott Hunter. He's the unofficial vice president of our poorly-named circus, and I'm just a lowly... well... R.C., if you know, you know. Anyway, I'm going to take the rest of my," he checks the timer ahead of him, "five minutes and cede to Vice President Hunter."

Scott Hunter walks onto the stage to join him at the podium. A muted smattering of stunned applause greets him.

"Thank you." Scott takes over the microphone and Wagner steps to the side. "We've checked and this is allowed so long as Wagner stays up here with me. I know you thought you'd be able to get away from us this year— and you tried your best—" Scott winks, "but no luck. Sorry."

Hunter pulls out a notecard and dons his public-speaking voice. "It should come as no surprise that things are still bad. It was scary to watch Fredericks get mauled on the ice, scary to watch Baldwin and Price's careers end. We are so grateful to Washington for standing behind Rivera and Wagner, the Admirals for standing by me, and a handful of other teams who are silently supporting their gay players behind the scenes. But that won't protect us on the ice.

"This year we watched a concerted effort from referees to neglect homophobic violence. Fantastic journalism and brave whistleblowers proved that was an organized direction from the league itself. Yet, no internal change has been made, no investigations, and certainly no apologies. I'm comfortable enough in my career to say this part out loud: if the league is orchestrating this, along with the recent allegations of tampering with playoff games, maybe it's time to reevaluate our morals as an organization.

"So as you heard last year, and was recently confirmed, there's an ill-named cup tradition. Mateo Rivera was that award winner this year." Wagner starts a round of applause that spreads through the room, and Scott gestures to Wagner, "but we thought we'd add to the Fredericks tradition of someone coming out in the awards weekend too. Basically, we will continue to throw players at you until you couldn't possibly fire us all. As teams start to show their true colors, telling us whether you're a Carolina or if you're a Washington, the good teams will get these good players. Don't be surprised when trade requests start coming in.

"As always, we need to thank the tireless efforts of our Ringleader, but this year the gratitude also belongs to our team, our allies, and some new groups of faces. This thing is expanding. I

gave you a small number last year, and I won't make that mistake again. This year I can say with all our lists combined, our table is seated for *over 300 people*." Scott says the last words incredulously. "I think you'll find it hard to keep us down."

@RogueMLH

Teams that have stood up for gay players [infographic]

@RogueMLH

Teams that have made it harder for gay players [infographic]

@SilasWagner

Clearly I'm not such a great public speaker. Maybe I could lead the Department of Gay Agriculture or something. All I know is the love I have for my second team and proud to be a part of the Ringleader's #CIRCUS 🏳️‍🌈🏳️‍🌈🏳️‍🌈 #27

RASHYCOCK + Roz group chat

Ilya has added Wagner to the group chat

Oldest Man Alive: Welcome Wagner!

Wagner: is that really the name of the chat?

Wagner: disappointed

Rivera: I know!! I told them it was crass.

Wagner: no, im not represented.

Wagner: neither is Fredericks

Ilya: what do you mean?

Wagner: RASHYCOCK is for people who come out the night of the cup

Wagner: Right? It's the Cup King

Wagner: it should be just Scott and Matty

Wagner: and Baldwin. Sorry, I forget about you

Baldwin: 🙄

Oldest Man Alive: Ok so change it?

Wagner has changed the name of the group chat

RASHYCOCK + DICK COMA + Roz group chat

Oldest Man Alive: No.

Oldest Man Alive: Absolutely not.

Ilya: give him a minute.

Lundin: oh this should be good.

Wagner: Daddy Ilya's Celebrated King of Coming Out at MLH Awards

Baldwin: Ok now I have to know #CIRCUS from your post

Wagner: that one is obvious

Wagner: Commissioner Ilya Rozanov's Communal Underground Syndicate

Price: Holy shit.

Price: How are you people doing this?

Ilya: it is beautiful.

Ilya: I am crying.

Oldest Man Alive: Ok why are we doing this over text?

Oldest Man Alive: We're all heading to the same place.

Chapter End Notes

We got a new DICKCOMA and name!

#27: Silas Wagner, Washington, Playoff MVP 2019

Coming up: More from MLH awards weekend, and no one will be #BORING anymore



👉 hoping for two days in between again

Chapter 17: Las Vegas Bathroom

Chapter Summary

Still the night of the 2019 MLH awards in Las Vegas, following the State of the Gay Union

Chapter Notes

Pacing? Who is she? This chapter has a dumb amount going on. Take breaks and hydrate.

Warning: homophobic slur

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

“Hunter! and Wagner! You two said so many words tonight!” Ilya greets the men as they walk down the stairs to the basement meeting room. The 2nd annual DICK COMA celebratory afterparty was actually *planned* this year, which means no jogging in herds like gazelles around the hotel, dodging reporters and the entire league. Instead, Ilya, under a pseudonym, booked the lower level of a restaurant. The building has a dimly-lit rear entrance, it’s far enough away from the hotel, the security cameras are unplugged, and he had the owner and bartender sign an NDA. He requested there be no other staff on site. Cooper Lee has flown out for the occasion to act as legal muscle and ensure everything goes according to plan. 17 guys are in attendance, making it a little too big for a hotel room, anyway.

“For the second time, that’s not a compliment. But thanks?” Scott shakes Ilya’s hand. “Again. It’s insane over there.”

“That’s why we are here!” Ilya responds, “Try to keep up, I know is confusing for old men.”

“I need a stiff drink.” Scott eyes the open bar and walks away from Ilya without decorum. Wagner follows suit.

Ilya takes stock of the room after Hunter’s arrival. By the buffet, some guys from the Western Conference are standing around the food like flies. At the desserts, #3, #10, and #38 are having a heated discussion about the right way to eat a cupcake.

To their side, Cooper Lee looks surprisingly comfortable. Ilya always thought Cooper Lee thinks of himself as fairly straight. Certainly his S.H.I.T. seems to be between between Baby

Shane and 2009. But now he's chatting with #4, who would flirt with a cereal box, and Cooper doesn't seem to mind. Ilya snorts to himself and keeps looking around.

Shane is at a small standing table just outside the bathroom, chatting with Rivera. Ilya wishes he would stop, so that Rivera would get a chance to talk to #13, who is now laughing with #7 and the guys from Anaheim. #31 is about to move to Anaheim for the 2019-20 season, so with three players in Rozanov's Ranks, they'll be the gayest team in the league. Not for long, Ilya thinks with pride. Ottawa's GM invited Ilya to the upcoming draft to secure a prospect who fits their new vision.

As always, Ilya and Shane have decided to give each other space tonight to avoid being found out. Events like these are so tantalizing. They're both out in this room. Everyone here knows about them individually, and Ilya thinks they would all understand them as a couple, in time. Some already suspect it. It's almost more frustrating than being in a room where everyone thinks they're straight. Ilya sighs. Today isn't the day for that announcement.

This time, Ilya has promised to not host anything in his room, and Shane has compromised for a 1am meetup time to avoid a repeat accidental-self-outing. So Ilya will settle for making eyes across the room, hoping they convey promises about their plans later. Shane seems to get it.

"You, uhh, shouldn't be doing all that." Hunter sneaks up next to Ilya as Shane turns a lovely shade of pink all the way across the room.

"Oh, I am not allowed to look? Would be more suspicious if I didn't, he looks so good tonight."

"Ok, calm down, I know." Scott huffs and Ilya does an irritated double-take at Scott's casual agreement. "So... What's the plan?"

"Plan?" Ilya repeats.

"Yeah. What are we doing next season?"

"Hunter, do you think I am trying to rig again this year? Old people and their routines..."

"Fuck off, and I don't want you to rig anything. Look, we still have six teams with no one on them, right?"

Ilya ignores the memory of Scott telling Crowell this information last year, partially because this particular subject has been eating at him. "Eight," he corrects bitterly. How does he have fewer teams than last year? Ilya feels like a failure. "Lundin left LA with no one, and someone retired last week. Until we see the new rookies..."

"Eight teams with no one." Scott shakes his head, "I don't want to risk it again this year. I've been thinking we should... spread out a little."

"What do you mean?"

Scott nods over at the Anaheim circle, “Richards is moving from Colorado to Anaheim this season. That’s three players on the same team, and those are just the ones here tonight. We can’t have three players on some teams and none on others.”

Ilya chews on this. If he weren't so into the idea of Ottawa becoming the center of the gay hockey universe, he would have seen this. “And you think that is something I can just... do.”

Scott looks quizzical. “Rozanov, I’m not sure if you heard me tonight, but you did give me the numbers yourself. You have 300 people at your disposal. 250 active players, out of, what 700 something...?”

“736.” Ilya grits out.

“... thanks, Shane Hollander. Anyway, I’m not sure you understand how much power you’ve got. Why do we still have eight teams without anyone to come out if they win the cup? That’s my question. Sure, guys are going to want to trade to the teams that are good for us, but I want to be unavoidable. Someone on every team. No rigging needed.”

Ilya thinks hard on this. They’re both facing out toward the room, surveying everything they built together. “This is a nice idea, but I can't say how we would get it. I have no power. Look at this! I can not even get those two to hook up.” Ilya gestures vaguely. Scott looks around like it will be obvious who he’s talking about.

“Rozanov— are you playing matchmaker with players??” Scott sounds scandalized, but his face lights up. This fucking guy and his gossip. “I want to play!!” He continues to look around and stops when he reaches Shane’s conversation with Rivera. “Oh. I see.” He gives Ilya a skeptical look. Ilya doesn’t see how he would pick #13 and Rivera out, especially when they haven’t said a word to each other all night. “You’re very predictable.”

“Am not.” Ilya responds childishly and takes a sip of his drink.

“Isn't Rivvy’s dance card pretty full at this point? I can’t imagine.”

“Yes. Terrible. He should only be with one person.”

“I didn’t know you were so into monogamy. Every woman on the East Coast since 2009 wouldn't think so either.” Scott side-eyes him and starts fishing, “A little projection? Not monogamous and you’d like to be? What’s the deal there?”

“There is no deal there. God, Hunter, if you could fuck a rumor, you would. So nosy.” Ilya shakes his head.

“Can you blame me? I’ve known about you and *Shane*,” he lowers his voice to a whisper for only the last word, like that wasn't suspicious, “for like two years now and still have no idea what’s happening.”

“He is my twin brother, separated at birth.” Ilya deadpans.

Scott ignores this. “A secret for a secret? Trade?” He pumps an eyebrow. Ilya considers it.

“Ok, Hunter. What do you have?”

“I’m going to propose to Kip.” Scott has a nervous grin. “This fall. I have it all planned out.” He looks so happy. It’s disgusting.

“Oh my god, that is so boring.” Ilya says, jealousy burning in his gut. “If this is your idea of good gossip, no wonder you’re always so thirsty for it.”

“Fuck you, I haven’t told *anyone* that!”

“Fine, congratulations. Or, good luck? What’s the word when the young marry the very, very old so they inherit lots of money when they die?”

“Fuck off,” Scott says but he laughs, “Ok, your turn.”

“Shane and I are secretly married.”

Scott shakes his head, “Fine, if you’re not going to take this seriously, I won’t ask.”

“Sorry, I can be serious.” Ilya bites his cheek to suppress a grin, “He has divorced me.” Scott rolls his eyes and starts to walk away even as Ilya continues, “He left me with so many secret children to feed.”

Shane is *almost* glad to have the conversation with Mat Rivera interrupted. The kid is so boring; it’s kind of offensive that Ilya calls him Little-Shane. He’s worse now that he’s out, talking about how great it is and how he was asked to grand marshal the D.C. Pride Parade *and* the Puerto Rican Day parade. How his ad spots want to shoot all new content to show off their inclusivity. How he has all these dates lined up and maybe they’ll make his ex-boyfriend jealous or something? Shane stops listening when he sees Ilya coming over.

Ilya doesn’t greet him. He looks at Rivera, “I think Melnyk was looking for you,” then turns his gaze on Shane, and holy shit. The look is ravenous, like Ilya has one goal right now and it has to do with getting himself inside Shane. For a moment, Shane forgets where they are, how many hours it will be until anything like that can happen.

Until stupid fucking Rivera breaks him out of it. “Why would Melnyk be looking for me?”

“You would have to ask him.” Ilya says, but keeps staring at Shane.

Ilya grabs Shane's arm and pulls him into the nearby bathroom, much less inconspicuously than Shane would have liked. He protests with, “What the fuck, Rozanov?” But he already knows, even before Ilya locks the door, shoves his hands under Shane's suit jacket, attaches his mouth to Shane’s neck, and pins them both against the wall, what they’re coming to the bathroom to do.

This is pretty predictable Ilya behavior, even if they haven't been to enough social gatherings together to even know that. Shane decides to give himself thirty seconds of this make-out session before reprimanding his boyfriend and leaving the bathroom separately. Ilya starts dragging their hips together, and Shane starts planning. Maybe he can make their curfew 12:30 instead of 1. Ilya would let him. He's so predictable. And so hot. Fine, Shane can give himself twenty more seconds.

Ilya is never content to be predictable. At the end of the slew of mumbled Russian that doesn't fit in Shane's new limited knowledge of the language, the lips moving against his neck mutter, "Marry me, Shane." The sentiment takes a while to register, couched by the surrounding Russian words. The grinding probably doesn't help. The hot breath under Shane's ear is definitely a distraction.

So it's a few seconds before Shane backs his head up, startled, a little breathier than he would like, "What the fuck?"

Ilya stills and looks at him with reverence, like he has for years, like Shane is the best thing in the world. "Marry me before Scott Hunter can." Ilya moves in to ravage Shane's lips again, but Shane backs his head up onto the wall.

"Scott Hunter is gonna marry you?" Shane doesn't think Ilya has had *that* much to drink, has he?

"No, he is going to marry *Kip*," the word comes out like a slur, "who he has known, like, a month."

"— I think like, two years, actually..."

"While we are still unwed. Completely unfair." He nudges their hips together again.

Shane fights an eyeroll, "So you want to get married to beat Scott Hunter down the aisle." Shane isn't actually mad about it. Getting married is something they talk about a lot, and in those conversations Ilya is into it for the same reasons as Shane. So obviously, they will, someday. That day has always been a vague, nebulous, future, retired wedding day. Definitely not at the peak of their careers and height of fame, in the most dangerous time to be out for either of them.

Well... the public's response to Rivera has been promising so far. Maybe they could try for just later in their careers, when it doesn't matter so much if they're booted from the league. Ilya probably wouldn't mind an early retirement. It would kill Shane, though.

"And all the other reasons." Ilya kisses him again and moves back down his neck, "We can do it tonight."

"What??" Shane pulls them apart, again.

"Is Vegas not the place you go to get quick-married?" Ilya is so nonchalant. Panic starts to flood Shane's system.

“Ilya— I don’t even think it works like that, we’re Canadian. And *Russian*, if you haven’t noticed. I don’t know if you can just get married in whatever country you want, whenever you want. Is it even legal for you to get married? We haven’t looked into any of this.”

A cough comes from one of the stalls. *Shit*. Shane’s heart plummets into the ground. They didn’t even think to check, and he normally is so careful. Something about being relatively safe surrounded by... fuck. This isn’t even just a normal hookup to be blamed on alcohol or adrenaline, this conversation is so, *so* much worse.

“So, I think I can help with that.” The stall door swings open to reveal Cooper Lee, Ilya’s group’s attorney, who definitely already knows about them. Shane breathes with relief but he’s still pressed like a panini between the wall and Ilya’s body. Lee closes the stall door behind him, and it latches from the inside. Wait—

“Hi, Mr. Lee,” Ilya says, almost giddy, then a little louder, “Hey, Kowalski!” He’s much more calm than Shane feels. You couldn’t actually feel *less* calm than Shane right now, though, as he adds stupid *Kowalski* to the growing list of people who know about them. Ilya is nice enough to take his mouth off Shane’s neck to ask, “Can you answer my fiancé’s concerns?”

Shane shoves Ilya, “Shut up! I didn’t—” he stops himself from objecting. Fiancé sounds good.

“It *would* be legally binding if you got married here, and I’ve been telling Ilya to get married from the jump. Everything he’s doing is a terrible idea if he’s still a Russian citizen.” Cooper says, seemingly exhausted at the idea. “Not that there’s pressure on you, or anyone. Marriage is just the best way to do this.”

Ilya gestures to Cooper and says, “See?”

“But,” Cooper continues, “Nevada has no confidential records. So if anyone found out either of you were married, they would be able to pull the record and find out to whom.”

“I’ve heard of some tabloids checking records databases occasionally on a slow news day.” Kowalski adds, unhelpfully, from the stall.

Lee nods. “A Canadian marriage certificate would be confidential.”

“Then again, you two are less likely to be recognized here.”

“But—”

“Yes, thank you.” Ilya cuts them off, looking at Shane, knowing that Shane could complete that mental spiral on his own, and go deeper, thank you very much. He already has. Shane is on about the 80th level of this spiral already. But one of those facts mattered more than the others.

“No confidential records, Ilya.” Shane shakes his head.

“Ok. When we get back then?”

“You are actually proposing to me in a bathroom, with your lawyer and fucking... Kowalski here.” It’s not a question, and Shane sighs as he realizes his answer would never be ‘no,’ no matter how the question was posed. “Wait a second... how is this not the weirdest time we’ve had in a Las Vegas bathroom?” Cooper looks wildly uncomfortable, and Shane realizes what he’s said. “No! Sorry! It wasn’t like that!”

“—was exactly like that.” Ilya helpfully amends. Shane wishes he could turn himself into liquid and be poured down the sink drain, even before Ilya lowers his voice to ask, “Are you asking me to get on one knee, on this filthy bathroom floor—”

“—Ok!” Lee claps his hands, “We’ll just go. And maybe guard the door? I don’t know.” Kowalski sheepishly appears from the stall.

“Kowalski, I will not make death threats in front of my lawyer.” Ilya says, pointedly looking at Shane and then back. Kowalski nods frantically and follows Lee out.

Ilya puts his hands back around Shane’s waist under his suit jacket, much gentler than before. “We scared the poor little lawyer guy,” he pouts.

“...I’m not sure he was super innocent to start out with.”

They make out for a little before they hear “*This is uhhh occupied, there’s a private meeting, important group business. I doubt anyone is using the women’s right now,*” outside the door.

“Are we actually going to do this?” Shane whispers, “When we get back?” Shane knows it’s not really about the idea of Scott Hunter getting engaged. He knows Ilya always feels weird about the closet at things like this, and it’s draining for Shane too. The temptation to live their lives like they live tonight is strong. It’s almost worse to have these meetups, where they can be almost entirely themselves, and then have to go back into the real world. In an hour, they’re all due to return to the MLH party in shifts, and Shane will have to recalibrate. It sucks.

But being with Ilya is different than just being gay. It would still be scandalous even for half the people here. It would cement their legacies as a spectacle if people found out. *When* people find out, Shane reminds himself. It’s going to happen eventually, because Shane sure as hell isn’t going to stop being with Ilya. But does *marriage* actually make sense when they’re not surrounded by 15 (or, I guess, 16 if you count fucking Cooper Lee) other queer men? If his lawyer thinks this is the best way to keep Ilya safe then maybe it’s worth thinking about.

“Shane,” Ilya scans his face and brings him back to the present, “I would marry you tonight, even with public records. We could invite Crowella de Vil.” Shane scoffs at the name. “I am tired of not being able to say husband. I would even leave this room at the same time.” Ilya tilts his head in consideration, “We could tell these guys. What would they say?” Shane feels a familiar panic and his eyes must bug out because Ilya takes it back, “Ok. Maybe not that. Not tonight.”

“Sorry,” Shane feels embarrassed, and guilty, that he won’t hold Ilya’s hand in front of these guys. He thinks hard about why and lands on, “It’s Melnyk. For some reason... I just can’t.

I'm his captain and I'm..." *fucking another captain.*

"It's ok, hey." Ilya hugs him tight. "I will go first. You need the extra minute to make yourself look good."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you, too, Shane." Ilya walks out. Shane is going to marry that guy.

At the hetero after party, the guys have all decided they should not be seen mingling together. They even arrived in waves. So Shane is talking to J.J., carefully avoiding the topic of the very recent engagement, until someone calls his teammate over to another conversation. Shane isn't alone long before he is approached by someone else.

"Mr. Hollander!" Commissioner Crowell greets him. His poor secretary is one step behind him, weighed down by a gigantic leather bag. Shane should greet him back. He should start his phone recording. Maybe he can do it in his pocket without looking. He should have put the recording app on the homescreen like he had planned to. He should be carrying around a digital recorder like Ilya does. His mental spiral is cut off by six words that short-circuit Shane's mind: "Or should I say *Ringleader* Hollander?" Crowell smirks.

"...What?"

Crowell's face turns mean, and Shane just hears static. His eyes dart around the room, desperate for help. Ilya is so far away, and talking to someone, is that Brophy? Vinny Marcello is closer, but he's an idiot, he's not about to pick up telepathy. Rivera looks like he's exchanging angry words with Melnyk. Hunter is ordering at the bar. There's Young, and Jeffries, not looking at him. Where did J.J. go? Why is everyone distracted when he needs them?

"Walk with me."

Bianca doesn't know much about Shane Hollander. She knows most of the players in the league by name, so of course she *knows* Shane Hollander, but she's not really a hockey fan. You'd have to ask her wife for opinions about the teams or players. At one point she got a Hollander signed helmet for her son. He's the league's biggest star. That's about all she knows about him.

But right now, she can tell Hollander is crashing out. She saw the way his eyes darted around the room for help. It looks like he doesn't want to be talking to Mr. Crowell alone. Why did

he obey that very cringey “*walk with me*” line?

They walk through some double doors and make a few turns before Mr. Crowell tells Bianca to “Wait right here” and he leads Hollander into a side hallway. She can still hear every word from around the corner, which means the recorder she stashed in her leviathan bag can, too.

She knows the Ringleader has received the recording in which Mr. Crowell threatens his life, so it would make sense for Hollander to be nervous about meeting him alone. She also knows two other things. First, that Mr. Crowell has no plan to murder anyone. He carries nothing on his person and the idea that he would be able to outfight a professional hockey player, even one acting as timid as Shane Hollander, is laughable. Second, Bianca is 99% certain Shane Hollander is not the Ringleader. She needs to get him out of this conversation.

Bianca sends some quick texts to Suna Dunham, her contact for the group.

Bianca: Mr. Crowell is in a private conversation with Shane Hollander right now

Bianca: Accusing him of being the Ringleader

Bianca: 

All she can do is listen, her heartbeat racing in her ears.

“I’m not sure why you’re calling me the Ringleader but—”

“Don’t deny it, kid. The entire operation is you. Who else would this league fall behind? And that Rivera kid... It’s like watching a clone of you. You, Hunter, that kid, all these... the exact same type of person.” Bianca wishes he went a step further for the recording. She knows he’s thinking it, just get the hate speech in there already.

Suna: Where?

“Sir, there are a lot of different kinds of people in that group—” Oh my god, Hollander, don’t tell him you know who’s in the group!

“Oh, I’m sure. You think you’re smarter than me, giving me that list of teams. I checked every single one of them. You played me. Second year in a row, too.”

Bianca: awards after party

Bianca: East side hallway, two lefts off the side entrance

Bianca: hollander floundering.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“You know exactly what I mean. Last year was you, too. You think the public would believe Baldwin is that good?”

Suna: can you make up an emergency?

Bianca: there are very few hockey emergencies in the offseason.

“That wasn’t us,” Hollander argues, and Bianca cringes. If he was just a suspicion before, he’s not helping himself at all.

“No? Some other group coordinated to steal plays, sabotage games?”

“We didn’t—”

“But I’m getting in all the trouble for it. They’re investigating the league. That’s what you wanted, right?”

Suna isn’t getting back to her. Bianca wracks her brain— she has never had to pull the commissioner for an emergency.

“Someone should be. There are five alternating ways the games this season were advantaged.” Holy shit, maybe Hollander is higher up than she thought. He might make sense for the Ringleader. Is he admitting that to Mr. Crowell right now? Or does the whole group have that much information? Why haven’t they gone to the MLH board or the press with it?

“...Five? Where are you getting five?” Mr. Crowell sounds surprised at that number, like he thought it was a lower number. He must know what that sounds like, that he knew about three, or four, of those methods. Like there are methods at all. Hollander’s weird gambit paid off. Maybe he *is* the Ringleader.

Suna: Brophy just punched Rozanov in the face.

Suna: Ilya is fighting back

Loud, angry voices come from the direction of the ballroom.

Well... that’ll do it. How did that text come in before Bianca heard it? Is Suna Dunham here? Or does she just have people everywhere? Are Brophy and Rozanov part of this operation? One of them must be. Brophy did the hitting, he might be involved. Rozanov’s a loose cannon, pretty likely to fight back and cause a scene.

Bianca rounds the corner, “Mr. Crowell, I’m sorry to interrupt but there’s an emergency, two players have gotten into an altercation.”

“Does it look like— ok. Fine.” Mr. Crowell hates being interrupted, so this was an easier acquiescence than she suspected. He storms off and she follows in his wake, leaving Hollander alone in that hallway without another word. Mr. Crowell turns toward the elevator that goes to the hotel rooms, not the double doors to check out the altercation. “Thanks for getting me out of that. Kid almost got me.” They stop in front of the elevators. “I’m heading up for the night. I don’t feel like being shat on by some faggot who should stay on the ice and shut his fucking mouth. I’ll see what I can do. Theriault will be good.”

“Right.”

“Sorry. You’re not... involved in this. Looks like I should shut up, too.” He chuckles as the elevator dings. “Good night!” He steps in and leaves.

Bianca turns on her heel the second the doors close. She heads back to the hallway where they left Shane Hollander. He’s still there, on the phone.

“No, Mom, I’m fine, really. He didn’t even—” Hollander spots Bianca. “I gotta go.” He hangs up.

Bianca pulls the recorder out from her bag and says, “I got it.” He looks confused. “I got it recorded, the whole thing.”

His brows— his whole hairline really— jump up. “Oh!”

Before she can make sure he’s all right, a player she recognizes as Ilya Rozanov rounds the corner with an angry red welt on his cheek. His face is pissed but softens when he sees Bianca, for some reason.

Then he turns to Hollander and oh.

Ok. Wow. It’s immediately apparent that one of these men is the ringleader and the other is... The First Gentleman. She is speechless for a moment but shakes herself out of it, mumbling “It’s ok. I’ll send this to... it’s ok. Good night. It’s ok...” she realizes she’s still muttering nonsensically when she already turned the corner.

What the fuck did she get herself into?

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to everyone who made accurate predictions! I love all of your comments to death!! I usually don't respond to predictions (correct or incorrect) about big major things so as to not give anything away (plus it's just humanly impossible to respond to them all thoughtfully!!), but I read every one of them and they feed me and I love you.

We got some numbers? Names?

17 people were at the afterparty, these are the ones we saw:

#3

#4, flirting with their lawyer (who was consequently sharing a bathroom stall with someone named Kowalski)

#7

#10

#13

#14

#31 is about to move to Anaheim (making three players on one team). Someone named Richards is also doing that.

#38

Coming up: Ilya is a puppeteer, Shane is a professor (not an AU, but that would be fun, right?)

Chapter 18: Powerpoint

Chapter Summary

Summer 2019, Draft and Camp

Chapter Notes

I finally screwed the timeline pooch, we all knew it would happen! A wonderful post by @twirlingfreckles on Tumblr made me realize this draft should happen in 2018, not 2019. But because I would very much like this one tiny minor detail to still happen, I am going to go ahead and leave my botched timeline alone (it literally does not matter in the grand scheme of things).

Then, we get some Shane ft. competency kink & ADHD Ilya (don't get me started on my Ilya-has-ADHD headcanon). And a surprise guest. Enjoy!

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

Ilya feels weird being at the draft. Ottawa has the second pick, and there are about five prospects they could choose from. The team management wants to go for Hugh Doyle, the best prospect, if he's not taken first. But the Very Strange Thing happened again, and they asked for Ilya's opinion. The GM is actually taking Ilya's plan for Ottawa seriously. They could become home to a different kind of team. Even though players are not expected to be there, they need Ilya there at the draft, because their plan has some issues.

You can't ask an 18-year-old prospect if he's gay.

Ilya even feels weird scoping them out. It's one thing to talk to a 20-year-old rookie in a bar and have them tell you about other guys they knew from junior leagues, but it's another thing entirely to literally cruise for 18-year-olds. Ilya doesn't think the GM has thought this through, but he appreciates the sentiment.

It means Ilya is here, at the meet-and-greet the night before the draft, trying to suss out these top picks. It's kind of pandemonium, because it's most of these kids' first ever professional hockey event, and Ilya is kind of professional hockey's biggest star, so they don't know how to act cool yet. It's hard to tell a starstruck guy from a guy who might be interested. He feels a little like Shane, like maybe *all* of these kids are flirting with him. God, this is so gross.

He abandons ship and decides to scope out the room from the second story, overlooking the crowd. It is blessedly empty up here, so he can reminisce a little about seeing Shane down

there, talking to Montreal's GM, a decade ago. Then, he can see if these kids are looking at each other and that's a lot more helpful. Out of the five prospects his GM gave him, he's got a good read on the nerdy Swiss kid. He'd probably be the second overall pick anyway, so it's pretty perfect. None of the other five look like they'd be interested.

He pulls out his phone to text the GM his pick when he feels an evil presence behind him. He turns around to see Commissioner Roger Crowell, in the flesh. Feigning an itch, Ilya starts the digital recorder in his inside breast pocket. "Hello, sir."

"At ease, Rozanov!" Ilya can't remember the last time he talked to this man in person. Maybe it was right here, at the draft, 10 years ago. There's a little tiny demon in Ilya's head that knows, despite what Shane insists, that he scared Shane at the awards, accusing him of being the Ringleader. So that little tiny demon would like to kill this man.

Ottawa's GM had told Ilya that Crowell didn't like him moving to a shitty team. Ilya is supposed to sell jerseys, and tickets. Ottawa sells nothing. So he knows Crowell isn't happy with him either, regardless of the gay rebellion he's been leading.

"Enjoying the view?" Crowell joins him to look down at the crowd.

No, Ilya wants to say, I'm uncomfortable scoping out 18 year old boys if I am not also 18. And if Shane Hollander is nowhere around. But he goes with a more appropriate half-truth. "Reflecting. Was I that young, ever?" Ilya says with a smile. It's what he's supposed to say when looking at these draft picks.

"More promising than this class, too. And you gave it all up for Ottawa." Crowell responds bitterly, "Why?"

There are the real answers and the interview answers. He's actually given a few different interview answers, but he'll try out the one he thinks will sell the most jerseys. "Wanted a challenge. Want to rebuild a team around me. Ottawa will be great."

"No, it won't." Crowell says. Ilya lifts an eyebrow. It's ok to be offended here, right? "They made a mistake trading out defense. Fredericks shouldn't be in the league."

This isn't a statement, it's code. It's a gauge, Crowell is testing him. Ilya has to make a quick decision, if he is going to be on Crowell's good or bad side. Ilya posted in support of the ally movement, Crowell must have documented who did and didn't, at least with big names like his. Plus, he knows Ilya runs a foundation with Shane Hollander, who he believes is the Ringleader. So he already knows where Ilya falls in all of this.

"The defense wasn't clicking. Fredericks was cheap." Ilya says simply, to sit on the fence a while longer.

"Fredericks is causing problems," Crowell declares. "It would've been better if we let his contract die out." Causing problems for whom? How is the most mediocre defenseman in the league causing anyone problems?

"Yes, well. He is our problem now."

Crowell smiles at this. “You’re a good one.” Uh-oh. Crowell’s definition of “good one” is probably a lot different than Ilya’s. The decision has been made, Ilya will be on Crowell’s good side. “Have you been following all of this nonsense? Fredericks and Wagner? The Rivera kid?”

Following? As if it’s not the only thing anyone is talking about. “All of it is hard to avoid.” Ilya says plainly and sees an opportunity, “But what can be done about it?”

Crowell laughs meanly, “A whole lot, actually. But it doesn’t help when we’ve almost got one out of the league and a team picks him up last-minute.”

Ilya gets nosy. “And what about Rivera? Wagner? Washington is keeping them on.”

“We’re seeing what we can do. Keep it isolated to one or two teams, and repercussions are easier.”

“Repercussions?”

“Eh,” Crowell swats with his hand nonchalantly, “Don’t worry about it.” Ilya will worry about it. He *wants* to be worried about it... But the statement is absolute; it ends the conversation. So Ilya nods. “Anyway, I should go talk to the fresh crop downstairs. Just wanted to see where you’re landing. But you’re a good one.” There’s that word again. Crowell sticks out his hand, which Ilya feels disgusting taking.

“Yes. I am.”

“You let me know what’s happening on the ice, right?”

Ilya wants to say he’ll let *everyone* know what’s happening on the ice soon. “Right.”

Ilya loves the summer camp the Irina Foundation put together. He thinks it’s going well, the kids are really fun, and it’s nice to be laid back on the ice with Shane for once. The coaches are made up of some allies, like Pike, Wyatt, Boiziau, then Ryan Price is here, some players from the PWHL... not an asshole in sight.

So, altogether, they have everyone on the same page. Ilya and Shane are somewhat obvious about each other. No one is put on heart-eyes duty. The only ones who wouldn’t know about them are Boiziau and Price. Price walks in on Ilya and Shane on the first day, so that doesn’t last long. Ilya pulls Boiziau aside on the second day. Boiziau already knew Ilya is in charge of the ally army, but Ilya lets him know he’s also responsible for the queer infantry. Once Boiziau is in on that secret, and he already knows about Shane, and no one is squashing their heart-eyes, he silently catches onto the two of them quickly. Ilya and Shane get in the same car to go home, they bring the same food for lunch, they disappear in closets at the end of the

day... It's about as open as a secret can be. There's no one to hide from except the kids, and no one should be making eyes in front of children, anyway.

The camp provides a good hub for Ilya's cabinet. He never organized an official business meeting for his operation, but because Shane thinks he cracked the code on this year's rigging, Ilya decides to call everyone together. The only one who hates the idea is Scott Hunter, who is still in New York for the summer, but because Ilya is some sort of wizard, Hunter comes anyway.

Hunter is there as the public face of the group, Pike for the ally army, Harris for social media, Yuna for the staff army, and Shane for the hockey rules. Every general of this army is gathered in one small conference room at the camp's rink.

Shane has his laptop connected to the screen and has pulled up a paused hockey game. Everyone sits around the table. Ilya feels like King fucking Arthur.

"Ok, I think I've got it figured out." Shane says proudly at the paused hockey game on the screen. "I've gone through about a thousand games... Well, seven hundred and forty nine... about one hundred forty of them include one of the advantaged teams. And I've identified some ways I think the games were advantaged. There's one I can't get, I'm hoping you'll help."

He hits play on the laptop. "First, watch what happens here." The game is Boston vs. Montreal. "They should put their second line up against this Montreal line. Why didn't they? We asked Marlow, and he didn't know either. He thought it was weird at the time. You can also see this happen here," Shane clicks on the laptop and oh no... Ilya thought it was just a video.

It's a PowerPoint.

"In the Columbus game against Utah, they put this defensive line up." He points, "Those two guys should probably be fine with each other, but I texted Pierce and he said it was weird, they had never practiced it like that."

Ilya knows Shane is saying something about sub-optimal matchups, that the coaches must have been convinced, or paid, to put the wrong line out against their opponents or... something. Ilya never should have put Shane in charge of this. So much work went into this, Shane figured it all out, and Ilya won't be able to listen for long enough to understand it, because he just wants to watch Shane's lips move. Did he have to wear the glasses for this? Ilya shakes himself back into focus.

"...so I think it's a sabotaged coaching strategy in these games." Shane clicks and a list of about 40 games populates the screen. "But that's just one angle." He clicks and a graph comes up. "It's the refs, too. These are the penalties called against our six teams versus..."

The ref examples are played. Ilya figured this one himself. The league has already tampered with bad refereeing, so he lets himself lose focus again, only paying attention to Shane's

determined look, and his hands gesticulating, and the way his shirt would expose his stomach if it were an inch shorter...

Oh shit, wait... what? Ilya missed something. Shane is saying something about hockey stick tape shortage.

Hayden's brow furrows, "I heard other people complain about this, but it seemed like Montreal got their bulk supply early so I guess we weren't affected?" Faulty stick tape? How did Shane even figure that out? Ilya will get Hayden or maybe David Hollander to give him the bullet points later. Ugh, no, he'll still know they came from Shane. This is a disaster.

"We had to use the world's shittiest tape." Hunter says, "I think the puck literally would adhere to the sticks sometimes."

"The shortage only affected all the other 26 teams. Guess which six teams had plenty. But..." Shane clicks again, and there's another list, "The equipment in every game was just slightly off... We looked at the team staff, too." He gestures to his mother.

Yuna chimes in, "Every team has someone on the staff close to the change room or arena staff who posted on their social media in support of anti-gay political candidates."

"Right. So we're fairly certain it's staff. But because it's slightly different every game, or almost every game, I didn't figure them all out. I'm still working on it..." He sounds disappointed in himself, and Ilya wants to hold him.

Shane looks around the room, and asks "Questions so far?" Like he's a teacher. Shane looks at Ilya and then quickly looks away, so it must be written all over his face: Teacher Shane is doing a *lot* for Ilya.

There's no pause for questions, Shane just continues. "Ok. This is the one I can't get."

He plays a set of clips, pointing out individual players. His sleeve moves up to show a little of the inside of his bicep when he reaches up to the screen.

Hunter nods, "You're right, it's weird... Burke just stops and messes up. But it could be anything."

"Can I just say?" Pike interrupts, "It's so eerie to watch these clips without the sound."

"Oh," Shane looks embarrassed. "Sorry. I always have it on mute. The commentators are so distracting... and they're always wrong..." he trails off distractedly. He unmutes the sound and plays the clips again.

Unmistakably, in every clip, some random sound occurs exactly at the moment the player messes up. In one, an airhorn, in another a whistle from the audience, not a ref, a vuvuzela in another. There's only one clip where it's not as obvious. Everyone notices at the same time.

"They must have been lenient about letting whistles and stuff in, usually they aren't allowed. What about the one where it's not there?"

“Hang on, I just chose the ones where it was most obvious.” Shane pulls up a folder with hundreds of clips. He opens one at random. This one doesn’t have any weird sounds, but Troy Barrett whips his head in the wrong direction and drops the pass anyway. Something is happening in the audience.

Ilya furrows his brow, “I asked the allies if there was anything weird, and the gays would have just told me.” This might have been addressed while he was willing his erection to go down, but Ilya needs to at least look engaged in this presentation.

“No, that’s the crazy part. Especially with the audience interference, things like camera flash and air horns were used when very specific people had the puck. Kent, Nelson, Barrett, Burke...”

“The assholes.” Pike clarifies, as if anyone needed help.

“Almost like they knew not to go for our guys.” Shane looks at Ilya, “You know who to ask about this.” Ilya nods. He pulls out his phone.

Ilya: phone call in one hour?

Barrett: ...why?

Ilya: just have a question.

Ilya: two other people will be on the call

Ilya: nothing about you being gay as fuck with very famous men i promise

Barrett: eat shit asshole

Ilya: so, yes?

Ilya tunes back in to see Shane’s slide with team rankings. “...then, it never got too suspicious, because they let us lose some games in overtime, so we still would get a point. Especially against each other. Check out how many of these games went into overtime.” He clicks, and there is a chart.

While everyone recalls their overtime games, Shane looks so enthusiastic and pulls up scores to bolster their points. Ilya gets lost in daydreams again.

Shane’s PowerPoint is presenting a huge chart with color-coded squares. “...with the combined methods of coach, ref, equipment interference, and the, I guess, what should we call it? Audience participation? ...the league never had to use the same combination twice between matchups, and the rotation of the methods threw anyone off the scent. This chart is the method I think was used in each of the games between January and the playoffs.”

Ilya looks at the screen to make sure he didn’t just miss the detail before asking, “This is only four ways. I thought you had five.”

Shane looks confused, “No, I think this is it. Why?”

“On the recording,” Yuna says, “With the commissioner, you say five.”

“Oh.” Shane blushes sheepishly. “I just... I had four. And then I figured... maybe I didn’t get them all, you know? So I said five to kind of... make him *think* I got them all. It was probably dumb, but...”

Hunter is aghast, “You bluffed?”

Yuna chimes in, “You lied?”

Ilya is the most shocked, “He believed you?”

“Yes, he believed me.” Shane responds defensively, “You heard the recording.”

Hayden bites his lip, “Yeah but like... you’re not the best liar in the world.”

“I lied to you for a long time, didn’t I?”

That shuts everyone up.

Hunter breaks the silence, “What do we do with this information? Just send it to Kavita?”

“No,” Ilya shakes his head, “Kavita is taking so long with things. We might see the article in a year like last time.”

“*You* delayed that article.” Scott says defensively.

Ilya rolls his eyes, “Still. Almost a year. No. We will put this on RogueMLH.”

Harris’s ears perk up after a *lot* of intense hockey talk. “That actually makes sense, that’s what it’s used for. There’s a little problem, though. This whole conversation sounds really familiar.” Harris pulls up an internet browser on his laptop, “There’s a subreddit, it’s been around forever, r/MLHCorruption. They make these kinds of accusations all the time. Like, so often that no one really takes them seriously anymore. Almost every game is rigged, according to them, and definitely every single cup. Yuna and I can ask the staff but I think everyone in the league sees them as tinfoil-hat conspiracy theorists.”

Ilya’s gut feels a little sick. Could the league really have rigged every game? Ever? Ilya watches as Harris scrolls on his laptop next to him, and some of the others pull it up on their phones. The posts range the spectrum from serious discussion of Kavita’s recent article to whether the hockey league was involved in rigging the last presidential election. There are theories that Crowell has been dead for years next to screenshots of Ilya’s own RogueMLH posts about Fredericks.

“No one’s going to take you seriously because these guys have been doing this for decades.” Harris concludes.

Ilya sees his name and reads the post aloud. “*Ilya Rozanov is a Russian agent and the 'hockey camps' are training a Russian sleeper cell...* What the fuck?”

“Apparently,” Yuna says, looking at her phone, “The commissioner put a thin layer of olive oil on the ice before a game in 2016 to injure all the players in the Brooklyn/Boston game, to prevent them from voting in the election.”

“I remember that. I voted twice.” Ilya jokes.

“*Dallas Kent has an underground sex dungeon.*” Harris reads and looks disgusted.

“That one might be true.” Scott tilts his head.

Shane furrows his brow at his phone. “I’m trans? My concussion in 2017 was me getting bottom surgery.”

Yuna snorts, “Convenient that Marly knocked you out, then. Right on time for your surgery.”

“No, wait...” Shane blushes as he continues reading, “Cliff Marlow is my lover!? That’s *why* he knocked me out??”

“They were *so* close,” Scott responds smiling at Ilya.

Hayden turns pale and puts his head on the table, “Ilya Rozanov is fathering my children.”

“Yes, sorry for you to find out. It is so hard to find time while I am training the Russian army.”

Yuna tilts her phone to Hunter, “Is this picture of Theriault in blackface real or photoshopped?”

“Hang on. And—” Scott stops himself and shakes his head, “This is ridiculous, but... is that the point of this? I hate this, I sound like someone on this forum but... the league... you don’t think they’re contributing to this, right?”

“What?”

“The headlines you just read. It’s like two truths and a lie. We don’t believe something that might be true because the other claims are demonstrably false.” The room is silent for a moment as they consider this.

“That’s kind of what I’m saying,” Harris says, defeated. “We can post Shane’s charts up on RogueMLH, but we need a LOT of evidence. Otherwise, all of this work belongs here.”

Barrett hasn't responded to Ilya by the time the meeting is adjourned and it's just the three people who need to be there.

He hopes telling Barrett about the two other people on the call didn't scare him off. It's just that Shane knows these plays, games, and dates backward and forward. The other attendee will be the one writing the posts for RogueMLH, Harris.

Ilya would not normally out a player, but he already has told Shane. They have no obligation to this idiot, so Ilya could out him to Harris, too, but they actually need his help right now. Ilya can play nice.

"Rozanov. What do you want." Troy's voice echoes out on speakerphone and Ilya breathes a sigh of relief that he answered at all.

Usually Ilya would have some sort of fun snarky remark about the terse greeting, but Barrett puts him in a bad mood. "Here with Shane Hollander and Harris Drover." He doesn't want to explain who Harris is or why Shane's here, though Barrett is likely to guess at that one, so he cuts to the chase. "Wanted to ask you about two games last season. March 3rd and 12th." Ilya reads off the legal pad Shane placed in front of him.

"We played 80 something games, I'm supposed to remember?"

"They were against Montreal and New Jersey. I'm sending you a clip from the Montreal game."

There's some silence as Troy watches the clip. "Oh." He says, "That's embarrassing."

It is embarrassing. Barrett has the puck, sailing down toward Montreal's goal, a clear path ahead of him, and then he just... loses the puck. He looks up, angles his stick the wrong way, and drops it.

"What happened?"

"What the fuck is this, Rozanov? You're going through my footage to make fun of me?"

"Try the other one. Sorry, hi Barrett, it's Shane... Ilya is sending you another one now, was it the same thing?" Ilya sends the New Jersey clip. There's more silence as Barrett watches it.

"Wait. No— it wasn't the same thing but..." Barrett exhales a huff. "That's so weird. I didn't even think about it but there were, like, distractions."

Ilya is intrigued, "What do you mean, distractions?"

"It's like when something takes your attention..." Barrett says slowly. Harris squeezes his lips together not to smile. Ilya glares at that and cuts him off.

"Fuck you Barrett, I speak English. What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure which happened during which game but there were little things all season."

"Like what?" Harris asks. When Barrett doesn't respond, he adds, "Sorry, I'm Harris. Hi."

“Hi.” Barrett replies, “I don’t even remember. I think there’s a flash, you can see it across my face in the second video. It came from the audience.”

“Like someone was taking a picture?” Harris asks.

Ilya shakes his head. “People take pictures all the time, Barrett, would that distract you?” He’s not really trying to chirp, it’s a genuine curiosity.

“Fuck off. No, it was longer than that, like maybe a full second. Like... I’m going to sound crazy.”

“No, what?” Harris encourages him.

“Like you know when you were a kid and you did a science experiment with mirrors reflecting lights at specific angles?” He stops mid-thought, “...wait that’s another thing, there was an airhorn.”

“Yeah we got the air horns.” Shane says.

“Yeah, like a sudden sound. It fucked up a pass to Dallas. But that wasn’t in March, that was like... February? Right around when we—” He cuts himself off, unwilling to admit he met with Ilya, and the implications that might have. Harris raises an eyebrow at Shane, who shrugs.

“Ok, so like dumb little distractions.” Shane clarifies.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Thanks, Troy,” Harris says, “Can I be in touch if anyone has questions once this is posted?”

“You won’t say it’s me, right?” Barrett sounds frantic.

“No!” Harris confirms, “Of course not. You’re safe.”

Shane catalogs everything Barrett can remember and they hang up, soaking in the information. Harris’s legal pad is filled with ideas on how to present this information to the public.

“He didn’t seem so bad.” Harris says, leaning back, “You made him out to be the devil, what’s wrong with him?”

“No, Harris, he is an asshole.” Ilya insists, “He is like the devil and Dallas Kent had a baby.”

“Ok, I guess. He’s a hot devil, then. Even I know that,” Harris giggles.

“Ugh, no. You’re way too good for him.” Shane says.

“A dead animal is too good for him.” Ilya nods, “Besides, he is in a relationship.”

Harris shrugs. “Well, that’s a shame.”

Chapter End Notes

Yet again these two use their red string of fate as an Ilya Rozanov tripwire.

No numbers? At all?? ok weird.

As always, I love your comments, I live and breathe for them!!! I try to respond when there's a question (or if I can't help but make a joke), but I can't respond to them all. I won't confirm/deny big predictions so as to not give anything away, but don't let that stop you from speculating!!

Coming up: Social media!! You can thank @PinkLetterDay for advocating for it! The only thing I don't like about writing social media is coming up with a million different usernames, so right now they're all one word or letter. Hit me with your best usernames! (or if you want me to use your actual ao3 name (but tell me what kind of person you'd be)).

Chapter 19: r/MLHCorruption

Chapter Summary

End of summer 2019. Social Media reacts to some of these events, Ilya reacts to some of these social medias.

Chapter Notes

1) burn my house down if I ever do another social media fic. It's a headache. This chapter is short and there are definitely still formatting errors, but I'm letting go! I might reformat eventually but you know when you've been looking at something too long and it doesn't seem real anymore?? Let me know if you see any errors!

2) *slaps chapter* this baby can fit so many HR fandom references and discourse.

3) I asked you for usernames and then promptly ignored all of them. Sorry! (I think @PinkLetterDay suggested something like one of them but we also have @PLD to thank for this chapter, so that makes sense)

Warning: There is a ton of toxic internet culture in here. Homophobia, sexism, xenophobia, etc. Probably nothing you don't see daily, but I wanted to give you a heads up.

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

Ilya regrets asking his squadrons for social media updates. It's the end of the summer, and with the season about to begin, no one will be able to dedicate as much time to this again. He sorts through the screenshots the guys send him with people reacting to Rivera, then Wagner, but a few stand out as more interesting than the rest.

@HockeyCanFan

OK who is the #ringleader?? Someone gay enough to lead this thing but not enough to come out??

@admiraladmirer

For real. Hunter and these posts have been implying that he's somehow a better leader than Scott Hunter? Captain of the year 3 times?

@admiraladmirer

Scott Hunter should be no one's Vice President.

@GoaliePolieOlie

Rivera's made me think the hashtags are acronyms. So far we have SCHUMEM, FRIEND, EIGHT, CIRCUS and (omg Rivera get it together) PHPGBQU.

@WashTheClock

Can we safely infer Rivera's is professional hockey players' gay bisexual queer union/united?

@GoaliePolieOlie

that's fair. He's fucking boring.

@GoaliePolieOlie

Rivera also tagged #RC and Wagner said that one in his speech, too.

@ImpeachCrowell

Wagner also tagged #FOR at one point in a comment on Rivera's post.

@GoaliePolieOlie

there's not a single letter they all have in common.

@Alcoholockey

most have E in them, is that anything? I can't imagine what that would stand for. Emancipation? Electorate? Ejaculation?

@CharredHamburger

ok so like, none of these guys are smart enough for this but FOD was Friend of Dorothy back in the day, a way for gay guys to know each other.

@Dress2Surpress

they actually might know that. Lundin wrote FRIEND.

@CharredHamburger

yeah but that's because Scott Hunter said "28 close friends"

@MovingtoLA

FOR could be Friend of Ringleader, in which case RC would be Ringleader's Circus like in Wagner's post

@WashTheClock

No, Wagner said in the speech he IS "a lowly RC". You can't BE a circus, idiot.

@MovingtoLA

Fine. Ringleader's Clowns?

@SulphuricAcid

can we talk about how fucking bad this group is at branding?

@HockeyMystery

on the MLHCorruption subreddit they've been calling it TGS or "that gay shit".

@admiraladmirer

God, that sub is so gross why are you even on it?? You must be an incel

@ShaneHollander4POTUS

literally those people are so fucking stupid. And dangerous! Allegations about Zullo were on there first so no one believed them for so long

@HockeyMystery

that place has accusations about everybody. I just saw a post about Dallas Kent assaulting women

@admiraladmirer

Dallas Kent probably DOES assault women.

@CharredHamburger

They're fucking hockey players, they're dumb as fuck.

Ilya has to set his laptop computer down for a full thirty seconds, eyes closed. People on the internet are so fucking stupid. And mean! All of these comments have an undercurrent of negativity. How hard is it to just be nice, keep your negative opinions to yourself??

He braces himself with a few calming breaths. Then he checks what Harris has posted for them.

The first is an infographic with the timestamps for the distracted players from Shane's data. They can't post any MLH video without permission, so they need to rely on other people looking into it. The second is a list of games where the refs seem compromised. The third, a list of optimal matchups that highlight some of the most egregious coaching errors, and timestamps for games where a weird grouping was played. Shane and Harris agreed the equipment tampering hypothesis seems like it belongs on r/MLHCorruption, so they chose not to publish that one. The fourth tweet was more of a conclusion to the persuasive essay they had prepared:

@RogueMLH

Six teams were not affected by these methods. Compare those to the final four, the season rankings, the cup winner.

@Kavita_Kingsley** and 125k others retweeted **@RogueMLH

@ShaneHollander4POTUS

ok I know this low-key sounds like r/MLHCorruption but I kind of trust @RogueMLH...

@GoaliePolieOlie

I know... they were right about the Fredericks stuff, and that got verified by actual journalists.

@Dress2Surpress

They also alluded to the 2018 cup rigging scandal before the Kingsley article came out.

@HockeyCanFan

They have me fully putting on my tin foil hat because look at the flash of light on the Feb23, Mar4, Mar16 examples!!

After going through all of the allies' work, Ilya is still perplexed by one thing. Seeing this bizarre subreddit mentioned several times in his own comments makes him want to see more of what they're doing in there. It's a morbid curiosity, like watching a train wreck or picking at a scab. Some of posts contain the most disturbing and vile toxicity he's ever seen. Some of the posts are pretty normal. All of the posts have the full range of comments.

r/MLHcorruption

This is a forum to highlight the corruption, scandals, and coverups throughout Major League Hockey. Be respectful and keep an open mind. We encourage everyone to do their own research. Together we can create a more transparent MLH.

u/FloraOrFauna MOD 1 year ago 

Scott Hunter's Gay State of the Union Megathread

All discussion of Scott Hunter's address at the 2018 MLH awards should be limited to this post.

You can find the original video [here](#).

↑ 4k ↓  701

u/Faint4Taint

I just searched it. This sub has debated the sexualities of 64 current players. So clearly this "leader" didn't get them all.

u/LiveBreatheHockey

Or, hear me out, maybe you're wrong about some of them.

u/dscvrroe45780

You guys didn't even get Scott Hunter. Last post about him before he came out was how he was a Crowell puppet.

u/Faint4Taint

Ok so then there's more than 64? I don't get what you're saying.

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r

you know what's weird? Every post about someone being gay has like a bajillion downvotes.

u/penisthedong

weird? you misspelled homophobic. these are hockey fans bruh they won't want to hear about their precious Scott Hunter taking it every night from some art history grad student.

u/V1rg1n1aCr33p3r

Scott Hunter was at risk of being outed so he came out just minutes before a damning sex tape would have been released

u/intelonwatergate

Why didn't the sex tape get released then?? Wouldn't it still have been damning?

u/sir1589shelf *1 yr. ago*

Ok so no one picked up Baldwin's contract bc he was gay?

↑ 544 ↓ 27

u/Catalpa_Tree

There has to be another reason.

u/ScratchYourAss4me

How the actual fuck did vancouver win

u/Apps-And-Zerts

Have you not been on this sub?? The playoffs were scripted.

u/FloraOrFauna MOD *1 yr. ago*

Masterpost: List of all 197 who partook in TGS Summer 2018 affection-fest

In chronological order of self-posting:

Hayden Pike (Originator)

Carter Vaughan

Wyatt Hayes

Cliff Marlow [[Read More](#)]

↑ 3.1k ↓ 590

u/sir1589shelf

Can we call it anything other than "That Gay Shit"??

u/LiveBreatheHockey

Wild that Russian nationals like Rozanov are on this list, is he still trying to go back there ever?

u/EnglishIvy

He's a Russian opp. Putin probably told him to acclimate, make it look real.

u/Champ-ion-agne

he's bratva not kremlin

u/Faint4Taint

Hayden Pike Originator? Do we think he's Ringleader then?

u/souroursrouse

Hayden Pike is married with a million kids

u/iinsister1

Fredericks is married too and he came out.

u/Phil-o-dendron

Fredericks's wife is trans

u/DM_me_your_mom

Okay even if that were true (which... the transvestigating on this sub has gotten wild), he's still bisexual.

u/FloraOrFauna MOD 1 yr. ago

Baldwin's wedding photos

[View in Post]

↑ 2.7k ↓ 97

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r

It's crazy how damning any of these would have been like six months ago

u/61courH

Hollander and Rozanov even putting aside the rivalry for TGS affection-fest?

u/Faint4Taint

The rivalry is fake everyone knows that.

u/BermudaGr-ass

Sometimes the conspiracies on this sub are absolutely too much for me.

u/penisthedong

Confused how any of these people actually know each other. Why were Hollander and Rozanov even there?

u/Azalea_Bush

Shane Hollander was on the Canadian team when Baldwin was an alternate for the Olympics. They also did a bunch of charity work together. Rozanov and Baldwin know each other through Carmichael.

u/penisthedong

ah thanks

u/Chrysanthemum

Baldwin's husband is a registered sex offender

u/HorseJailforHorses

Do you have a source for that? not finding anything.

u/sir1589shelf

oh no, are you new here? never ask for a source on this sub! Sorry to be the first one. Up your ass.

u/penisthedong

you'll find it up your ass

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r

have you looked up your ass?

u/LiveBreatheHockey *1 yr. ago*

Ok which one of you is RogueMLH?

I'm pretty sure it has to be one of us, right?

↑ 3k ↓ 122

u/Apps-And-Zerts

The Ringleader is RogueMLH

u/dscvrroe45780

Are you fucking kidding me? You think a professional fucking hockey player who already has a dripping wet schedule is organizing a fucking players' union AND a fucking underground journalism operation? Are you out of your goddamn mind?

u/Caryophyllales

RogueMLH is wayyyy more insane than this sub

u/FloraOrFauna MOD *1 month ago* 📌

Kingsley RSM Article Masterpost

All discussion of the recent MLH executives alleged gambling schemes should be limited to this post.

You can find the original article [here](#).

↑ 6.9k ↓ 991

u/ScratchYourAss4me

holy shit

u/sir1589shelf

I've been on this subreddit for 12 years and I've never seen it be verifiably right about anything holy shit.

u/Faint4Taint

Crowell himself had money on the outcome of the cup. Not just his cronies. The Kingsley article doesn't mention that.

u/Ragweed1977

Source?

u/Faint4Taint

up your ass

u/AutoMLHCSource_Bot

It appears you've asked for a source. As per the sub rules, check up your ass first. *I am a bot, and this action was performed automatically.*

u/MrSirHimself

It doesn't go into how the hockey was actually rigged, just the money side of it.

u/Monsteraaaa

women don't know how hockey works

u/MrSirHimself

it wasn't supposed to talk about hockey dumbass

u/61courH

I mean, check this sub. The entire season, people were posting about how rigged it was, and the methods they used.

u/GreenGrass 1 mo. ago

Fabian Salah (Ryan Price's gay boyfriend) is Al Qaeda.

↑ 2.7k ↓ 97

u/unfortunateusername

Salah is Lebanese you racist asshole

u/PucknPull

aren't you racist for saying Lebanese people can't be Al Qaeda?

u/GreenGrass

Al Qaeda was in Lebanon, too [\[link\]](#)

u/unfortunateusername

Oh sorry! I stand corrected. Salah could definitely be Al Qaeda.

u/99OrganizedOrgans

LOL if you think that little twink is fighting anyone.

u/Apps-And-Zerts

ngl tho his music is lowkey good.

u/LiteralPieceofHumanGarbage 5 yrs. ago

Ilya Rozanov is on performing enhancing drugs

It just seems like he is. There are some clues and he has some of them.

↑ 0 ↓  1

u/MrSirHimself 9 mo. ago

RogueMLH's Fredericks ref scandal

Is it possible to be in love with a twitter account? This sub saw this shit happening, but to be posted on twitter with evidence?? What a fucking badass.

↑ 741 ↓  406

u/pinetreepinetree 3 mo. ago

The Pittsburgh social media page is dogwhistling antifa propaganda

↑ 124 ↓  5

u/Champ-ion-agne 2 yr. ago

Frank Zullo's mob connections

↑ 233 ↓  10

u/BeardedIris 9 mo. ago

Lundin had a drug charge that threatened his visa, the real reason he left LA

↑ 44 ↓  7

u/ChiefErectutiveOfficer 3 mo. ago

Scott Hunter and Shane Hollander are 100% hooking up

↑ -4 ↓ 13

u/Boston-Fern 1 wk. ago

Cliff Marlow changed his name from Marleau to avoid homicide charges

↑ 16 ↓ 8

u/Gr4dual_Dcline 5 yr. ago

The league pushed out Amy (Arnie) Reginald because she was trans

↑ 212 ↓ 35

u/ClockingSideeye 4 mo. ago

Hayden Pike's wife is a literal witch.

I have a friend who works at this hippie food co-op in Montreal and saw Jackie Pike buying frog legs... [\[Read More\]](#)

↑ 666 ↓ 19

u/Apps-And-Zerts 1 wk ago

Ok is it time to talk about the discrepancy in rankings now?

u/dscvrroe45780

Montreal, nj, wash, Anaheim, Utah all leagues above everyone else. Why these five teams? What do they have in common?

u/Juniper

good fucking players?

u/penisthedong

I'm comparing them to the teams on these new RogueMLH posts. It looks pretty bad.

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r

do we think they did it again? would they be that dumb?

u/sir1589shelf

I mean yeah kinda.... but seriously, if they didn't know they were being investigated by Kingsley before they did this, they might have thought they could get away with it because they just did the year before.

u/spanishmoss

wdym again?? you're really buying what's in that trash article? Kavita Kingsley was on Barack Obama's payroll.

u/dscvrroe45780

Where the fuck did you see that???

u/ChiefErectutiveOfficer
look up your ass

Ilya scrolls further than he should and realizes something. The rigging that people “noticed” before last year was outlandish, like the commissioner infecting the entire Florida team with chlamydia. Or verifiably false, like goalies adding illegally large pads under their gear to take up more space. Any picture from the game could clear the accusation in a second. Their evidence for claims was meager; one photo could lead to a rumor on here. Some of the photos are clearly doctored.

But in 2018, the evidence gets real. They notice the refs are biased, for starters, with video evidence to prove it. They even get some of the coaching missteps Shane analyzed, an entire season before anyone else realized it. The league clearly used the same rigging techniques for 2018 and 2019.

Ilya also sees for every legitimate claim, there's an absolutely off-the-wall nutty one. Hunter was right. It almost seems like the insane theories are there to make the entire community look bad, not that they always need much help.

Before he can stop himself, Ilya is making a reddit account.

u/RogueMLH is requesting a chat

u/RogueMLH: hello. I have spent hours on your ridiculous subreddit community and you three seem like the least dogshit crazy.

u/RogueMLH: have you noticed when someone posts legitimate criticism of the league or anything with evidence, posts immediately appear with something insane?

u/RogueMLH: just observing, carry on.

u/LiveBreatheHockey: No way you're actually RogueMLH.

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r: what the fuck?

u/RogueMLH: the mod is not doing you favors by allowing nonsense

u/RogueMLH: posts without evidence should be deleted

u/RogueMLH: pretty obvious

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r: gah I really hate to do this but have you tried up your ass?

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r: im so sorry sir

u/RogueMLH: yes. I have tried there.

u/RogueMLH has left the chat

u/sir1589shelf: damn I missed him??

u/sir1589shelf: do you think he actually checked up his ass or was he lying?

u/LiveBreatheHockey: I think we just received instructions? From RogueMLH?

u/LiveBreatheHockey: I'm going to try something.

u/LiveBreatheHockey *1 hr. ago*

The commissioner donated \$500k to anti-abortion charities in 2017

No comment, it's just a ton of money. [[link](#)]

↑ 10 ↓  2

u/69Hydrangea *Just now*

Roger Crowell is the Green River killer

The guy they caught was paid off to take the hit.

↑ 1 ↓  1

u/sir1589shelf

...interesting.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Trouble in paradise!

FYI The toxic internet culture here is partially a meta reference to what's happening in the HR fandom. I personally have not felt the brunt of what's being discussed on every platform, but feel the need to make it clear anyway: keep your negative opinions to yourselves. People make fanfic for fun, no one is paying for it, no reader is entitled to content.

I almost feel like I'm preaching to the choir because most of you have been good to me. Make sure you're also good to everyone else and stand up for us when you see shit on other platforms!

Chapter 20: Bad Meetings

Chapter Summary

Beginning of 2019-20 season. Shane meets with Montreal; Ilya meets with Scott and Kip (and Kyle, for some reason)

Chapter Notes

Chapter 20! I really can't believe it. I love you all, thank you for coming with me on this ill-advised whim. My last 25-chapter fic took 2 months to write and then I posted it over the course of 4 months. Here, I've been chucking chapters at you left and right, scrambling to keep up with my own plot lines. Blessedly I'm five chapters pre-written ahead of myself now but it's definitely a much different experience.

I hope we had fun with the social media nonsense because today we have no fun at all. It's just a timeline reveal, what could go wrong? Sorry in advance!

Let's make bad guys better and good guys worse, ok? Boring ones can stay boring.

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

No good can come from a meeting with Montreal team management two days before the season begins. Shane is prepared for the worst: Digital recorder in his pocket, brave face, prepared rebuttals that he's practiced in the shower all summer... actually, for years, really.

Shane spoke with Cooper Lee about this at length. They considered having him attend the meeting, too. But, Ilya and Hunter think management is going to expose themselves and admit to a plan. They won't do that if Shane's lawyer is present. Still, Mr. Lee walked him through his rights. He doesn't have to answer anything. He doesn't have to agree to anything. The words 'I'd need my lawyer present to answer that' are ready on his tongue.

As ready as you can be, you can still be *sad*. This team was supposed to be his family when he signed on as a teenager. Now they're getting ready to... well, he doesn't actually know.

The goal of the meeting wasn't disclosed but he can guess. Last time Shane spoke to Coach Theriault outside of practice was the phone call after Rivera came out. Shane was asked if there were gay people on the team and, by not answering, he confirmed a) there are gay people on the team and b) it's him. He's gay people on the team.

So Shane enters the tiny board room with some trepidation, some heartache, but he's ready.

Everyone is already there. The General Manager, the coaches, some faces he vaguely recognizes, is that the team legal counsel...? all on one side of the table in their suits, leaving one seat on the other side, like a tribunal.

Shane sits down, trying not to show his nerves. He eyes the man he thinks is the team's legal counsel from one mandatory workshop he led. "Should I have my lawyer here?"

The GM laughs. "No, you're fine. We're here because of a rumor— well, it's pretty substantiated... that you came out to your teammates last fall."

"I did."

"Great," The GM says, like he's checking off a box. "Good. We have some questions, and some suggestions."

"Ok... I'll answer what I can." Shane remembers Mr. Lee saying, '*You don't have to answer anything.*'

"Do you know if there are any others on the team?"

This is their first concern? Oof. "I can't say. Probably. It's one in ten, right?" Shane tries to smile.

"You can't say because you don't know? or because you've promised not to say?"

"Does it matter either way?" Shane reaches into his quiver of prepared sentences, "Why does it matter whether a player is gay?"

"Because—" A man, Shane recognizes him from Christmas parties but has no idea of his name or title, butts in, "It's a distraction from our team's accomplishments if someone were to, say, come out just after we win a cup."

Actually, this is the most logical argument Shane has heard thus far. It's still bullshit, and wrong, but at least it's not *because we don't want them*. "Sure." Shane says, "But do you know how many Rivera jerseys have been sold since the cup?"

"Any cup-winner is going to increase—"

"No." Shane cuts him off, "Just Rivera. A 230% increase in sales of that jersey, 120% increase in Wagner, while everyone else on the team saw a boost of about 70%." Ilya had Wagner ask about their numbers in case this would come in handy. Sure enough.

"Doesn't that show Rivera was a distraction? Shouldn't the whole team be seeing that increase?"

Shane sighs. "I think they will, when the numbers settle back down from cup hype. The fans love Washington's attitude toward Rivera and Wagner. A bunch of their players marched in the D.C. Pride parade, and this season's games will likely all be sold out."

"These non-hockey fans are going to be short lived, and burn out—"

“Why am I here?” This couldn’t be why they called Shane into this meeting. The men all look at each other and agree to move on.

“We’d like some... assurance.” The GM leans forward and looks slightly pained to say, “that you won’t be making the same mistake as Rivera and Wagner. And Baldwin.” The last name is said carefully, and even Shane can tell, it’s a threat. This cup thing is a career-killer.

Shane’s heart pounds. “Are you asking me if I’ll come out?”

“Well, yes. We’d like to know, if and when.”

The group has unofficially decided it would be common courtesy to tell the coaching staff at least before you come out. So far almost all of them have given management *some* warning. But Shane doesn’t even really know for *himself* if and when he’ll come out. He considers it seriously for a moment before answering. “I suppose if we win the cup. I’m sure you’ve heard of this tradition—”

“Yes. We’re now well aware. You won’t unless we win the cup?”

Shane’s mouth falls open as he draws that train of thought to its logical conclusion. “You wouldn’t...” His eyes dart between the men in front of him, and land on his coach, who has been silent thus far. “You wouldn’t throw the cup just so I don’t come out, right?”

The silence is damning, but the GM is the one who breaks it. “Goddamnit. *No*.” He says, almost to himself and the men around him, “I don’t care what— no. We would be able to make other arrangements for Shane fucking Hollander.” What the fuck does *that* mean? He continues, perturbed, “Anyway, are there any other circumstances in which you’d come out?”

Shane wracks his brain. “If I were, like, outed, I guess.”

The legal counsel raises his hand, “Which— if you need *any* protection from that happening, we can help you.”

He wants to laugh. Where was this offer years ago when Shane was buying a building just to have sex with his rival captain? Would they have paid for it? Shane briefly considers asking about the extent of this offer.

The silence goes on too long, and Coach Theriault speaks up. He looks tired and resigned. “Look. We built this team around you, you know. We don’t want to lose you over something this dumb. But all the teams are being asked to... crack down... on this stuff.” He seems annoyed, and not necessarily at Shane. He’s speaking more candidly than the others had. “So we just want to keep it to a minimum. Like we said, it’s not like we’re going to throw the cup over this or anything, we just... don’t want it to get out.”

Shane looks at this man who has been his commander for a decade, and sees he’s kind of pleading. It strikes Shane that they all might be walking a fine line, too. Coach probably only wants to see the team do well and all this “dumb stuff” is threatening to get in the way of that. That’s how Shane lived for years, so he understands. He acquiesces.

“Ok fine,” Shane sighs, “Here’s my honest answer. I don’t want to come out right now. I care too much about my career, and honestly, the consequences for the other players have been scary. I have— it doesn’t matter. I’m not about to go rogue.” The men in front of him look pleased with this answer. Shane remembers himself, “Unless we win a cup. I have an obligation.”

The other side of the room visibly deflates. “About that,” The GM says cautiously, “We’ve heard... and— this is ridiculous, by the way—” The room is more comfortable to be speaking honestly now, and Shane is grateful for that. Everyone has relaxed a bit. “We’ve heard you’re in charge of this... thing. Any truth to that?”

“I told the commissioner. No.”

“I know. He’s still convinced. I think I can speak for all of us when I say we don’t think so, because we know you.” *What is that supposed to mean?* “But who is it?”

Shane is caught off guard and actually laughs, “Uhh... no,” he shakes his head, unable to suppress his smile. Two of the men also smirk and Coach Theriault snorts.

“That’s what I figured. Worth a shot,” the GM smiles. He turns to the side, “Anything else? Are we done here?”

The counsel, for some reason, nods down while checking the paper in front of him. “That’s everything.”

“Great.” The GM says in the same bored tone, as if a checklist has been completed. “Then have a great season, make us proud.”

“Will do.”

Ilya is back at the Kingfisher, Hunter’s favorite bar in New York City. It’s the first week of the season, and Scott said he had something serious to discuss.

Why the Denim Demon is here is beyond Ilya’s imagination. Why he brought a legal pad and a laptop is even weirder.

Ilya sits down, perplexed. Kyle, the nice bartender from last time, brings a good beer over to the table. “Thank you, Kyle,” Ilya says sweetly. Kyle winks back. Kyle is kind of a flirt, huh.

Ilya glances between Kip and Scott, “What is happening here?”

Kip starts, which always elicits a groan from Ilya. “I’ve been talking to Gloria, Carter Vaughan’s girlfriend?”

“Very famous actress? Filming a movie with Rose Landry?” Ilya says bitterly.

Scott shakes his head, “God, chill out, man. It’s been like... years, right?” Kip furrows his brow in confusion, so Scott says “Rose Landry dated Shane Hollander,” to explain. Kip nods like that makes all the sense in the world.

That’s it. Ilya thinks he’s held off long enough, and this topic is making him want to stake his claim. He brings his hands up to the table to clasp them. Four eyes simultaneously shoot down.

A gold band decorates his ring finger. He’s been wearing it on his necklace in public, afraid to be caught by paparazzi with it on. But he likes to wear it on his hand when he can, and today was a deliberate choice. He heard Scott mocking him at the awards, like his monogamous life was so much different than Ilya’s, and he wants to show off.

He hasn’t told anyone. Well, Shane’s parents were their witnesses, and Hayden and Rose got called on the drive home from city hall. But Ilya has been weirdly excited to tell Scott Hunter, of all people. God, are they *friends* now?

Scott’s mouth hangs open. Kip is a little less speechless and leans forward to whisper through a smile, “You *didn’t*!”

Ilya couldn’t keep the grin off his face if he tried. “I did.”

Finally Scott can speak, “Ilya you— at the awards, like two months ago you...”

“Yes,” Ilya waves his hand dismissively, “I gave you no warning. So sorry.” Ilya could tell him that it was Scott’s words that inspired this gargantuan decision, but he chooses to remain an asshole for a little longer.

“You... are *married*. To another player.” Scott’s eyes are still wide.

“No.” Ilya rolls his eyes, “I am married to a smoothie salesman.”

Scott ignores the sass. “Ilya... what the fuck is Crowell going to say? Is this like... legal?” He cuts off Ilya’s smartass answer, “In *hockey*, idiot. How are people going to react? You have to know everyone’s going to have questions... and suspicions. I’ve said this to you before, I wasn’t kidding. The accusations are going to be insane. Plus— if you thought *me* coming out was a media circus, I can’t even imagine—”

“Hey.” Kip puts his hand over Scott’s to cut him off and turns to Ilya, “Congratulations.”

Ilya is stunned. He really thought Hunter, of all people, would have seen this coming and support the decision. “What should we have done?”

“Fuck, I don’t know? Was it for citizenship? You could have married anyone!”

“I could not have married anyone.” Ilya hopes his tone is conveying annoyance and not the deep disappointment that's settling in his stomach.

Scott stares into the distance. “I guess I didn't think it was serious. This wasn't like a whim decision? ...Oh my god, was it while we were in Vegas??” He snaps his gaze back to Ilya.

“No, Vegas has open records. Couldn't happen there,” Ilya says sourly, as if he hadn't had the same idea. “It is *very* serious. Why...” Ilya breathes a few times, surprised by how hurt he is, “Why do you think I did all of this? The group, this whole movement? Shane is scared, so we are making it less scary.”

The table is quiet. Scott stares at the far wall and Kip sighs a soft “oh.”

“Yeah, *oh*.” Ilya mocks like it was a dumb thing to say, but Kip has been nice. He tries to look apologetic, but moves on. “We know there will be... suspicions.” A horrible thought enters Ilya's head, “Do *you* have suspicions?”

Scott looks down at his drink. Well, that's a response in itself. Kip interjects, “Of course not!” When Scott doesn't join his enthusiasm, he turns to Scott, “What? Do you think they're going easy on each other or something?”

“Can you blame me?” Scott looks back at Ilya, “You're not exactly the most ethical dude, and you've shown you don't really care if the game is fair or not.”

Ilya's heart sinks. Of course. Those cheating accusations, the suspicions that they somehow help each other or even throw games for each other, that they're not at 100% every game... if the public found out about the relationship *and* discovered the... gentle nudge Ilya has been giving playoff fate... “I see.”

Fuck. So this is how his relationship will look to anyone on the outside of it. Nevermind the fact that they both play better against each other than anyone else. What is he supposed to do about that, though? Un-rig the 2018 cup? Shane was right from the very first night of this stupid endeavor: being gay is one thing, fucking your arch rival is another. *Marrying* your arch rival turns out to be some weird third thing.

“Look,” Scott says. “I think you're too much of an asshole to let Hollander win, under any circumstances. But if this is the goal— getting to be public about that relationship— I'll say cheating was probably not the best way to do it.”

Ilya swallows his response, that everything they did was legal, there was no cheating. But he feels scooped out. He's surprised how crushed he is at stupid Scott Hunter's reaction. What, is he looking for approval like Hunter is supposed to be his father? Or Grandfather? He thought Scott would be happy, congratulate him. Instead, Ilya is trying his hardest to not burst into tears because the first person to hear about his wedding is being so mean about it.

“Why am I here?” He asks coldly. He puts his hands back under the table and looks at Kip. He brought his stupid laptop and legal pad, might as well finish whatever this is.

Kip looks back and forth between them and chews his lip, thumbing at the closed laptop on the table in front of him. “I had a suggestion but...” He finally pins his gaze at Scott, telepathically trying to communicate. Ilya wants to tell him that doesn’t work, it takes a decade to get that to work, but Scott acts on it anyway.

“I’m sorry.” Scott sighs like a toddler made to apologize, “I know you... *probably* haven’t done anything like that when it comes to Hollander. Hell, he would have won more—” he cuts himself off and palms his face. “Ugh, *God*. Rozanov, he has two cups!” Scott tosses his head back in frustration and Kip elbows him. “Can anyone blame me for thinking maybe this wasn’t your first rodeo?”

Kip gives Scott a disbelieving look, “Scott. Babe. When were those?”

“I don’t know, like 2015 and 2016?”

“Ok. You’re implying Ilya liked Shane enough *four years ago* to rig the cup for him? They probably weren’t even—” Kip catches Ilya’s frantically shaking head in his periphery. “You were? ...ok Rozanov, you might be on your own.” Kip sits back.

Scott’s jaw drops, “2015??”

“I did not rig any cups to Shane’s advantage.” Ilya says clearly, not confirming or denying that year.

“Except this last one.”

Oh, god. Shane’s was one of the six teams Ilya gave the commissioner. “...Except this last one.” Ilya concedes.

“Ok. I have to ask, point blank, because right now it’s my *name* on this thing. When did it start? This... thing with Hollander?”

Ilya knows he doesn’t have to answer this. In fact, now more than ever he would rather not. If it looks like Shane’s entire successful career was handed to him by his degenerate, immoral husband, it could ruin his legacy. And Shane still wants his legacy to be hockey. It’s fucked up that Scott is even asking, and Ilya is resistant. He wants to deflect. He turns to Kip, “So do you save all of your gossip for when you are having sex? You say, ‘*you hear the neighbor is getting divorced?*’ and he comes all over the place?”

“Rude.” Kip rolls his eyes.

“No.” Scott doesn’t allow the distraction, “I need an answer, because if you two got together and all of the sudden Shane is winning cups and then— Jesus. *I* won a cup. You wanted me to win that. You planned that!”

Ilya’s heart races. The Admirals were favored to win in 2017; Ilya had no thumb on the scale at all. He wracks his brain for proof. “It could have been Lundin.”

“No, it couldn’t!” Scott looks frantic. “He had the same visa as you, you were never going to let L.A. win!”

“How could I—”

“Wait... 2014 *you* won the cup. Rozanov what...” Scott puts his head in his hands.

Ilya’s head is swimming. This is exactly what the public will see if they ever find out a *hint* of what’s going on here. Six times. Six years the cup has gone exactly the way Ilya wanted it to. At the time, when Shane had consecutive wins, Ilya wanted to die. Shane had won the last two cups his father lived to see. But now he wouldn’t trade the memories of his husband’s grinning young face on his television.

Even Kip is looking expectantly at him. What can he say? Even if he says they met in Juniors... their last two World Juniors Championships went to Russia and Canada. Fuck. Is it his fault he’s the second best hockey player in a generation, married to the best hockey player of all time?

Fuck it. If Scott Hunter, the first gay hockey player and Ilya’s current— ugh god, is this true? — *best friend* can’t understand this, no one on the planet will.

“Juniors,” Ilya says quietly, “End of 2008, we met. We hooked up 2010. Before we even entered the league.”

The statement is met with silence. Ilya stares down at his hands in his lap, twirling his new ring. This stupid ring that he should have kept a secret. Scott pulls out his phone and types for a second. “Jesus,” he whispers. Ilya doesn’t even need to look up to know, he just Googled the results of their two Juniors championships.

“Ok, no.” Kip pushes Scott’s hand down after looking over his shoulder. “You’re implying that a, what, 17-year-old kid rigged an international tournament. Twice. Once to advantage a guy he hadn’t even hooked up with yet?”

Scott is burning a hole through the table with his stare. It’s clear he’s not swayed by Kip’s skepticism. Finally he braces his forehead with one hand. “Ok. Look. I’m trying to convince myself that you probably didn’t influence every major milestone of both of your careers. For now, it doesn’t matter what I think.” Ilya is surprised by how much it *does* matter to him what Scott thinks. “What I *know* is that this can’t get out. You and Shane being together for, Christ — a fucking *decade*... isn’t going over well with anyone. Not just Crowell. Kavita Kingsley? People who know what you’ve been up to? They’re going to come for your head. And Shane’s. I don’t even— does he even know about this stuff?”

“Not about 2018, no.”

“God. I take back everything I said about you being a mastermind... it’s just so *dumb*, Ilya.” Ok, Ilya does actually feel like Scott is his father now, scolding him for misbehaving.

“I know.” Something occurs to Ilya, “But you *did* know, this whole time. A lot of people know. Kavita suspects. No one is asking any questions so far.”

Kip tilts his head at Scott, “He’s right. He moved to Ottawa.”

Scott shakes his head, “I guess I didn’t think it was serious. And if it’s not serious... You don’t rig a cup for your casual sex partner. You rig a cup for your husband, though. That’s for sure.” He fidgets his fingers, “I’ve umm... I’ve talked to some of the guys about you—the ones who knew already!” He clarifies quickly. “And I think everyone assumes it’s like a funny, occasional thing. I don’t think anyone— hell *I* didn’t even think you were the kind of person to like... catch feelings.”

Of course that’s what everyone thinks, because everyone sees him as the kind of flighty and irresponsible hedonist who only has sexual partners for fun, never settling down.

But how could they know about Shane and still think that? How could they think Ilya got to have Shane once and would ever let him go for good?

“Plus, if you’re saying you did all of *this* for him, then—”

“Ok. I get it. Why am I here?” Ilya is done with being reprimanded.

Kip seems to want to get off the subject now, too. He clicks his pen and leans forward, as if that serious conversation can just be forgotten. “Ok, like I was saying, I was talking to Gloria, and we think we can help. She was talking about some of the WAGs being super gross and racist to Carter, and some of them have been weird about me, too.”

“WAG army.” Ilya nods. He’s had the idea jotted down on a legal pad for ages. But, he knows Shane, Harris, and Yuna will kill him if he takes on another 50 people. The retired players list is still waiting on his desk, the Reddit twerps he employed are trying to overthrow their moderator, and he had to start a whole foundation just to be able to delegate the staff army to Yuna.

“Yes! And, weirdly enough, I already spoke to Shane—”

“You did?” Scott says before Ilya can, looking similarly perplexed by this.

“Yeah umm... We text a lot.” Kip looks nervous. “It’s a very... *particular* experience, being involved with one of you two, and he understands better than, like, Gloria.”

Scott and Ilya look at each other. For a moment, whatever animosity they built up dies away. They both giggle.

“What!” Kip demands. “It’s not like I can talk about it with just anyone!”

“You have mob wife support group!” Ilya says through his laugh.

“I’m not a mob wife!”

Scott snorts. “I’m sorry I can’t rig any cups for you, babe. My grand romantic gestures are gonna look so dumb now.”

“*Anyway...*” Kip says over their laughter, “I’m ready to head up the effort, if it’s ok with you.”

Ilya gets a little more serious, and considers the offer. “Ok, here is the problem.” He shifts his gaze between the two men. “I am careful with Shane, because he is another player. He gets no privileged information. I am not in your relationship, I don’t know what you share.”

It’s Scott’s turn to get defensive, “What are you talking about?”

“If Mr. Denim goes to all these WAGs and tells them something secret, they might tell their players... the whole thing is very messy if partners are involved.”

“Oh, so now you’re suspicious of other peoples’ relationships?”

“I will say it one more time and if it comes up again, I will leave. I have never cheated to benefit Shane.”

“Except this last cup.”

Fuck. “...Except this last cup.” Ilya hates this. “I haven’t cheated for you, or for me—”

“Except this last cup.”

“Fuck. Ok, *except this last cup*. God. Anyway. If someone is going to have access to that list, and be in charge of that group, it can not be someone with privileged information.”

“You could get someone from the outside to run it.” A voice says from a few feet away. Kyle is leaning against the closest table.

“What the fuck, Kyle?” Ilya says angrily but looks at Scott. He’s always sworn to Ilya that this place is secure, that they can speak candidly here.

“He’s fine.” Kip says looking apologetically at Ilya. “Kyle, when you start dating professional hockey players, we can talk.”

Kyle eyes Ilya up and down suggestively, but Ilya holds up his hand with the ring, and Kyle gets visibly annoyed. That’s a handy trick.

“Stupid men with wedding rings...” Kyle mutters under his breath.

Ilya takes pity on the poor boy and looks back at Scott. It’s a gamble, but he’s pretty sure he’s right. Scott hasn’t been asking about the backup Admiral, and it can only mean that the man came out to his closest friend. “I wish we knew a single bisexual hockey player in New York.”

Kip’s eyes light up, looking like Scott with gossip, or like when Ilya told him he was playing matchmaker. These two are meant for each other, it’s disgusting.

Scott ignores them, still acting annoyed from the evening’s revelations, and turns to Kip. “Besides, what is a WAG army even going to do?”

“Could come in handy.” Ilya says, suddenly fully behind the idea, maybe *because* Scott doesn’t like it. “I collect groups. They might be useful someday.”

Scott opens and closes his mouth, and Ilya can see his wheels turning. Whether he likes it or not, Ilya and Kip pore over lists and strategies for the rest of the evening while Scott quietly sulks.

On the way back to the hotel, with his ring firmly back on his mother's chain, Ilya sends a text:

Ilya: would you be surprised to learn I got married? Hunter thought it was “not that serious” and freaked out.

#7: No. Scott Hunter is a moron.

#7: Congratulations bro!

#7: glad you crazy kids figured it out.

Would that have been so hard for Scott Hunter to say?

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Fall 2019 and All-Stars Weekend 2020

Just #7 today and we already knew him (and knew he would totally 100% think Scott Hunter is stupid). [edit: Ahhhh ok more info because it's been a while and the people are confused! He's the NJ guy (he actually even has a name, Vinny Marcello) who is one of the ones who knows about hollanov (from the hotel room Shane walked into angrily). Trust if someone's identity actually matters I will give you more than this always!]

edit: Sorry! Someone had to point all this out to Ilya, and it would have been a LOT worse if it wasn't Scott...

Chapter 21: Excellence in Noncompliance, Ill-Timing, or Scandal

Chapter Summary

Fall 2019 and All-Stars Weekend 2020

Chapter Notes

This picks up with Scott's POV directly following... whatever that was. Does anyone even want to HEAR Scott's side?? (spoiler: it probably won't change your mind)

Book gays are back on the menu, kids!

And I'm adding the Happily Ever After tag so you feel safe staying with me after that clusterfuck chapter, but I think that's the most emotional angst I'll put you through.

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

Scott is really fucking sorry.

He doesn't need Kip to chew him out the entire ride home to know that. He does need to hear the big one from Kip, though.

"You didn't even congratulate him!"

"Yes I did!" Scott snaps back. "...I did, right?" Kip gives him a Look. "Fuck. Maybe I didn't. I was distracted by the *dumbest thing I've ever heard in my life*."

That's not an exaggeration.

When Scott first found out about Hollander and Rozanov in 2017, it was funny and ridiculous. The two superstars of the league, boning right under everyone's noses? Awesome.

Then six months later at the MLH awards he saw them together for the first time. It was, as he put it at the time, not subtle. He can't believe he didn't see it before, the chemistry they have. The way Shane barged into the room like he owned the place, presumably to get plowed, and accidentally cooked their goose. Seeing them together, they seemed like they were having so much *fun*. It felt like two best friends with an inside joke, and everyone else in the room was on the outside. Scott and Baldwin had looked at each other in disbelief as Shane pulled Ilya's hair out of annoyance, like a sibling might.

So no, Scott didn't know they were more than good friends— probably best friends, who fucked around occasionally. He didn't even think twice when Ilya moved to Ottawa. Ok... in retrospect, Scott definitely should have seen this coming.

But he looks at Kip's circle of queer friends and *everyone* has slept with each other. Kip has even kissed his friend Kyle. That's just how some people are. It makes sense for Hollander and Rozanov, who both have to be so closeted, to fuck when they can. At some point in there they realized they could tolerate each other and became besties. It makes sense.

They started the foundation together! Why would they do that if they were in a serious relationship? Wouldn't that just signal to the public that they're more than friends?

At All-Stars last year, Scott watched as Shane successfully picked up a straight man. Sure, nothing happened, and it was part of a weird challenge Vinny Marcello had initiated, but that's not something monogamous partners do all the time. He knows that's not something that he or Kip would do. Hell, it was weird that Shane Hollander did it, single or not.

But Scott knows Ilya pretty well by now. They're good friends (obviously not as good of friends as Shane and Ilya). He knows Ilya was probably on the edge of his seat as Shane got further and further in the 2019 playoffs. What if Shane won the cup and came out, leaving Ilya behind? What if Ilya wanted to be the one he was kissing on the ice in front of everyone? In that moment, Scott realized what was happening, and he felt fucking proud of himself for it, because Scott doesn't often put things together quickly. As evidenced.

Ilya is in love with Shane. Ilya might not even know it yet.

So at this year's awards, Scott asked very clearly if they were monogamous. Despite what Ilya might say, it wasn't just for the love of gossip. He was genuinely curious if this is something they've addressed. The way Ilya was gazing at the man made it seem like they hadn't seen each other in forever and he missed him, so yeah, Scott asked. And Ilya gave him junk answers. Scott opened up, offered some of himself, and Ilya shot him down. The man is a menace, and it's frustrating to be around. He's supposed to believe Shane Hollander puts up with that?

He told Ilya the first time he saw them together— between the media circus, the speculation... it's best to leave this bad idea alone. As coded as he could in front of a bunch of guys who didn't know about the two superstars, Scott tried to warn him.

But then Ilya Rozanov walked into the Kingfisher *married* and all of these realizations hit at the same time. They aren't just hooking up. They aren't even just dating. Ilya's plan this entire time has been to benefit Shane Hollander. Does he even know how bad that looks? Scott thought the responsible thing to do would be to tell him.

Personally, Scott talked himself out of the idea that Ilya has cheated for Hollander pretty quickly. Well... mostly. If Rozanov has no issues cheating, and admits he's organizing a pretty large-scale operation for Hollander— No. Rozanov couldn't have won those cups for Shane without the large group of influence he has now.

After the initial shock and the fleeting suspicions, Scott got *worried* for them, and tried to see this the way the public might. Because even if he knew Rozanov wouldn't (or couldn't) rig a tournament when he was 17, the public might not see it like that, especially if they learn he's the Ringleader. Scott starts worrying for poor Shane, who didn't ask for any of this.

Finally, Scott found himself being petty for no reason, moping while Ilya and Kip (and Kyle, for some reason) planned the WAG army. He had been looking at Ilya all night, recently married and thrilled about it. Ilya knew Scott had been planning a proposal for months. Now? Kip is going to think they're doing this just because of Hollander and Rozanov. This little shit had stolen his thunder. To make Scott's mood worse, they started recounting this... *dynasty* that Shane and Ilya have created. Six cups in a row went exactly the way Ilya wanted. Every major award he could possibly win.... Ilya really has gotten every single thing he's ever wanted in his career, even the husband. So yes, Scott freaked out, and he can admit it now. He was jealous.

The night after their conversation, NY plays Ottawa. Scott means to congratulate Ilya, earnestly, as soon as they're on the ice together. But some wires get crossed, Rozanov takes offense, and suddenly gloves are being dropped. The fight is messy, much to the glee of everyone in Scott's cell phone when the game ends. Scott reads his texts with an icepack against a fresh black eye.

"Daddy vs. Daddy: who will out-dad?"

"Do you fight anyone who isn't in that relationship?"

"I can't tell which one of you is doing the hate crime"

"Roger Crowell jerking off right now."

"Did he hit on Kip or something?"

"Refs honestly look like they wouldn't mind if you killed each other"

"On one hand I'm rooting for mutual destruction, on the other please don't break your faces, they are both too beautiful."

"If this is leftover beef from Bingo last night, let's leave that off the ice, grandpas."

Seems like everyone but Ilya has something to say. Scott knows he messed up for the second time in as many days, so he reaches out.

Scott: I'm really sorry. I did just mean congratulations, I'm sorry if it came out sarcastic or something. Let me know if you need anything, I know you're slammed on a road trip this week.

Rozanov: thanks.

Scott feels like he deserves that. He continues to try all week, texting Ilya whenever he thinks about him, which is often. The guilt that bloomed in his gut is eating him alive. Kip asks Shane what to do, and Shane must have said something because Scott gets a text.

Rozanov: Shane tells me your grandson/lover is asking about me?

Rozanov: please remind him that I am married now

Scott breathes a sigh of relief. If Ilya is chirping at him, things are back to normal. Maybe.

In November, Scott proposes to Kip. He immediately tells Kip this was the plan *before* Ilya walked into the bar married, and actually he thinks Ilya got married *because*— Kip doesn't want to hear that. He cuts him off to say yes.

They throw a pretty successful engagement party and tell Eric Bennett to take the damn wedding ring off *before* entering a gay bar as a single man, idiot. Eric came out to Scott at the end of the last season, just a few months after getting divorced, citing Rozanov's group as a large factor for him to feel safe to do so. Scott had some suspicions. Sure, Eric was in a 75-year marriage to a woman, but Scott isn't stupid.

Rozanov obviously can't make it to the engagement party in the middle of the season, but sends a large check to the Kingfisher that more than covers the cost. Scott figures this is his life now, trading olive branches with Ilya Rozanov back and forth. He feels distinctly like he's being one-upped.

Their dynamic is almost back to normal by the time Cooper Lee conference calls with both of them in December, probably not realizing the two men haven't actually spoken at length since dropping gloves on the ice.

"The commissioner wants to speak with the Ringleader." Cooper announces. Scott has been careful about commissioner correspondence going through Cooper since the cup, when he forgot to record the conversation.

"He has Shane's number, no?" Ilya jokes.

"How are we going to manage that?" Scott is a little more serious, because he's not a dick. "If you're calling, you're entertaining the idea."

"This is going to sound crazy," Cooper sounds hesitant, "But Scott, I think you should meet with him and call us while you're in the office. Relay the conversation. The commissioner already said he would be amenable to this solution."

"That's a literal game of telephone." Scott points out.

"I've thought about this a million ways. He wants to talk to Ilya, but we can't have him hearing Ilya's voice. It's obviously something he doesn't want in writing, because he would just email it, so I think you both would be very curious to know what he's going to say. But he's also including your lawyer, so it can't be that bad—" Mr. Lee has a tendency to verbalize his spiraling trains of lawyer-thought.

"We'll do it." Ilya cuts him off.

So that's why Scott is in Crowell's office with Cooper Lee and Rozanov on a conference call on his phone. He has the volume turned way down so Rozanov's Russian accent can't even be heard in a tinny whisper through the phone at his ear. They tried this a few times with Kip and you can't hear him if the volume is turned down this low. A recorder is running in Scott's

pocket and he's sure at least two— if not three— other people are recording this conversation.

After everyone is set up, Crowell leans forward so the phone can hear him. "You may notice I'm in a bit of hot water. The investigations— which I know you're behind— are interfering with my job." This is potentially true. Every day there's some news about how deep the trouble is getting for the commissioner. "Now I know you had a hand in 2018—"

"Don't confirm or deny that." Cooper's voice comes through the conference call into Scott's ear. Fucking obviously, Scott wants to bite back. He thinks he hears Rozanov growl it anyway.

"...And I know you gave me the wrong teams on purpose last season." Crowell continues. "I have reasons to believe you are on one of those teams, because you know my suspicions, Mr. Hollander."

"Don't confirm or deny that." Scott hears and keeps his face blank as possible. Man, he really was not cut out to be a spy.

"Won't look very good for you if you gave me the name of your team when you knew what I would do with it." Crowell tilts his head and smiles mischievously like they're both in on the same joke. It's slimy, and Scott's stomach turns. "...Allegedly."

"You can agree with that." Ilya's voice says when it becomes clear Crowell is waiting for him.

Scott nods and relays the message, "He agrees with that."

"And my hands are tied. I can barely have this meeting without an investigator present." Crowell looks disappointed. "So I won't be able to make any moves this season."

"What does he want?" Rozanov asks.

"I don't know!" Cooper responds.

"Ok..." The voices conversing in his ear are more than a little distracting, but Scott manages, "So what do you want?"

"Just a fair season." Crowell says simply. "No one tipping the scale."

"It is scummy. I don't like this," Rozanov says.

"He really can't do much with the heat on him though, he's right."

"He will find a way. The man is a ballsack."

Scott is silent for too long.

"If," Crowell continues, "You agree no one comes out at the cup."

"Ok, agree." Ilya says immediately, almost sarcastically, like it was an asinine suggestion. Scott knows it's a bald-faced lie. Cooper must know that, too, but he's quiet. Surely their lawyer will have an issue with him lying to the commissioner.

Scott looks down to indicate he's talking to his phone and asks "Mr. Lee?"

"Nothing is in writing, and the group doesn't physically control anyone's actions... I don't see why you couldn't agree to this. On the other hand, he just admitted he has no leverage at all, he can't rig anything no matter what you say."

"Hunter, just agree."

Scott takes a big breath. "Ok, he agrees."

"Great. A fair season." Crowell looks happy, "and, if I get the chance, I'll help you out as a thank-you."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Cooper blurts out, and Scott almost laughs. He's rarely that unprofessional.

"All three of us are recording, yes?"

"He still thinks it's Shane Hollander."

"Are you going to accuse me of this cup too, Hunter?"

Scott can't help but be annoyed at the last jab. "God, will you stop it with this already? I said I was sorry."

Crowell smiles. "Trouble in paradise?" He whispers, almost mouthing the words

"What? No." Scott immediately snaps.

"No what?"

"What did he say?"

"I'm— nothing." Scott can explain that later, because it seems like the recording might have picked it up and his head is swimming in the two separate conversations. He doesn't like how Crowell is smiling at him like they have a secret. Scott wishes now more than ever he had less of a moral compass. Someone else— Marcello or Rozanov or Melnyk— would have used this as an opportunity to wink at Crowell and try to play double agent when they hang up. Scott just doesn't have it in him.

"Ok. So we have assurance he will not mess with gameplay this year?"

Scott relays this question, "He's asking to confirm you won't be messing with the gameplay this year."

Crowell scoffs, "I don't have a choice. It's not up to me. These guys are up my asshole." He looks somewhat disgusted at Scott, "not... *literally*, obviously."

Ilya laughs so loud Scott is worried Crowell might be able to hear him.

By the time 2020 rolls around, Ilya is desperate to be around people who know him. All season he's been working on getting a member on every team. Between the new rookies and some trades, two of which he helped inspire, he has all but 3 teams. He sets up a meeting with his queer court over the All-Star weekend. This time, only 8 guys are there, but it's enough to have a little gathering in his hotel room with copious alcohol. Everyone has been engaged in the standard discussions of their closeted lives, and Rivera looks confused.

"I get why everyone is still hesitant, but it really is better to be out," Rivera comments for the 15th time tonight.

Shane is frustrated enough to roll his eyes, "So you just *like* getting beaten up on the ice?" This poor kid idolizes Shane and always says the wrong thing in front of him.

But it's true, players have been really rough with Wagner and Rivera since they came out. At least this year, the refs are calling the aggressive behavior and the ally army is larger and retaliating against the perpetrators. Rivera will argue that the benefits outweigh the prejudicial beatings, but it's still enough to scare some of the guys. Shane included.

The season is shaping up to be really good for Montreal, and Shane is actually taking the cup pact seriously. He has accepted the idea that he'll come out if he wins the cup. The reality of that has been settling in gradually, and he's on edge. Ilya wants to tell him it's ok, #13 can come out instead, he doesn't need to do anything. But Shane has decided on it, and when he decides on something, it's final. In Shane's mind, Montreal has already won the cup and he'll be coming out.

From what everyone can tell, the commissioner has kept his word and there's no rigging scandal to be seen this season. This makes Ilya feel even worse because Shane's team really might win. Their first cup married and it'll go to Shane. This will look just great to Scott fucking Hunter, and by proxy, whatever history books will include this very strange branch of hockey history. Especially after the commissioner's weird comment about "helping" the Ringleader if he can.

But right now, Ilya can see this is going to go from a fun evening to Shane maybe decapitating a kid for hitting too close to home.

Ilya interrupts the negativity and changes the subject for Rivera, "But you have men dripping off of you, yes? Anyone good?" He almost hates to ask. He saw the way Rivera and #13 barely looked at each other when he tried to get them together at the MLH awards. That was the chance, and they missed it. So no, Ilya doesn't really want to hear about Rivera's Deluge of Men but here we are.

Rivera blushes at the question. This kid has such a crush on him. "No, no one." Ilya wants to clarify it wasn't an *offer* but the conversation moves on. A few other guys press him for answers. Everyone knows Rivvy had a full slut summer after coming out. Rivera's face gets redder than Ilya thinks is healthy, so he puts an end to it, directing the group to just play games instead.

‘Never Have I Ever’ fizzles out after just one round when #12 posits “Never have I ever hooked up with a celebrity,” (easy when, until last year, you’ve been married to the same woman since your birth in 1922), and everyone in the room admits they have. Now, the circle is simply going around trading those stories. Luckily they’re all pretty good about respecting privacy, so when someone says “they’re not out, I really shouldn’t,” everyone moves on, even if it’s not stopping most of them from spilling the beans anyway. Ilya is mostly proud of his guys.

Shane blushes when the circle gets to him and shakes his head “I really shouldn’t... It’s not even that big of a celebrity,” he says with a distant grin that Ilya wants to bite. Shane knows what he’s doing. He looks faux-innocent, expectantly gazing at the next person.

Scott smiles. “Well that’s just not true.” Shane’s face goes completely blank with horror, and Ilya wonders for the third time this season what it would be like to hit Scott Hunter. Scott looks around like he’s wondering why no one is agreeing with him. In the room, only he and #7 know about Shane and Ilya. Is he drunk?

“Gossip king has gossip, what a surprise.” Someone says mockingly.

“We really shouldn’t if Hollander doesn’t want to.” Rivera says quietly. This kid is such a suck up.

“I agree.” Ilya grits out pointedly, staring daggers into Scott.

“I mean it’s not really a secret right?” Scott’s grin is evil. What is he doing? “You never had sex with her? You dated Rose Landry for like, months.”

The sigh of relief emanating from Ilya probably would give something away but he wouldn’t be able to stop it if he tried. Shane is just deep-breathing with his eyes closed as proclamations of understanding fill the room. “Seriously Hunter?” Shane finally says. Scott just shrugs, still smiling.

Ilya tells two stories to make up for Rivera’s chaste “I’m not doing this,” and is rewarded with angry-jealous Shane eyebrows. Shane’s just having a bad night.

The circle gets around to #16 who says “I have the best one. By far.” He smiles in a preemptive gloat, “Adrian Dela Cruz. For like a week two months ago.” Ilya’s heart sinks. Troy Barrett’s boyfriend? Everyone is shocked. The very famous actor isn’t even out. #16 continues, “Not anymore though, he has a boyfriend now. It’s actually the *director of his next movie*.” He lowers his voice for that, like it’s a secret. Like he didn’t just spill more secrets than he even knows.

Ilya’s breath catches. He would text any of his other guys in a heartbeat, but Barrett turned down the group. But... he *was* helpful with Shane’s detective work and Harris said he answered some other questions for them when they were working on the infographics for RogueMLH... fuck Ilya’s stupid soft spot for assholes who don’t deserve it.

Ilya: did something happen with your boy?

Barrett: no? wdyam?

Ilya: you are in a monogamous relationship?

Barrett: yes?

Barrett: what is this.

The problem is that Barrett is still an asshole, and Ilya doesn't know if he should be exchanging privileged information with someone who isn't a member of his tribe. He can't tell Barrett he knows for a fact their relationship is not monogamous, because if Barrett went off and confronted Adrian, he might spill the name of #16. Members of the army come first.

Ilya isn't his friend, he doesn't owe him anything. But it also wouldn't cost Barrett anything to just make the cup deal as so many others have. Maybe just this much will sow some seeds of doubt in Barrett's head? He's here in the same hotel. Maybe he would come up to this party if Ilya asked. But no, bringing someone like Barrett into this room, even if he had made the cup bet, would ruin the vibe for everyone else here. Not to mention out 5 people.

The circle pays no mind to Ilya's internal panic. If Shane notices, he doesn't say anything.

Ilya resurfaces from his thought-cavern to Scott saying, "It's been a year since Ryan Price came out?" He shows #12— his *actual* best friend, Ilya reminds himself— his phone screen with some sort of timeline throwback.

"We turned DICKCOMA into an annual tradition after the awards," someone remarks, "... and didn't Lavelle come out after retiring at the end of the summer like Lundin did?" It's true, Ilya's #28 retired at the end of last season and, three months later, started flaunting a boyfriend on social media in an eerie echo of Lundin the year before.

Scott grins, "Is it annual tradition time?" Ilya smiles with him. For all his stupidity, he and Scott really are on the same wavelength sometimes.

"The PENIS!" #7 exclaims, louder than is wise. "The Price award for Excellence in Noncompliance, Ill-Timing, or Scandal. Anyone who comes out during the regular season wins the PENIS."

"Oh my fucking god..." Shane mumbles. Scott rubs a hand down his face.

Ilya considers the opportunity to get another out player. He looks at Scott and says quietly, "Technically, it is not someone coming out at the cup. We are not liars yet." Scott smiles with a shaking head, and shrugs to signal his permission. Ilya smiles back. "Ok. Who wants to win the 2020 PENIS?" Not really expecting anyone to—

"I can." #12 raises his hand. "I already told my team, but I'm making another announcement after this weekend anyway. I can just tack it on at the end. Probably won't use PENIS though."

“Are you finally retiring?”

“I thought you’d die in the goal.”

“Why not wait until next year when you’ll be 100?”

#12 is a good sport about the jokes and lets the guys have fun thinking of dumb potential acronyms. They argue for so long that by the end, #12 doesn’t even really know what he’s posting.

Ilya breathes easier. If Shane wins the cup, at least someone else will have come out this year. It takes some pressure off him to do it.

@Eric_Bennett_Goalie

[Eric smiling with Scott Hunter at the Kingfisher, small rainbow flags visible behind them.]

An official statement will follow next week, but I wanted to be the first to let you know: This is my last season. Thank you to a great team for a great career.

It is customary now for our circus to make this simultaneous announcement: I am #12 and am honored to follow Ryan Price and accept the 2nd annual Completely Unplanned Midseason Sexuality Launch and Unveiling Trophy. The Admirals will win the cup this year, and I’ve been assured this still counts if we do. 🏳️🌈🏳️🌈🏳️🌈

RASHYCOCK + DICKCOMA + Roz group chat

Bennett: Really? CUMSLUT????

Bennett: You guys let me post this???

Chapter End Notes

Bennnnnyyyy!!!

For your spreadsheets:

#7 : Thought of PENIS

#12: Eric Bennett! And he's out now! ☺ But retiring soon 😞 (featuring some slight canon divergence I'm attributing to the butterfly effect)

#16: Hooked up with Adrian Dela Cruz 😞

#28: Named Lavelle, retired Spring 2019, came out at the end of the summer

Coming up: Spring 2020. You might have noticed I haven't strayed from canon winners of the cup (except 2018, which I had to make up). Next chapter is a weird one that is solely #13(Melnyk)'s POV of this whole thing. It's OC-heavy but I promise it's relevant to the larger plot and *very* worth it. Like, does any of this matter to rookies who started

in the league after the group was formed? Are their lives going to be better as a result of all of this? Does Ilya's matchmaking service actually work? etc. Shoutout to everyone on Tumblr who supported me when I announced I accidentally wrote a chapter's worth of Melnyk lore.

I am going to be even worse about not responding to comments this weekend, but I love all of you so much!!

Chapter 22: Melnyk

Chapter Summary

2016-2020 in the life of #13 (Melnik)

Chapter Notes

If you hate OCs, I *think* I've made it so you can skip this chapter and be fine plot-wise. That said, people seem to like this one.

This was supposed to be like 1-2 scenes or maybe a half chapter for context before he becomes plot-important, but I went a little overboard by accident. So now we have a chapter of Melnyk's lore, with his experience of this whole operation from the beginning.

Some things we already know about this guy: He is #13 which means he was taken on as the first rookie after Ilya decided to make this a Thing (only #12 Eric Bennett was earlier in the 2017-8 season). He's a defenseman, traded to Montreal pretty early in his first season in 2017. Ilya once described him as “a loose cannon with zero moral qualms” and, most famously, Ilya wants to set him up with #14 Mateo Rivera.

This also turned out to be the longest chapter so far but oh well, it's mostly for me.

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

Summer 2016

Danny Melnyk has always been a confident person, and he has always been confident about this one idea: There *have* to be other gay hockey players. There are 15 queer people in his high school, and they're all super popular. His parents keep talking about how it's a plague getting worse. Danny knows that should scare him, but all he can hear is: it's spreading. There will be more people like him soon.

Rationally, it just makes sense. There's no way among the thousands of hockey players on this continent, he's the only one. But, for some reason, no one admits to it. He doesn't even know what would happen if they did. Nothing good, probably.

He can't relate to guys in the locker room being so obsessed with girls, and he hates being asked about them, so Danny is an asshole. If no one wants to get to know him, no one asks about girls or sex. It's also easy being an asshole to people who constantly make fun of

people like you. A few years ago, he got really good at quick insults, chirping his opponents on the ice relentlessly. He has a way of pinpointing someone's weakness and poking at it. Guys find it funny because the guys are all assholes. So on every team he's ever played for, Danny is the funny, mean, loud asshole, always good for a joke at someone's expense. King of the locker room assholes.

The moment he gets scouted and stops needing his parents to pay for his travel hockey at 17 years old, he cuts ties with them. He starts living with a billet family with his team three hours away. They let him stay for the off season, too. In order to pay for his own cell phone, Danny gets a job at the recreational rink in town.

That's where his truth is confirmed: There *are* other gay players. Or, there's one. Danny is getting some alone time on the ice before closing when it happens.

He's content to practice shooting at the net for accuracy, even though as a defenseman, there's not really much of that in his future, but there are only so many things you can practice solo. He doesn't think there's anyone else in the building until he hears a door close and another kid skates onto the ice. He's about the same age as Danny and looks like he also plays hockey. The kid shoots at the other goal for a few minutes before skating up behind Danny, startling him.

"Would you mind receiving some passes? I'm trying something and I can't really do it on my own."

"No. Fuck off." Danny doesn't look away from the goal. He had been looking forward to quiet ice time where he didn't feel the need to be "on".

"Asshole! Come on, you're clearly not ever going to shoot on goal anyway, why are you even working that?"

"I could be a forward, how do you know?" Danny says defensively. Fuck this guy.

The kid has the audacity to snort at Danny. "With *that* shot? You're more likely to be a goalie. Or... sorry for assuming you even play at all." Danny glances at the kid's smirk, then down his own body to make sure he's wearing his team sweatshirt.

"At least I'm not the one who came out here by himself to practice passing."

The kid gives Danny a cute head-tilt, "Look, I'd be happy just to skate laps, but you could probably use passing practice, too. I'm opportunistic."

Danny chokes back the dick pun he was about to make on that word. For some reason he wants this kid to think he's cool, and that wouldn't have been his best work. "Fine." Truth be told, they're both better off practicing together and Danny feels himself giving in no matter what.

This kid is hot. He looks like he belongs in a boy band, not a hockey rink. And Danny is too young to know you're supposed to look away when you find someone inappropriately attractive, so he stares. The guy definitely notices.

They drill passes until Danny is sore. The kid is really good, and Danny is simultaneously trying to soak up the experience of playing with someone so skilled, and having more fun than he's had playing in a while. This guy doesn't seem like he's getting tired at all, so Danny keeps going. It's only when his elbow twinges from an old injury that he calls it. They awkwardly pull off the ice at the same time and, more awkwardly still, after changing out of their skates, walk out of the rink at the same time, Danny locking the door behind him.

The kid asks where he parked and Danny bashfully tells him he took the bus. What is he supposed to say? *Even if my parents weren't barely making ends meet, they don't want to give a car to their faggy son anyway? My hourly wage here just barely pays my cell phone bill?*

He offers to give Danny a ride home without even asking where he lives and *that's* when Danny starts suspecting... There's a non-zero chance this kid likes boys.

On the way, Danny's stomach growls and they pull into a McDonald's. The kid only gets fries at the drive-thru and then parks so they can eat.

"Did you even eat dinner?" Danny eyes the fries in the kid's hand.

"No, but McDonald's is so unhealthy. I'm on this macrobiotic diet that Shane Hollander's on."

"How do you know what diet Shane Hollander is on?"

"Fuck off, he talks about it in interviews all the time."

"And *McDonald's fries* are on that diet?"

"I had to get something!" The boy exclaims, "I'm not going to sit here and watch you eat a burger." Danny realizes how weird it is that they're strangers sitting in this parked car to begin with.

They sit there for a while, long after they're done eating, talking about their favorite professional players, then their favorite peers. The kid billets with a family two hours away, he's just home for the summer. They know a lot of the same guys, it turns out.

Danny tries to sneak in a hint, "Oh my god Henderson is the *worst*, he only wants to talk about his roommate." He has a suspicion about Henderson and his best friend/roommate. The kid laughs. Ok, maybe he never picked up on the same vibe from Henderson.

"I'd rather hear about that than listen to like... Bonavi. The problem with Bonavi is that he always wants to talk about girls. I don't even think he talks about hockey, just cunnilingus. All the time." The kid says through another laugh.

Danny laughs too but a storm is raging in his head. He has to just ask, and this is his chance. He blurts out, "You like them?" Fuck, this was a weird way to phrase it. "Girls?"

The guy looks at him like he's making a decision, how much he should say, and just from the look, Danny can tell what the answer is. His stomach does a gleeful backflip.

“No. I don’t think I do.” The kid says and breathes twice. “I tried, like once. I didn’t like it.”

Danny smiles because he can’t hold it back. “Me either.” His heart is racing.

The kid looks so nervous, and opens his mouth a few times before he clarifies, “Like, I think just watching Ilya Rozanov play did more for me than that one time with a girl.”

Danny laughs and it lets some of his frantic nervous energy out. “Ew,” he teases but there’s no heart to it. “Ilya Rozanov is so old.” Even for an 80-year-old, Rozanov is damn good looking, and Danny can say that because people have said he looks like an uglier Ilya Rozanov. This very hot boy just told him he likes guys, that he likes hockey players, that he likes specifically guys who look kind of like Danny....

He can’t even reciprocate by mentioning a hockey player that looks like this kid because he’s hardly ever seen one. First, because there are only a handful of non-white players. Would it be racist to mention one of them now? It doesn’t matter, he doesn’t know if there’s any player as attractive as this guy. Shane Hollander, maybe? Must be the diet. Danny could put his foot in his mouth fifteen different ways right now, but makes a better decision.

In a manner that could later be called reckless, Danny leans in. The guy whispers a shaky “oh thank god” to himself before meeting Danny halfway.

Making out with a boy is officially the coolest thing Danny has ever done. His entire body responds to it, and before long they’re groping at each other's pants.

Danny immediately wants to make plans to do this again but realizes with some horror that he’s an actual slut who never even got this kid’s name. Bashfully, he tries to remedy that. “What’s your name? I’m Danny... Melnyk.” He adds the last name in case this kid wants to be like normal hockey players and use it, even after they’ve swapped spit.

The kid gives him a high-pitched laugh, like he just remembered they never introduced themselves, too. “Mateo.” He adds his last name in the same way. “Rivera.”

That summer, Mateo and Danny try everything together. They form preferences, which luckily align with each other’s, and by the second or third week, Danny is convinced his preference is just... whatever Mateo wants.

And it’s Mateo. Never Mat or Matty or, god forbid, Rivvy, like his teammates want to make happen. Danny learns through trial-and-error, not just because he was introduced as Mateo, but if Danny says Mat in bed (or in car or in alleyway or in locker room), it doesn’t earn the reaction *Mateo* does. “Rivvy” gets him hit. Mateo is proud of his family and his heritage, so he likes his name.

When the 2016 MLH draft comes up that summer, Danny doesn’t have to actually be present for it, so he doesn’t make the trip. He’ll be drafted, but not high up enough to make the broadcast. He’ll probably be put on a farm team, lucky if he plays in a professional game. He

halfway hopes his drafting team might want to see him go collegiate first so he can have a backup plan for when hockey inevitably ends for him.

Danny is lucky to be chosen at the end of the second round, and go to the Brooklyn Scouts. They don't want him yet, so he'll stay on the junior team roster another year. At least.

But Mateo is a legit prospect. He actually travels to the draft in Toronto. He goes #24 overall to Washington. He's also waiting at least a year to play in the league, but his team is actually excited for him.

The summer is great, but then Mateo goes back to his team two hours away. They make some weekend trips and text constantly but only see each other occasionally until the championships.

December 2016

They're both on the USA team at the World Juniors Championship. Danny loves having Mateo as a teammate. They're pretty much best friends, though they've never said that. And they're pretty much boyfriends, though they've never said that, either. The team just knows they move as a unit. When one is invited somewhere, the other goes, too. They don't seem like they have much in common, but no one really questions it. Danny's abrasive behavior means Mateo isn't bullied in the locker room for being shy or awkward. Mateo's hockey skills make Danny seem better by association.

Mateo gets injured the last day of practice before games actually begin, so he's not actually in the championship, but he still hangs out. Danny plays better in that tournament than he ever has in his life.

After the new year, Danny gets an apartment with his signing bonus from Brooklyn. They're not even quite 19 yet, but Mateo stays there a lot, sometimes commuting 90 minutes daily to his team practices and games.

There are probably reasons they shouldn't be doing this, but, like the relationship itself, they never talk about it. At some point, one or both of their teams will call them up. Or they'll be sent to a different junior team. Or Mateo will realize this is dumb. Or they both will— It *is* dumb. There aren't any out professional players, that just doesn't happen. Danny isn't a good player, and he's sure any team would probably drop him if they found out he was gay. There has to be a reason no one is out. When he's at practice, among all the locker room insults, he understands why they have to be a secret. But when he goes with Mateo to concerts or pride parades, it makes no sense. They hold hands and kiss and no one fucking cares. But god forbid you tell a teammate you do that? It makes no sense.

June 2017

They sit on Danny's couch, watching the Admirals take the 2017 cup. The game is over, now is just the boring family part, but Mateo wants to watch it anyway. Danny is trying his best to distract him but keeps getting shoved off. He finally manages to get a hand on Mateo's crotch and is fortified hearing "Holy shit..." so he tries to straddle Mateo's lap but gets shoved again, "No, dipshit, look!"

Scott Hunter is making out with a man on television. *Holy shit.*

Maybe this homophobic locker room culture is just in the junior leagues, maybe the MLH is more adult about this kind of thing. Danny is struck by excitement, and then fear. He never really saw a future with Mateo before, never let himself even think about it. But this tiny modicum of hope, this possibility, makes it impossible to think about anything else. They could actually *be* something. *Holy shit.*

September 2017

They can't be something if they're hours apart. Both of their MLH teams tell them to prepare to be on the roster this season. Danny is surprised, but it makes sense. He did really well in the last juniors tournament. He's sure he'll be lucky to see 15 minutes on the ice this season, but playing for a professional team has been his dream since he was a kid.

Brooklyn is four hours away from Washington, D.C. They're in the same division, and they're as close as two teams in different cities could be, but it's still double the distance they're used to. Danny and Mateo make the adult decision.

There's no way to keep up a relationship— or whatever they have— long distance. They fight during the last few days they have together about whether they'll still hook up, or whether they can be friends, or how tolerant the league actually is, or whether they'll safely be able to find anyone else if they're celebrities now, but none of it matters. At the end of the summer they are ripped apart.

October 2017

Boston comes to Brooklyn for the home opener, and Danny actually plays 3 minutes in the game. He does a decent job in his first game, for a mediocre rookie, so the guys take him out to a bar. He's definitely not supposed to be here and drinking at 19 but no one is carding him, and his heartbreak is really only a few weeks old. He hasn't heard from Mateo in 18 days. He'll definitely be drinking tonight.

At the bar, he almost drops his beer. *Ilya Rozanov* is here, and he's approaching Danny. Is it completely fucked if his first thought is about Mateo, and their first conversation, their first date, when he used Rozanov's name to tell Danny he liked men?

"Good game, rookie." Rozanov holds out a hand that Danny reflexively takes.

"Holy shit, you're Ilya Rozanov." It's not the most eloquent thing he's ever said. By now, he has learned you don't stare at attractive men, so he takes a sip of his beer to avoid letting his eyes follow the chain on Rozanov's neck, dipping below his shirt.

Rozanov laughs, "You have played three periods against me. Or maybe, what, two minutes at least." He grows a wicked grin at the jab. "You can be cooler than that."

"Of— of course. Yeah. Sorry." This is so surreal. Danny knows they agreed to give each other space, but he wants to text Mateo so badly, it feels like his phone is burning through his pocket.

"Anyway." Rozanov glances around and eyes Danny's team far away from them, then his own friends on the other side of the room. "Scott Hunter came out last year, yes? Big moment?"

"Yeah." Danny looks away from Rozanov again. Mateo would be laughing at him, trying not to stare. "It was awesome." Rozanov raises an eyebrow. Shit. Did he want him to make fun of Scott Hunter? Rozanov might come from the same exact kind of family as him, maybe he's homophobic. Danny hasn't really gotten into this conversation with his teammates yet, so he doesn't know what to expect. It doesn't matter. Danny has never cared what people think, why start now? In fact, if this is an edgy, controversial opinion, it's even better. He squares his shoulders to look confident about his statement. "You have an old-person opinion about this?"

"No. It *was* awesome," Rozanov agrees, and narrows his eyes at Danny. "He is not the only one in the league."

Danny thinks about Mateo, who has always been so careful about his every move. What's the point? What's the worst that could happen? The MLH has an out player, juniors had none. So it's gotta be better here. Danny makes a snap decision to be out. He shrugs, "Not anymore. I'm here now. Some guys I was in juniors with were, but they're not... yeah. I'm here now."

"Would not just be *you*." Rozanov says combatively, almost to take him down a peg. "I have a small group. Twelve guys, or so."

Twelve? Out of the whole league? Mateo and Danny used to talk about the guys they knew, and they probably guessed twelve they played against in two months. "Only twelve?"

Rozanov looks perturbed. "Yes, *only* twelve. I only started last year and—" He considers Danny for a second, "Do you know how much the league hates gays?"

No, he really doesn't. Danny swallows and fear drips cold into his chest. Not for himself, really, he doesn't give a shit. But Mateo's paranoia is contagious. If the league hurt Mateo, or

kicked him out, Danny would never forgive himself, like gay was some kind of disease Danny himself gave Mateo. He shakes his head a little.

Rozanov shifts uncomfortably, “Do not umm... probably don’t tell many people you are gay. Until you have thought about coming out. There are a lot of things to consider. This is not good for a hockey career.”

Danny wants to make a joke about advice from old people. He wants to rebel and disobey, like an automatic switch when someone tells him what to do. But this is *Ilya Rozanov*. He just nods and tries to internalize the advice.

“Anyway.” Rozanov continues, “We have a bet. If you win the cup, you come out.”

“Scott Hunter did it because of a bet??” God, Danny really is going to have to text Mateo tonight, isn’t he?

“He did.” Rozanov looks satisfied. “Would you make that bet? Join us? I will only make you come out if you are ready.”

Join a club with Ilya Rozanov and Scott Hunter?? That only has *twelve* members??

Danny’s brain reboots. “Absolutely, I would.” Rozanov holds out a hand to shake on it, and Danny does immediately. What Rozanov said begins to sink in. He’s gay? “You’re gay?”

Rozanov laughs, “That took... too long, kid. But no, bisexual.”

“I didn’t know people your age knew about bisexuality.”

He glares at Danny but continues, “The cup deal is a mutual trust. You keep secrets, I keep secrets. We all benefit if people come out, but it is scary. When someone came out to management last year, they were threatened to be kicked out of the league if they came out publicly.”

“Holy shit.” Maybe he should *call* Mateo after this.

“Yeah, *holy shit*.” Rozanov shakes his head, “So never ask me ‘only twelve?’ It has been six months. In six more months I will have double that, and it will still be insane that we got twelve in the beginning.”

Danny takes a sip of his beer, feeling firmly chastised. Usually a member of authority saying something like that would have him rattling his cage, but if the elder is Ilya Rozanov, Danny can have a little more respect.

“Danny Melnyk.” Rozanov says, like he’s considering it. “Is Danylo, right?” Danny cringes, so Rozanov backs off, “Ok. Just Melnyk. Tell me about your draft class.”

It’s a pretty traditional old-person talking to young-person question, and Danny does his best. “They’re pretty good guys. Mateo Rivera, Guy Bonavi, Ray Henderson...”

Rozanov nods and cuts in, “Washington, Tampa Bay, Buffalo.”

“Holy shit. Do you like... study that?” Mateo is good, everyone should be following his career. But Ray and Guy are mediocre at best.

“Is part of my job. And you won, in January?”

“Yeah, that’s crazy. We won against Canada, actually.”

Rozanov keeps asking questions about his juniors career, about his teammates here in Brooklyn, if they’re nice to him. Rozanov tells him he has a boyfriend, which surprises Danny. Even non-hockey people know Rozanov is kind of a whore. It’s clear what he’s doing; trust begets trust. Danny tells him he just broke up with his boyfriend and realizes, belatedly, that’s the first time he’s ever said that word about Mateo.

Danny calls Mateo on the walk home and tells him he met Ilya Rozanov. Mid-story he catches himself: he’s about to out the guy who just made a big production about not outing anyone. So Danny finishes fanboying over Rozanov and then, as if it’s a separate story, tells Mateo about the cup bet, obfuscating the identity of the person who approached him about it. He’s wondering if he’ll be approached, too. Danny starts to wonder how Rozanov even knew to target him.

It feels like coming home, to talk to Mateo after a few weeks, and it seems like Mateo agrees. Whether it’s hearing his voice or hearing there are hockey players out there making gay relationships work or maybe the alcohol, Danny knows he has to try to get Mateo back.

After a long soliloquy from a less-than-sober Danny about how he could be there in 3 hours if he sped down I-95, and they could meet halfway in just 90 minutes if they both did, that they could buy a house in the middle and both commute an hour and a half to work every day, spilling more hopes for the future than he ever had before, Mateo agrees to talk about it when their teams meet in two weeks.

Before the two weeks are up, fate and hockey burn those plans down. Danny has played 3 games for Brooklyn and done pretty well. Well enough, it turns out, that he’s worth something in a trade, and he gets the phone call just three days before Brooklyn is set to meet Washington. He is traded to Montreal.

It puts the brakes on everything. Now, he’s a 9 hour drive from Mateo. A completely separate country. Washington and Montreal aren’t even in the same division. It’s over.

Spring 2018

Being on a team with Shane Hollander is cool even if the guy doesn't hang out much. Hayden Pike's wife helps Danny decorate his apartment. J.J. Boiziau takes him under his wing and they go clubbing after basically every game with a group of really fun guys around his age. Danny hasn't had a good group of friends on a team since the junior's tournament he played with Mateo. The team itself matches Danny's personality a lot better than Brooklyn, and will probably be a lot more professionally successful.

Danny also has this weird mentorship from Ilya Rozanov. He calls frequently, asking about his love life, giving advice and critiquing his hockey form. That last one would be annoying if he weren't always right. He always has practice routines for how to improve. Rozanov told him to text Scott Hunter, and Scott Hunter actually texted back. Danny *texts* with Scott Hunter. All of this would have been unbelievable even six months ago.

He feels cared-for. It's a weird feeling he hasn't had since long before he left home. It keeps Danny from quitting hockey and just showing up on Mateo's doorstep.

Washington and Montreal only meet three times that year, and yeah of course they hook up. Of course Danny is single, he can't even fathom being with anyone else, and he wonders if Mateo is. He doesn't ask.

Boiziau always tries to set him up with girls at the club, and Danny loves to dance, so he dances with them. Occasionally he'll walk them out to make sure they get home safely, and if the team assumes he's hooking up, that's neither here nor there. The warning from his first meeting with Rozanov rings around in his head, so he doesn't come out to anyone else.

Mateo and Danny both make it to the 2018 playoffs. Washington makes it to the second round, Mateo gets a few crucial goals in the playoff run, and gets some endorsements. Once brands realize he's the most handsome hockey player since a young Shane Hollander, everyone wants a piece. His image is everywhere. It's terrible for Danny, whose heart breaks a little every time he sees it.

Baldwin comes out at the cup, and immediately has to retire. Mateo must be freaking out. Danny doesn't know; they stopped talking in between meetups.

Mateo is invited to the MLH awards for Rookie of the Year. He's not going to get it, it's pretty clearly going to someone else, but even being nominated is crazy. Rozanov says a few guys from the group are going to meet up, but that it's not a big deal. Danny wants to go just to see Mateo, be there if he wins by some miracle, and meet the other members of this weird group. He trusts Rozanov when he says it's not a big deal. If Mateo says it's fun, he'll go next time.

He gets a weird text that weekend, though.

Mateo: do you think two players have ever hooked up before?

Danny: idk if we could beat them for first, but we could do it MORE than any other two players

Danny: if you want

Mateo: no dipshit

Mateo: seriously

Mateo: just this whole thing is so stupid risky, right?

Danny: yeah.

Danny: it's awful.

Is Mateo asking because he's about to hook up with someone at the awards? Danny puts the idea in the back of his head, too distracted by Mateo's apparent disgust at what they've been doing for years now.

But as soon as he's back in Washington, Mateo invites Danny to come down for the D.C. Pride parade. His apartment overlooks the parade route, so they wouldn't even have to go and risk being spotted. It sounds like fun, and he's never going to turn Mateo down.

Danny stays there for six weeks.

Fall 2018

It was a weird night. Comeau had knocked the shit out of Fredericks, for a very transparent reason. Hollander started bugging out, and then explained they can't be laying out queer players if they have a gay captain.

Wait.

They have a gay captain? ...*Shane Hollander* is gay?

The silence in the locker room is awful. *Holy shit*. Danny realizes he really shouldn't come out to these guys, maybe ever.

Danny waits for stupid Hayden Pike to leave. He needs to talk to Hollander alone, tell him he's here, too. He doesn't know what Hollander knows about him, if anything. Finally Hollander is alone. He approaches him.

After they talk about it, when Danny tells Hollander to "go home and get some," Hollander's face looks so familiar. It's a mirror of his own emotions every time he realizes he can't just unlock the door to his apartment and find Mateo there. It's the pain of a long-distance relationship. "...Or call him? I don't know man, whatever you're into."

Danny goes home that night and curses the fact that he's back to the unspoken non-speaking arrangement for the season. He'll see Mateo in a month for one night.

Later that fall, Hollander and Rozanov announce their foundation. Danny knows they're friends, Hollander told him so when he came out, but apparently that's a big deal. The rivalry was pretty crazy when Danny was like... eleven, but he didn't think it was that bad anymore anyway. It's cool to see Rozanov in public the way he's gotten to know him one-on-one. He's a pretty sensitive person, whether he wants to be or not.

Danny opens the text thread to Rozanov, the last outgoing text a month ago, asking if Boston had "started implementing an age limit" to explain why Rozanov left for Ottawa. He types out a few jokes about how Hollander and Rozanov are probably collecting money for their retirement and donates \$3000.

Spring 2019

Rozanov calls him, telling him not to come out or get caught before the cup. Danny wants to laugh. What the fuck good would coming out do? So what, Danny wouldn't have to go looking for dick in alleys anymore? He tried that like three times, and it's never Mateo, so it's never worth it. And getting caught? Not really a risk when you only hook up once every six weeks. He confidently responds, "Wasn't planning on it, boss."

Washington and Montreal meet three times that season, and each time Mateo and Danny spend the night with each other. It's almost harder to have this, sporadically meeting up just to refresh Danny's memory and show him what he's missing. They don't really talk in between.

They play a series against each other in the playoffs. A best of seven series means they're in the same cities for about a week. So for that one week, they're back. They forget about any playoff superstitions or nerves and just live. They start for the first two games at Danny's Montreal apartment, then two games at Mateo's in D.C., then back. They shirk their teams in the hotels. For two years they've done this, so everyone on their teams thinks they have family in each other's city to stay with. If anyone cares, they've never said anything. They both play better against each other, so maybe the teams are attributing that to a superstition at this point and letting them do it. In any case, Danny and Mateo spend seven nights in a row together.

On the third morning, Mateo starts the conversation about the Thing They're Not Allowed to Talk About. "Rozanov has been bugging me about my plan."

"Plan?"

"To come out. Like I guess on the off-chance we win. He says he has someone else, I think it might actually be Wagner."

"Oh. He hasn't asked me at all."

Mateo nods, “I think probably Shane Hollander will come out for Montreal, right? He probably gets priority, maybe he doesn’t want to be overshadowed.”

That makes sense. Danny is a little relieved but he’s never particularly cared about staying in the closet anyway, Rozanov was the one who told him not to come out in the first place.

“Yeah, probably. So what do you tell him your plan is, when he asks?”

“I think just a statement online. It’s not like I have anyone to kiss on the ice.” Mateo says coolly.

“You want me to go down and kiss you on the ice?” Danny is surprised. He also knows with 100% certainty that isn’t going to happen.

“It’s either that or my parents can bring out a flag, that would be cool.” Ah. It wasn’t a real offer, Mateo has a plan already.

“Your parents would do that?”

“Yeah, umm last week I kind of... I came out to them. And my sisters.” His parents were always kind. They let Danny come over for dinner all the time, and he stayed there overnight sometimes until he got his own apartment. They didn’t ask too many questions when Mateo wouldn’t come home for days or weeks. “It went well. But... they asked about you. They asked how you were doing.”

“Oh? And you caught them up on my life because you know it so well?” Danny doesn’t mean to sound so hurt, but it’s true. Mateo is not an expert on his life anymore, and it’s weird that he would even tease Danny by talking about them kissing Scott-Hunter-style on the ice.

“No, asshole, I told them the truth, I told them what we...” *were? are? did?* Danny desperately does and does not want to know how that sentence should have ended. “They were fine. My mom asked if she could call you, I said I’d ask. Have you talked to your parents?”

“No.” Not since before Mateo knew him. “I don’t want your mom calling me.”

It’s the morning of game six in Montreal and Mateo is wrapped like a koala on Danny’s side. It’s so warm in the bed, and Danny would rather die than get up. Mateo picks his head up, “After you lose today, can I have you for the summer?”

Danny’s heart shatters. First, because every single atom in his body says yes, however long you want me, have me. Then, more realistically, how long can he do this? Be a live-in boyfriend for six weeks a year and then go back to no-contact? A summer back how they are now would kill him, just to return to an insurmountable distance.

He says no. They have a blow-out fight.

That night Montreal loses, and Danny goes home to an empty apartment.

The next week, Danny has to watch Mateo come out. He reads the statement five times every night and refreshes the comments every thirty seconds. Single. *Single*. Mateo should not be *single*.

Danny fucking *took the picture* in Mateo's post. Now it's on the news. Mateo is in interviews talking about how close he is with other gay hockey players. He probably means Ilya Rozanov and fucking Scott Hunter. Not the gay hockey player he's actually fucking lived with. He says he knows "thirteen or fourteen of them personally." Is this a sick fucking joke? If Mateo is #14, Danny is #13, and Mateo knows that. Why would he say those numbers? The reporter asks about his DMs. Danny wants to blow up this reporter's car.

Rozanov demands that Danny come to the 2019 MLH awards. If Danny doesn't have Mateo, the one reason he hasn't left hockey is the older guys' expectations of him. Even though he knows Mateo will be there, he agrees to go.

Danny doesn't know a lot of these guys except obviously, Mateo. He looks stupidly good, and he's so adorably awkward when he's talking to his idol Shane Hollander. Danny has been on a team with Hollander for two seasons, the star power has kind of died down. But Danny never idolized him to the extent Mateo did. Danny buries himself in conversation to avoid staring.

The guys he meets are actually pretty funny. Danny is laughing so hard he's crying at some of the acronyms he's hearing and he actually forgets for a second that his heart is across the room, not in his body. He gets to thank Vinny Marcello, the man who created RASHYCOCK (the acronym) in person. Marcello has the right idea, "When I come out, I won't use some idiotic jumble of letters like Matty." Danny shifts a little as he hears the name grate across his ears. "I'm going to use RASHYCOCK and ITCHY."

"It's Mateo." Danny corrects, and Marcello smiles broadly like he's figuring something out. So Danny quickly proceeds, "I think I'll use HANDJOB, PLOWASS, and SMEGMA." The guys laugh, so he knows he didn't ruin anything, but Vinny Marcello still looks at him knowingly. Danny hates being Known.

He doesn't even see Mateo approaching him until he's being pulled aside, "Rozanov said you were looking for me?"

That's weird. "I wasn't."

"Ok." Mateo turns to leave, but Danny grabs his arm. They've never been in the same place and *not* hooked up.

“Where are you staying?” Danny feels so fucking weak. It only took him 30 seconds to cave?

Mateo looks relieved. They catch up on the cup frenzy. Danny carefully doesn’t ask anything about coming out or about the parade of men that surely lines the sidewalk outside Mateo’s apartment or about how he clearly got a stylist for the last few interviews. It feels ok, until Scott Hunter comes up to their conversation. It’s been two years, and Danny has gotten used to chatting casually with Hollander and Rozanov, but talking to Hunter still feels like he’s meeting a celebrity.

“Hey, Matty! Melnyk, good to see you. What, is this the kids’ table?” Hunter laughs.

“Or are we in the old people room?” Danny chirps back.

“Melnyk!” Mateo kicks him.

“Right, respect your elders and whatever.”

Mateo crosses his arms, “Didn’t you have a Scott Hunter poster in your room growing up?”

“No, actually you’re thinking of my *dad*. My *dad* had a Scott Hunter poster in his room growing up.”

“Yeah sorry, I’m thinking about your dad a lot.” Mateo smiles suggestively.

Scott Hunter stares, wide-eyed, following the volley back and forth. Shit. That was kind of obvious, huh. Fun, but they probably shouldn’t be flirting via chirp in front of everyone. Hunter looks around like he’s looking for someone, and his eyes hit the bathroom door. He shakes his head and mutters, “Ah, fuck.”

Danny and Mateo can actually hang out that night. It occurs to Danny that they could actually be *seen* in this room. They could kiss right here in front of everyone, like they could before their faces were on national TV. People in this room still probably wouldn’t be on board with two players doing it. Especially not for years.

It feels better just being around Mateo in public. It feels like when they played on a team together, like when they were in the same group of friends. Mateo hangs out and laughs with everyone. They drink way too much and they walk together to the hetero party.

Maybe he’s tipsy, maybe it’s the closest they’ve been to going on a date in two years. Whatever it is, Danny leans in. In public. No one’s even looking, but it breaks whatever spell the night had, and Mateo scolds him fiercely in a whisper-shout for what feels like hours. It’s not until Mike Brophy literally hits Ilya Rozanov in the face that they’re distracted enough to stop fighting.

During the short break after All-Stars weekend (Mateo is always invited, Danny never is), Danny is surprised to find Mateo knocking on his door. When he answers, instead of a greeting, Mateo says, “Move to Washington.”

He invites Mateo in. “What are you doing here?”

Mateo hugs him and kisses him in the entryway as if he’s just coming home from work, not 3 months of silence. “Right now there’s no one to come out if we win the cup, right? Because Wagner and I just came out? I think Rozanov can pull strings and get you traded.”

“You want me to ask Rozanov to get me traded to Washington?”

“He needs someone on every team who can come out. Montreal already has Shane Hollander. We wouldn’t even have to tell him about us.”

Danny’s heart drops. Ok, so this is the same fucking thing as always. Mateo trying to be fucking married or something while maintaining the secret. “I don’t want to do that, Mateo.”

“Oh.” He looks crushed. “I just thought... maybe we weren’t together because we’re so far away. I was talking to Vinny Marcello at All-Stars and—”

“It sounds like we wouldn’t even be together if I moved to Washington,” Danny snaps back. “If we can’t even tell *Rozanov*.”

“Ok, then tell Rozanov! Tell fucking everyone. Come out!” Mateo looks like he might cry, “I don’t even care if we’re in the same place or not. We’ll have summers, and we can call in between. I want you— I want to be able to text you all the time and not feel like I’m interrupting I don’t know, a date or something.”

“You’re the one with dates. I don’t— I haven’t.”

“I don’t have dates.” Mateo sighs, and Danny immediately feels a thousand pounds lighter. “People act like I have all these guys reaching out to me, I don’t even check. I don’t know.” He rubs the back of his neck, “I told Rozanov I did because it seemed like he was going to set me up with someone. I don’t want to be set up with anyone Rozanov would pick.”

“What if it were me?”

“Why would he try to set up two professional hockey players who live in separate countries?”

Danny laughs. “Good point.”

“Can we actually try this for once?” Mateo pleads, “Get traded to Washington. Or just come out. Or both. Or neither, just be with me.”

It’s tempting. It’s all he’s wanted since he met this guy. He doesn’t know how they made it almost three years of this hiding and denying feelings and long distance in this league. Danny

knows any longer would definitely kill him. It's so blindingly tempting that Danny can't resist it. There's no negative that could possibly outweigh this benefit. "Ok. Let's do it."

Chapter End Notes

Eeee!! Thank you for indulging me!

Vinny Marcello was back on his acronym game again today.
I believe if you're looking hard enough, you'll find a Buffalo rookie named Ray Henderson who has a roommate he's obsessed with...

Next up: One of those plans commences.

Shout out to the VERY few people who predicted this twist before it happened and especially to @sparklespiff, who has an idea of what their version of the tuna melt would be and I have to copy and paste this from the message because it's too good: *"in my head melnyk puts together the most horrifying gringo tacos ever seen and poor rivera is like 'this counts as a macroagression you fuckhead' and melnyk is like, 'but the flamin hot cheetos topping is the best part?'"* 10/10 head canon.

Edit: Pretty sure Rivera doesn't know for positive about Hollanov either, he was just around for the hypothetical conversation where they were talking about what a bad idea it *would* be for Ilya and Shane to hook up (and maybe looking like he was about to pass out for multiple Reasons). Melnyk definitely doesn't know about them.

Chapter 23: And Rivera

Chapter Summary

Pre-Playoffs, 2020

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for supporting my little babies. [Silksong-when made art for us!!](#) And a few of you have been mentioning 1314 is "forever" in Chinese slang which was not intentional, but I'm calling it fate and leaning into #1314!

We now return to our regularly scheduled Ilya POV, then some Angry Shane POV. Let 🙌 Shane 🙌 Be 🙌 Angry 🙌

Most of the plot roads have been leading us here, so we're about to go on a roller coaster. Don't worry, I'll put everything back where I found it when I'm done playing (HEA reminder) and this is much more fun than the last time I damaged you emotionally. When something like this happens in canon, Ilya needs to go get fingered about it. That doesn't happen here but you can assume it happens off-screen.

Shoutout to @AntimonySchnuck for the name of one of the trophies in this chapter; I've been saving it for so long for this moment!! And to @TulipTrip for giving me a word to jump off from.

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

Just before the 2020 playoffs, Ilya gets a surprise text from #13, one of his favorite guys. He's a defenseman on Montreal with an attitude problem and he reminds him of a younger, worse at hockey, gay Ilya. He was in one of the earliest waves of converts from the fall of 2017 when the kid was just a rookie and Ilya needed to replace the retiring players. He was traded to Montreal that same month, which rendered him kind of useless for Ilya and the cup bet. Or very useful, for Shane and the cup bet.

There are two texts and then an image.

#13: wanted to let Daddy know before it goes live but I'm coming out on my socials in about an hour.

#13: have a bf now

Ilya scrolls to the image and— holy shit. #13— Danylo Melnyk— is shirtless in bed with Mat Rivera. They're both grinning maniacally. How did this happen?

Ilya: I called this two years ago

#13: bullshit

Ilya: you reminded me of a couple I know

Ilya: i was trying to set you up

Ilya: you idiots

Ilya: [image of Melnyk's card dated 10/2017: 'belongs with #14']

#13: well then you were a year too late to “call it”

What? They had already known each other? They never played on a team together. Ilya watched the tournament when USA won, Rivera wasn't in it. How would they have met before the league? A fucking CCM ad?

Wait. Two weeks ago Melnyk told Ilya to keep him in mind if he wants someone to trade to Washington. Ilya told him to fuck off, he's not his agent, but immediately acquiesced and wrote it down as a plan for the off-season. It wouldn't have helped this late in the season anyway, after the trade deadline.

Come to think of it... Ilya only got Rivera in the first place because he kept coming up in his first conversation with Melnyk. After Melnyk agreed to the pact, they hung out at that bar for a long time. The kid talked about all the players he idolized and some he hated and some he played with in Juniors... Rivera's name must have come up 15 times, and Ilya knew he needed rookies to replace the retiring players. The name must have latched into his brain so hard that Ilya did a double take when they played against Washington. Why didn't Ilya ever notice that? Is he really as perceptive as he thinks?

He thinks back to Rivera's nervous agreement to the pact. It was so quick, he must have known Ilya was coming. He remembers Rivera looking like he was going to puke when he heard about the prospect of Shane and Ilya boning. At the time, Ilya thought it was because the idea was just too hot for him to handle. It probably was, to be honest, but it also probably hit very close to home when the entire room was giving reasons two players shouldn't be together.

And the awards— oh my god. They were so adamant about not speaking to each other. But Ilya would bet now, every penny in his account, that they went off and hooked up that night.

He reads the texts again and again. He knew they would make a good couple two years ago. He wanted the heartbroken Melnyk to feel like he deserves a nice boy like Rivera. And he thought Rivera deserves to be shown a good time. He just didn't think they would actually *do* it.

...Or be *public* about it.

Ilya feels tears on his face, and he wishes Shane were here. Melnyk was his backup for Montreal. What will happen if Montreal wins the cup now? Playoffs are ten days away and Montreal looks great. Sure, they could probably still count #13, if it happens within the same year. That's what he told Bennett, anyway.

It's also a couple. An *out* couple. Two players in the MLH.

Ilya is... jealous? Territorial? Why do these kids get to go first? The text says the announcement will drop in an hour, but he can't wait that long. He calls Shane.

"Hey! I wasn't expecting to talk until later." He sounds happy to hear from Ilya, and Ilya is about to ruin it. "What's up? Are you still coming here tonight?"

"Wanted to hear you. I got news?" Ilya's shocked voice is hesitant.

"...Can you tell me this news?"

"Someone is about to come out... A couple. Two players are together."

"Oh." Shane sounds the way Ilya feels: weirdly sad about this. It should be happy. This is literally what Ilya wanted— for the idea to be so normal that it would be unnecessary to hide it. But now? "Well, good for them." It sounds polite, like it's the right thing to say. Not like he means it. "I guess we can see how the public reacts to them. What are they like? Are they in the same division? I guess I'll see soon enough."

"Shane, it's Rivera and Melnyk."

"Oh." Shane is quiet again. Then he whispers, "Oh my God."

"What part of this would you like to do first?"

"Melnyk was my back up," Shane takes a beat, then asks, "Do you have a third player on Montreal?"

"No."

"Ok. Ok, it's fine. What are the odds we actually win, right?" Actually pretty good, but Ilya has been trying not to think too hard about that. Shane has been preparing for this, but #13 was a back-up plan neither of them realized they were taking for granted.

"Right. Ottawa will beat you."

Shane laughs weakly. "Also... those two?"

"What, you mean baby Shane and baby Ilya?"

"God, is it that obvious?"

On the surface, yes. But Ilya shakes his head. "They are not rivals. There was no Russia. Melnyk is not so much of a talent. No one is leading a gay bratva." Ilya sighs. These reasons

sound so thin. “I think they fucked before but just started going out two months ago and now they can be in public.”

“...When it’s been a decade for us,” Shane confirms.

“Yes.”

There’s a beat of silence. Ilya doesn’t have to be in the room to know Shane is crying already. His own eyes well up at image.

“Ilya, I love you. I’m proud of you.”

“Melnyk did it because of you, you are his favorite.” The kid talks about Shane Hollander like he cured terminal eye-fucking.

“No, seriously, you changed everything. If we had this when we were their age, we would have done the same thing they are.”

Ilya doesn’t want to state the obvious and spook Shane away, but he also did all of this for a reason. “We *do* have this.” His heart beats loud in his chest. It’s a bad idea to be entertaining. Since Hunter’s reaction to his relationship went south, Ilya has been thinking less about coming out himself. But that doesn’t mean Shane shouldn’t. What is all this for, if Shane still feels like he’s hiding? “So if you ever want to do it... I can see wanting to... I just would—”

“I know. I’m going to do it. I’ll win the cup this year, I promise. If not, I’ll... figure something else out.” Ilya’s chest fills with pride for his shy, brave husband. Shane adds, “You’re still coming here tonight?” as if he could keep Ilya away.

Council of (Mostly) Straight Elders group chat

Ilya: a couple is coming out, 30 minutes

Ilya: two players together

Ilya: social media squadrons at the ready

Ilya: key points:

Ilya: they are professionals at work, no one is owed a timeline, no one has thrown any games

Vaughan: 🙄

Vaughan: a couple of players?

Vaughan: is half the couple in the room with us right now?

Pike: WHAT

Pike: LETS FUCKING GO 🎉🥳

Hayes: wait it can’t be Rozanov

Hayes: when has he ever been professional at work?

Ilya: it is not me.

Pike: ...

Pike: there's another fucking couple?

Hayes: omg can I guess??

Vaughan: goalie powers of perception disqualify you from guessing. This is a Pike and Carter game.

Pike: there aren't that many out guys who are single

Vaughan: I was just with Eric and Kyle last night so it's not him

Vaughan: Fredericks is fucking married

Pike: damn so maybe someone is coming out AND hard launching a relationship?

Vaughan: Wagner and Rivera are on the same team, so throwing games wouldn't be a concern

Hayes: think younger

Pike: Yeah that's like a ten year age gap

Vaughan: Where were you when Eric Bennett shacked up with his 25 year old?

Hayes: and I think you were warmer about coming out and hard-launching

Hayes: I think one of them is out

Ilya: you all are worse gossips than hunter

Vaughan: fucking excuse me?

Vaughan: very insulted

Vaughan: NO ONE is a worse gossip than scott hunter

Vaughan: but good point let me ask him

Ilya: he does not know

Ilya: and he should not be telling you

Vaughan: omg he told me!!

Vaughan: holy shit this is good tea

Pike: so I'm the only one who doesn't know!?!

Hayes: it doesn't matter, the post is up now

@Danny_Melnyk

[images: Rivera and Melnyk at the rink; teenage Rivera and Melnyk carving pumpkins with the Riveras: a selfie of them together, clearly taken the same day as Rivera's

coming out post picture.]

Pleased to receive the #TOPPING of the year and the first ever #PROLAPSE. Couldn't wait to have a #SHART but I hope #RASHYCOCK is contagious and spreading.  
    

Grateful to all our Dads and Daddys who got us here. Proud #13th Member of #SMEGMA #1314

He added “gay and in love” to his bio.

Fuck, Shane is probably one of the Dads he’s talking about. He probably thinks he doesn’t have to wait for the cup because Shane would come out for Montreal. Fuck.

RASHYCOCK + DICK COMA + PENIS + Roz group chat
Melnyk has been added to the chat

Oldest Man Alive: Getting a little crowded in here!
Oldest Man Alive: Welcome Melnyk!

Melnyk: who are all you people?

Lundin: we’ll tell you if you tell us what the fuck all these things stand for

Rivera: please don’t ask
Rivera: i told him not to
Rivera: my face is on a post with PROLAPSE and SHART and RASHYCOCK and SMEGMA on it
Rivera: please kill me

Bennett: Better than CUMSLUT

Rivera: is it?

Bennett: YES

Fredericks: seriously though man what the actual fuck is all of this? SHART?

Rivera: ugh just tell them
Rivera: it’s the Scott Hunter Annual Remembrance Trophy

Oldest Man Alive: I’M NOT DEAD!!!

Melnyk: easier than changing it in a year

Ilya: this is what I told hunter too!!

Melnyk: Mateo tell him what award we give everyone still in the closet

Rivera: don't do this

Rivera: ...

Rivera: it's FIRMASS

Melnyk: the Formal Ilya Rozanov Memorial Award for Secret Sucking

Lundin: Oooh burn

Lundin: and SMEGMA?

Melnyk: Scott's Members-Exclusive Gay Men Alliance

Bennett: some of us are bi

Oldest Man Alive: I'm scared to ask. Topping?

Melnyk: I mean I can if my boyfriend says its cool

Rivera: DANNY!!!

Rivera: Trophy Of Pre-Playoffs Inception of Noted Gayness

Baldwin: ok that one is so dumb

Oldest Man Alive: Implying the rest were good??

Ilya: first ever PROLAPSE?

Melnyk: President Rozanov's Official Lovers' Award for Players Sexually Engaged

Oldest Man Alive: Oh my god.

Lundin: 🙄

Baldwin: Oh no

Two days later, Shane is called into a meeting with management. This is not the first time he's nervously approached this conference room knowing he's about to get homophobically reprimanded. He walks in to see his coach, general manager, some other bigwigs in suits, and Melnyk, who is comically underdressed in a tank top and baseball hat. He looks like a kid in detention.

"Left practice as soon as I saw your text." Shane says, sitting at the table.

“No problem. We thought it best to have the captain here for this so any rumors in the locker room are quashed.” The GM says. Now that Shane is seated at the oval table with Melnyk in his sight line, he can see the kid is pissed.

“Ok,” Shane nods slowly, “What rumors?”

“They’re kicking me off the team.” Melnyk spits. Shane’s head snaps toward the men in suits.

“We are *encouraging a resignation*.” The GM clarifies, “This is uncharted territory but we feel it’s the best course of action. Commissioner Crowell said so himself.”

“Why?” Shane knows why. He wants to make them say it. His heart is beating in his ears. The deep envy he’s felt since he heard about Melnyk and Rivera is quickly morphing into something else. It’s fear and anger, knowing this could have been Shane and Ilya. It *should* have been them. They are protected against this kind of thing, but Melnyk could be dropped for any number of reasons. Shane is angry that the kid lacks foresight, he’s angry with himself for not coming out first, but most of all he’s angry at this team, and this league. What’s the fucking point? What is the league so scared of?

“Two male players dating?” The GM says as if he doesn’t have to explain any more.

“What about it?” Shane pushes.

“We thought you of all people would understand. It’s not the gay thing but—”

“But your first adjective was ‘male’.”

“—But,” The GM continues louder, “the inherent... conflict of interest, when we play Washington.”

“Are you accusing Melnyk and Rivera of throwing games?” Shane is barely keeping his temper under wraps. He’s barely keeping his *marriage* under wraps. He wants to say it here but he can’t. He can’t say it, right?

“No, not exactly, just... that they might not play their hardest.”

“Because they can’t do their jobs?” What these assholes don’t know is that Shane overthinks these arguments every night in the shower and he has for years. He has a script planned on the off chance someone accosts him on the street. He would be ready anywhere. Sure, “we” is changed to “they”, but Shane is just as much fighting for himself as for these kids.

“Not effectively, no.”

“Melnyk— not that it matters, not that you have to answer— but how long have you been with Rivera?”

“Forever?” Melnyk murmurs, head held low.

“Good.” Shane says automatically. He can react to whatever that answer means later. He addresses the suits, “Have you guys watched *every* game against Washington? Have you catalogued plays that Melnyk missed? Or, because I’m almost certain this is the case, did they play harder against each other than any other team?” He’s only certain because it’s true for him. He honestly hadn’t checked the tapes he’s talking about. He quickly looks to Melnyk, who gives him a little nod of agreement.

“Look, Hollander, we’re just not having it.”

“And Washington? What are they doing?” Shane directs the question to Melnyk.

Melnyk shrugs and mumbles, “Nothing. They’re letting him stay.”

“—We actually don’t know that yet,” one of the suits cuts in, “The commissioner was clear about his instructions here.”

“He just met with management!” Melnyk sits up, raising his voice in a rude tone, “They’re standing up for him!” Shane’s approach has been professional and collected, and he realizes Melnyk probably isn’t doing himself any favors by staying in this meeting without help. What the fuck is the team going to look like after this? Will Melnyk ever be played if he manages to stay? More importantly, Shane wonders how *he’ll* be able to play for a team like this.

“Fine.” Shane stands up with his heart racing, the words leaving his mouth before he can think them through, “Melnyk has a lawyer for this reason, and so do I. I’d like you all to know I’m married to another player. So if you’re firing Melnyk for that, you’ll fire me too. It’ll look great to start playoffs next week.”

“No, you’re not,” The GM says. “You don’t have to do this to save this idiot’s career. Don’t go making stuff up just to be some sort of social justice hero.”

“Do you want to call my bluff? Go for it. In the meantime, I’m getting Melnyk into practice because when our lawyer clears this up, we’re going to want him in shape for the playoffs.” He turns to Melnyk, “let’s go.”

They exit the conference room and the door slams shut behind them. Shane begins a speed walk through the halls of the facility with Melnyk on his heel. The only thing Shane was bluffing about was practice; the guys probably went home a long time ago.

“Christ, Cap, that was hot.” Melnyk says with a smile, “you didn’t have to do that— say you’re with another player for me. What if they ask?”

“Not making it up.”

Melnyk scoffs a little. “Ok, I’ll bite. Who is it?”

Fuck. Shane realizes it’s not just management. *No one* is going to believe this if he frames it like he’s helping the kids out. Better try. He keeps his eyes straight ahead and keeps his walking pace quick. “It’s Ilya Rozanov.”

Melnyk laughs. Hard. He actually slows down a little and Shane turns to make sure he didn't hurt himself. "It has to be someone more believable than that. Bennett, maybe?"

"Why does everyone say Bennett?" Shane mumbles, shaking his head. He has plenty of proof that his relationship is real. His parents know Ilya... well, through the foundation. Hayden knows, and the guys from the meetup. Other people suspect it but... shit. Evidence might be hard to come by.

No, that's crazy. They have a *marriage license*. Shit, is Shane going to have to publish that? It would out Ilya.

They enter the change room and Shane's suspicion was correct, no one is left after practice. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and hits "stop" on the recording. Melnyk is grabbing his bag like he might leave so Shane says, "Wait. We're calling Ilya."

Melnyk nods. They'd probably do this even if Shane hadn't just used Ilya's name as a decoy. Shane dials and puts it on speakerphone

"Hello?" Ilya answers. Shane wishes it were more affectionate as proof for Melnyk but there's more serious business. He holds the phone between them.

"I'm here with Melnyk—"

"Hey Rozy."

"— and we just met with management. They're trying to get him to leave the team."

"They cannot do that." Ilya says, "His contract is—"

"Yes." Shane knows. "Can you get our lawyer's number to me? I can get the union rep but we're going to need more than that."

"Sure. Yes. Sending it to both of you now. Did you record the meeting?"

"Yes, I can email it to you. And Ilya..." Shane breathes, "I did something maybe dumb." He knows Melnyk is in this conversation, too, but as of ten minutes ago, it doesn't matter.

"You? Never." Ilya says and Melnyk laughs like it was sarcastic.

"They said the relationship between players was the reason. So I might have implied I was also in a relationship with a player."

Melnyk laughs and cuts in, "He didn't *imply*, Rozanov, he told them they'd have to can him too because he's *married* to another player."

"Ugh, yeah I guess I did say that." Shane rubs his face and Melnyk continues to giggle.

"Aren't you a little concerned if they find out your husband is not a hockey player? Are you even married?" Melnyk asks and Ilya just laughs.

Shane rolls his eyes, “That’s the other thing. No one is going to believe me because I told them like this.”

“He just told me it was *you*! I’m glad he didn’t say that in front of management!” Melnyk laughs.

“It *is* me.” Ilya responds bluntly.

Melnyk rolls his eyes, smiling. “Oh my god, I didn’t think you’d go along with it that easily. You’d really do anything for your guys. Well I’ll back you up if you want to lie to everyone.”

“Melnyk. Is not a lie. I fuck Shane speechless every time I see him. We do cottage trips. I know his parents. Ask anyone.”

“Don’t ask them about—”

“—ask them about the fucking especially.”

“Ilya!”

“Ok,” Melnyk puts his hands up. “Sure. Whatever works. To be honest it would be adorable if you two fell in love in this weird fake dating romcom trope.”

“You have other concerns,” Ilya reminds the kid.

“Ilya.” Shane’s heart sinks. He hates this team. He knows it’s the league, and Crowell, doing it all. But Rivera’s team isn’t giving in to them. New York didn’t, Ottawa didn’t. This is such a terrible thing to ask. “Ilya, Crowell is going to tank our season. We have to win the cup.” He really wishes Melnyk weren’t standing right here for this conversation. “I have to do it,” Shane says, hoping Ilya will know what he means. Shane knows, in the back of his mind, if he tells his husband he needs something... no, that’s crazy, Ilya can’t just give someone a cup. Can Ilya just give someone a cup?

Ilya is quiet for a moment. “Understood.”

Shane and Ilya both sigh hard. “Ok. I’m going to go,” Shane says, “I’ll call you from home. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

“I hope you two can commit to the bit!” Melnyk is still snickering.

Shane realizes with a pit in his stomach that the only proof he has on his phone are faceless dick pics and a text conversation with “Lily”. It’s ok, he doesn’t need to prove anything. He has a marriage license.

“Wait, why is his name Lily?” Melnyk eyes the phone in Shane’s hand as the call ends.

“Didn’t he ever tell you to put your boyfriend’s name in as a girl’s name?”

“Sure. I never listened to him, but...” Melnyk trails off. Shane looks expectantly at him, but Melnyk is silently considering him, gears clearly working in his thick skull. That’s not Shane’s problem. He gathers up his things and heads for the door. “—Wait?” Melnyk says and Shane turns around. “Thank you for doing that for me.”

Shane nods and lies, “No problem.”

@RogueMLH

If Melnyk is not playing for Montreal tomorrow night in the first round of playoffs, why would that be?

@RogueMLH

It would be a shame if more players in relationships came out. There are more.

@RogueMLH

How many good players is the league willing to lose?

@GoaliePolieOlie

holy shit is Montreal pushing Melnyk out??

@TorontoBeeth

imagine losing your career for your boyfriend lol this is why no one likes the gays

@WashTheClock

I would lose literally anything for Matty Rivera.

@HockeyMystery

this is like Fredericks all over again? Are we sure RogueMLH isnt tied in with TGS

@ShaneHollander4POTUS

eww spillover from r/MLHCorruption! Can’t believe you guys call it That Gay Shit.

@Alcoholhockey

I know it’s not the topic of conversation here but #1314 could press me like a panini

@HockeyCanFan

for real I would kill to be a fly on the wall in that bedroom

@TorontoBeeth

flies only live for like two days

@HockeyCanFan

and it would be worth it.

@SulphuricAcid

@RogueMLH don't you think it's sus? I'm all for gay rights, I just don't know if they should be playing against their lovers.

@admiraladmirer

they're at work. It's a job. You come home and eat a burger even tho you spent all day flipping them.

@HockeyCanFan

I'm not sure I understand this metaphor

@munch3yum3

sounds like Rivvy flips AND eats at home 😊

@HockeyCanFan

I don't understand this metaphor either

@ImpeachCrowell

I think Mel would be the one doing the flipping and eating, no?

@CharredHamburger

are you out of your fucking mind?? Mat Rivera is the top and I'm not entertaining this argument anymore

@ShaneHollander4POTUS

Melnyk said he gets topped in the post

@WashTheClock

that was an acronym

[[see 38 replies](#)]

@MontreatsCleats

if this is why we lost to Wash in the playoffs last year I'm going to be pissed.

@RogueMLH

you mean like game 3? When Melnyk checked Rivera so hard he spent 10 minutes getting checked for concussion? [video]

@RogueMLH

or like in game 5 when Melnyk stole the puck from him? [video]

@RogueMLH

Melnyk spent a total of 4 minutes in penalty over the series and 2 minutes were because of Rivera.

@MontreatsCleats

at least when we win the cup this year there won't be any gay dudes stealing the team's thunder.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter 24? 🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄

Chapter 24: 24

Chapter Summary

Picking up where we left off, then Cup playoffs and final 2020

Chapter Notes

Just to throw this out here because no one (and that's literally NO ONE) has commented on this: #5 won the cup in chapter 5. #14 won the cup in chapter 14.

So anyway, it's chapter 24, and there's a cup. But that could mean nothing.

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

Ilya hangs up the phone and takes a deep breath. Did Shane just sort of ask him to rig the cup?

There's no way Ilya could do that, not with Scott Hunter and Roger Crowell breathing down his neck from two different sides like the world's oldest orgy. Right?

But Shane is right— Crowell isn't going to let Montreal win after this, knowing that Shane, the supposed Ringleader, is pissed at the league and potentially ready to come out. Montreal sounds like they're mad, so they'll probably tell Crowell right away. Or Crowell will ask why Melnyk hasn't resigned. He's going to find out. Ilya opens the recording Shane sent him.

He listens to Shane get more and more angry, the GM and Melnyk raising their voices at each other. Shane is standing up for this kid, and Ilya's heart clenches. It sounds like Shane is standing up for *them*. He's saying the exact right things, obliterating his team's management. He's being so brave, and passionate... On his third try, Ilya can finally make it all the way through the recording without jerking off. When Shane video calls later that night, there is no discussion of any of this, just more of that.

The next day, Melnyk meets with the players' union representative, a bumbling idiot who slings sexist insults on the ice. The union can protect Melnyk a little bit, ensuring he doesn't get fired for being gay and ensuring his workplace conditions are adequate even when the team wants to retaliate. Ilya could tell by the recording of the meeting, the union is reluctant to help. The majority of the league, and therefore the players' union, is still homophobic. If he wanted to change the union, Ilya would have to get a majority vote. It might not happen in his lifetime.

Cooper Lee is a lot more helpful. The lawyer sifts through Melnyk's contract, the union materials, employment law... There's no way Montreal can *make* Melnyk resign. They can maybe make his job unbearable in the meantime, despite the union's most mediocre efforts.

The request Shane made haunts Ilya even 24 hours later. They didn't talk about it when Shane called him back, but Ilya can't ignore it. Scott Hunter's warning about public perception echoes loudly in Ilya's skull. So, when Ilya needs someone to talk him out of it, he knows exactly who to call.

Hunter has been overly apologetic all season, acting like a clingy puppy asking if Ilya needs help with anything, sending Ilya and Shane wedding presents... But possibly most importantly, he actually took it upon himself to put together the damn retiree army. Ilya had been sitting on that growing list for 2 years, and Scott got them organized. This works pretty well, since the old guys usually reach out to Hunter, as he's the public face. Hunter decided he'd hand the reins to Eric Bennett because he'll be retired in a few weeks, and Bennett and Price can actually run the thing. Price isn't super on board, but his boyfriend Fabian is. They're planning a cup pact of their own for next season; if a retiree has a connection with a cup-winning team and they're not already out publicly, they'll come out too. Retired players also inhabit a privileged position, no longer bound by fear of losing their jobs. If anyone needs to speak out against the league, it's retired players. Ilya can't wait to join those ranks and say all of these things out loud.

With all the consistent updates on that project, Ilya and Scott are back to normal. So, knowing it could drag them back to a darker time in their... ugh fine—*friendship*... Ilya is terrified to call the man asking this question.

"Can I rig the cup for Shane?"

Scott laughs on the other end of the line. Then he sighs, "Why break tradition?" And Ilya laughs too.

Ilya explains the situation that unfolded yesterday: Montreal wanted to axe Melnyk, Shane came out and said he's married to another player (Scott gasps a scandalized "*No!*"), and now they're next to positive Crowell is going to find a way to tank Montreal.

"Ilya... you're going to kill me," Scott warns. "But I think we have to ask Cooper Lee."

"Ugh, fine." Ilya groans. "You used to be fun."

"When?"

They call the lawyer, who has already talked to Melnyk and Shane, and knows the specifics probably even better than Ilya.

"I have to agree with Scott, Ilya, you cannot be seen even thinking about organizing a scheme here," Lee says definitively.

“But...?” Ilya asks hopefully.

“No. Full stop. You just can’t. I think you should be considering Shane’s long-term hockey legacy, as you clearly don’t care about your own.”

Ilya wants to object, but it’s basically true. There have been dozens of times in the last few years he’s chosen this bizarre hobby over hockey. Shane never has, until now.

Scott is the one who stands up to Cooper, “Crowell is going to rig the cup, though.”

“Not necessarily,” Cooper argues. “First of all, we don’t even know if Montreal is planning to tell him about Shane. Like you said, Crowell might try to lose them the cup, so it would be stupid for them to tell him. Shane doesn’t know whether Montreal’s bigotry or obedience would come before their will to win. Second, he’s being investigated, there is literally no way he could do that.”

“He will try.” Ilya is positive. He’s also oddly jealous. It sounds like Shane ranted to Cooper for a while if he heard Shane’s full spiral. Knowing Cooper and Shane, they probably envisioned every possible negative turn of events. Ilya’s surprised they came to more positive conclusions than he had. He’s surprised they ever got off the phone.

“Ok. Hear me out,” Scott says, “If he tries, he’ll use the same methods, right? I’ve been trying to think of anything else he could use, and I can’t. So if we know they’re coming, maybe just... thwart him?”

“What is thwart? It sounds sexual.”

“Oh my god...” Scott sounds exhausted, “Just like... stop him.”

“That isn’t the worst idea you two have ever had,” Cooper says. “I can try to get in touch with his investigators, too, to warn them that he’s going to try something, maybe ask for a contact so we know if he’s got a plan.”

Ilya doesn’t even need to consider this for long, “No. You do not talk to the investigators, you are associated with us. Kavita will do it.” Kavita has been blowing up his phone since the RogueMLH posts last night anyway, and there’s been no official news on Melnyk’s status after his coming out post, so he knows he can trade her a scoop or exclusive interview with Melnyk for this favor. “In the meantime. Hunter, call Crowell. Tell him if Montreal drops or benches or even insults Melnyk, three players will come out.”

Hunter scoffs, “Who agreed to that?”

“No one yet.” But Ilya knows at least three would be willing to do it for Melnyk. Hell, it sounds like *Shane* might be willing to do it. He tamps down the memory of that recorded meeting one more time.

They hang up the phone with their game plans. Ilya texts every guy in his kith individually, even the ones he’s been able to put into group chats from events. Within a half hour, he has six players agreeing to come out if the circumstances require it. Good players, too. He

contacts Kavita for the investigator's information, giving her the Ringleader burner email address. He texts Melnyk and tells him to give Kavita whatever he can when she calls. The kid has been lying low on social media and public appearances, and Ilya can't help but think it's because he embarrassed Rivera so hard with the initial post. Still, Melnyk agrees to work with Kavita, especially since Ilya just saved his job.

The playoffs are great. Ottawa obviously didn't make it, but it means Ilya can do so much more without his pesky full-time hockey job distracting him. He has his hands full working with the investigators to thwart the commissioner's efforts.

First, Crowell's assistant, Bianca, records Crowell's half of a phone call to the referees asking for help. That gets thrown to the investigators, who immediately remind the referees they would be committing several crimes to follow any instructions like that. Ilya pockets the recording for himself, too, saving it in the same folder as the rest.

Then, staff in two separate hockey arenas report lax security in the first round of playoffs. They've unofficially been informed to allow an unusual list of things that are ordinarily contraband: whistles, laser pointers, etc. Ilya has Yuna inform their staff members to ignore those orders. When Yuna inquires, similar messages come in from other arena staff and equipment personnel, both of whose ranks have grown in the last year.

When they are still receiving reports like this in the second round of playoffs, Ilya gets some various members of Kip's new WAG army to actually record the agents letting people in with vuvuzelas at the gate. He sends those videos to the investigators. He also sends them to Crowell, with the note: "We are everywhere, and we see you. Five people, or one big one, will come out at the cup, regardless of the winner, if it doesn't stop."

Last time, the league also used coaching errors. But the only team they want to see losing is Montreal, and with Shane as captain, they can't really get away with that. When Theriault looks like he's going to put up someone weird, Shane gives him a look like he's watching. In this way, it's nice that Crowell thinks Shane is the Ringleader. Still, the other conference is being affected to optimize Montreal's opponent should they make it to the cup finals. With some trepidation, Ilya goes back to Reddit.

***u/RogueMLH** is requesting a chat*

u/RogueMLH: hello

u/RogueMLH: commissioner is rigging the cup again, need your help

u/RogueMLH: document all plays that look like a coaching error and post them

u/sir1589shelf: still can't really believe this...

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r: Aye aye sir 😊

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r: lot has happened. Sir Shelf is now the mod, we kicked out the Crowell plants

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r: commissioner is always rigging things what else is new

u/LiveBreatheHockey: yeah we tried to keep you posted but it was basically a coup.

u/LiveBreatheHockey: gram, we've been through this, you have to stop saying everything's rigged because it's hurting our actual credibility when things actually are.

u/RogueMLH: You are doing good. But coaching errors, especially against or by Montreal or teams that might play them.

u/LiveBreatheHockey: why Montreal? 🙄

u/sir1589shelf: how do you know you're really rogueMLH?

u/RogueMLH: are you asking me for proof?

u/RogueMLH: have you checked up your ass?

u/RogueMLH has left the chat

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r: fucking again with this guy???

u/sir1589shelf: literally just stay in the chat wtf!

u/LiveBreatheHockey: legend.

Now with the Reddit, staff, and WAG armies activated, with his crack team of investigators, journalist, and lawyer, Ilya spends every day doing exactly what he wants to be doing, which is waging war with Crowell.

The tension Shane usually feels during playoffs is clearly diluted with everything else going on, and he's playing perfectly while maintaining a level head. Ilya has seen him calmly reading through a statement he's writing on his Notes app when they're heading off to bed because they're in the same place.

That's the best change from last year: Ilya is *here*. He lives at Shane's Montreal apartment during the playoffs, treating his husband to anything he needs. Shane's parents can't tell if it's the pandemonium or Ilya's presence, but they say he's better than they've ever seen him during a playoff run. And he's playing like it.

There's one other change that could be contributing to Shane's mood. Shane *really* didn't need to stand up for Melnyk by telling him he's married to another player. The team management thinks he was lying and is willing to forget he made the declaration.

But Shane isn't. Shane, knowing he could be just weeks from coming out anyway, stops trying to hide it, and even from the outside you can tell, it's freeing for him. When asked why he's not celebrating a win with the rest of the team, he says he's going back to his *husband*. He wears his ring and only keeps it on a chain when he's playing. He answers calls in the locker room. He tells stories about his husband. Ilya is happy to help him show up to the locker room with loads of hickies. He does everything he can except come straight out and say it's Ilya Rozanov. Sure Hayden knows who it is, and JJ has some suspicions from

working at the Heart Eyes Summer Camp, but the rest of the team just assumes his husband is very much not a player.

Except Melnyk, who has clearly been discussing this with Rivera and now believes there's a *possibility* Shane and Ilya are telling the truth. It's not until the second round of playoffs that he fully understands.

Melnyk: So wait are you married to Hollander?

Ilya: Is there a delay?

Ilya: It has been two weeks since he told you.

Melnyk: No but like when did that happen?

Ilya: last summer.

Melnyk: so me and Mateo are still first PROLAPSE couple, right? Lovers? Sexually Engaged?

Melnyk: we got together in 2016.

Jesus. *How?* Ilya still wants to know. But he also can't have this kid thinking he's the first relationship in queer hockey. He knows Hunter's weird warning about not telling anyone this timeline, but if the kids already know about them, and they might be the only two on the planet who understand, Ilya decides to let him in. PROLAPSE is for Lovers, Sexually Engaged. Ilya knows Shane doesn't like the term Lovers, but that's what they've been from the beginning.

Ilya: then no. we were first PROLAPSE.

Melnyk: When?

Ilya: before you were born

Melnyk: right I forgot you're 900 years old

Montreal keeps advancing, round after round until they've won a spot in the finals. It's past the time Ilya would check in with his players about their plans, so with some apprehension, he starts. Nashville will face Montreal for the cup, and #26 is ready to go with a very conservative statement online, nothing else. He told his team when they advanced to the final round and the management has been relatively fine if he keeps it as low-key as possible. However, they did ask him if he is with another player. "I told them that's the grossest thing I could possibly imagine," #26 told Ilya at the beginning of the series, "No offense, if..." he trailed off, as if waiting for Ilya to confirm or deny whatever rumor or suspicion he has.

"I will tell Melnyk you think he is gross."

And Ilya checks in with Shane during breakfast on the morning of game 3, Montreal's first home game of the final series. Shane is still eerily zen about the whole thing, and Ilya would

be worried about him tanking the cup, but it seems like he's playing harder than he has in his life. So Ilya asks about the plan.

"I'm mad, Ilya." Shane responds bluntly, and Ilya's heart sinks. He never meant to make Shane do this, it wasn't supposed to be a death sentence for him. Shane must notice his pained face because he quickly corrects, "No! Not at you, obviously. Never at you." He cups his hand briefly on Ilya's face. "At fucking everything. It's so hard, we're playing so well, and they're still trying to fucking fix the games, right?" Ilya nods to confirm this. "It's not right. And for what? So I'm mad. I don't want to win the cup for fucking Montreal, but I have to, because after this I want to leave." He breathes like he just sprinted. "And you're helping us?"

This one, Ilya has to correct. Shane shouldn't believe his boyfriend is rigging a cup for him, because really he's not. He's using his army to thwart— non-sexually— the efforts against Montreal. "No, Shane, this is all you."

He looks surprised. "Huh. We've been doing really well."

"You have." Ilya smiles. He loves being reminded he married the second best hockey player in the league. "So... the plan?"

Shane stares at Ilya's face, clearly trying to read it. "Before I tell you my solo plan... do you want to do this with me?"

Yes. Of fucking course, Ilya wants to. He wants to go and fuck Shane on the ice after they win, make Hunter's kiss look stupid. He wants to do interviews and photoshoots with Shane, which Scott has been setting up for whoever comes out. He wants to post his own statement with his own filthy, funny acronyms that put Melnyk's to shame. He wants to speak at the MLH awards and say it was him the whole time.

But... "I can't do that, Hollander."

Shane looks sad, but not surprised. They hadn't talked much about it, but it's been assumed all season that Ilya wouldn't and Shane might. "Ok. In that case. I have a statement— Not just about me, but about... all of this." Shane must see some horror, or excitement, on Ilya's face, "No, not *you*. I mean, you're in there, but no, not... no." Shane breathes. "My mom will post it. But I've been thinking... regardless of who comes out, Nashville is a little shitty to their players, Montreal is very shitty... I don't want jersey sales going to either of those teams."

"You will sell a lot of jerseys as a 3-time cup champion," Ilya points out, and Shane's eyes glaze over at the prospect just like they do every time he says those last few words.

"Right. But what if we printed our own? We can't use our last name or jersey number, because they're property of the MLH, but with our real number, the number you gave us. The Irina Foundation could raise a lot of money this way. Kip said the WAGs have people who print jerseys for them sometimes—"

"—you have talked to Kip about this?"

Shane looks shy, “You had a lot on your plate, Ilya.”

Ilya looks at him incredulously, “You are in the *playoffs*, Shane.” Shane just shrugs.

So even though they have an army of nearly 400 people awaiting the day’s instructions, and game 3 of the 2020 cup finals to play in a few hours, Shane and Ilya work together instead. They consider how this will look to Crowell, seeing as he thinks Shane is the Ringleader but that Ilya is a “good guy”. They decide they don’t care.

By the night of the seventh game, the jerseys have been designed and they are ready to take orders.

Shane squats down for probably the last face-off of the series and the season. There’s just a few seconds left on the clock, and Montreal leads by two. Shane has been crushing it this whole playoff run, propelled by the hatred for his situation and the joy of seeing his husband thriving. The puck drops, and they’re off. Shane is pretty sure he knows who would have come out for Nashville, and he shoots him an apologetic look as the seconds tick down. But soon there’s no time to think about that or anything else, because he is a three-time cup champion. He doesn’t even hear the buzzer, he’s being enveloped by his screaming team.

Chapter End Notes

Eeeee!!

#26 is on Nashville

Last time the season ended, I treated it a little like a season finale and took a few days to catch my breath and wrap my head around what comes next, catch up a little. I think it’s a good idea here, too. So update end of the week, like Friday/Saturdayish. Updates about updates are usually on Tumblr.

Chapter 25: Box Suite

Chapter Summary

The night of the Cup Finals 2020

Chapter Notes

I hope we all enjoyed the extra two days! Thanks for your patience. I am caught back up and almost too excited for everything that's coming.

CW for this chapter: briefest reference to sexual abuse/assault (Dallas Kent)

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

Ilya knows it's probably a stupid idea to put himself on display like this, but he planned for everything. Not being in this building would be worse than death, so Ilya is in the building.

He's sitting in a box suite with Hunter and Kip, Vaughan and his girlfriend Gloria, Hayes, Rivera, Marly, some of the queer cavalry, some Ottawa teammates, some ally army, Harris, Yuna and David, Svetlana, Rose Landry... it would almost be easier to list people *not* in the room. Altogether there are 25 people on varying degrees of the Kinsey scale. Ilya invited a perfect combination of people to keep any nosy onlookers guessing. They are as safe as they can be, albeit on display, surrounded by 30,000 fans and cameras, at game 7 of the Nashville vs. Montreal cup finals.

The box was booked under the Irina Foundation name, so people probably assume it's Shane's friends and family. After tonight it won't matter so much that Shane is publicly associated with so many queer people.

The guys are gossiping and laughing, the loud rowdiness drowning out even the announcers. A few minutes ago, Roger Crowell's assistant poked her head in as if to tell them to quiet down, but upon seeing who it was, laughed and whispered "I wish I could be in here," and returned to the neighboring box. Crowell is sitting one wall away. Incredible.

Ilya can't take his eyes off of Shane. Luckily the Montreal bench is a bit obstructed, so Ilya is able to look away sometimes when Shane is off the ice. Most of the box knows Shane is gay, so they're rooting for Montreal. No one knows about #26 on Nashville and Ilya can't help but think the man likes it that way, so he's rooting for Montreal as well.

Like that's the actual reason.

No, the actual reason is now scoring his second goal of the game, in the third period, putting Montreal ahead by two. The box erupts when Shane scores, and the camera on the jumbotron shows his celebration and then cuts to Yuna and David watching from the Irina box, Ilya Rozanov and several others visibly celebrating in the shot. This is why the plan was risky. Ultimately, though, worth it to be surrounded by people who know him and hide in plain sight for an evening to support his husband. What's the point of three years of work if he can't clap in public when Shane scores a goal?

As Shane hits the bench again, Ilya turns his head to see Rivera with a matching face. Ilya almost forgot that he has someone on the ice too. He's wearing a custom rush-ordered #13 jersey in red and blue with the Irina Foundation logo on the front. Rivera's team did terribly this season, despite having won the cup the year before, so he's been living in Montreal at Melnyk's house since the playoffs started. In five minutes, Rivera and Shane's parents will head downstairs to the corral with all the other families who are allowed on the ice.

Ilya sighs thinking about it. Yes, it hurts. Obviously. Shane spent an entire afternoon in bed—during the playoffs—coddling Ilya about this. Ilya didn't ask him to, and he was trying not to let his feelings distract Shane. He knows he should be over the moon excited for his husband, and he is, but Shane obviously saw past his front. The comfort was effective; Ilya is 90% overjoyed for his husband, only 10% dreading this.

They have a plan. Yuna is going to hit Post on a statement from Shane, which, in a first for his cup winners, Ilya hasn't actually seen yet. Ilya will hit Post for the Irina Foundation's advertisement for their new jerseys. Or, more accurately, *Scott Hunter* will hit post. Scott has Ilya's phone tonight, as the damned thing was threatening to explode with the number of text threads blowing up. Apparently, for the queer brigade sitting on their couches it doesn't matter that Ilya's ring is safely on his chain, tucked in his shirt, he just *looks* like he's married to a player on the ice.

Vaughan and Hayes are taking over Pike's duties for the ally army. Their squadrons are all ready to go on social media. They were told it might be a big celebrity, the post might say he's in a relationship with another player, and the comments might have some racially-charged negativity in addition to the standard homophobia. Luckily the allies already have a flowchart for how to deal with each of these intersections. But the high-profile nature of Shane's celebrity means there will much more to handle, so the staff army is joining their ranks for the evening to try and lighten the load. Regardless of what they plan, it will be chaos. If Shane comes out tonight, it will break the internet.

The clock must be ticking down but Ilya can't take his eyes off Shane for long enough to know. He jumps when a hand is on his back.

David Hollander is there when he briefly looks up. "We're going to head down there." Ilya knows both Yuna and Shane told the man not to add "*Last chance to come with!*" but it's written all over his face. Rivera nods and pats Ilya's back sympathetically, too. If anyone in the room didn't already know about Ilya and Shane, it would be increasingly hard to keep it secret. Yuna hugs him and Ilya returns to his spot watching Shane like a hawk. He hears the

door open and close. The room is no less boisterous; it's not like the Hollanders and Rivera were adding to the noise level.

The noise provides some privacy when Scott takes Rivera's place by Ilya's side. "You ok?"

"Yes." Ilya says truthfully. Then, because he's an asshole, "I know he will win because we fixed the game."

"Careful. Crowell's next door." Scott grins.

"Should we go and say hello?" Ilya looks away from the ice for a nanosecond to tilt his head in the direction of Crowell's box. They both laugh.

Montreal is still ahead when the final buzzer sounds.

Four people pounce to hug Ilya, or just jostle him around in jubilation, he can't tell. He's darting his eyes back and forth from the ice to the Jumbotron, whichever might have a better view of Shane Hollander once he is unearthed from the pile of ecstatic hockey players.

Scott shows him he's hitting Post on the Irina Foundation account and they all refresh Shane's Instagram page simultaneously. It takes a second to load. This man really is going to break the internet.

@ShaneHollanderHockeyPlayer

[image: Shane's hand with a wedding ring holding a Pride puck]

So proud of my guys! Cup champions!!! We'll be celebrating for months but tonight is also about something else. It does not take away our win, it is not meant to distract. In my opinion, this tradition has added to the excitement of the last three cups.

It's finally my turn to announce I am a #Schumem Award winner! 🏳️‍🌈🏳️‍🌈🏳️‍🌈 I am the 6th #FRIEND in the #PHPGBQU #CIRCUS. I've been #BORING since this whole thing started (until recently), so I know better than to try and name anything in a hashtag.

Thanks and love to my parents and my friends for their support. Thanks to #1 for being our Dad. "Thanks" to #13 for making sure I had to do it this year (and showing me what acronyms not to use). Above all, thanks to the Ringleader. This movement has been so impactful to watch from the very beginning, and I am so proud of all of us.

No thanks at all to a league who doesn't want players like me, and who thinks two guys in love can't play against each other. It's insulting. When we are on the ice, we are at work, and we do our jobs regardless of who we love. If you haven't noticed, we do pretty well. #1314 aren't the only ones. There are probably more we don't even know about.

The Irina Foundation is proud to be working with the Ringleader and company to launch #BuyOurJerseys. The MLH owns our name and numbers, but they don't own our queer order number. If you were in the market for a Hollander jersey but don't want to contribute to the bigoted league, you can now order a #6 Irina Foundation jersey. Choose from #1, #5, #8, #11, #12, #13, #14, #27, #28, #29 and now me, #6. All proceeds go to the Foundation's fund for LGBTQ mental health charities. Buy Our Jerseys Without Outrageous League Bigotry!

Finally, thank you to my husband, love of my life.

Scott turns to Ilya, who has no idea what his face must be doing. "What is BORING? Did he tell you?"

The room gets quiet while everyone waits for a reply. The gay army knows this is important, so they shush the allies and partners in the room.

"He did not tell me." Ilya disappoints them, "He *is* boring, though."

"Not anymore. Crowell is going to lose his shit."

The families come out onto the ice, and Ilya watches as Shane's mom gives him a little handheld rainbow flag. When the Jumbotron pans to Shane, the box can see: attached to the flag is a single white lily.

Rivera runs to Melnyk and they share a messy, smiling kiss. When they separate and finish gazing into each other's eyes with huge grins, Rivera approaches Shane. He hugs him and clearly whispers something in his ear. Shane pulls back and looks directly up at the box, grinning from ear to ear. He waves and the Jumbotron shows his eyes welling up. This man cries at the drop of a hat, Ilya thinks with watering eyes.

Shane holds his hand out to his mom and she gives him his phone. Shane types for a minute and then looks back to the box. Ilya asks Scott for his phone. He has a text already waiting for him.

Jane: Boyfriend Of Rozanov, Internationally Notorious Gay-wrangler

It's so stupid. Shane doesn't have the practice these other guys have. It's not a good one, Ilya is even surprised Shane posted it. It's so dumb that Ilya lets himself cry a little bit. About how dumb it is.

Ilya and Scott sit at the edge of their seats to watch as Crowell hands his husband the Cup. Crowell couldn't even pretend to look happy about it, his normal scowl forming a full-blown frown, and his face a purplish red. This is the first captain to come out since Scott Hunter, and Crowell now has to shake the hand that was on Ilya's dick just this morning. Amazing.

Crowell leans in to say something in Shane's ear and Shane pales before straightening his shoulders and shrugging. He turns back to smile at the cameras.

While Shane is hoisting the trophy above his head with tears in his eyes, Ilya is oblivious to the other guys talking, the announcers' commentary piped in through the speakers, the phones dinging and buzzing everywhere. It's not until Shane hands the cup off to Pike that noise starts filtering back in.

He looks behind him to see the guys are all hunched over someone's phone.

Ilya looks at Scott and nods to them, "What is that?"

"They're on Grindr. Apparently the shit-for-brains owner of this team didn't think to take down his picture before entering a stadium filled with people who know his face."

"Get a screenshot." Ilya says with a flip of his hand and turns back to watch Shane watching J.J. hoisting the cup.

"Manners, Rozanov." Scott rolls his eyes but Ilya hears him directing whoever to send him a screenshot.

"The guy is married!" Someone else giddily calls from across the room as other people chime in with details about the Montreal team owner. Trust a group of queer men and a group of allies who have now been trained on social media to find every detail about this guy's life in thirty seconds. Ilya almost wants to detach his eyes from his husband to see if Scott Hunter and Kip are grinding on each other from the gossip.

That night, after Ilya is sure he's watched every word out of Shane's mouth in post-game interviews, Scott thinks they all need to stop refreshing the comments on Shane's page and let the allies and staff at home do their jobs. Ilya moves the party of two dozen people to Shane's place while Shane is out with his team.

Kip, Vaughan and Gloria, Hayes, Harris, and #10 are standing in a circle, talking about Dallas Kent. The guys are all wondering how the man isn't in prison for being a serial abuser. Gloria is explaining to them why women might not come forward, how broken the system can be for victims.

"It's scary to try to do it on your own," Gloria says, "But if one women sees more coming forward, she might be more likely to press charges or speak out."

"Can the WAG army recruit these women?" Ilya asks Kip but also Gloria. If he were Kip, he would put Gloria in charge.

"How would we find them?" Kip replies.

"Maybe he has an ex-girlfriend who might know some of them?" Hayes suggests to Gloria.

“I don’t even know how we’d find an ex-girlfriend,” Vaughan says.

“Actually?” Harris cuts in. “I might be able to help with that.” He pulls out his phone.

#10 stops him. “Wait. You can’t tell anyone or, like, post it right now.”

“No! I won’t. I just... I kind of know Dallas Kent’s best friend?” Harris says, staring at his phone. Ilya exchanges a look with Hayes. Maybe Kip and Gloria aren’t informed as to who Dallas Kent’s best friend is, but Ilya sure as hell is.

He narrows his eyes at Harris and slowly asks, “You... know his best friend?” Ilya recalls Troy Barrett on the phone with him, Harris, and Shane, explaining how the league’s rigged interference affected known assholes. He knows Barrett texted with Harris a little to clarify some details— or did they call? Ilya puts one finger atop Harris’s phone and pushes it away from his face to look him in the eye. “What do you mean you know his best friend?”

Harris looks at Ilya and then shrugs shyly, “I know Troy. He helped us, remember?”

“Yes. I remember he helped us one year ago. You are talking to him still?”

Harris resumes poking at his phone with his thumbs, turning a little pink. “We text. Sometimes.”

Kip’s eyes begin to glisten as he picks up the subtext here. Ilya almost wants to call Hunter over so Kip can’t use this gossip as foreplay later.

“Who is Troy?” Gloria asks with the same facial expression as Kip.

Ilya waits. Harris needs to dig himself out of this one, and he stumbles over his words as he does, “He’s just a hockey player. Forward with Toronto.” Harris squeaks. “He knows Dallas.”

Everyone instantaneously pairs off to exchange looks. Ilya sees thousands of things wrong with this but he starts with the obvious, “He is in a relationship, Harris.”

“Ummm,” Harris shifts uncomfortably, “He’s not. I think you actually said something to him?”

Ilya did actually tell him his relationship might not be as monogamous as he thought. He’s secretly glad his cryptic texts were understood. Even if Barrett is an asshole, he still shouldn’t be double-timed. Ilya glances around the large circle of people who don’t know about this very closeted asshole. He desperately wants to know what’s going on fully, but he can settle for Harris’s side. “So... you are trying to seduce him?”

“Ilya!” Harris cries so loud, the other people in the very loud room look over. “No! I don’t even think he knows what I look like! I just... text him. Some days.”

“Some *days*??” Gloria latches onto the gossip, “How often?”

Ilya starts to worry this conversation is outing Barrett when #10 looks like there might be more to this story and asks “Does he respond?”

Harris might have the same concern as he avoids the question. “What am I asking him again?”

Kip rolls his eyes, “Oh my god. See if he knows if Kent is abusing women, but he can’t ask Kent about it! We don’t want him to get ahead of any allegations.”

“Ok.” Harris types. His phone buzzes, and he giggles. Everyone looks around in amusement. It’s hard not to be invested in whatever’s going on here. “Ok. He says congratulations to you, Ilya, and... well that’s not nice...” Harris trails off, “It’s about Shane.” He furrows his brow, types again.

Ilya rolls his eyes, unsurprised. “Harris, he is never nice. The man is a rodent.” The phone buzzes again and Harris snorts.

“Ok then why did this *rodent* just immediately believe me when I told him about the women?”

It feels a bit like a surprise party when Shane comes back to his apartment a little earlier than expected with Hayden, J.J., Melnyk, and Rivera in tow. A cheer emanates from the whole room.

“You’re back early, 3-Time Cup Winner,” Ilya steps up to greet Shane as he comes in. He itches to touch him and greet him the way a 3-Time Cup Winner should be greeted. But that would still shock half this room. It would confirm a lot of suspicions. It’s a fairly safe room, but it would raise eyebrows about their integrity, their individual legacies. Shane just posted that he has a *husband*. It would out Ilya as his *husband*.

“People were assholes,” Shane breathes. He must feel the same itch, but with the adrenaline from the night still radiating out of him, he reaches out, pulls Ilya close, and kisses his husband in front of 25 people. All of the cat-calls and whooping sound a lot like Ilya’s plan working.

RASHYCOCK + DICK COMA + PENIS + Roz group chat
Jane has been added to the group

Oldest Man Alive: Welcome Hollander!!

Oldest Man Alive: Thanks for hosting some of us last night!

Fredericks: wasn’t hollander already in here?

Fredericks: why do I feel like he already came out?

Fredericks: too many people in here

Bennett: don't be a dick

Bennett: congratulations!

Lundin: #BORING? we gotta know.

Ilya: that is just who he is as a person.

Melnyk: gotta agree I'm pretty sure it's just a good self-description

Melnyk: he could have just left PHPGBQU

Melnyk: saying boring is the same thing

Baldwin: God. I hate that there are two Rozanovs now.

Rivera: Congrats! I think Hollander has it right.

Rivera: it's good branding to just stick with ones we've already used.

Lundin: omg take your nose out of his ass before his husband gets upset

Jane: Thanks everyone! Sorry, I'm just really overwhelmed by everything right now.

Jane: But Ilya is right, I felt pretty boring not coming up with my own acronym.

Jane: You guys are better at it anyway.

Melnyk: you should have asked for help!

Melnyk: Wholesome Half-Asian Captain Kissing Our Fearless Founder

Rivera: am I allowed to leave the chat?

Oldest Man Alive: Well that's something that everyone just knows now?

Fredericks: Wait is that true?

Wagner: ???

Bennett: Hollander's post says he's married so I think it's just Melnyk being dumb

Lundin: I mean the post says he's married to another player....

Baldwin: No it doesn't.

Melnyk: Oh my god it doesn't.

Melnyk: Oops.

Fredericks: Rozanov and Hollander real quiet

Rivera: I'm sure they're just both not checking their phones.

Baldwin: I think that might be your answer.

Price: Fabian wants to know if Hollander spelled BLOWJOB backwards in his post on purpose?

Ilya: he WHAT

Chapter End Notes

SHANE HOLLANDER RASHYCOCK

(The contact names are the way we would see them in Ilya's phone, Shane and Scott probably both have different names in everyone else's phones lol)

#10 was one of the queer folks at the party with them, in the Dallas Kent gossip circle.

I've gotten some requests for an acronym glossary, so while we don't have too many numbers today, let's get some of those:

RASHYCOCK: for cup-winners who come out with the cup (Scott, Baldwin, Rivera, Shane)

DICK COMA: for coming out at the MLH awards (Fredericks, Wagner)

PENIS or CUMSLUT: for coming out in the middle of the year due to Noncompliance, Ill-timing, or Scandal (Price, Bennett)

PROLAPSE: for players who are lovers/sexually engaged (#1314, Hollanov)

FIRMASS: for those still in the closet, secretly sucking (named for Ilya, oof)

You can always Ctrl+F in the entire work to get their actual sentence!

Coming up: Aftermath, MLH awards!

Chapter 26: Scott Hunter, Politician 2020

Chapter Summary

Post-cup 2020 and MLH awards

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your ongoing patience with me! I have one more busy week at real-work and then I'll be a lot more free to fic at my leisure.

Happy State of the Gay Union to you! Shane POV in the second portion!

CW: Dallas Kent related discussions. I like that this is code now for anyone who needs it.

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

Shane is by far the biggest hockey celebrity to come out, so he does indeed break the internet with his statement. Luckily, the encouraging voices outnumber the shitheads. Just like Ilya predicted 3 years ago, actual fans are more interested in the *three cups in 6 years* aspect of it all. Obviously there are racists who make it their job to torture Shane online. That's always been true for him, and now that there are homophobes as well, it seems like just more of the same. Ilya's ally army is equipped to handle both, so they do.

Shane grants Kavita an interview before anyone else, as she's been kind to them. It gets published online fast and after that, Shane does the regular morning shows and late night shows. The interviewers are given lists of subjects they cannot touch, and a strict warning that if they skirt the list, they will not be given another RASHYCOCK interview. Not in those words, of course. They can't ask about Shane's husband's career or whether he has personal experience dating another player. If they were frustrated by how little Rivera shared last year, they weren't prepared for Shane Hollander, tight-lipped steel vault, where personal information goes to die. Even off-camera, when asked about his husband, Shane's face turns into a blank wall, daring them to ask again. He is a fluff reporter's worst nightmare.

He's doing this press because he has a message for hockey fans: there's no reason gay players shouldn't be allowed to play, even those players in relationships. He talks about Montreal trying to fire Melnyk at the league's behest, ensuring he is clear about the actual culprit. He might have to stay in Montreal until his contract runs out next year, so he's careful not to offend them, always bringing the blame back to the league. He plans to do the same at the

MLH awards in a few days.

Last year, Ilya decided the winner of the Playoff MVP trophy. It had to be Wagner, because he had to make a speech at the MLH awards. This year, it needed to go to Shane. But if Ilya is caught in repeat mischief pulling the strings, it would mean trouble. Scott Hunter's optics are not in favor of that option. But, with more goals than anyone and seeing how he's the captain of the winning team, it should go to Shane anyway.

So when Shane's fair-and-square win is announced on the night of the cup finals, it's a win for their legacy. If Ilya had spent the previous two weeks making sure Crowell wasn't stopping Shane's win, well that's no one's business.

All said, the first week after coming out could be much worse than constant pleasant media appearances and awards. In fact, there's bigger news than Shane.

Kip, Gloria, and Kyle have been busy with their own enterprise with their WAG army. As it turns out, Kip had vastly underestimated the need for sympathetic ears among woke WAGs. Women aren't treated very well in these athletic circles, and typical WAG culture is too conservative to complain. The vibe for a lot of them is more about supporting your husband through thick and thin. These ally WAGs can be much more vocal about their complaints in the safe space. They immediately form connections and by the end of the season, that group chat is by far the most active.

When they find Dallas Kent's ex-girlfriend through Troy Barrett, the group bands together for her. She has a graphic account to share but didn't think it was worth going to the police. She knows there are others, so the WAG army rallies to find them and lend support. Hayes tells them about the incident that led to his trade to Ottawa, and luckily he still remembers the woman's name. Two others come out of the woodwork once they start to ask around. Four women saying the same thing is different than just one, the WAGs hope. All four women are amenable to their stories being made public and informing the authorities. They work with Harris to post statements on RogueMLH. The names have been removed for the public, but the copies they send to the police are complete.

The WAGs want this to drop before the MLH awards. They want the audience and the league to have to squirm and make statements, confront the reality of the situation with minimal time to prepare. Dallas Kent is usually at the awards, will he get uninvited? How will he be treated?

Ilya just watches in awe, and a little horror, at what he facilitated. This army has done more to Dallas Kent in a weekend than Ilya's two-week campaign to physically hurt the man.

Once RogueMLH posts the stories, Ilya is able to direct all of his players and allies to promote these stories on their social media and speak out in any media appearances. Shane takes them up on it almost immediately in his burn-down-the-league press tour. Whether he wanted the attention off of himself or he wanted to draw attention to the women's stories and

stop Kent from doing it again... both things can be true. By the time the awards come around, the stories have made their rounds.

Dallas Kent is still invited to the awards, but he doesn't show up.

Standing in front of this room never gets easier. Shane knows his shaky breaths are getting picked up by the microphone, amplifying his anxiety for the entire room to hear.

"I am not a public speaker, and I'm not even close to being in charge of this thing. I am a good hockey player, though. I wanted to say that. Now that there are more of us out and you can go back to look at the names... Every year for a while, one of us has been up for MVP or Rookie of the Year or, well, any of them. Some people want us gone but... The league would be worse. Anyway, sorry I'll just— umm turn it over to the guy you actually want to see. Thanks again to my teammates, and my family, and the players in this group, and my husband..." Shane bites his lip to hide his smile and darts his eyes down to the wedding ring he can now wear in public, "It's good to say that. Ok." He recovers and looks off stage, "Hunter?"

The applause is a little less stunned this year as Hunter takes the podium. They must be expecting it at this point— it's the fourth year in a row Scott has addressed this crowd. It's the second time he's done it without a place on the schedule. Shane is honestly surprised they haven't received a memo with a changed rule or something.

"Thanks Hollander, and thank you to Shane's husband," Scott says into the microphone before turning to Shane and adding, in front of everyone, "Congratulations on the wedding."

"Only took you a year," Shane grumbles, luckily only quietly picked up by the mic.

Scott does a double take at Shane's retort, smiles broadly when he sees Shane is kidding, and then turns to the crowd, "Hollander is just mad that I'm taking Kip Grady off the market next month." Shane joins the room in laughing, but Shane laughs hard... it seems like maybe *too* hard for Scott's liking, really, so he dons a serious face and puts on his public speaking persona. Shane has to stand here next to him, that's the rule they've made up after going through decades of televised MLH awards to find a precedent. Shane doesn't know what to do with his hands. He puts them in his pockets. What is his face doing? Should he look at Scott or the crowd? He can't see the crowd through the spotlight, what if he's looking at someone weird? Where is Ilya sitting, maybe he can find him? The floor! He can look at the floor. That way it looks like he's listening, because he is. Really.

"...players getting brutalized on the ice and mistreated in locker rooms. But a new problem has popped up in just the last few months. We saw the league try to axe a couple of players from Washington and Montreal over their relationship. When word got around about Shane Hollander last fall, they asked something similar of Montreal if he came out. But it's weird—

When we spoke with Toronto this morning, they had received no similar instructions for their star center.” Shane shifts uncomfortably next to Scott. “If you’re saying it matters who a player is off the ice, then it should matter for everyone.”

After Scott’s full speech and the awards portion finishes, Shane breathes a sigh of relief and starts to leave for Ilya’s afterparty. Scott grabs his arm, “You have to stay, smile and shake nine hundred hands. Give it about ten minutes before we head out.” Shane nods. Scott’s done this a million times by now, he knows the protocol. Shane’s done it a million times, too, but not since they had somewhere else to be on a night like this.

Big crowds are awful, and Shane hates when all the attention is on him, but Scott seems to thrive. He’s in his element, shaking hands and laughing, quick quips back and forth with league execs he just chastised onstage. As long as they stick together, Shane can do ten minutes of this. Ten minutes, and they can see Ilya, and Ilya is going to eye-fuck him in his suit and make dirty faces across a room and it won’t matter as much if anyone sees. Maybe twelve minutes before Shane can pull him into a dark corner or bathroom and do something about this adrenaline.

“Mr. Hunter!” A reporter is approaching them and rudely cutting off Shane’s filthy train of thought. He looks between Scott and Shane, “Scott, you acted like you know Shane’s husband! What can you tell us about the mysterious Mr. Hollander?” A small mob has gathered and quiets to hear Scott’s answer. It feels a bit like a press conference or a post-game interview.

Scott looks at Shane and smiles, “I have met *Mr. Hollander*.” Shane tries to ignore the heat in his gut when he hears that name referring to Ilya, and pins it on a corkboard in the back of his brain for later. “Nicest guy on the planet. Worships the ground Hollander walks on, like that’s hard. They’re very cute. Am I allowed to say that?” Scott asks Shane for show.

Shane’s anxiety about the question melts and he nods. Scott calling Ilya the nicest guy on the planet is something else.

Another reporter cuts in before he can respond for himself. “Shane! Your post was a bit confusing, did you mean to say your husband is another player?” This is a question they’ve warned his interviewers not to ask on penalty of blacklist from the army. The post was vague on purpose. Shane swallows nervously. It seems like Scott isn’t going to help, so Shane just starts.

“The way the league treated Rivera and Melnyk was unacceptable. They asked my team to cut Melnyk because of who he’s involved with. This should be troubling to anyone. I’d prefer no questions about my husband’s career—”

“—and I think you know that,” Scott confirms to the reporter who nods sheepishly. Shane sees Scott’s eyes dart down to the press badge around their neck, clearly taking in the news agency who dared to defy the group’s boundaries. The other reporters notice too, the observant bunch they are. They ask a few more softball questions and, when the questions turn homophobically invasive as they always do, Scott leads Shane away from the press

section of the room. “Ok, I think we can head out in a minute. Usually there’s one more conversation...” Scott says, reaching into his pocket as he spots someone over Shane’s shoulder.

As he finishes his sentence, the conversation waddles up to them. Commissioner Crowell appears with his poor secretary behind him, weighed down by her leather bag. “Gentlemen.”

“Commissioner Crowell, nice to see you.” Scott says and holds out his hand. Shane distantly thinks, for the hundredth time tonight, what a good politician Scott would make.

“Hmm.” Crowell grunts in response, shaking Scott’s hand. “And Hollander?”

“Yes, sir.” But Shane is not about to shake his hand. He felt gross even doing it in exchange for the cup. He keeps his hands in his pockets and Crowell is content to forgo the handshake.

“You are number 6.” Crowell says. It’s not a question.

“Yes.” The number evokes a ton of feelings every time Shane hears it. First, pride in the movement and the identity that’s now attached to the number 6, an identity distinct from his name or his jersey number. But then, a small hit of jealousy that he wasn’t first. Or even second after Scott. It’s a good thing now, though, because it might have thrown Crowell’s suspicions. Shane panics for a moment thinking about Ilya, what number is he going to put if he ever comes out?

Crowell grunts again. “You let me talk to you like you were the leader.”

“I tried to tell you—”

“—who is it?” Crowell looks angry. He’s trying to stare a hole through Shane’s face and for once Shane is glad for all the times people have called him robotic. He knows his face doesn’t give too much away.

Luckily Scott takes over. “Sir, you are in touch with the leader of the group already. I know you’ve emailed, and I’ve even been the operator of a phone call. But it’s not Hollander.”

Crowell looks at Scott, “He said no one would come out at the cup.”

“We don’t control our players, sir,” Scott points out. “No one told Hollander to do this, in fact, I believe he made his plan clear to his team management at the beginning of the year.”

“That’s right,” Shane agrees with Scott, but he doesn’t know what they’re talking about. Did Ilya really tell the commissioner no one was going to come out at the cup? Still, Scott expertly fed Shane the plan with his response, so Shane can pick up on it, “I wasn’t asked to come out, I was just following the tradition.” It’s kind of true.

“What’s the point?” Crowell spits, “Are you people done? You got what you wanted. The league is gay, our fans are upset, I’m under investigation. What more do you want?”

Shane doesn’t know. When *will* Ilya be satisfied? He’s never really asked about the end goal here. Shane is worried for his own safety on the ice next season, he’s still worried about

Melnyk's contract, he's worried about Ilya. But really, they got what they came for, right? People are out, the conversation is started, right?

Luckily Scott knows how to respond. This is why Shane isn't in charge. "We need to be sure any progress doesn't leave when we do."

"So I just have to wait out you and your ringleader." Crowell looks satisfied.

"I think we'll have a shorter wait than you." Scott says smugly, and Shane almost turns to him in disbelief. This man is their *boss*. What is he doing? Is he always like this with him?

Crowell seems perturbed by this fact but not by Scott's demeanor. He changes the subject and asks the question Shane has already gotten. "And your *husband*," he says the word like it's an imaginary friend, "Is he a player in the league or not?"

Scott recognizes Shane's internal panic, "You don't have to— he doesn't have to answer that. He was just trying to stand up for these kids, you wanted to ruin their careers over a relationship?"

"We don't need these guys getting romantic in what's supposed to be a men's game."

"I thought they were men." Scott turns to Shane facetiously, "Did you know they aren't men? Kind of a defining characteristic of a gay relationship in a men's hockey league."

Shane is appalled that Scott is just speaking like this to the commissioner. He doesn't know what to do with that. Crowell does, "You know what I mean."

"What do you mean?" Scott asks. Shit. Shane should have been recording this. But the way Scott is acting... maybe he is? Shane makes eye contact with Crowell's secretary, standing two feet away looking bored. She sees his look and gives him a very subtle nod.

"Our fans, they like to watch actual men— *masculine* men." Shane involuntarily snorts, and Scott smiles at him. Even Crowell's secretary now looks amused. Crowell must realize what he's said because he immediately turns purple. He faces his secretary, "Didn't I have a call to take?"

She's quick to respond, "Yes. You can take it in the next room." He turns without any farewell and she follows after shooting a wink to Shane and Scott.

Scott pulls out his phone and hits 'stop' on a recording. Shane breathes a sigh of relief, "Ugh thank fuck because I forgot. He would have killed me."

"Oh yeah, I learned my lesson. Forgot once, it was a nightmare. I think Bianca saved me, though." Scott shudders, "I still haven't heard the end of it."

"So what the fuck was that? Aren't you scared of Crowell firing you?"

"Nah," Scott laughs and brushes a hand through the air, "He needs me. Plus, if you get him upset he says the dumbest shit for the tape. You know that, from last year."

“Right.” Shane is ready to walk over to the restaurant where Ilya has set up a discreet party of who knows how many queer players, but he has to ask, “About that question... What do you think is Ilya’s goal here? When is he done?” The question will distract him all night if he doesn’t ask. It probably will anyway. Shane can’t imagine Ilya’s life without this right now, he’s so passionate about this project. And Shane loves it for him. But surely it will reach a point where he doesn’t need to be doing it, right? What then?

Scott just studies Shane’s face for a minute, considering, “Let me ask you, are you scared of anything?”

He thinks for a second but he has a running tally, and he assumes Scott is only talking about things pertaining to this conversation. “I guess people will be dicks on the ice next year. And Melnyk and whoever else comes out might still get forced to early retirement. And it seems like it doesn’t even matter what we do, Crowell’s going to cheat.”

Scott nods and shrugs, “Ok, then he’s not done. And we have a party to get to.”

Chapter End Notes

I think this has the lowest Ilya content per volume we’ve ever seen, including the oops-all-OC chapter.

Coming up: non-hetero-after-party, DICK COMA, the Summer. More Ilya.

As always, updates on updates will be posted on my Tumblr, and I can pick up a more regular schedule again soon!

Chapter 27: Democracy, or The MLH Players' Union

Chapter Summary

Non-hetero after-party; after the after-after party

Chapter Notes

All hands on deck for DICK COMA!

Ilya is finally back on his morally-gray mastermind bullshit. Please remember: you kind of like him! Even when his target is your second favorite character.

If you are a nerd: I am too! The MLH players' union here is structured differently than the NHL's. See the bottom of the end notes for more details.

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

Ilya surveys his party of 20 queer soldiers socializing at their private MLH Awards after-party. The same venue agreed to the same conditions as last year, and they proved themselves to be trustworthy. Ilya pays them an exorbitant amount of money, so they better be. Scott Hunter sidles up to him, as usual, right on schedule, to comment on Ilya's pensive look. "Are you having the annual planning session in your head without me?"

Scott had just come in with Shane, and Ilya chose not to greet him like he usually does, knowing it would be impossible to resist lifting his husband up and carrying him to the bathroom. "Just thinking about how many words you said tonight."

"You're predictable," Scott quips but still looks concerned at Ilya's face.

Ilya sighs, watching Shane greet a circle of guys across the room, his wedding ring glittering on his hand. "We need another level."

"Ilya, you have, like, 6 armies at your disposal right now." Scott either doesn't notice or is accustomed by now to Ilya's eyes focused on Shane during a serious conversation. "I didn't even say the number of people we have tonight in the speech because it's too many. It's us, allies, staff, WAGs, retirees, the fucking internet, I think? ...It's a lot of people, Rozanov."

Ilya shakes his head. "None of them have any real power." He finally gives into Scott's eye contact, "Remember Cooper Lee told us to work with the union?"

"Yeah, and you basically told him to shove it?"

“Yes. I meant it. But they should have helped Melnyk more.” Ilya tilts his head, “We can get into the union, no? Rivera would run, he is such a nerd. Or even Shane—”

Scott scoffs. “You think we’re ever going to get majority support behind our guys? Look, we have people, but two-thirds of the players in the league still hate us. What, are you going to rig the election? Next you’ll tell me you’re going to get elected to the Board of Governors.”

“So maybe—” Ilya stops short. Why hadn’t he thought of this sooner? He has to say this out loud for the plan to coalesce in his mind, and for whatever reason, Scott Hunter has become his sounding board, so he says it. “Ok. There are some guys on my list who will never come out, cup or no. They make the bet and then pray every night they will not win. So if we put them up for the union, no one would know they are ours. And...” He’s always careful about outing people who have made the bet, but there’s one person in particular who *hasn’t* made the bet, who he could still tell at least Scott about, but suddenly he needs that guy’s trust. “Some... would win the assholes’ support, too.” Ilya hopes this doesn’t give too much away.

“Who!” Hunter’s eyes light up. “Who am I missing? I’ve tried to make a list— I have a spreadsheet of your numbers just based on hints...” Then his face falls as he remembers he’s talking to a locked box. “Ugh, fine. If it’s actually Dallas Kent, we’re going to have some issues.”

No, it’s his best friend. “Later.” They can’t talk about this here. Ilya rapidly changes the subject, the plan now fully formed in his head. “Now who is coming out this weekend? Three of these guys have volunteered.”

“Damn,” Scott whispers under his breath. “It’s been three years, and people are fighting over who *gets* to come out. That’s wild.”

Ilya agrees, and the magnitude of it is still astonishing. But he’s an asshole, he can’t tell Scott that. “Yes, we could get emotional, or we could pick a DICK COMA.”

“Uhh,” Scott turns to face the room beside Ilya. He nods over to the circle of laughter in the middle, “I don’t want Vinny Marcello in the group chat. You and Melnyk are bad enough. Can we hold off on that as long as possible?”

“He didn’t ask. He is waiting for the cup to kiss his boyfriend on TV. Derivative.”

“Who taught you *derivative*?”

“Kip did.” Ilya says smugly.

“God, I hate art history.” Scott says, but smiles affectionately. It’s adorable, Ilya wants to throw up. “Besides, Marcello said that like four boyfriends ago, I think he’s even had a girlfriend in that time too. I’m sure he would take any opportunity now. But good thinking, if we wait until New Jersey wins a cup, we’ll be safe from having him in the group chat for a while.” Ilya gives Scott a look. “Ok fine. You’re so into elections tonight, go take a vote. It’s not control of the union but it is...” Hunter sighs, “...DICK COMA.”

“Gather! Sit!” Ilya commands the room a few minutes later. Most are sitting already, and fucking Melnyk actually stands up when he hears the order. Rivera grabs his sleeve and tugs him back down. “We are going to have a vote. Three of you have offered yourselves to the outing gods of DICK COMA.”

“What the fuck is dick coma?” #37 asks loudly.

#16 scoffs, “If you don’t know, I feel bad for your partner.”

Right. If they’re not in the RASHYCOCK group chat, they wouldn’t know. It’s not as if anyone is putting DICK COMA on their coming out post.

“Daddy Ilya’s Celebrated King of Coming Out at the MLH Awards,” Wagner recites and the room murmurs in appreciation. Shane rolls his eyes.

#32 speaks up, “Shouldn’t Wagner and Fredericks get to choose? It’s their group chat.”

Wagner and Fredericks both look at Ilya like it’s a fair point. Ilya didn’t know there would be a specific group chat for them, does he have to be in it?

“I just figured it would be you coming out today, Roz.” #20 says and a low wave of agreement trickles through the room at their assessment.

“Cannot be me.” Ilya says quickly and moves on, “Everyone gets one vote—”

Hunter cuts him off, “Actually, I kind of think Fredericks and Wagner’s votes should count twice.”

Ilya glares at the interruption and at Hunter’s disobedience, but he lets it slide. “Fine. Anyway.” He claps his hands once, “If you would like to be the third annual DICK COMA, stand up and tell us why.” He leans up on a table near the wall, out of the way.

#25 starts. He’s bashful and clearly afraid of public speaking. “Well ummm... my boyfriend? I think he wants to propose but he knows we can’t get married if I’m not out... I’d really like to marry him, though?”

Boring. But Ilya is diplomatic, “Ok, next.” He also carefully avoids eye contact with Shane at this reasoning.

#15 stands up, “My grandpa died.”

“This is an election to decide who will come out,” Melnyk says, as if that’s a normal, routine thing, “You’re not trying to get out of an 8am class.”

“No,” #15 continues, “He was a douchebag, he was the only reason I wasn’t out to my family, so now I am. They’re all hounding me about coming out, figured it was a good time.”

“Ok. That is sad.” Ilya says quickly and turns to the third candidate, “Beltran?”

#30 looks up, “Me? Right, I volunteered. If someone else wants it, go for it. I was taking one for the team— I thought everyone else was still scared.”

Apparently not. More guys raise their hands. Ilya doesn’t know what to do with this— would all these guys really come out now?

“There is a sex tape of me that's about to get leaked.”

“I just want to be able to go on dating apps.”

“I already told my coaches.”

“My partner gave me an ultimatum.”

Ilya cringes at that last one, and the room agrees they should probably be breaking up with that partner anyway.

Before this can turn into advice-by-committee, Ilya cuts them off. “Ok. We can vote now.”

“Can we vote for you?”

“Can we vote for Shane’s husband? Is he here?”

“Can we vote for Montreal’s owner?”

Scott is the one to shut that down. “No. We are not outing someone against their will.”

#16 speaks up, “I want to make the case for Rozanov coming out.” Oh God. “Here’s my argument: why the fuck not?” Some people hum in agreement. Ilya is leaning on the side table closest to where Shane sits with Rivera, Melnyk, and Hunter. He looks at Shane, who shrugs apologetically.

Scott, the meddlesome little troll, thinks he needs to save the day, “...Russia?”

“Thank you, Hunter. Russia.” Ilya says and sighs. He looks around the room and tries to tally up who here knows about his relationship, who doesn’t, who has voiced some suspicions. Some of the suspicious jokers in his texts actually apologized on the night of Shane’s statement, saying they didn’t know Hollander was married, as if that ruled Ilya out. Ilya counts nine out of the twenty-odd people here who know for sure. So all around, the news about them would shock about half the people here.

Because he is taking so long to say anything else, Scott continues. “And...” he draws out the word, “He’s the Ringleader, Crowell would figure it out immediately.”

“Why does that matter?” #35 asks, and oh, right, not everyone here knows that this group is a cheating pile of corrupt cheaters.

Shane can obviously see there’s worse things this room could know. He gets up and joins Ilya, leans up against the same table. Ilya looks at him carefully, trying his best telepathy to ask if Shane is sure. Luckily that’s one phrase they’ve mastered, and Shane responds with a little nod and a lip twitch that is telepathic ‘I love you.’ “Ilya can’t come out right now because we would be too obvious.”

The room is silent, unsure what to do with this information, until #37 asks “Don’t you have a husband?”

“I do,” Shane says and bites back a smile. God he’s so fucking cute, Ilya wants to bite the smile too.

“I am the husband.” Ilya says, still looking at Shane.

The room erupts, split almost evenly between cheers from people who knew, gasps from people who didn’t, and “I knew it!” from people who actually might have known it.

“Hey!” Ilya tries to call them to order and puts an arm around Shane’s waist as the room settles. “That information does not leave this room.”

Everyone talks at once.

“So you’re together?”

“Since fucking when?”

“Why are you surprised? They did a piss poor job hiding it.”

“They are literally eye-fucking 24/7.”

“Is hockey like... foreplay?”

“It’s Shane Hollander, we already knew hockey was foreplay for him.”

“Can I be excused for 10 to 15 minutes to handle something in the bathroom?”

“I call it first, I won’t take that long.”

“*Married* though??”

“Right, I thought they were just fucking.”

“Again, I would like to take care of a situation that’s becoming urgent.”

“Does this mean Shane Hollander is our other Dad?”

“Don’t worry, Hunter, you’ll always be our first Dad.”

“First Lady Hollander?”

“He needs a pantsuit like Hillary”

“No, it’s Daddy Hunter, Papa Rozanov, and Hollander just gives Dad energy.”

“Last time I’ll say it before I ask someone to actually come with me to the bathroom.”

“Fuck it, I’d go.”

“Ok! No one is hooking up in the bathroom this year!” Ilya tries to quell the crowd. That was a mistake.

“*This* year?? Did you do it last year??”

“I thought they both left for the other party early last year.”

“They didn’t just hook up...” #4 says knowingly.

“Kowalski!” Shane warns.

Scott looks at Ilya, eyes wide, “What does he mean by that?”

“Why can’t I tell them? It’s not a secret anymore!” #4 whines. Shane covers his face in embarrassment and Ilya shrugs a vague approval, soothing a hand over Shane’s side. #4 lifts his head proudly, “I was present for the Ring-lander engagement.”

The room is dangerously quiet. Until it's not.

“A *bathroom??*”

@RayOfHendersonshine ✓

[Ray Henderson and his bestfriend/roommate/boyfriend in front of Niagara Falls; Henderson, Rivera, and Melnyk as teenagers at the 2016-7 World Juniors tournament]

Now that the rest of my gay draft class is out (shoutout #1314!) I'll add myself to the mix. I was in love with my best friend for years before the founder of our little #GROUP pointed it out to me. I owe everything to this movement, love you people! 🏳️‍🌈🏳️‍🌈🏳️‍🌈 #25.

@Faithful2BkScouts

who the fuck caaaares bruh this is such old news!

@ImpeachCrowell

What are you doing about the commissioner's gambling scandal?

@ReleaseRozSexTape

sorry, you want one mediocre third-year player to do something about a league-wide corruption plot?

@LivingInDanial

fuck imagine having to come out right after Shane Hollander lol someone drew the short straw

@BuffaloPTP

nah Sonny is super lowkey, he def didn't want the spotlight

@PayAttnToTheNews

hollander didn't want the spotlight either but he did it for the greater good and made a powerful statement. WTF is "Sonny" doing to propel the cause? Nothing.

@BuffaloPTP

dude you're talking about the nicest person on the planet stfu

@SkinTightSkin

According to Scott Hunter, Shane Hollander's husband is the nicest person on the planet

@RiveraFan1314

Can you imagine Hollander being with someone mean??

@PikePower

.... Is Sonny the husband?

@ShaveMarlowsPlayoffBeard

No actually I went to high school with them and Henderson's boyfriend is his high school sweetheart

@ShaveMarlowsPlayoffBeard

My HS chat is going off because everyone thought they were already together but this post says they hadn't figured it out yet

@RiveraFan1314

Love is real ❤️ these hockey boys keep proving it

@SkinTightSkin

ok so now that Shane Hollander is out, we can all agree he is Ringleader? #Ringlander

@PikePower

No he said he's #6. Ringleader would be #1.

@SulphuricAcid

Shane thanks #1 for being their "dad". Is he his own father?

@BuffaloPTP

Stop bringing everything back to Hollander, this is Henderson's moment.

@PikePower

i just want to know who Husbander is so i can make my fan edits in peace 😭
#ReformedShaydenShipper

@HockeyCanFan

no one needs your parasocial fanedits of someone who probably isn't famous

@3rdPeriodBlowie

it's another player, we've been over this, definitely famous.

@HockeyCanFan

it's absolutely not

@BrophysTrophy

they would've come out together like #1314.

@RiveraFan1314

Rivvy came out a full year before Melnyk...

@WashTheClock

they weren't dating that whole time. Rivera was dating the host from that game show, right?

@BabysBreath

no, he was dating a White House aide in DC

@ShaneHollander4POTUS

r/MLHcorruption is spilling, mods come get your boy!

@PenaltyBoxBait

did anyone catch Scott Hunter saying Husbander worships Hollander "like that's hard"? Kip Grady blink twice if you want out!!

@ShaneHollander4POTUS

i can't imagine working with Shane Hollander every day and not worshipping him. I don't blame Scott Hunter one bit.

@munch3yum3

Ilya Rozanov seems to do it easily 🙌

@Appreci81

because Rozy isn't a gayass

Ilya: at MLH awards?

Barrett: yes?

Ilya: Room 1045 in ten minutes

Ilya: Hunter and me for gay things

Ilya: business. not sex.

Ilya: I have an idea

Barrett: I'm just supposed to come when you call?

Ilya: you are busy?

Ilya: Is Kent here hmm?

Barrett: fuck you.

Barrett: what's the business let me just hear it

Ilya: no.

Scott fidgets anxiously ten minutes later, “I’m getting a little weirded out that we’re just alone sitting in a hotel room waiting for someone and you won’t tell me who. Everyone it could possibly be is at the bar downstairs.”

“Is important to get this guy to trust me. He is like a scared animal.”

Scott sighs and leans back in the desk chair. There’s a curt knock at the door. Thank God. Ilya hadn’t actually received any confirmation that Barrett was coming at all.

Ilya opens the door and leans half his body out. “Hunter is here, are you ok with him—”

“Yeah, yeah!” Barrett hisses urgently, “Just let me in!” Ilya steps aside to let Barrett push past him, “Looks like a fucking hook up if you’re whispering around in a hallway. Don’t you have a husband now?” Barrett takes stock of the room, looking like it’s still post-party, because it is. Ilya hosted the after-after party here. He looks at Hunter and nods quickly.

Scott gasps dramatically. “Ilya...” his eyes are wide, darting between Barrett and Ilya. “Why is Troy Barrett here?” He says the name like he says *Dallas Kent*, with disdain.

To Barrett’s credit, he looks a bit ashamed at his own name. He shoves his hands in his pockets and looks at the floor.

“Because he is going to help us,” Ilya says. Barrett looks up at this, confused.

“Rozanov, I already told your guys everything I know. I told you...” he starts but glances once at Hunter and winces. “I can’t come out, I’m not like... I can’t do that.”

Hunter scoffs and quickly apologizes for it, “Sorry. But I agree, it probably wouldn’t be a great look for the cause.” Ilya snaps his head to Hunter. He’s never been a dick to anyone, that’s part of his appeal. He shakes hands with Crowell and jokes with the league execs and even laughs at some of Ilya’s jokes. He gets along with referees.

Ilya asked Hunter here because Harris said he’s Barrett’s favorite player. He didn’t ask why Harris knows Barrett’s favorite player. But he didn’t realize how much he was depending on Hunter to be nice to the guy, he just took that fact for granted. At the very least, he shouldn’t be *mean* to the guy they’re about to ask a pretty big favor.

He chooses to ignore Hunter’s bad manners, “I do not want you out. Not yet.”

Hunter rubs at his face, “Ok Rozanov get to it, because I don’t know what we’re doing here either. This guy is an asshole.”

“We need you to play both sides.”

“What?” Barrett finally looks interested in the conversation.

Ilya continues, “The whole league thinks you are an asshole.” He gestures to Hunter’s attitude as an example. Hunter and Barrett both nod at this. “Ok. Players’ union elections are soon. We put you up for the union election. Assholes vote for you because you are an asshole. My block votes for you because I tell them to. We win.”

Ilya is used to the familiar shocked face Scott wears when he tells him a good plan. Barrett’s is good, too, he’s finding out.

“God, Rozanov, I thought you were joking about the union stuff.”

“I never joke about anything,” Ilya jokes. “I have other guys who will join you. They do not want the cup bet, they would rather die. But they made it anyway.” Ilya raises an eyebrow at Barrett.

The really closeted guys— guys who have never posted as if they were in the ally army, who wouldn’t come out if their lives depended on it— got a text from Ilya an hour ago. They can have immunity for the cup bet and stay closeted if they run for the players’ union. He had to text them because they don’t even come to these things. One of them is in this hotel and just refuses to meet up with him. Ilya is pretty sure he’s the only other person on earth who knows about their sexualities.

All four of them took him up on it immediately. Really, they just have to hold out long enough to get elected. Then if they come out, they’re already in the seat. Ilya really only needs one term with full control of the union to enact all of the changes he wants to make.

He finishes explaining this all to Barrett and Scott and meets silence.

“Well.” Scott finally breaks it, “I always knew you’d go full mob boss eventually, and you can’t do that without the unions.” Barrett laughs at this. “But if they’re imposing all of your new rules, won’t people know they’re ours? They’d be outed.”

Fuck. Ilya probably should have talked to Scott a *little* before Barrett got here. It’s not that Ilya hasn’t thought of this. It’s that he knows Barrett, and Barrett isn’t cautious. For all he talks about staying in the closet, he chose the highest-profile celebrity to run around with. He’s shamelessly eyeing Shane in public. He started flirting with Harris the second he got his phone number. Hell— he chose to make Ilya appear in person for a meeting that could have been an email. The last few years have seen Barrett slip up, and Barrett will get caught eventually, and the others can “blame” him for any progress the union makes.

But Hunter saying this out loud kind of ruins it. Ilya hedges, “We will deal with that when the time comes. Someone will be ready to come out by the time we need them.”

“Not me though, right?” Barrett worries, “I wouldn’t have to come out?”

“No.” Ilya says so he doesn’t cringe. He means it, too. For now. “I would protect you from being outed. You call me for help, I will pay for your discreet prostitutes, that kind of thing.”

“Rozanov!” Scott exclaims.

“What! He is not in a relationship—”

Barrett interrupts, “Where’d you hear that? Harris told you?”

“*Harris??*” Scott glows with interest. Huh. Kip got this gossip last week and did nothing with it. Either he’s saving it for an anniversary or he didn’t know what a big deal it was. Kip and Gloria didn’t even know who Troy Barrett is, so even if they had picked up on a requited crush, they wouldn’t know why it was so surprising. “Why does Harris know if you’re in a relationship or not, Barrett?”

“We text.” Barrett shrugs, and Ilya tries to catalogue every micro gesture. When he heard about this last week, Ilya realized he’s fiercely protective of Harris and this asshole isn’t going to break his little heart.

“So you know Harris from the group?” Scott looks at Ilya, “How long has he been on your list?”

“Ehhh Barrett is not. Not really.”

“Wait you’re not gay? Or bi or anything?”

“No I am.” Barrett says and Ilya thinks of how nervous he was admitting that a year ago.

“Very. Just, Rozy has this weird idea you have to come out if you win the cup and... I can’t. So I guess I’m not in the group.”

It’s true, this has been Ilya’s rationale. But, as more and more check marks appear on Barrett’s index card, Ilya is starting to think those could outweigh the one next to cup bet.

“Why not just make the bet?” Scott asks, still a little dismissive. “Toronto will suck next year without Kent.”

“I won’t be in Toronto next year. Kent will.” Hunter and Ilya look up at this. Barrett looks back defensively, “What? It’s not like I can stay there. I have no idea how I would play on a team with him. The guy is a monster. And the team is officially standing behind him, so he’s not going anywhere.”

Hunter starts, “Where—”

Ilya’s is more important, “This union thing... it means you cannot even be an ally. You have to be quiet on Kent issues.” Why was he so sure before this meeting that Barrett would be on board with being silent? Now he doesn’t know. He didn’t expect Barrett to be passionate about this... or *anything*.

“Yeah that’s fine.” Barrett nods, “I’m not like... on social media. And it’s not like I’m going to lash out and call him a rapist at practice in front of our whole team. Maybe when I first heard, I might have, when I saw those girls’ stories, but I can be normal.”

“I wouldn’t be able to.” Scott says. Ilya rolls his eyes at the heroics. “Are you going to be friends with him? Don’t you guys hang out outside of the rink?”

“We did,” Barrett shrugs, “We’ve been doing less of that recently anyway. I can just kind of... ghost him.”

Scott brushes the air like the topic is done, “Ok, well... wherever you land, just make the bet, right?”

“I just can’t. It’s not something I want to do, maybe ever.”

Ilya considers this and finds himself relieved. First, for his union scheme. Then, for Harris who would never be involved with someone in the closet. Harris lives his life very loudly.

“Well, I think the pact is the barrier for entry. It kind of builds trust, right?”

“We can do without it.” Ilya announces. Barrett has more activities next to his name than most of his numbered guys. It’s a leap of faith, but Barrett has already helped them too much to not be a part of it. “You are in, without it.”

Scott’s eyebrows jump up. “Are you serious? *Troy Barrett* gets away with this?”

“He helped us. He told the league’s distraction methods, he gave us Kent’s girlfriend—“

Barrett stops him, “Yeah, I’d appreciate you not telling anyone about those.”

Ilya waves a hand. Fucking obviously.

“This guy was also a huge reason a lot of these guys were uncomfortable to begin with!”

“Hunter, he is going to help.” Wait, fuck, is he? Ilya turns to Barrett, “You *are* going to help, yes?”

Barrett is quiet for a moment but eventually, “Yeah. Can I umm... can I tell Harris?”

That’s his first thought? Fuck, does Barrett actually *like* Harris? Ilya can’t have that. “You know he almost told Kip. I had to stop him.”

“*My* Kip?”

“No, the other *Kip* that we all know of.”

Barrett looks uncomfortable but nods, “Yeah, he mentioned talking to you guys about it. That’s ok. He said he didn’t actually say anything incriminating, and no one else knew me.” Ilya is surprised at the immediate forgiveness. He wouldn’t forgive anyone that quickly for something like that. Well, except Shane. Oh, god.

They talk through the logistics for a long time. Ilya pulls up the players’ union online materials for how to run, the responsibilities, the details. They work all the way up until there’s a light knock on the door. This year is so much different, Ilya thinks with a little glee. Shane can just waltz into this room with fucking Troy Barrett and Scott Hunter in it.

“That’s our cue.” Scott says loudly and nods toward the door. Barrett smirks.

Ilya shakes his hand, “Number 45.” He usually doesn’t tell people their numbers. But he’s breaking a lot of rules with Barrett, and Scott would ask anyway. Might as well get it out of the way sooner.

Scott shakes his head, still questioning Ilya’s decision. Barrett looks a little surprised at Ilya, but nods and follows Hunter to the door. He turns at the last second, “And hey, uh congrats on the wedding. Locking down the hallpass. Kudos.”

“See Hunter, you are more of a dick than Troy Barrett.” Ilya smiles, “Get the fuck out of our room, both of you.”

RASHYCOCK + DICK COMA + PENIS + Roz group chat
Oldest Man Alive added Henderson to the group chat

Oldest Man Alive: Welcome Sonny!

Rivera: Hi Henderson! Congratulations

Henderson: Thanks!

Lundin: GROUP? Boring.

Lundin: What is it.

Henderson: Gang of Rozanov’s Out and Unified Players

Henderson: But I think I prefer RAWDOG

Baldwin: of course you do.

Melnyk: you just making personal announcements?

Henderson: idiot.

Henderson: You were literally there when I came up with it tonight.

Henderson: We workshopped it.

Henderson: Rozanov’s Award-Winning Democratically Outed Guy

Oldest Man Alive: Jesus Christ.

Wagner: You workshopped that??

Coming up: #queerjoy fluff, pulling strings so thick you could call them ropes, WIEBE!!! (oh god if I put anything in all caps you people are gonna-- whatever it's ok)

Numbers who appear:

#4: Answered to the name Kowalski

#15

#16

#20

#25: Voted the 2020 DICK COMA, so he's now out! Named Ray Henderson

#30: Answered to the name Beltran

#32

#35

#37

#45: Troy Barrett

In attendance, named but not numbered: Ilya, Scott, Shane, Melnyk, Rivera, Vinny Marcello

The NHL's union has 32 representatives, one from each team. The MLH's has players in an elected executive governing board with a president and local chairmen. Did I change it to a more traditional union to match my narrative? Yup. I need you all to collectively promise you won't come at me about this because it bothers me too! But the plot point was too munchy to leave behind for realism.

Chapter 28: Wiebe

Chapter Summary

Summer 2020

Chapter Notes

We are entering the 2020-21 season! Two things:

1. This is the season in *The Long Game* and *Role Model*, so from here on out is blanket spoilers for those books. Yes, I've been fucking heavily with canon, but if you read this and then read the books you will maybe feel like some details were spoiled.
2. This is the last season we'll follow in this much depth. After this, the 21-22 season is going to be covered quickly, and then we'll get a time-skip epilogue. You all have been ridiculously kind to me and I never want this to end! But it's getting down to it. I've been averaging about 10 chapters per season, so you can do the math there. As soon as I know, I'll put a definitive chapter number on it instead of x/?.

Ok! Let's get some PDA for these boys and get the ball rolling on the final army. [Insert obligatory "Ilya is morally gray" disclaimer].

Bonus surprise "outsider" POV at the end 😊

Warning: light mentions of Dallas Kent

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

Scott and Kip get married in July a few weeks after the awards. Eric Bennett is his best man, but Carter Vaughan and Ilya himself round out Scott's half of the wedding party.

Scott had called Ilya a week ago with an odd question, "Have you ever been on a date with Shane?"

The answer is, of course, *no*. The only times they've ever been in front of people in public as a couple were in a hotel room, then at Shane's house, and lastly at the after-party last month. Even at Baldwin's wedding, when they shared a dance it was under a million layers of caution and coverup. Scott's wedding invitation had come to Ilya's house, addressed to Ilya, but on the inside was a second envelope made out to Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander, on the same line, like a couple.

So Scott clarifies, “It’s not a huge guest list. We’re not allowing guests to have cameras. The staff is all signing NDAs. Hell— It’s in the middle of nowhere and Kip even got them to restrict the airspace surrounding the venue.” He pauses, then adds, “I want you to feel safe.”

Ilya doesn’t know what to say, and he knows it’s not just for his sake, but he appreciates it anyway. “Thank you.”

“Not for you!” Scott laughs, “I just think if you’re allowed to touch each other in front of people, we won’t lose our deposit when you try to do it in a bathroom.”

“Ehh... that will still happen. I will pay the deposit.”

That hasn’t happened this evening (yet) but Ilya has taken advantage of the assurance. Shane is still skittish about most PDA from a lifetime of hiding, but about an hour in, he lets Ilya rest a hand on his back. Then they hold hands, then Shane leans on him during a conversation with #7. If it were up to Ilya, he would be sitting on Shane’s lap throughout dinner. They slow dance and make out a little and if anyone is surprised or appalled, they keep it to themselves.

They sit at a table with Ryan Price and Fabian, Eric Bennett and Kyle, Lundin, Baldwin and his husband, #7 and his current boyfriend... Ilya is surprised to find the gays have been sequestered off to one table like this, but looking around, it actually seems like maybe the *straights* are in the minority at their own little table. The straight Admirals are at their own table of Carter Vaughan and Gloria, Matti Jalo, Greg Huff... It’s very obvious which friends are Kip’s and which are Scott’s.

Being here, not hiding in a restaurant basement in Las Vegas or some hotel room, and being able to hold Shane’s hand, surrounded by other queer people who can understand, is all Ilya wanted from the beginning.

For the second year in a row, Ilya has attended the draft for Ottawa. He narrowly avoided speaking directly to the commissioner this time.

When he gets back from the draft, Ottawa’s GM pulls him into a meeting. Over the summer, this can never really be a good thing. When he gets there, he is met with another man sitting across the desk from the GM. There’s really only one person this could be, given the news from the last few weeks.

“Hello,” Ilya struts in. This new guy is weird, Ilya belongs here.

“Rozanov, meet your new coach, Brandon Wiebe.”

Ilya sits next to, apparently, his new coach, and shakes his hand.

“It’s an honor, Rozanov.” Wiebe seems warm and nice. Already pretty paternal, except for one weird thing...

“You are my age?” Ilya asks carefully, because it seriously looks like it.

“Rozanov, be nice. Coach Wiebe is just a few years out of the MLH.” The GM tries to get the conversation back, “I brought you here because I’m trying to tell Coach Wiebe about our goals as a team, and who better to do that than the...” He pauses, waiting for Ilya to say something. Probably a title that has nothing to do with this team at all. The GM sighs and finishes his sentence, “captain.”

“I heard you’ve been uniquely involved in some of the drafting and trading. It’s good.” Wiebe says.

“I am.” Ilya confirms, “We have a good team.”

“Ilya.” The GM uses his first name. Uhoh. “I brought you here to help me convince Coach Wiebe of the right way to handle a trade that just came across my desk.”

“He wants to turn down Troy Barrett!” Wiebe says dramatically. “We’d be getting a weirdly good deal on him, too. I think Toronto needs to get rid of him quick, maybe a locker room issue? And he *wants* to come here.”

“And I am trying to tell him that the goals of this team are at odds with Barrett’s... reputation.”

Barrett wants to come to Ottawa? Why? Ilya thinks of the vision he has for this team, how they got Fredericks and Hayes and got rid of the racist little defensemen. Maybe Barrett sees this happening? He is pretty perceptive.

Or, Ilya pushes this thought down into the recesses of his mind, it’s Harris Drover. But you don’t *move* for someone you’re texting. Again, Ilya is struck with the need to know what goes on in those phones. This must be how Scott Hunter feels all the time, salivating for any hints of gossip.

They’re waiting for Ilya’s response, which has to be careful. The GM might suspect Ilya of being the Ringleader, but he shouldn’t confirm it, especially not in front of this new coach he doesn’t know if he should trust yet.

He puts on a persona. He can be the head of the ally army today. He is, technically, every day. But for this meeting, that’s all he is. He can still protect Barrett’s operative status.

“The problem is... we have heard from Washington and Montreal that being too...” he glances at Wiebe, “...woke is having consequences. The league tried to stop Montreal’s win, you know this. And Washington.” Ilya hasn’t been able to stop thinking about what Crowell said at last year’s draft. There would be *repercussions* for teams with too many gay players. Then how poorly Washington did. Then the league’s interference as soon as Melnyk came out. These are the repercussions.

The GM looks surprised, “You think we’ll get a cup if we’re not woke?”

“We’re getting a cup.” Wiebe says. States. Asserts. Ilya gives him a sarcastic look that makes the coach smile.

Ilya agrees, “We will if we take Barrett. He will make us look better to the league. We need some people so we are not one hundred percent gay.” He hopes this isn’t too at-odds with the reasoning he gave for getting rid of assholes in the past.

Wiebe considers Ilya, “Are you in touch with this movement? The Ringleader stuff, whatever it’s called? You run the Irina Foundation with Shane Hollander, you must be, right? Your jersey sales are putting an actual dent into the league’s revenue.”

Ilya swallows and looks at his hands. Wiebe continues, “I want to be clear about something, and I’m sitting in a room with only two people. This doesn’t go anywhere else.” Except the recording device running in Ilya’s pocket. He feels a little bad, but there’s no way to inconspicuously stop it now. He can delete anything bad later. “I love my wife, and I’m very happy. But if I were still playing, I would be in that group. I believe in their message on a personal level.” He lets the words sink in. Ilya has been come-out-to maybe a hundred times now and that certainly sounded like one of them. The GM hums at the revelation, but Wiebe isn’t done, “But to turn down talent just isn’t realistic. The league is going to have some bad dudes. In fact, we get them on a team like this and maybe we change them.”

Ilya wants to tell him he’s been trying to change Barrett for years. Any improvement is due to Ilya’s continued patience with the man. He holds his tongue.

“I agree,” is all Ilya says. “We should take him.”

The GM looks at him, “Is this why you had me leave cap space open?”

“No,” Ilya says ruefully. Shane can’t leave Montreal this year, there’s just no feasible way to do it. “Was wishful thinking.”

“Ok. I’ll set this in motion.” The GM shuffles some papers. “The commissioner approved Melnyk’s trade to Washington pretty quickly, so this shouldn’t be a problem.”

It’s true. Aside from his own jealousy, Ilya has concerns about Washington. The boys want to be on the same team, live in the same city, but this helps the commissioner’s strategy to get all the gay guys on the same teams so it’s easier to dole out repercussions. He wonders if Montreal will meet the same fate next season. He thinks probably, as the commissioner told Shane when he handed over the cup, *“this will be your last.”*

“He is going to tank Washington’s season.” Ilya announces. To his surprise, Wiebe doesn’t look surprised or scandalized or skeptical.

In fact, he nods. “I don’t know why the Board hasn’t done away with him yet, the scandals alone are hurting the league’s image. Let alone the ethics, the integrity of the game... public trust in the honesty of our league has never been worse. We’re less trusted than FIFA.”

Ilya is struck. “The Board...”

“The Board of Governors, they pick the commissioner.” The GM explains, taking Ilya’s revelation-face as an expression of confusion, “There’s one from every team, usually the team owner. They usually just go with whatever the chairman says. Right now the chairman is Yates from Montreal.”

Ilya knows how this works, but had never considered *using* it. If he could control the Board of Governors, he could choose the commissioner. If only he knew anything about the owner of Montreal’s team... aside from the Grindr profile screenshot in his phone.

Ilya is excused from the meeting, everyone now satisfied with the Troy Barrett trade and all on the same page. Before he leaves, he looks at the GM, “You can tell him everything,” nodding to Wiebe. Right now, he doesn’t want to do the actual coming out. He has some plans to make.

Ilya fucking Rozanov has controlled Troy Barrett’s life for 3 full years.

Troy didn't think about it like that at first, didn't want to acknowledge the witchcraft being done before his eyes. But it started getting unavoidable, and now?

It's just a fact. Ilya Rozanov controls Troy's life. In two, maybe three interactions a year, Rozanov has fucked with his love life, his friendships, and even his career.

Troy used to wonder why all these guys listened to whatever Rozanov would tell them to do. It's so stupid, really. Why is he making this such a big deal? So people come out, so they don't. Whatever, you already got Shane Hollander, leave everyone else alone.

But now that he sees Rozanov for what he is— an inevitability— it's just easier to go with it than argue and eventually go with it two years later.

It's not that Troy didn't know he was gay. Stupid Rozanov with his stupid Shane Hollander just made it frustratingly *possible*. When Baldwin came out and with him the cup bet came out, Troy realized he had Rozanov to thank for Scott Hunter, too. His favorite player is out, thanks to Ilya Rozanov.

Troy already knew Scott Hunter was gay, of course. Spending time around Dallas Kent has given Troy a third eye about this stuff. Some guys clam up when Kent comes around, looking painfully afraid they'll get called the Thing. Scott was pretty obvious. So was Shane. Rozanov was... a surprise. He doesn't really shrivel in front of anyone.

When the stupid Irina Foundation was announced, Troy saw right through it and it made him pissed. Why are these two assholes allowed to date? If he had acted a little sooner, would he

be the one moving to Ottawa for Shane Hollander? He never felt the need to get laid before that, and luckily Adrian crossed his path, hotter than Hollander, at just the right time.

So Troy can blame Rozanov for getting him into that shitty relationship. And he wasn't even hotter than Hollander, in retrospect.

Rozanov's chirp about Dallas being a rapist sat in Troy's head, and he started looking for it. Rozanov took away any trust Troy had in his best friend.

All of this is leading to something good. That's what his mom says. Not about the gay stuff—she doesn't know that. No one does. It was just Rozanov, and then Adrian, then probably Hollander, then Hunter.

And Harris Drover, a man Troy has never even seen. The social media director for a team he doesn't—and never wanted to—play for.

A year ago, Rozanov had the gumption to call Troy with Shane Hollander and this random guy on the line. Rozanov said he didn't tell them how he knew Troy would help them, but Troy knows that's probably bullshit.

So it's weird when he gets a text

Unknown number: Hi! It's Harris Drover from the Centaurs and also from Ilya LOL

Unknown number: Can I ask you some more questions about the games we talked about?

Troy answers all of Harris's questions truthfully. Harris seems to know hockey pretty well, so the conversation goes there. Before he knows it, Troy is up until 2:00 in the morning texting with some guy he's never met.

Troy stops himself just short of looking the guy up. He has a boyfriend, he can't be doing this. What if this Harris guy were hotter than Adrian? It would be hard to be hotter than Adrian, but he works in hockey, right? Regardless, he can't be texting this guy into the wee hours of the night.

They do text 'Merry Christmas' and 'Happy New Year.' When Troy gets a hat trick, Harris texts him but Adrian doesn't. Adrian makes it up to him later on FaceTime but Troy is starting to think Harris would do that, too.

So even before Rozanov texted him with the final brick, Troy's relationship was under water because of Ilya Rozanov. Again, by sending Harris, Rozanov had fucked up a crucial pillar in Troy's life.

And just like he sowed seeds of doubt in his best friend, Rozanov continues the campaign against Troy's sanity by doing it again at the 2020 All Stars. *"You are in a monogamous relationship?"*

He knows what that text means. Rozanov is somewhere at a party, gossiping with his guys, and maybe someone heard a rumor about Adrian. Troy wouldn't get invited to a party like that because of the stupid bet—not that he'd go. He's busy avoiding Dallas who wants to go

out for the night and probably cheat on his girlfriend. If Rozanov is right, maybe non consensually.

Fuck. So Troy is alone, with confirmation that his boyfriend and best friend are both assholes, both care of Ilya Rozanov.

He needs a friend. He also needs a boyfriend. Or family. He does the only thing he can think of.

“Troy?” A light voice answers the phone, “...are you ok?”

What a time for a voice reveal. Harris’s voice is warm, he wants to lie down in it.

“Yeah. Sorry I called, I guess I just... I don’t know.”

“It’s ok! I saw you doing the skills competition today, you were really good!”

Troy has to bite back a smile and remind himself it’s this man’s job to watch. Something about Harris is even warmer in his ear and he ends up unloading. He bitches about Dallas, then his mom living too far away, and finally being gay in hockey. Harris tells him Rozanov never actually said anything about that outright, but that he read between the lines.

When he’s done complaining about literally everything else in his life, he remembers why he called to begin with. But he feels weird talking about his boyfriend with Harris, and that’s his last clue.

“...and I’m going to break up with my boyfriend.”

“Oh my god Troy! Why?”

“Rozanov said he’s... Well, it doesn’t really matter.”

He keeps Harris on the phone long past when he should.

After that weekend, Troy makes good on his promise to break up with Adrian. He doesn’t say it’s because Ilya Rozanov all but told him he’s getting cheated on. He just ends it, which Harris says is ok. *“You’re allowed to just not like someone anymore.”*

And the texting picks up. It was just special occasions, once in a while. But in the lead-up to the playoffs, they find an excuse to text almost every day.

Troy knew Harris would be in Rozanov’s box on the night of the cup finals. He watches the game maybe more intently than he should, trying to pick out which reveler in background of the shots of Hollander’s parents might be Harris. He can’t make himself look the guy up on social media, but he can pause the footage to take stock of everyone in that box. There are a few people Troy doesn’t know, but one stands out. You know, the one who looks like an apple farmer, not a hockey player. The one who is short and stocky, like the exact opposite of Adrian Dela Cruz. The one constantly laughing, the people around him laughing, too. His drink is almost empty, why is no one getting him another? Troy is overcome with the need to drive from Toronto to Montreal and offer to get that man another beverage.

Troy makes a point not to text him, as Rozanov might ask who Harris is texting, and then Rozanov is suddenly infiltrating yet another part of Troy's life. But hours after the game, Harris starts the conversation.

Harris: ummm Dallas Kent is the friend you kind of don't like but is your best friend anyway right?

Troy: that's... one way to put it.

Troy: yeah why

Harris: I'm here with Rozanov and everyone and they have some pretty bad things to say. Is he not nice to women?

Troy: tell Rozanov I said hi and congrats.

Troy: Hollander's going to be getting a lot of thirsty DMs

Troy: hope Roz gets more attractive soon

Harris: That's not nice.

Harris: But I laughed.

Harris: Anyway, do you know Kent's ex-girlfriend or anything? They might try to find his victims.

Harris: Obviously don't tell him we're asking LOL

Troy: victims?

Troy: yeah I can get you her number.

Troy: burn him down guys

He means it. He's had time to stew in this idea, that this is a possibility. He tells them not to bring his name into it, but gets the number to Harris. Within just a few days, four accusations have been posted from the RogueMLH account Troy shouldn't know Harris runs.

At this season's awards, Troy kind of scans the crowd for Rozanov. It's weird— after the main event, he can't find him, or Hunter, or Hollander... Come to think of it, this was true last year, too. Damn, for a covert operation, they're not very discreet. Troy stays mingling for longer than he wants to, just to show his face. Someday, people are going to start putting this together, and realize if you're not around after the show, you're gay. He's surprised people haven't already. He takes stock of the faces he saw in the auditorium but who are no longer milling around. Huh. No Helthon, or Kakogiannis, or Marcello... There are a lot of them.

It's not until late that Troy gets a text from Rozanov, summoning him to a hotel room. Is this what people do, really? Come when called, like dogs? This is Troy's train of thought as he takes the elevator to meet Rozanov and Hunter.

Of course he's helping them. Ilya is a steamroller and a bulldozer and a magnet all in one. As soon as Troy gets back from Vegas, he's filing paperwork and starting a campaign to run for

And he's calling his agent. He won't be playing for Toronto next year, he'll take literally anywhere else. He has a preference, and can't believe he says it out loud on the phone. His agent asks him twice if he's sure. He's sure. He doesn't know why he wants to go there. Sometimes it's safer to think it's because Rozanov is building a woke little oasis in Ottawa. Sometimes it's safer to think it's for the best friend who now lives in his phone. Either way, Troy knows where he wants to end up. If Ilya Rozanov is going to be pulling the strings of his life, he might as well be his captain, too.

Troy is traded to Ottawa before the season starts.

Barrrrretttttt!!!

Coming up: Ottawa gets a Rookie ☺ (and some bad things happen) Let's focus on the Rookieeeee ☺!!!

Edit: also I'm taking an extra day or two! 🙄❤️

Chapter 29: Ilya's backup

Chapter Summary

Ottawa Centaurs' 2020 Pre-Season party; days before the season.

Chapter Notes

As mentioned we are entering the 2020-21 season (RM and TLG books). If you haven't read the books, most of the Centaurs' names here are canon.

Luca Haas is Ottawa's rookie this season. His sexuality isn't confirmed in the books, but Rachel Reid wanted to write a book for him, so we can very safely assume he is queer. Other relevant canon facts: he is Swiss, he draws very well, he is a hockey fanboy (specifically of Ilya), and he is an adorable little baby (20 year old lol) who gets pink when he drinks. Relevant fanon that this fic will adopt: he definitely participated in some Hollanov shipping shenanigans as a chronically-online teen. I am making up his middle name for this fic.

Anyway, I think Zane Boodram is lighting up the grill.

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

Ilya meets his first hand-picked rookie, Luca Haas, twice over the Summer. Those meetings, one official with team management, and today's unofficial welcome party at the Boodram household, work to firm up Ilya's certainty in the kid's sexuality. The problem is, he can't invite him to the pact yet. Ilya needs Haas to know him as Captain first, before queer messiah. He also needs to know if he can trust the kid not to tell the entire team. So he hasn't asked him to join his club yet.

Or maybe, just *maybe*, Ilya can admit to himself, freaking out in the Boodrams' bathroom, he's nervous.

There's a difference in coming out to a teammate, Ilya is realizing, and sympathizes with all the times Shane was reluctant to tell Melnyk. Hayes and Fredericks are the only Centaurs who know this part of him, and they both learned before joining the team. Every day he debates telling his team, but there's so much they would figure out if he told them that much. They know he's running the ally army, because most of them are in it, and they've guessed he's in a serious relationship. Between those two things, he would be Mr. Ilya Hollander, Ringleader, pretty quickly.

And Ilya has never had to deal with this before, he's never had a backup. There were no other queer players in Boston when he was there, he just got a rookie there last season. As for the cup bet, Fredericks is out. Now Barrett is joining the team but he isn't obliged to the cup bet. If Ottawa won the cup this year and Haas makes the pact, Ilya won't necessarily be the one who has to come out. It's a small relief, but he resolves to just rip off the bandaid at some point today.

He washes his hands and returns to the deck, where it appears Harris is monologuing to the entirety of the Ottawa team. Well, all but one of them.

"... if you give him a chance when he gets here." Harris concludes his speech.

"Harris, you haven't had your ribs rearranged by the guy against the boards."

"He's never called you a slur."

"Explain how you know Troy Barrett again?"

Harris shifts uncomfortably where he stands, "I did his first interview for the socials already."

Ilya isn't sure if that's true or not. By now, Harris probably already knows the answers to all those questions. He could probably narrate a video about Barrett's life at this point.

Barrett is coming to the party today, so he must have moved to the city already. Ilya is desperate to know if he and Harris have met up yet. Maybe he'll be able to catch a vibe when Barrett arrives. Ilya can guess Barrett is pretty superficial, and if he's been leading Harris on just to turn him down when he sees him in real life, Ilya will kill the man.

"Roz," someone notices Ilya slinking in, trying not to interrupt the conversation. "The ringleader had us vote that douchebag into the union, why?"

Ilya breathes. "He was electable, and he will do what we ask of him." Ilya has gotten used to using the royal 'we' when talking about the ringleader, as if they are two different people. He knows what the ringleader is thinking because he's in charge of the allies. Not because he *is* the ringleader.

The conversation breaks off into groups, some discussing Barrett's worst offenses, some about the new investigations into Kent and the league's potential coverup of his crimes, some about typical ringleader identity speculation.

Wyatt Hayes catches Ilya's eye and nods to the far corner of the deck as a silent summons to a meeting. Ilya attends.

"What are we thinking about Barrett? I assume you didn't get him traded here on purpose," Hayes says cautiously. "I thought they usually consult you about trading now for some reason."

Ah fuck. Ilya's been preparing for these questions all summer and it would be easy to lie to someone else. But Wyatt Hayes sees everything. He played with Barrett in Toronto, he knows

Troy Barrett B.C.— Before Cock. Any change in personality will sound the alarm.

Ilya goes with the half truth. “He could not play with Dallas Kent. We gave him amnesty.”

“Amnesty.” Hayes repeats. Ilya can see he’s already piecing together way too much. “So... but *Harris* is excited about this amnesty though?” He sees the strained look on Ilya’s face and changes his tone. “Look. Roz. These aren’t even goalie perceptions, or whatever. This is anyone with a brain, dude. People are going to ask. You told us to vote for him in the union elections and he won. You think I was happy to do that?”

Ilya sighs. And lies a little. “Ok. In exchange for amnesty, he agreed to do the union. He’ll put forward the rules we tell him. It works well.”

“God, Rozanov. These are some shady dealings.” Hayes shakes his head. Then, “doesn’t explain Harris though.”

“Nothing explains Harris.” Ilya mumbles, bitter that Harris didn’t heed Ilya’s multitude of warnings to stay away from Barrett. Plus, Harris is loud, but that’s no longer officially Ilya’s business. In truth, Ilya just needed Barrett to stay quiet for the election. Once the season starts, he can win the damn PENIS for all Ilya cares. “When they said Barrett has not rearranged Harris’s ribs I—”

“Jesus, Rozanov.” Hayes cuts him off, “I get you’re married to Shane Hollander so you’re allowed to make homophobic jokes and everything, but—”

“Who’s making homophobic jokes?” Zane Boodram appears out of nowhere, wearing a #29 Irina jersey. “I just let Barrett into the house two minutes ago, is he already...? But he’s not married to Shane Hollander.”

“He wishes,” Ilya mutters.

“Wait, you know who Husbander is?” Bood asks excitedly, “Cassie and I have been trying to guess!”

“Ehhh.” Ilya really wouldn’t mind telling Bood. He’s an active ally, he puts up better numbers than Marly in the new ally ranking scoring system Hayes came up with. Ilya shrugs, this is his alternate captain, he should probably know anyway... “Me.”

Boodram laughs loudly. “Ok. Didn’t think Rozy would be the one making homophobic jokes. Come help me.” ...Or it could go like that. Ilya sighs, a little relieved. Bood jumps off the subject, “I want to give this asshole the shovel talk.”

Hayes and Ilya stare at him. Surely Harris and Barrett haven’t been *that* obvious in the two minutes he’d been here.

“Shovel talk,” Zane repeats at their confusion. “You know... *you hurt my team, I’ll hurt you, right?*”

Ilya sighs again. He looks over to where Barrett is standing awkwardly, looking around with his hands in his pockets, alone. Harris is off to the other side, talking to Selena Chouinard,

Nick's wife. Ilya, Hayes, and Bood rejoin the group.

After a long, dramatic threat from Zane Boodram, Barrett looks less put-off than Ilya would have assumed. Even though it was pretty clearly a private conversation, everyone got quiet to listen, and by the end, the entire team was watching.

"I get it." Barrett raises his hands in surrender at everyone, "But I was elected union president to represent everyone, so that's what I plan on doing. I'm not..." he gestures over to Ilya, "Ilya Rozanov or the ringleader or Scott Hunter or Hayden Pike or whatever," most of the guys there are in the ally army, so they know what he's talking about, "...but I'm also not Dallas Kent."

"You're not?"

"Since when?"

"Yeah, the difference is Dallas Kent got caught."

Shit. This team is not set up to take in an asshole. Ilya hates fucking doing this, but he's paid to be the team captain, not everything... else. As much as that fact pains him every day, it's the truth. So that comes first. He can't have his team at odds with each other.

"Ok. Here is the deal. Because we can not play if everyone hates everyone." Ilya stands next to Barrett. The whole team is here, plus some WAGs. He eyes them, and God Bless Cassie Boodram, she stands up and lures the WAGs inside with promises of... something. "The strategy is Barrett comes here, becomes union president, we can tell him what to do. The gay group knows about this, was their idea. Barrett owes them favors for Dallas Kent." That's all... very fair. Everyone can know this part now, he's already elected. Ilya still doesn't want to out the guy, though. People nod their heads. "In exchange, Barrett has promised not to be an asshole. Yes?" He looks at Barrett. This wasn't part of the deal, but Ilya wants to imagine that someone can't really be an asshole after... Well actually, what's changed for Barrett, really?

"Yeah. I just want to play hockey. I'm not... yeah, I'm not Dallas." He rubs his neck uncomfortably.

"Ok." Ilya says. "So we move on. Troy Barrett is here now, he is good at hockey, and he hates Dallas Kent." He looks for some affirmation, and the team nods. They all go back to talking amongst themselves, Barrett finishes his walk to the beer fridge and Ilya notices he pulls back a fresh bottle of hard apple cider in each hand. They're unlabelled, but everyone on the deck knows they come from Harris's family's farm. Barrett takes a seat next to Harris and gives him one. Harris thanks him with a tiny smile, clearly restrained from his typical face-splitting grin.

They aren't even looking at each other, they're not touching, they're both now listening intently to whatever LaPointe is talking about, but fuck. Ilya looks at Hayes, who is also watching the scene. Hayes shrugs at Ilya, shaking his head. This is... not subtle. Ottawa might be coming for Washington's top gay spot.

Finally, Ilya gets enough courage to talk to Haas. It seems backwards. The 20-year-old should be terrified to talk to Ilya—and it looks like he is—but Ilya can't shake the nervousness. It will be his first one-on-one conversation with the kid. He pulls him onto the lawn, away from earshot.

"How is it?" Ilya asks, vaguely enough for the kid to complain about anything if he wants to. But Ilya already can guess this kid isn't about to complain about anything. He doesn't even think he's heard Haas *speak* yet. Though, this group probably hasn't stopped talking for long enough to let him.

Haas looks down at the hard cider in his hand, "Not bad. I prefer apple brandy, but this is good. I told Harris I would try one." His accent is less noticeable than Ilya's, even though he's only 10 days removed from home in Switzerland, not 10 years.

"It is very close to apple juice. Good for children," Ilya teases. Haas blushes, and that might be the cutest thing Ilya has ever seen. "You are excited for the season?" He's stalling, delaying the inevitable. Why is he so anxious about this? He's had this conversation about 50 times now.

"Very. I wanted to say," Haas takes a shaky breath, "I looked up to you as a kid. And Zane Boodram. And Troy Barrett... I'm glad the team is going to give him a chance. It's surreal to be here."

Well, that's as good of a segue as any. Ilya swallows. "And Scott Hunter? And Shane Hollander?" He loves that his husband's name can be his new code for 'are you ok with gays?' Scott Hunter has been his gay-gauge for years. The name itself often provides a facial expression that tells Ilya what his next step should be. Not in this case. Haas just nods.

"They're incredible. I followed the rivalry closely, but I know it's not so crazy anymore." That's not helpful.

"But off the ice, they are also... inspirational, yes?"

Haas looks to the group on the deck and then back at his cider. "I'm aware the league is not nice to people like them." He says seriously, "And I'm worried for Shane Hollander on the ice this season."

It's like pulling teeth, he's getting farther from the point. Ilya rubs a hand down his face, "We have Fredericks. It is our job to protect him, even if he is defense. Same for Shane Hollander, if someone is violent with him, we have a target for the next game." Plus, Shane isn't a delicate flower. He's not huge like Fredericks, but he can stand up for himself pretty well. The problem is where New York and Washington might protect their gay players on the ice, Montreal might not. Ilya is not about to let it get to that point, though. The ally army is currently working to spread the rumor that anyone using excessive force on Shane will be fucked up in the next game. The speculation about him being the ringleader, or pretty high up in the organization, is going to protect him here. The possibility that he might be married to a

player doesn't hurt either. Whoever it is might target you when you least expect it. Ilya is prepared to pick up a lot of penalties this season.

Haas nods dutifully. "I am prepared to do that."

Oh. Ilya sees why this isn't working. He underestimated how far his captain hat would cast shade over his ringleader hat. There are some things you don't show your captain. Maybe he should get Fredericks to do this.

No. This is a child, he can't hurt Ilya. He pulls up all his resolve and starts a more direct sales pitch. "There is a tradition, when a queer player wins the cup, they come out of the closet." Everyone knows this by now. Still, it's comforting for Ilya to say, like muscle memory. Haas nods like Ilya might be dumb. Ilya breathes and asks, "Would you make that bet?"

Haas shifts nervously. "Are you asking if..."

This doesn't work unless Ilya rips the bandaid the rest of the way off, so he does. "I am in it. I will come out if we win. You can too, and Fredericks can... re-come-out, I guess." Haas's eyes get wider as Ilya continues to speak. He doesn't respond, so Ilya continues. "I put this group together some years ago, and we have grown." Haas's lips separate as his jaw slowly hangs. "I went to your draft, I picked you. I thought you might help me with Ottawa's mission." The kid's eyebrows are next to move, slowly raising. "You do not have to help! It is no effort on your part, really, unless we are attacking or..." Haas's head lurches slightly forward. By the time Ilya trails off, the rookie is the textbook illustration of flabbergasted.

He sputters. "Uhh.. mm, you? ...Are you?" Haas shakes some of his features back in line, "...are you the leader?"

Ilya nods and takes a sip of cider.

The next question is unexpected, "So do you know who RogueMLH is?"

In his surprise, Ilya almost gives it away. But there are some oblivious guys in his Rolodex who don't know this about him. It's not something he advertises. It's not something he thought the public has connected. "Yes," he says cautiously.

"Ah, yeah you probably can't tell me."

"I cannot."

The questions only get weirder. Haas's expression gets shocked again. "Oh my god..." He whispers to himself. Then he looks up with a panicked face, "So you're married to Shane Hollander?" Wait... *what?*

"What— how do— *why?*"

"Sorry. It might not be. You don't have to tell me." Haas shakes his head frantically. Then he explains, "I am in some of these communities online, and there are theories. We were pretty sure that— but I guess not."

Ah. That sounds familiar to Ilya. It would explain some of this. “Really, they think I am married to Shane Hollander?”

Haas rubs his neck. “Yeah. Well, that he’s married to the Ringleader. I ummm...” he looks back at the group on the deck and then tries to change the subject, “I’ve been very interested in the league’s mishandlings for years.”

Ilya gets a weird, tingling sensation at Haas’s readiness to accept and admit that. Like that’s a safer topic than Shane Hollander’s marriage. “Well, you are not wrong. The commissioner does not want any of us to come out.”

“He scheduled direct phonecalls with all the rookies. Mine is next week.” Haas says, unreadable after dropping a bomb like that.

“Crowell is asking you for a phonecall?” Ilya is stunned at the audacity. This isn’t a tradition, this is new. He knows exactly why the commissioner would be doing this. “Haas, you do not know me, but I need to hear that call.”

Haas nods, “If you’re the ringleader, that makes sense. To be honest, I was going to record it anyway.” Well, this kid is handy. “I know there’s evidence compiling up against him, and I’ve always tried to do my part.”

Again, the weird feeling that Haas knows a lot. But how could he? He hasn’t even started his first season with the league yet. “What do you mean?”

He seems uncomfortable, but admits, “Just that people are sharing evidence against the league on... or, yeah, you need evidence on there now.”

“The subreddit.” Ilya clarifies, “MLHCorruption.”

“Yes,” Haas says, almost defensively. Maybe he took Ilya’s revelatory tone for the skepticism people usually reserve for that subreddit, “It wasn’t always as reputable. But we’re trying to fix that.”

Ilya’s stomach drops. *We’re trying to fix that? Who is this kid?*

“You *run* the subreddit?” He whispers.

“No!” Haas squeals, “No, not really. A friend of mine... well I’m *one* of the moderators now but...”

Ilya brings a hand to the bridge of his nose. A few weeks ago he wrote out Haas’s index card. He’s taken to writing middle names since Fall 2018, when Chicago took the league’s second player named James Rice. So Ilya’s memory flashes vividly to where he wrote Luca Balser Haas across a card, and... *No*. He thinks about the nerds he’s been messaging, the only three sane users on that site. One of them was... “Haas. Your... initials. Are they also Live Breathe Hockey?”

Haas’s rosy cheeks drain their color. His eyes widen again. He just gasps in tight breaths. “What? That’s my...”

“Oh my god.” Ilya palms his forehead, “I am RogueMLH. Harris runs the Twitter.” He gestures back to the group exasperatedly. He barely has the foresight to keep his voice down. “*You* are running the Reddit front? I *messed* you.”

Haas looks like he might die. Ilya just barely keeps himself from frantically scrolling through his phone, rereading their messages. It looks like Haas is thinking about the same. But he can’t do anything else. Ilya warns, “You cannot tell anyone it is me. Obviously. Even the other guys in that chat.”

“No!” Haas whispers. “No. No, I won’t. They don’t even know that I play. What the fuck... This is *wild*.” He puffs out a disbelieving laugh, his eyes still wide.

They stand in speechless silence for too long, until the snap of a twig on the lawn behind them draws their attention to Fredericks approaching. “Are we ummm...” he looks at Haas and shrugs, “are we making bets out here?” It’s well-coded if Haas isn’t queer, but actually, Ilya never got an answer.

He cocks his head at Haas, “Are we?” He can choose to pretend he doesn’t know what they’re talking about, if he doesn’t want to be out to Fredericks.

“Yeah. Yes. Absolutely.” Haas says, still stunned. Ilya holds out a hand and Haas shakes it.

Fredericks tsks ruefully, “I never got to do that.”

A week later, Ilya sits in his living room with Luca Haas, the commissioner on speakerphone on the coffee table between them. Ilya has the call recording and a legal pad in front of him for notes.

“Luca Haas! Welcome to North America.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I make it a point to touch base with all the rookies every year, see what kind of talent we have.” No he fucking doesn’t. Ilya almost laughs at this. “Ottawa isn’t a great team but I’m sure you’ll turn them around.”

“I am excited to work with Ilya Rozanov and Troy Barrett. And Zane Boodram. And Wyatt Hayes.”

Dang, Ilya thinks, that’s a good lineup.

“Right.” Crowell doesn’t sound convinced. “There’s a sensitive topic I have to make you aware of.” Ilya braces himself. “If you are approached by someone asking you to make a deal about the cup and your sexuality, someone claiming to be the ringleader, you are contractually obligated to inform my office. Failure to do so is a fireable offense.”

What? Is he serious? Ilya makes a note on his legal pad to have their lawyer look at Haas's contract. There is no way that's true. Is he just trying to scare the rookies?

"Ok," Haas says lightly.

"Do you have any personal attachment to this cause, Mr. Haas?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you gay, Haas. Bisexual or transgender or whatever."

Ilya rapidly shakes his head no. As much as he'd love another double agent, it will not be his rookie. Ilya has only had Luca Haas for one week but if anything happened to him...

"No sir," Haas lies well.

"Good. Not that there's anything wrong with it! We are proud of our gay players. But it's important that you know, all the gay people in the league are out already, there aren't any more. Lots of teams don't want them, and their safety on the ice can not be guaranteed. It is wisest if any rookie abstains from making those kinds of career choices before they know the consequences."

For once, Ilya agrees. It's why he tells rookies not to come out right away. But to tell these rookies there's no one else like them? Fuck, that's so cold. Also demonstrably false, if the ringleader is someone still in the closet, who presumably has other people who will come out at the cup.

The conversation wraps up, just as slimy as it started. The commissioner is calling every single rookie with that? He stops the recording. Haas breathes out, "That was so cool!" He quickly corrects himself, like he didn't mean to say it out loud. "In a very scary and sad way, right?"

Eh, Ilya can admit it, too. Sometimes it feels cool to lie to the commissioner.

A few days later, #37 calls him from Tampa.

"Our rookie came out to the team at the first meeting over the summer, I was going to introduce you when you come play us next month."

Ilya gets a sinking feeling, "But..."

"But he got booted back down to the farm team. We don't know why, but he probably won't ever be back. Good kid too, a lot of potential."

The kid probably told Crowell when he called. So Crowell has taken down a rookie because he came out to his team. Ilya decides he needs to be taking Crowell down.

Ilya gets the rookie's number from #37.

Ilya: Is this Lowery? Tampa Bay Rookie?

Lowery: Not anymore. Who is this?

Ilya: I organize a group of queer players. Did you tell Crowell you were gay when he called?

Lowery: The Ringleader???

Lowery: I told him I was homosexual/aromantic actually.

Lowery: I also told him about being genderqueer

Lowery: he/him is fine.

Ilya: Ok. Send me your contract and any correspondence about this. Our lawyer is going to try to get you back in.

Ilya: Record all phonecalls from now on. Try to get things in writing.

Lowery: I'm so pissed he took this away from me, I was looking forward to meeting you.

Ilya: You still can.

Ilya: It was very brave to come out. I am sorry it's not safer right now.

Ilya: If you decide to come out on your social media, we will support you.

Ilya: you are in the group now.

It's probably not going to be a very popular decision with some of his more exclusive guys. He doesn't care, the kid deserves to be commemorated. Ilya also would've loved to hear the conversation where Crowell hears words like "aromantic" and "genderqueer."

Lowery: It'll be super weird for me to come out, everyone I know already knows.

Lowery: and no one else like... follows me

Lowery: I never even played a MLH game.

Ilya considers this. It's not a bad point. So he has a better idea.

Ilya: Can RogueMLH do it for you?

Lowery: I would be fucking honored.

@RogueMLH

Lowery (#47 of the #CIRCUS) won't be playing with Tampa Bay after coming out to his team and Commissioner Roger Crowell.

@RogueMLH

First round draft pick scrapped because of his sexuality. Crowell reportedly called rookies to ask them each personally about their sexualities.

@RogueMLH

This is in violation of the league's anti-discrimination policies. The union must act to fortify these policies in player contracts.

RASHYCOCK + DICK COMA + PENIS + Roz group chat

Ilya added Lowery to the group chat

54 new messages

Melnyk created a group chat

Melnyk added Oldest Man Alive, Ilya, Jane, Rivera, Fredericks, Henderson and Wagner to the group chat

*Melnyk renamed the group chat: **JACKOFF** group chat*

Melnyk: am i allowed to do this?

Melnyk: the other group has so many old people in it and randos who dont play

Melnyk: we need one for Just Actual Current Kings Of Faceoff Fellatio

Fredericks: Kind of hard agree

Fredericks: the other group is like... thirteen people? Fourteen?

Fredericks: fucking chaos.

Wagner: It's a little exclusionary but I can see the need for the chat with just active, out players.

Henderson: I don't mind being exclusive with you guys

Melnyk: I can check with my boyfriend ;)

Oldest Man Alive removed himself from the group

Ilya added Oldest Man Alive to the group

Ilya: if i have to be here, you have to be here.

Luca Haas got a number! And a reddit username? I'm sorry that I love torturing Ilya with the "they've been talking the whole time" trope so much.

#37: plays for Tampa

#47: Named Lowery, Was on Tampa, had to leave.

Coming up: Crowella de Vil

Also!! @MonkeysNPlaybills has been doing something really cool: in the comments of each chapter (usually the last page right now, but that might change) you'll start finding updated lists. I won't confirm or deny any facts on there, but it's solid work! Again, the numbers are really just fun and you'll know if there's someone I need you to know, but if anyone is interested in checking their list or wants to reference one for any reason, it's a good resource!! [The master list of them can also be found on their Tumblr!](#)

Chapter 30: Daddy Trouble69

Chapter Summary

Fall 2020

Chapter Notes

disclaimers:

1. Ilya is morally gray. I know I say it every chapter but this time I really mean it: Ilya is a criminal in this story!!! He has been since like the second chapter. I might lose some of you here, but I hope we all knew what we were getting into.
2. Idk how the law works.
3. The group chat with numbers format might be hard to read. You don't need to tell them apart if you don't want to! There's no one we really know well in there.

That said, Western Conference, rise up!! Start earning your keep! Clearly they are the bad influence of the two conferences, because whenever they get involved, shit gets real illegal, real fast.

I know this all sounds ominous but we are truly back to our roots in every sense here!

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

The jilted rookie, Lowery, does some interviews following the RogueMLH tweets. It's two weeks into the season, and he still hasn't played a game in the major league, but somehow he's become an overnight hockey sensation. His blasé attitude toward coming out makes him a hero for queer fans and bystanders, and his progressive language and gender identity make him an easy target for conservative pundits, too. Every interview goes viral with one camp or the other. Or both. One clip in particular, a video where he shrugs and says, "Yes, I asked the commissioner for his pronouns, why?" is particularly well-viewed by both sides of the aisle.

Ilya has had a few conversations with Lowery, just to strategize, but the kid doesn't know anything about the group that would be damning for Ilya, and he clearly doesn't need media training, not that he would really listen to it. He goes through each interview, boredly educating whichever poor host has him. The only concern is that Ilya's own identity must remain a secret. Despite stressing that fact repeatedly, he doesn't really trust this kid— Ilya doesn't know what to do with people who don't have secrets— so he watches each interview with bated breath.

An interview on cable news finally asks Lowery the dreaded question. “In the initial tweets, RogueMLH said you have a number in the group of Scott Hunter’s ‘close friends.’ How did that happen?”

“It didn’t, really. I’ve been looking forward to joining that group since I was 17. But the Ringleader texted me after I was sent back down. He’s been helpful. This all happened before my first real MLH paycheck. I know the GoFundMe raised a lot of money, and I’m grateful, but the Ringleader is paying for my legal defense. The union has since added a few things to the contract negotiations that might have helped me, but I wasn’t even in the players’ union yet.”

“So he just texted you and then paid for your lawyer?”

“Well, I think the group has a lawyer. It’s the same guy who helped Fredericks and Melnyk. But it’s not like it’s an official group with a bank account, someone is paying the lawyer.”

“So you know who it is. What can you tell us about the Ringleader?”

“I’m very grateful to him, so no, I won’t give him away. He is very smart, like he’s always 15 steps ahead of everyone else. He clearly cares a lot about the cause. It’s not just a personal, selfish thing for him, I think he’s actively doing this for people like me...”

Ilya sinks back onto the pillows in his hotel room. Shane isn’t here this time to keep him from spiraling at these words. He pushes his palms into his eyes as the kid keeps talking, keeps extolling his virtue. It’s too *much*. In no world does he deserve this kind of praise. It’s not even true, he *is* doing this selfishly. For Shane.

On the other hand, Shane is out now. Sure, they can’t be a public couple, but that goal has been accomplished. So maybe this kid has a point. Some days Ilya doesn’t even want to get out of bed, he’s only spurred by the people who need him. It’s nice to feel needed. But if he thinks about that for too long he thinks of all the people depending on him, people he could potentially disappoint, and that paralyzes him.

His phone starts to buzz. Ilya flips it so he can’t see the screen. It’s probably just Shane, worried about him. Or Scott, telling him to turn on the interview as if he isn’t watching already. Or #15, asking him to tell Scott something. Or maybe it’s someone who needs his help and right now, he just can’t be bothered to do it. When he finally tunes back into the interview, he’s caught off guard by what he hears Lowery saying.

“...honestly, I wouldn’t have made it through without therapy.” Therapy. Huh.

Kavita Kingsley releases yet another article right after the season starts. It outlines the game rigging in the 2018-19 season. Her conclusions are different this time around.

The games seem to have been influenced not for any gambling payout. In fact, the only motivating factor here seems to be the infamous tradition of a queer player coming out at the cup win. The league was so heavily invested in stopping that event, they were willing to cheat.

Kavita is not an opinion writer, but after that day, several of them come out of the woodwork to complete the message: The league would rather have unfair games than gay people.

The article also, yet again, lends credibility to the RogueMLH account because it reported this first. Real news organizations are starting to use RogueMLH as a serious source. The account is very active in the first weeks of the season because there are now more out players. They're documenting every time Shane, Rivera, Fredericks, Melnyk, Wagner, or Henderson gets an over-enthusiastic hit from a fellow player. Everyone but Shane is on a very gay team— Washington, Ottawa, and New York have made it clear they'll stand up for their guys.

But Montreal hasn't, and Shane isn't being very well protected on the ice. Boiziau does what he can as the only defenseman who goes out of his way to protect Shane, and Shane can protect himself pretty well, but the rest of the Montreal defense look like they would be the ones walloping him if they could. The refs are taking it seriously, at least, after warnings from the federal bureaus investigating the league, but Ilya's forces still have a growing hitlist of guys who are making every attempt to fuck up a queer player.

He likes to think he'd do it for any of his guys, but Ilya is terrified every time Shane hits the ice. So he's in the investigators' email inbox daily, urging them to investigate the players, too. He wants these repeat offenders banned from the sport. He wants to change the actual rules; if the penalty was rooted in bigotry, it should be doubled, like how hate crime laws work. Or an automatic match penalty. Or they should be fined. Or kicked out of the league. Or killed.

But he can't implement a death sentence without the help of people who make the rules for the MLH. Barrett got elected to the union handily, and with the board of Ilya's other guys, he's able to implement some changes to the upcoming contract negotiations. They start small — you can't ask a player's sexuality, we should be guaranteed a safe workplace for all sexualities, races, etc. Basic stuff that mostly just restates existing workplace laws. Barrett can't just flip his whole persona immediately without outing himself, they have to start small.

This is not enough. The union is taken seriously among players, and might do some hard work in changing their minds about some things, but actual rules are made by the Board of Governors, the team owners. They also pick the commissioner. If he could infiltrate the Board of Governors, he could effect actual change. If only a golden opportunity were dropped into his lap to make this happen.

#18: hello western conference buds

#18: so... remember how Kowalski was sending those screenshots around?

#18: of the montreal owner?

#18: Astor Yates on grindr?

#15: *Mastur Bates

#15: put some respect on the name

#10: Also, Rozanov will not acknowledge you unless you call him that

#3: can confirm

#18: ...anyway.

#18: we're in montreal and im on grindr and look who i found

#18: [screenshot]

#18: smart enough to take his face pic down but the username is still DaddyTrouble69

#18: which, by the way, is the worst username i have EVER seen on grindr.

#18: Is HE Daddy Trouble? Or he has daddy troubles? Or he's advertising he can give you daddy troubles??

#36: Is it a trouble 69?? I've had those, they are the least enjoyable of all 69s.

#10: Is Daddy a title? Like Officer Trouble or Judge Trouble?

#15: No, he's Daddy 69. Trouble is his middle name.

#22: maybe the 69 is between two daddies?

#40: so you think he's only looking for another Daddy to 69 with?

#40: asking for a friend.

#3: I haven't heard the last name 69. Is it French?

#18: The man is a mess.

#18: anyway, I messaged him.

#22: god why?

#18: I heard King Roz was mad at whoever saw him and didn't message

#18: so i've got this guy sitting in my app, what do you want me to do with him?

#18: i am uninterested in a trouble 69 with him.

Ilya: get him to meet with you.

#18: absolutely not.

#18: im on here for like, sexting.

#18: I cant actually meet up with anyone

#18: let alone a franchise owner.

#18: we're also leaving in like three hours so grindr is going to say im 3000 miles away

#22: he probably has it set to kilometers

Ilya: you will not be the one meeting him.

Ilya: turn your location off for the day

#18: ...the things i would do for you

#10: keep it in your pants.

#10: roz is very taken dude

#36: wait really?

#36: I just figured this whole group was like a harem for him

#36: was starting to wonder why I wasn't Chosen

Ilya: get him to meet tonight 7:00

Ilya: i have a free night

Ilya: i can meet him

#36: not "taken" enough for Daddy Trouble, i see.

#3: Rozanov has daddy issues

#3: ask Scott Hunter about that

#15: granddaddy issues

#40: Mastur Bates is not unattractive

#40: is it just me?

#40: I have no trouble with that daddy.

#36: me either, i would just stay away from 69ing.

#3: People under 25 are just fucking sick i guess.

#18: he's reluctant. "Can we chat a lil first"

#18: LIL!!! Like he's 14 and it's 2004!!!

#18: 🤡

#40: you gotta make him want it

#18: i have no idea how to meet up with someone on this app!

#18: help!

It takes six different guys' opinions, but Sexting-by-committee successfully coaxes this very closeted, heterosexually married man into a meeting. Montreal is playing tonight, and the puck drops at 7 when they're supposed to meet up. It's ideal— there's less of a chance a fan or coworker will run into the team owner in this hotel across town.

Ilya lets Ryan Price into the hotel room he booked for the occasion. Price has agreed to stand there and be intimidating muscle. No one else should know what's about to happen. Only Price has heard the plan, just so Ilya knows he won't interrupt and object on moral grounds at any point during what might be a very delicate negotiation.

The whole thing is exciting. Plus, Ilya can surprise Shane after his game.

So maybe Ilya's seemingly good mood has Price confused. He goes over the plan one more time, "Tell me again how this isn't blackmail?"

"Ehh... it *is* blackmail." Ilya states, like it's obvious. There's not really a better way to describe it. Ilya needs a man on the Board of Governors, preferably the chairman who makes all the real decisions. The chairman of the Board needs to keep his gay secret. Ilya might be able to throw in a discreet hookup or two, if the guys in the Western Conference group chat are any indication of interest. Some more of his guys might find this geezer attractive. That's not prostitution, is it? Ilya makes a mental note to ask Cooper Lee what crime that would be. Hypothetically.

After some internal debate, Ilya sets up his digital voice recorder. This recording can be deleted if it's more incriminating for Ilya than for Mastur Bates, but in case anyone says something that can be used, Ilya wants to have everything recorded. Maybe he'll give Lee the recording as an early birthday present. When is his birthday? It must have come and gone twice since Ilya's known him, that's a shame.

What's taking this guy so long? Price is playing a game or something on his phone, his knee jittering anxiously. Ilya stops pacing and pulls out his phone.

#18: You'll have DaddyTrouble69 in fifteen minutes.

That was 13 minutes ago. Ilya cracks his neck and shakes out. "You ready? He is almost here."

"I have nothing to be ready for, I'm staying the fuck out of this." Price puts his hands up in surrender. "I told you I'd be present in the room, answer the door and stand in front of it. And not squeal. That's about it." He wishes Price would pretend to be a little bit more of a team player, but he nods.

Ilya picks up an honest-to-God leather briefcase and sets it on the bed.

"I'll give you one thing: you commit to a bit, don't you. Where's your fucking trilby, Don Rozanov?"

Ilya has no idea what a trilby is, but now he really wants one. He continues what he was doing and pulls some printed screenshots out of the briefcase and places them on the bed. Price glances at them and says, "Fabian said he would have swiped right. Not sure what that says about his taste in men. Or me."

Mastur Bates is old as balls, but he just *looks* rich. He certainly would appeal to someone looking for a very specific kind of Daddy. Or a very specific kind of Trouble. Or a very

specific kind of 69.

A knock on the door snaps Ilya's head up and Price gets up to get it. Ilya takes a seat in the cuck chair. Price looks through the peephole to find the same man as the screen shots and nods to Ilya. He opens the door, hiding himself behind it, and the man, squirrely from the closet, rushes through it without checking who is in the room. Price closes the door and stands in front of it so he can't bolt.

The man's eyes widen with fear when he realizes who he's meeting. He whips his head around to see Price, too.

"Astor Yates." Ilya greets him, straining to avoid using his pet name, "Sit down."

By the time the Montreal owner leaves the room an hour later, an agreement has been reached.

Even Price admits the whole thing went well. Ilya said he and Price were muscle for the ringleader, to not out himself. Once the terms were laid out, it became clear this is not Mastur Bates's first quid-pro-quo rodeo. He agreed to look into dethroning the commissioner and will even take some suggestions from the ringleader for his eventual replacement. He said it will be hard without a criminal conviction. Change in leadership makes the organization look unstable. It would also make Crowell look guilty, that's why they haven't done it already. He'll ask around and gauge interest in holding a vote without a criminal conviction, but if they had one, the whole thing would be easier.

In exchange, Ilya promised him ongoing silence. Ilya mentioned, casually, that a few of the guys might be interested in meeting up when their teams come to Montreal. He figures it's a mutually beneficial arrangement if everyone has the same secret. Not to kink-shame, but apparently some of these sickos are into this guy's vibe. Ok, he's *fully* kink-shaming them.

Later, while waiting in Shane's apartment to surprise him after the game, Ilya calls every member of the Players Of the Western Rozanov Sector group chat and tells them to delete the afternoon's messages. They all do, no questions asked. #18 even deletes his Grindr and plans to make a new account. Nothing can be traced back to any of them.

Ilya feels a twinge of guilt for ruining Mastur Bates's hookup. Not for the blackmail, though. Mastur Bates doesn't need to know that Ilya wouldn't out him publically no matter what. At most, he will show his picture to his single guys who might be interested in fulfilling the secondary part of their agreement.

Otherwise, it's just sad that this guy needs to cheat on his wife. Ilya feels bad for her. He also feels bad for the guy. Maybe this whole thing will help them, too.

Lastly, he sends the recording to Cooper Lee, who calls him after a half hour. Ilya mutes Shane's post-game interviews.

“Ilya.” His voice is warning. “What the fuck did you do?” Ilya smiles at his usually-professional lawyer dropping f bombs. Lee doesn’t give him the chance to respond, “I’m only.... 27 minutes into this recording and I can’t even count the crimes. I stopped when I got to the potential prostitution ring. I’m emailing the immigration lawyer to try to see how much longer your citizenship will take because you will definitely get fired or worse for this.”

Ilya swats a hand through the air, “Is fine, he liked it.”

“No one *likes* being blackmailed and extorted!” Lee pauses, then amends, “He didn’t actually seem too upset about it, especially after you said some guys would be interested. Are guys actually interested?”

“Yes, I could not believe it either.”

Lee sighs, “God. If it’s consensual, and no money is involved...” He laughs deliriously, “It’s still blackmail. Who knows about this?”

“Just Pricey. Some of the guys know I met up with him, but they deleted their messages. The guy who set us up even changed his Grindr account.”

“Not Scott? Not Shane?”

“No. I do not usually brag about crimes, you are special.”

“God, Rozanov... I’ll give you this much, it sounds like the commissioner is on his way out. You’re sacrificing yourself, but this illegal, moronic plan might work.”

And that makes Ilya happier than he expected. His mood is only improved by the code beeping on the front door to indicate Shane is home.

“Gotta go, Lee, I am surprising my husband.”

“Have fun. You belong in prison.”

Chapter End Notes

Not the first person to tell him that!

I had to shift things around but coming up now actually: Crowella de Vil.

In the Western Conference group chat:

#3: presumably older than 25

#10

#18: found DaddyTrouble69 on grindr

#22

#36: presumably younger than 25

#40: presumably younger than 25

The people participating in the Western Conference group chat today don't make up the full group chat, and some players in the Western conference might not want to be out to their colleagues, so would not join such a group chat. If you are SUPER into the logic problem, this narrows down some of their teams? (again, the logic problem is literally just for fun! you'll know if there's anything I need you to know!)

Chapter 31: Luca Haas, pick-up artist

Chapter Summary

November and December, 2020

Chapter Notes

Things are ~happening~

Shane POV at the end!

CW: Homophobic slurs

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

For the past 3 years, the beginning of the season has been marked with Ilya eyeballing rookies. This year, Crowell complicated that by threatening them. Now, Ilya has to be careful in case the rookies seriously think they legally need to be Crowell's informants. The last few years he's been able to get two or three, just waltzing up to them in a bar after a game and saying the words "Scott Hunter" at them until they admit they like men. But this season, he feels like he's losing his nerve.

He blames his new therapist, who tells him about 'impulse control' or something. That maybe he should think through risks before acting. Ilya is good at most types of planning and strategizing but all of that is easily lost at a moment's whim for him. He takes this like a technique correction from a coach and starts to think about it immediately. It was probably not his therapist's intention to make him better at piloting this bizarre, illegal, queer aircraft, but it does help.

Weirdly enough, Luca Haas is the only person he tells when his standard reckless bravery starts failing him. In November, Haas plops down next to Ilya on the bus from Seattle to Vancouver and asks, point-blank: "Are there any other rookies this season?"

Ilya looks up with an eyebrow raised. Either this kid wants to be set up with someone, or he's nosy as fuck. He'll go with the latter. Why can't any of his guys ever just mind their own business?

He can't let Crowell's cruel plan work. He doesn't want Luca to think he's alone, that there's no one else like him. He remembers Melnyk, Rivera, and Henderson, and the close bond they

have from being in the same class of rookies. Ilya will give himself credit for that, not the loads of underage sex two out of three of them were apparently having with each other.

“Yes. There are plenty.” Ilya says honestly. There are, he knows it. He just hasn’t approached any of them, despite being almost two months into the season. He lets Haas in a little bit, “It is... not as easy this season. I can’t ask them when Roger Bowel is breathing on me. If even one rookie squeals...” he doesn’t finish the sentence. He doesn’t need to.

Luca nods seriously. “I can do it. I can ask them.”

Can you imagine? Ilya laughs. “No, thank you, kid.”

“Why not? They’ll trust me, I’m just another rookie, right? It’s not as suspicious as like... you.”

“Well,” Ilya starts, but stops. There’s a huge list of reasons this is a bad idea. Haas doesn’t get that, so Ilya starts with number one. “If you get caught, it is much worse for you.”

“No, I won’t tell them I’m... I’ll just ask how they feel. Or even just if they would call Crowell if they were approached. And then you can ask them... or whatever. Let me help.” Dang, it sounds like this kid has actually thought at length about this.

Ok, Ilya continues on his laundry list of issues with this plan. “You don’t know who to talk to. I cannot tell you who I’m suspecting.”

“My gaydar isn’t that bad!” Haas protests, and Ilya wants to pull up his own stats and show him. He’s well over 95% at this point. Luca rolls his eyes like a teenager. “Fine. Then I’ll talk to every rookie and tell you which ones will be ok.”

“No. This would be insane.” Ilya says definitely, and ends the conversation. Luca drops it.

Still, they pick the same bar as their opponents after the game. And Luca, sure enough, is already across the room, talking to the one rookie that Ilya himself would have approached. He never thought Haas would be outgoing at all. Maybe he’s not, and he’s pushing himself just to impress Ilya. God, people have to stop doing nice things for him.

A few minutes later, Luca comes back to Ilya with a shit-eating grin and says “Go ahead, he’s good.” He looks so proud of himself, Ilya can’t deny him the satisfaction. Ilya does his own pitch on the kid and after an excessive number of green flags just to be sure, he asks and the kid agrees to the cup deal.

So Ilya enlists Luca’s help with the rookies. Luca is right, maybe they’ll trust him and tell him where they really fall without Ilya giving away his identity. Once Luca’s established the guy won’t tell the commissioner about a visit from the ringleader, Ilya swoops in. Haas does this in five or six different towns. Ilya performs the part even in the situations when he thinks maybe the guy won’t be joining the group: Talking from far away, then making an excuse to shake hands, so Haas doesn’t know exactly who is joining up. He should still give these

rookies some semblance of anonymity. To his credit, Luca hasn't missed a guy Ilya wanted to talk to. Plus, he obviously really wants to be doing it. He clearly enjoys talking about Crowell in bars to other guys who might be queer. Ilya wonders if he's gauging their interest in league corruption to see if they have that in common. Like asking "Hey are you into corporate scandal?" would be Luca's go-to pickup line in an ordinary circumstance.

His gut tells him not to use Luca. It's dangerous out here for a rookie. But Luca keeps reminding him he's been training for this for years, leading his little double life on Reddit. He knows the risks and still wants to do it. Ilya nervously asks for Scott's advice without naming Luca. Scott thinks it's fine. Shane would probably not. So he doesn't ask Shane.

When is Ilya going to learn? His gut is always more right than Scott. Well... like, 60% of the time. But the Shane inside Ilya's head is always right, 100% of the time, whenever Ilya chooses to listen to him. He probably should have listened to head-Shane.

Delegate, they said. Don't take it all on yourself. Oh well. So much for that.

It's December when the commissioner learns about Luca because of a rookie.

Well, that's not really fair. That makes it seem like the other rookie's fault, when... ok, it's partially the rookie's fault.

In a hotel room before an away game, Ilya receives a text from #32.

#32: Uhh just FYI Kent is telling Crowell about your Haas kid

Ilya, unable to type, calls #32, even though Troy Barrett is lying in the second bed. He has his earbuds in, blasting EDM so loud Ilya can hear it. He'll just be careful about his side of the conversation when #32 picks up. "What do you mean Kent is telling Crowell?" Or not. He swears the EDM gets quieter.

#32 sounds nervous, "I don't know man, our rookie said something about Haas in the locker room. I think Kent made some sort of deal with Crowell so they don't kick him out. Anyway, now Kent's selling your rookie down the river."

Fuck, so this is how Kent has been staying in the league, despite being a wanted criminal. He's fucking standing trial soon, and Toronto and the league are staying mum on the whole thing. He gets a few more details before #32 has to get off the phone.

Ilya paces the hotel floor, trying to think about what Crowell will do next. So Ilya's first call is to Ottawa's GM.

The guy doesn't pick up. Fuck. He leaves a voicemail. "Crowell is going to tell you to send someone back down to minors today. We can not do that." He breathes. He should have planned the voicemail out. Instead of clarifying anything, he hangs up.

Barrett is fully not listening to music anymore. Ilya actually couldn't care. He and the rest of the world will find out about Luca tomorrow if Ilya doesn't fix this.

He panics and taps a contact he didn't think he'd have to call for a long time. A whispered voice comes on the line, "The fuck do you want? I'm at dinner with my wife."

"Dallas Kent out of the league. And queer rookies stay." If Kent is really informing on them, he needs to be taken out. Plus, Ilya would love to watch the man burn just for Luca. It's not what he wanted to use his blackmail chip for, but it's an immediate reaction to protect his guys.

Impulse control, or something.

Ilya hangs up after confirming the "I'll see what I can do" from the chairman of the Board of Governors. Barrett raises an eyebrow, now not even hiding his interest. Ilya can't explain this to him, so he needs to stay busy.

He calls Wiebe, who actually picks up. "All good Rozanov?"

"No, Coach. The commissioner knows about one of us. A... junior member of the team. He cannot be benched or sent down."

"Fuck." Wiebe sighs, "Ok. We actually have talked about this possibility, and we're all on the same page. It's not going to happen."

Oddly enough, Ilya kind of knows that. It's nice to have a team he can rely on, who he can expect certain things from.

He does not expect his rookie coach to come out publicly. Or whatever he's doing the next day in this post-game press conference.

"Our team is ready to support any player, even if we are instructed otherwise by the league." Wiebe is in his first year coaching, for fuck's sake. He can't be doing this. "No one is losing a job because of their sexuality here. If our team did what they're asking, to ban queer folks, we'd lose some important people."

What the fuck is he doing? That could imply coaching or management staff. Or the ringleader. Or both. Ilya understands Wiebe was just trying to stick his neck out for his team. But with Fredericks out and a queer rookie they're protecting, plus now a potential coach or ringleader, this might confirm to someone listening carefully: Ottawa is the gayest team in the league.

In mid-December, Ilya gets a strange call. It's a New York number he's seen on enough of Cooper Lee's transcripts to have memorized. But it's not ringing on Scott's phone. It's not the Ringleader calling that number. No, that number is calling *him*. The number is calling *Ilya*.

He sits at his battle station and starts to record before answering.

“Ilya Rozanov! It’s Roger Crowell. How is the season?”

What the fuck? The question is the final straw that takes Ilya’s planned words away. The season would be great if this asshole weren’t alive. “Good,” Ilya thinks the commissioner should know that. Ilya is pulling this team together singlehandedly, and they’re doing well. They might hit the playoffs this year. “I am excited to be turning the team around.”

“Of course you are. Ottawa is shit.” Crowell scoffs and fortunately gets to his point. “You run a charity with Shane Hollander.”

Oh. “I do.”

“Are you aware they are selling jerseys for these fags? Our jersey sales are down.” Jesus. Ilya is a bit relieved, if this is the reason for the phone call and not ‘are you married to Shane Hollander and running an expanding empire of fugitive queers?’

But this is not new information to Ilya. Since they launched their ‘Buy Our Jerseys’ initiative, they’ve sold close to as many as the MLH brand has. Yuna was recently saying those numbers must be cutting into league sales.

“I do know. The intent was not to take customers from the league,” Ilya lies. “But it is a popular trend, you understand. Raises a lot of money. Good business.”

“I need you to stop. You have as much pull as Hollander, right? Use it.”

Ilya gulps. “I think Hollander is upset with the league.”

“Ah.” Crowell says, like he’s realizing something. “You’re close with him. You’re ‘friends’” Ilya can hear the air quotes around the word, “You must know if his husband is a player or not.”

“He is a very private person—”

“So you’re not friends? Would the media like to know this? It seems like your foundation wouldn’t get as much money if it’s run by sworn enemies. But...” There’s a smile in Crowell’s voice that makes Ilya’s insides feel sticky. “...If you’re *friends*, you would at least know who his husband is.”

Is Crowell threatening him? Is he saying he’d tell the media they’re not actually friends if Ilya doesn’t share this information? What a weird threat. This man obviously has no leverage at all. Ilya is slightly relieved.

“I am a loyal friend. If Hollander does not want that information public—”

“...Or, I could have you fired if you don’t tell me.” Crowell says angrily, “I’m getting pretty sick of that fag, and all of them.”

This would scare anyone else, and it should probably scare Ilya, but in the course of the last three years, he's learned this threat has no legal standing. And he's protected by his celebrity, his team, his contract... Ilya can remain calm. He's seething inside that the man even thinks he can get away with this, swinging his power around like a mace. No wonder the rookies were scared of him, and he feels a surge of protective anger. He's insulting his husband and for that, Ilya would like to see the man bleed out. But on the surface, he can act unaffected.

Ilya breathes a laugh that feels like it could be fire, like a dragon, "I don't think this would be a popular decision."

Crowell changes tactics, "Did you know your rookie Haas is in this?"

God, the casual outing is weird to Ilya after being so careful for so many years. "He is a good player. He is an important part of the team."

"Are you serious, Rozanov?" He pauses, and Ilya isn't sure if he's supposed to respond to that or not. Apparently not, because Crowell continues, finally asking the dreaded question with a threatening voice, "...are *you* a part of this?" Ilya wonders what shade of red his face is.

"You cannot legally ask someone their sexuality, commissioner." Ilya feels his plausible deniability cracking, so he adds, "Be careful, do not want you to get sued by one of these guys."

"No one is going to sue. It would be a career killer." Immediately, Ilya wants to sue. "Are you going to sue me for asking if you're trying to take down the league? These guys are wreaking havoc."

"No, I will not sue." Ilya has thousands of other avenues to take before that particular one is necessary.

"Take the jerseys down, Rozanov. And I'd tell you not to come out at the cup, but Ottawa doesn't have a chance in hell."

Ilya genuinely wonders if he's looked at the division rankings so far, or seen a game, or realizes exactly the lineup they have right now. Maybe he's saying he's going to make sure Ottawa doesn't win it.

"You are right. We are so bad, we will never see the cup. Have a good night sir."

Upon hanging up the phone, Ilya decides he has to win it. There's no choice. Between him and Haas, one of them will come out. Haas would do it.

But he makes another resolution: this guy will not be commissioner by then.

Now that Crowell likely knows that Ilya is in the group, there's one fewer reason to keep Shane hidden. They're in Ilya's living room on Boxing day when he floats an idea.

"Bood is having a party tonight," Ilya says casually. He's been thinking about this party for weeks. All the WAGs will be there. This is the kind of event that's been slowly killing Ilya since they got together. "I want you to go, too."

"You want me to go to a party with your teammates? As...?" Shane waits for Ilya to fill in the blank.

"As husbands?"

"And your team would know. About us." Shane clarifies. Ilya can see what his brain is doing. He's calculating how many people there already know about them, how many will be surprised. Ilya does the math for him. It's a lot. Ilya can count the number who *do* know about them: Hayes, Harris, Troy, Fredericks... it's not a lot. Most know he's in a serious relationship. None of them know he's queer. Hell, he's been leading the straight army, according to them.

But it's starting to not matter. His team saved Luca from being benched or cut. The commissioner already knows. After listening to the recording several hundred times, Ilya is also starting to think the commissioner suspects that he is Husbander, or it's not too long until he puts it together. Shane's position with Montreal is stable, and they know he's potentially married to another player. So even if they do this, Shane's career is safe and it wouldn't change anything. The public perception of their relationship is bad if they learn Ilya is the ringleader and has been rigging games, but this isn't the public, it's his team. And none of them know about the dark side of the group.

Ilya sees this same deliberation happening in Shane's mind, too. Maybe without knowing how much the commissioner knows, or what his team did to save Luca, or the whole rigging games business, but he trusts Ilya's decision. Appearing as a couple wouldn't change anything for him. So finally he shrugs. "Ok, yeah."

Ilya usually tells Shane when there's a team function coming up. So it's weird that Shane hears about Zane Boodram's Boxing Day party from Harris, of all people. Since then, Shane has been waiting for Ilya to bring it up so he can tell him: Shane wants to go. They're not out to their teams as a couple, and he doesn't think many Centaurs even know Ilya dates— or marries— men. But it's starting to matter less if they're found out. Shane is starting to *want* to be found out. When they play Washington, Shane sees Rivera shake his head at Melnyk when he does something dumb and... he wants that. Shane wants to be able to say "that's *my* idiot."

Obviously Ilya asks the day of the party. For such a mastermind, he really doesn't plan things well in advance, this seems kind of impulsive. Even though Shane had been thinking about

this party for weeks, he acts normal and agrees to go as if he had just considered it for the first time. Silently, he's giddy like a teenager that his crush asked him to the party.

Shane and Ilya park with the rest of the dozen cars in Boodram's driveway. No one knows who Ilya is bringing, he just told them it's his spouse. That group text must have been wild. Shane can't even imagine what they're thinking, if Ilya hadn't even told them he's married. So far most people have found it most plausible to assume they're joking or lying about being together. But Shane has learned from the very few times they've been allowed to be a couple, it becomes pretty clear after a few minutes that they are *not* joking, and they'll be here for hours. At Scott's wedding, Ilya couldn't keep his hands to himself by the end of the night, and Shane wasn't complaining.

There's one fortifying kiss in the car before they take the death march to the door. Ilya lets himself in like he owns the place and leads Shane through a gorgeous, albeit empty, house. There's a small group of WAGs standing around the kitchen island who look at Shane with wide eyes, speechless as Ilya greets them and they walk by. As Ilya leads Shane onto the deck he hears someone finishing a sentiment something like "...You might lose your shit when they get here."

"No one is losing any shit," Ilya says to announce their arrival. Dozens of people are sitting on the deck, and they're all looking at Shane. He finds the eyes of the people who know about them: Harris, Fredericks, Hayes, and lastly Troy, who was the one speaking. But now the deck is silent. Shane finds it easier to focus on the fear that maybe this deck can't hold this many people.

Zane Boodram is the first to speak, "Were you not kidding? Is this part of the joke?"

Then everyone talks at once. Most are variations of "Holy shit," but there's also:

"Fucking *when*?"

"Are you going to step down from the ally army?"

"Is this a citizenship thing?"

"Rozanov can't be gay, he dates women."

"...and this *isn't* a joke?"

Shane is quiet as Ilya fields the questions and evades the ones he doesn't like. Ilya has been saying they should be careful about who they tell the timeline, so he ignores that one. But yes, he can still lead the ally army. No, it's not a citizenship thing, but it's helping (and it is—Cooper Lee has informed them Ilya is pretty safe from being deported). No, Rozanov is not gay, bisexuality is a thing. That one is accompanied by Ilya throwing a nearby empty Solo cup at the perpetrator.

Shane takes the opportunity to speak for the first time to answer the last one, "No, it's not a joke." He snakes an arm around Ilya's waist. Everyone's eyes widen, and for a second Shane doesn't think it's a good idea for him to be here. Then he catches Luca Haas looking dumbstruck and weirdly happy. It reminds Shane why Ilya did all of this, to give the rookies the welcoming league they never had. Shane thinks maybe Ilya should have come out to the

rookies before, to show them there are queer players on the team besides Fredericks, but he doesn't like to get involved. He wonders if Ilya already has that kid in the group.

Bood and Hayes's wives, Cassie and Lisa, save Shane from the world's most uncomfortable show-and-tell. They drag him away from Ilya and back into the house where the group of women are hanging out. "We were excited to include Ilya's person. We're not going to let the boys have you just because you're Shane Hollander. You're a WAG!" Cassie squeals.

"Would you prefer it if we changed it? Partners? Spouses?" Lisa asks earnestly.

Shane thinks about the asinine acronyms the guys come up with because they can't decide on one, and quickly shakes his head. "No! WAGs is good. I can be a WAG." He looks around at them as they introduce themselves, he recognizes Fredericks's wife, and— why is Harris in here? He raises an eyebrow at him. Harris just looks down at his drink bashfully.

They explain that there are some homophobic and racist WAGs on the team, but that they've iced them out. It's expected that those women are still invited to all these events, but Cassie announces proudly that they've made it so uncomfortable for them, they no longer attend parties at the Boodrams'. It clicks in Shane's mind why Bood is the one to host so often; it's not just that he likes firing up the grill.

He gets added to the "Centaur WAGs feat. Harris (Better Version)" group chat, and asks them all to save his name under something more feminine, just in case. They all nod in agreement and have fun with that directive. He's in ten different phones as the obvious 'Shana' and 'Jane', but also 'Ilya-ette', 'Brendra', 'Tiffanalia', 'Something More Feminine' and 'Getting Paid Less' ("That's feminine, right??").

He's having a great time with them, and he wonders whether the Montreal WAGs would be this funny and welcoming with Ilya. Maybe not, he thinks grimly, remembering a bunch of particularly conservative posts on social media last election. Jackie Pike has been fine, but the rest...

It doesn't matter. Shane has a plan. Ilya will be an Ottawa WAG.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: so much, people.

For your lists:

#32 shares a locker room with Dallas Kent and a Toronto rookie

Ilya and Haas picked up a rookie in Vancouver

Chapter 32: Nothing bad happens in Carolina

Chapter Summary

More Boxing Day -- First week of January 2021

Chapter Notes

WE ARE GETTING DOWN TO IT! This is SO much, friends. I was offered Pacing with my meal and turned it down. Feel free to take breathers and drink water. It's longer than normal and... yeah. Sorry.

A Troy POV to start us out?? Ok, sure! what's he been up to?

CW: Homophobic language, and then more homophobic language.

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

Troy is pissed at Ilya Rozanov. What else is new?

The fact that Rozanov can waltz into a party with Shane Hollander on his arm is insane. And Troy is not jealous at all. Not about Shane—he will stay far away from that can of worms. But Rozanov coming out to the team? When Troy's life is like *this* because of him? It's fucked up.

Four months ago, Summer 2020

Harris is really nice to Troy while he's getting settled. He helps him move into this blank, vague apartment. He shows him the least boring parts of Ottawa, which are still pretty boring. But the experience itself is exciting, getting to see Harris run into people he knows—he seems to know everyone—and watching him show off his hometown.

Troy was happy to see Harris was the guy he picked out of Rozanov's box suite on TV. So far, Harris's personality, his appearance, this whole situation is so different from what Troy is used to... he's having a hard time figuring out why he likes it so much. Or why he ever liked his ex-boyfriend so much.

But Harris is very out, and very loud about it. Every person they run into knows Harris from a gay bar or a gay organization or a gay pick-up boardgame league. Troy doesn't want to drag Harris back into a closet just for him. They don't clarify what they're doing, despite their

texts getting flirtier over the summer since Troy joined up with Rozanov and traded to Ottawa. And before they could act on it or even talk about it, Zane Boodram is having a barbecue to welcome the new rookies and, apparently, Troy himself.

Troy texts Harris when he's in the driveway, asking what to do. Harris always seems to know what's socially acceptable. He tells him to "just come in" which Troy will *not* be doing. So he rings the doorbell and Boodram answers. He looks at Troy like he would rather it be a deliveryman bringing a package of human feces, but lets him in anyway. Boodram gestures vaguely at the WAGs standing around inside, saying "These are the WAGs, WAGs this is Troy," like he is not worth their time. Some of them look at him like Boodram did, but one or two of them smile warmly.

Troy really, *really* hopes it's because they don't know who he is. That they don't know how he helped the ally WAGs accuse Dallas Kent. Unfortunately, he knows some of them probably *are* the ally WAGs. He should have asked Harris before.

On the deck, he sees the entire Ottawa team for the first time, and it registers how many of them are pretty decent players. They might have a shot at something, really. Even the rookies are supposed to be good. Rozanov is on the far corner of the deck talking to Hayes. Those are two of the only people he actually knows, he could go over there. Hayes might be weird, he only knows Troy as being an asshole from playing in Toronto.

He sees Fredericks, the heterosexually-married bisexual guy. Why did that guy even join the gay group? He's talking to Rozanov's hand-picked rookie. He could go talk to them. They all would have something in common: Ilya Rozanov has ruined their lives.

But he keeps looking, hoping for one person in particular, and finally finds him. Harris is talking to a woman Troy doesn't know and still, that seems like the most appealing of his conversation options. He doesn't, though, he stands awkwardly with his hands in his pockets until Boodram approaches to threaten him. Troy just agrees when Rozanov tries to defend him, looks ashamed and apologetic. He says he's just here to play hockey.

Except that's not really true, is it? He could play hockey anywhere. He could play *better* hockey almost anywhere. He is, almost certainly, not here because of hockey. As the conversation dissipates, he sees why he's here. Harris is tilting his unmarked bottle up so high, nursing the last few drops. The bottle is probably now empty. Troy wants to fix that. *That's* why he's here.

Fall 2020

It turns out, flirting with Harris is even more fun in person. They hang out all the time, in Harris's office and out on weekends, they have movie nights and go out for drinks and Harris gets him invited to Hayes's nerdy board game nights.

There's one particularly charged moment early on when Troy's subconscious screams loudly about how easy it would be to kiss him. Harris seems to notice, and they have the full, excited, lead-up-to-the-kiss moment before Troy realizes what he's doing.

“I uhh... I can’t be out.” Troy says, kicking himself throughout the sentence. “I understand if you don’t want this.”

Harris looks perturbed but understanding, “Yeah. I mean— I *do* want this. But it would be hard.”

“Yeah.” Troy agrees.

“Yeah.” Harris says, for no reason.

That truce lasts about a week before it happens again. And again, it gets quashed. Harris stops it this time, whining “Why can’t you be out again?” He shakes his head like he wants to take it back, “No, like, I get it. I’m sorry.”

“It’s Rozanov, and the union.” Troy responds. That’s kind of true, and Troy doesn’t want to inspect that answer, the reflex to blame Rozanov for everything in his life.

“Right.” Harris nods. He sighs heavily, “Ok.” And he turns on the movie they’re watching on Troy’s couch and they don’t talk about it. If the movie goes directly over Troy’s head because their whole sides are touching, it doesn’t matter.

This keeps happening. Every perfect, romantic, potential *moment* is stopped by one or the other, bringing up Troy’s predicament. *Their* predicament.

But it doesn’t stop everyone else in the world from drawing their own conclusions. It starts light. Cassie Boodram, Lisa Hayes, and Caitlin Dykstra have been finding increasingly diabolical ways to ice out WAGs they don’t like. It seems mean to Troy, but he’s in no position to talk. They make personalized water bottles for their favorite WAGs and, for some reason, Harris. Harris got a WAG water bottle. They both shake it off, separately. It’s not weird. Harris belongs to the whole team. He is simultaneously included in staff and players and management, so why not WAGs, too?

Then Harris is added to the WAG group chat. One of the wives, rightfully, takes issue with it. He’s not a WAG, why would he be in the chat? Harris agrees with her when he rants about it to Troy later. But instead of removing Harris, Cassie *makes another chat*. Harris never really questions *why* he’s considered a WAG now. Neither of them do, until it becomes unavoidable.

That last straw is the invitation. They’re together in Harris’s office when they both get the text.

“*A couples’ wine night?*” Harris reads the text from Lisa. “The team has a couples’ wine night?”

“Why...” Troy trails off. They’re not a couple. They’ve never actually acted on anything they’ve talked about, but it dawns on them both simultaneously: the team doesn’t know that. The team sees them hanging out constantly, at each other’s apartments, Troy bringing Harris

drinks, arriving and leaving parties together, in Harris's office with the door closed, like right now...

"Oh my god, am I a WAG?" Harris whispers.

"You're a WANG, Wives and Not-Girlfriends."

Harris swats his arm. "But... we're not a thing, right? We probably shouldn't go to this couples' wine night, huh..."

"Probably not." Troy responds sadly. He makes a quick exit and resolves to be cooler about Harris in front of the team.

So two weeks later, when Troy hears that Ilya Rozanov is bringing his spouse to the Boxing Day party just an hour before it starts, he's pissed. Why is Rozanov allowed to be out and Troy isn't? Rozanov gets to fuck Shane Hollander in front of his entire team while Troy is denying himself something he can now admit he *moved* for. It's fucked up.

He wants to tell the team who Rozanov's spouse is before they even get to the party, but sticks to the fact that they'll "lose their shit". He just wants to rub it in someone's face that he knows something. He knows he's acting like a kid, but Rozanov just brings out this side of him. He's fucking pissed. And Harris—a man he desperately wants to kiss but *hasn't* because Rozanov said it was important for him to be quiet—is getting carted inside with the WAGs to welcome Shane Hollander. Harris has to go look happy for some guy who is *actually* getting fucked down regularly. Again, it's fucked up.

Troy is seething and all anyone on the deck can talk about is Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov. Hollanov, Husbander, whatever. It's worse when the WAGs release Hollander back onto the deck and he sits in Rozanov's arms and they pick lint off each other and kiss and hold hands and Troy wants to puke. That should probably happen inside.

He nearly smacks into Harris on the way in, and Troy's phone drops to the kitchen floor. Harris giggles and reaches to pick it up, but Troy grabs him and drags him into the walk-in pantry and closes the door. He'll get his phone later. Call it impulsive, or whatever, but he stops worrying about what he's supposed to be allowed to do and just lets himself have what he wants. And Harris seems on board judging by the cute noises he's making, which Troy doesn't even try to stifle, he's too happy and relieved and hot...

Troy loses track of how long they've been making out when there's a knock on the pantry door accompanied by a cellphone ringtone.

"Barrett." Rozanov's voice booms, "Emergency." Troy rests his forehead on Harris's and breathes. He's never hated *anyone* as much as he hates Ilya Rozanov.

Troy opens the door, "How did you even know we were in here?"

Rozanov grins widely at the scene and shrugs, "Harris is loud." He holds up Troy's own cell phone, screen lit up with a call. His face gets more serious, "We need to take this."

Troy scoffs, annoyed at the audacity. As a power move to make Rozanov wait, he turns back to Harris as if no one else is there, “Can we talk later?”

“Hoping to *not* talk later, actually.” Harris giggles, and Rozanov joins in. God, how is Rozanov *here* for this? The ringing on the phone starts up again and Troy grabs it from Rozanov.

He freezes at the name on the screen.

Incoming Call: **Dallas**.

Ok, maybe there’s one person on earth he hates more than Ilya Rozanov. “I haven’t talked to him in months.” Troy whispers to himself.

“Yes, well you need to talk to him now. While you were...” Rozanov wiggles his fingers at the pair, “Dallas Kent was kicked off the Guardians. Come on.” He walks away. Troy is too shocked to resist, and he follows him.

They land in a guest bedroom and Rozanov starts his phone recording. Dallas is calling for the third time, and Rozanov whispers “Speakerphone.” Troy nods and nervously swipes to answer.

“Hey Dallas, what’s up?” He belatedly realizes he’s out of breath and winces.

“I know it was you, fag.” An angry voice is spitting over the speakerphone. “I know you said something.”

“What do you mean?” Troy plays dumb. He actually is dumb—he has no idea what’s happening. Did the victims’ accusations finally catch up with him? He should have asked Rozanov for details before going into this. He doubts Dallas will be ok with ‘*Sorry, I was sucking face and grinding up on my long-term boycrush’s boner for the first time so I didn’t hear the news.*’

“You fucking know what I mean. I tell Crowell about a fag Cuntaur and now I’m getting kicked out. What the fuck did you do?”

Troy furrows his brow. He remembers overhearing Rozanov’s conversation a few weeks ago about Kent talking to Crowell. Is this about that? Is he getting blamed for something Rozanov did? “I didn’t do anything, Dallas. I really don’t know what you’re talking about.” At least he can say that honestly.

“You’re trying to say there are *other* dick-suckers on your team? Get real. Fredericks doesn’t have this sway. *You* fucking did something.”

Cold sweeps through Troy. What does he mean ‘other’? He called Troy because he thought he’s gay? How did he know? How long has he known?

“What do you mean?” Troy asks again.

“Fuck you, Barrett. Act dumb. I was your best friend for a half fucking decade, you don’t think I noticed some shit?”

Troy wants to collapse. And Dallas is telling the commissioner about gay people, so the next logical conclusion...

Dallas is still ranting, “And I know you were behind these bitches setting me up, too. I don’t know how but—*fuck*. You’re going to pay for this. Crowell is gonna tell everyone and you’ll be out of the league like Baldwin.”

“Don’t—” Troy might not be above begging, but he’s interrupted.

“And I know you’re in that fucking cult group, too. Fuck, you might even be the fucking leader. Why else would you run for the union like an idiot? You’ve never given a shit about anything. You wouldn’t unless you had a reason.” The words are just skimming Troy’s consciousness now, he breathes but can’t really process any of it. “Or they got your secret too, huh? Sounds like they weren’t as nice as me. They fucking blackmailed you? I’ll just put you out of your misery.”

Rozanov shifts his weight at this, and Troy looks up at him for the first time. He looks worried, and... guilty? He fucking should, this is his fault. He practically *did* blackmail Troy.

“I...” Troy doesn’t know what to say. Rozanov doesn’t give him any indication. It’s silent.

Then, “You’re a dead man, Barrett. Crowell is going to kill you,” and the line clicks, the screen lights up with the ended call.

Troy stares at the phone in his hand, completely numb. The adrenaline of the last half hour is keeping him standing, but he doesn’t know for how long.

“Nice guy,” Rozanov laughs darkly. “He misses you.”

He looks at Rozanov and is actually glad he isn’t going through this alone, like Rozanov’s face brings some sort of comfort despite everything this asshole has done. “What the fuck do I do?”

Rozanov considers him seriously and then sits on the edge of the guest bed. He looks like he’s coming up with a plan. He nods to himself twice and says, “First...” Troy exhales a sigh of relief. He’s going to get instructions, Rozanov is going to fix this, “You tell me every single detail about how you got in that closet with Harris.”

...Is he fucking serious?

The first week of January, Ilya flies to Raleigh, North Carolina with his team, nervous for more than just the game. He's been watching Crowell's schedule like a hawk and knows that he's in the same city today. So Ilya has enlisted Fredericks's help to organize a very dangerous meeting the morning before their game.

He needs to talk to Crowell's secretary.

Ilya has a backlog of recordings, and Baldwin has been spending his retirement sorting and clipping down the most damning evidence for one master file. Unfortunately, the majority of the recordings are from Crowell's secretary, Bianca, who would be fucked if anyone finds out she was recording. So he wants to get her permission— or really just her opinion— in person, where she can't lie and say "oh it's fine, use them" if she doesn't really mean it. Yuna has said the woman is sweet and her position with Crowell indicates she might be used to being steamrolled. Ilya doesn't want to steamroll her.

Luckily, Fredericks kept his house from when he lived here, and has been renting it out. It's especially nice because Ilya still has no one on Carolina who could host them. Whether that team is queer-less on purpose, or it's just bad luck, Ilya has never looked into it. And he doesn't trust just any ally to do this for him in secret.

So Fredericks is letting Ilya meet with the secretary here. They're standing in the kitchen, admiring the vague AirBnB-style art when the doorbell rings and Fredericks answers. Ilya sets his phone to record, not because he thinks Bianca will say anything incriminating, but because he doesn't want to have to fill Hunter in with the messy details on his own. And maybe Cooper, if nothing illegal is said.

The woman appears in the kitchen behind Fredericks. She looks different without the massive leather bag she usually has on her shoulder. Ilya wonders if Crowell knows she is married to a woman. He thinks probably not. She wouldn't have this job.

He has seen her before, and he knows she has reason to suspect he's very involved by how quickly he responded to Shane in trouble when Crowell cornered him at the MLH awards that one time. So her face isn't surprised, it just looks anxious.

"Bianca? Or should I—"

"No. Bianca is fine." She shakes his hand professionally. She isn't smiling and her tone is clipped. Ilya gets the sense she might not want to be here.

"Ok. Please, we can sit." Ilya points at the dining table. He takes a seat, too. Fredericks brings them water and then sits further away. Ilya didn't tell him what this was about, and he didn't ask.

"I have to be quick. If Mr. Crowell knows I'm here, it's not good." She states the obvious. Ilya holds back his 'no shit'.

"Yes. We wanted to thank you for recording so much for us, and giving a hint inside the office." Ilya folds his hands on the table, his wedding ring on. He stares at it for strength before getting to his point, "And we want to use some of those recordings."

Bianca nods solemnly, her lips pursed.

“Our problem is... he would legally be able to fire you for doing this. We could make a case, we have a good lawyer, but you could lose your job anyway.”

She nods again like she knows that.

“We can get you another job if that happened, but we are going to time this very carefully so ___”

“What other job?” Bianca finally looks interested.

“Well...” Ilya has been trying to come up with an answer for this for a long time. He could call in his blackmail chip again to get her a job with Mastur Bates’s company, but he doesn’t know how many favors that blackmail chip will cover before the man refuses. He could also get her a job with the Centaurs. Both would require her to pick up her life in New York City and move to another country. There’s a solution he’s had for a while, and Yuna thought he was joking, but he could not be more serious. He wants to open an Irina Foundation in New York just for Bianca to run. He doesn’t know how to phrase this, though. She might think that’s charity, but it would be his fault she doesn’t have a job in the first place. “*If* this happens...” He emphasizes the words. “...You have some job offers in Canada, and a new Irina Foundation office is planned for New York. We will not let you go unemployed.”

“Hm.” Bianca makes an approving sound. Then she reaches into the pocket of her smart pantsuit and pulls out a USB drive. “There are more. Use them.” She slides it across the table.

Ilya looks at the small device with wide eyes. *More?* “More?”

“Most of these don’t have to do with you. They’re just from my own personal collection.” She darts her eyes to Fredericks and back. “Mr. Crowell is not *only* homophobic, you know.”

“Yes, we know. Is this hate speech? Racism? Sexism?” Ilya points to the USB drive, trying to envision what’s on there. “...Ableism?”

“Yes, to all. Some threats, some outbursts. General abusive workplace conditions. Some discussion of the gambling money, but Kavita Kingsley already has those. If you actually went public with these, it would uncover me as the source for that, as well.”

Ilya is practically drooling. He schools his jubilation, for now, “No, not public. That’s not the plan.” He just needs a criminal conviction to get Crowell out of power, so that became the new goal a while ago. If the man is tarred and feathered by the public along the way, that would be great. But not if it costs this poor woman her job. “But we can use these?”

“You can. If... Look. I would like to see him... *fired*.” Bianca looks at Ilya with an eyebrow raised, with the kind of caution of someone who has recorded every word she’s spoken for a long time. Ilya gets a chill when he catches her meaning. “There is some very damning stuff in there. Not only illegal stuff— embarrassing stuff. I wouldn’t give this to you if I didn’t think it would help. The public would have a field day.” She sighs and lets her posture get

slightly less proper, “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve almost said ‘fuck it’ and posted it online... or sent it to RogueMLH,” she admits and then looks at Ilya again like maybe she knows that’s him, too. “The day he discovered that twitter account... that’s on here, and it is *fun*. Some of the phone calls to the rookies, including Lowery’s...” She smirks like she knows what she’s sitting on. Ilya just about pees himself. Is this the best day of his life?

“You said ‘if’.” Fredericks points out. Ilya is glad. Surely he is salivating too much to speak right now.

Bianca nods. “This needs to end him. I can’t keep getting my hopes up, he can’t keep getting out of it. This needs to be it. That’s the only reason I haven’t done it myself, I don’t know how to make it stick. I’m giving this to you in hopes you can promise not to squander this, or sit on it, fucking around like you did the 2018 and 2019 game corruption.”

Ilya is surprised to hear her calling him out like that. “But... your job. We won’t go public, just legally...”

She waves a hand through the air, “My wife is a retired professional athlete, and we were smart with her checks. I was about to quit when I saw Scott Hunter kiss Kip Grady... I kind of knew he was going to need some friends. This whole thing has made my job a lot more bearable, knowing I’m helping something like this. Something important.”

Ilya is shocked by this lady’s kindness. He lets himself be quiet and absorb this gift she’s giving him.

It’s quiet for too long. “What sport?” Fredericks says, probably just to cut the tension. “Your wife, hockey?”

“UFC.” Bianca says without turning away from Ilya. He must look like a wreck, because she comforts him. “Listen, I love hockey. I like working for the MLH, but it would not ruin my life to lose this job, no.” She pushes the drive a little further toward him. “Take it. Do literally whatever you want with it, just make sure he doesn’t live to see next season... In his current position, of course.” She winks. Ilya is a little afraid at the *second* veiled death threat from the wife of a former UFC fighter.

Now Ilya is antsy with a kind of anticipation to go somewhere comfortable and binge these recordings like a 9-season sitcom. Too bad he probably won’t be able to do that until after their trip to the two teams in Florida.

Later, after their afternoon game, Ilya stands in the airport with his team. A booming, angry voice breaks the team from their post-win high. Ilya turns and— that can’t be right. Roger Crowell is waddling angrily up to his team. He is suspiciously alone. His assistant-shaped shadow is nowhere to be seen. Ilya panics. Did their meeting this morning lead to her termination already?

“Troy Barrett!” The man says again, his face a weird shade of light aubergine. “Let’s go!” Barrett sheepishly gets up from the airport seat he was practically sharing with Harris. Ilya is able to point to his phone quickly and as Barrett follows Crowell, Ilya watches him pull his phone from his pocket and tap it a few times.

Ilya stares at the conversation happening tragically out of ear shot. Crowell looks terrifying, and Barrett terrified. Barrett keeps shaking his head, denying something, as Crowell gesticulates violently at him. Troy says something, still shaking his head. Crowell pauses and narrows his eyes. The conversation isn’t ending, and Ilya feels compelled to step in. He walks slowly toward the pair, and Crowell snaps to face him.

“It’s you.” Crowell says to Ilya, pointing a finger up at him. “If it’s not Barrett, Fredericks is too fucking stupid, and it’s not the fag rookie. It’s not the fag coach. It’s not the fucking bitch running social media. It’s not the lesbo PT. It’s this one.” His finger jabs Ilya’s chest. Ilya cocks his head. Huh, he didn’t know they have a lesbian physical therapist.

Ilya could deny it. He tries to think of a lie, really anything to make this situation better. But he has these recordings burning a hole in his back pocket. He won’t have too many more chances like this before Crowell is booted, he’s sure of it. And Ilya wants to look him in the eye when he finds out, he wants to be the one to tell him. Ilya has been the thorn in Crowell’s side every step of the way, and some large part of him wants ownership of it. *Ilya* was the one to make Crowell feel this angry, who finally took him down.

Maybe it’s impulsive. He doesn’t really care. So he confirms it. He makes a tiny nod, “It is.” He ignores how proud he feels admitting it, the positive emotion warring with the fear and confusion and denial this man is trying to provoke, and winning. He can’t really help it, he smirks.

Crowell’s nostrils flair and he lowers his voice to a growl, “This entire team is dead.” He storms off, leaving Ilya and Barrett’s hearts racing.

Chapter End Notes

I’m gesturing wildly at the “Happily Ever After” tag.

Shout out to the comment in Chapter 15 that said “Hope Bianca’s wife can fight” because I immediately made sure she could!

For the logickers (Chips Official Logic-Obsessed Nuts? COLONS?): Ilya doesn’t have anyone on Carolina.

Coming up: 🤔😬👤

Chapter 33: When you frame it like that...

Chapter Summary

Last week in January, same evening

Chapter Notes

ACTUALLY READ THIS: I want to direct your attention to the “Spoilers for all Game Changers books” tag. We’ve finally gotten to a point where I’d feel bad if you read this and still planned to read the books, and it’s just going to get worse from here. Take a breather, go read them, and come back. We’ll be here, promise!

AND THIS: I brush over the details and emotions of what happens here (again, in hopes that you’ve read about it from at least two different perspectives by now), but if you don’t want to read it/hate feeling things, you can skip the first few lines and jump to the first line break. No one will blame you, and you won’t miss anything.

Otherwise, I am presenting this without comment, as I have learned my lesson about giving you disclaimers. Remember to have a rational, nuanced reaction to this.

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

Ilya thinks he’s going to die.

He’s on a plane, 30,000 feet in the air, that is about to crash. He’s messaging Shane with his last words, full of love and regret... and one other thing.

Ilya: He did this. He learned about me in the airport.

Ilya: Roger Crowell crashed our plane.

Shane will avenge him, he has to.

When the plane lands safe and sound in Florida, everyone is silent and harrowed from the near-death experience. Shane calls Ilya while the Centaurs are on the bus to the hotel.

Apparently Shane’s phone has been blowing up with people checking on him. He’s staying at Rivera’s tonight after their game in Washington, because the kids insisted he shouldn’t be alone. It sounds like there’s a whole crew there, between Rivera, Melnyk, Wagner, Hayden

and J.J., the apartment is packed and already more than a little drunk. They all shout well-wishes through Shane, and the Centaurs are saying “tell Shane for me...” and Ilya thinks for the first time that he’d prefer if people didn’t know about them, so they could be having this conversation in private where they could both break down. Later. Ilya has to keep it together for now anyway, he needs a plan.

Ilya ignores the vigil happening at the hotel bar with the rest of his team and makes his way directly up to his room. Barrett follows him up. Ilya’s first call is to Cooper Lee, of all people.

“Ilya!” Their lawyer sounds panicked out of the tinny speakerphone, “I was watching the news... are you ok??”

“Yes. Fine.” Ilya is putting off these emotions until he can get Lee on this case. “Is me and Barrett.” He doesn’t wait for either man to greet each other, “Crowell did this. He took down our plane. He learned about me ring-leading just before departure. Barrett is sending you audio right now,” he snaps his fingers at Barrett, who starts tapping on his phone. “He knows about Barrett and Haas and Wiebe.” Fuck. No one else knew about Wiebe or Haas. Crowell said it in front of Barrett too, but Barrett still looks surprised. “He brought up Harris, and a PT who isn’t traveling with us today. But he threatened us all.”

Lee is quiet for too long and then says, “... and you think he sabotaged your plane.”

“*Sabotaged*. Yes. Have been trying to think of the word.”

“Ilya? I know you’re scared right now, and shaken up. But be realistic. He’s made threats but ___”

“Today. *Today* he made a threat. On all of Ottawa. Then our plane goes down?”

“Barrett, are you there? Help?” Lee pleads for someone sane.

But he gets Barrett, who is maybe not sane. “Hear me out,” Barrett starts, unclear who he’s prompting, “Even if he didn’t do it... if we have him recorded threatening us, we have the motives. He was in Carolina when our plane took off, and Carolina loves Crowell and hates Rozanov’s group for... well, everything.” Barrett shrugs, “Sounds like... regardless, we could make a convincing case that he *did* do it.”

So... not someone sane.

Ilya is struck with a fondness he’s never felt for Troy Barrett. Like they are kindred spirits, homing around each other for years. Magnets. Maybe near-death has him thinking in terms of fate, but he thinks maybe he was always meant to work with Barrett.

“Yes,” is all Ilya can say, eyes prickling, threatening to tear up. “Yes. I love it.”

“Hello??” Lee’s voice comes out, interrupting Ilya’s epic thoughts. “We are not *framing* the MLH commissioner! For attempted murder of nearly three dozen people!”

“Ok. We’re not.” Ilya says sarcastically, “We should go, Cooper! Near death experience! Talk soon!” He hangs up quickly before Lee can protest. Ilya and Barrett smile momentarily. “Get Harris.”

Barrett starts typing on his phone and Ilya texts Yuna.

Ilya: We have a PT in Ottawa on staff army?

Yuna: ILYA thank God!!!!

Yuna: Are you ok sweetie???

Ilya: Yes, do we have a lesbian PT in Ottawa on the staff army?

Yuna: I am going to assume this means you are ok.

Yuna: And I believe she is bisexual but yes we have a PT in Ottawa.

Ilya: Is she out? Friends Family Work?

Yuna: Yep. She’s a sweetie, too.

Yuna: She gave me some exercises for David when his knee was acting up.

Ilya: Thank you. Tell her to stay off social media after she sees it.

Yuna: Sees what?

Yuna: Ilya?

Yuna: Sees what??

He calls Bianca. It’s dangerous, she could be with the commissioner, but she picks up after a few rings. “You have ten seconds,” she whispers.

“Did he crash the plane?” Ilya whispers before realizing he doesn’t need to be whispering back.

“No. Well... I don’t *think* so. But he’s frantic, because it really could look like he did. What did he say to you before you took off?”

“Threatened our lives. Not important. Can we make it look like he did? We have the threat recorded.”

“Mr. Rozanov— it’s *so* much worse. We were in the airport lounge and Dallas Kent called and told him an Ottawa player named Troy Barrett is gay. Mr. Crowell asked me to find out if your team had already left. When I checked and told him you were still at the airport waiting to depart, he asked me to stay in the lounge while he went out to ‘handle something’... sending that recording to you right now.” Ilya wants to cry, even before Bianca continues, “*And*, when he wants to calm down, he has a weird breathing technique he’s embarrassed about. It looks like— it doesn’t matter. After he spoke to you, he specifically asked for a place *without cameras* to go and calm himself.”

Ilya grins. It’s too good to be true. “Send me everything.”

When Harris gets to the room, they quickly fill him in on the details of their plan. Recently, because they have advanced knowledge of players' injuries, staffing changes, and especially cases of homophobia, RogueMLH now tweets with a kind of trusted prestige usually reserved for major news outlets. They've been consistently correct about every single thing they've tweeted, never any retractions or overstepping. They never really speculate, they only present facts with, at most, a skeptic or suspicious undertone. The hint about Lowery earlier in the season got the commissioner in a bit more hot water *because* it came from RogueMLH. They're just a trusted source now.

Harris sits at the desk and starts a post on his RogueMLH laptop, luckily undamaged in the turbulence, though his work laptop is busted. Barrett stands behind him, and Ilya paces the hotel room.

They clip the audio so it's just Crowell's diatribe after Ilya showed up.

"It's you. If it's not Barrett, Fredericks is too fucking stupid, and it's not the fag rookie. It's not the fag coach. It's not the fucking bitch running social media. It's not the lesbo PT. It's this one."

"It is."

"This entire team is dead."

They want to maintain some journalistic integrity, so they don't doctor the audio. Ilya's quiet admission, *"It is."*, contains no accent that would give him away. They pull a passing Evan Dykstra from the hallway to confirm. They play him the two words and he doesn't know who it is, even though it's his own captain. They tell him it's an Ottawa player, which the public will know, too. He guesses Boodram. They dismiss Dykstra hurriedly after he's served his purpose.

The clip never actually says what he's talking about, but a savvy public might put together that the Ringleader is on Ottawa, they might be able to infer that Barrett is queer, and Ottawa definitely has a queer rookie and a queer coach. The public already kind of knows they had a gay rookie from when he was almost kicked out, and Wiebe did imply someone higher up in the organization is queer too, but Ilya checks with Barrett. "This would out you."

Barrett just nods, "Yeah. It might... there's some deniability but it definitely might." Like it isn't a big deal? That isn't exactly the reaction Ilya was expecting, so he tries again.

"...And this is going to be public."

"Yeah." Again, it's met with nonchalance. Not that Barrett is noted for his... chalance, but this is *particularly* nonchalant.

"And you are ok with this?" Ilya speaks slowly to make sure he's understood.

“Am I allowed to be?” Barrett huffs, “Look, I’m just going where you put me, Rozanov. That’s what I’ve always done.”

Ilya rolls his eyes and mutters, “Yeah for like, one year.” He gets back to the point at hand, “You would be out.”

“Why are you so concerned? You’re the one who wanted me in the closet to begin with!”

“Until you got elected, yes.” Ilya responds with a furrowed brow. He’s a little confused, but they don’t really have time for this. “You can do whatever the fuck you want now, you can have a CUMSLUT!”

Barrett and Harris look at Ilya with twin shocked expressions. Barrett squeezes the bridge of his nose, “Ok. Just so we’re clear— you didn’t think to tell *me* that there was a time limit on that?”

Harris darts his head around, “Cumslut would have been my first complaint actually.” He shakes his head, “Vulgar, Ilya, even for you.”

“You have never wanted to come out, why would I tell you?” Ilya sighs. Why is this such a big deal? “And no... CUMSLUT is the trophy for the people who come out in the middle of the season. I think it can also be called the PENIS... there is very little precedent actually—“

“Ok, well have you considered that maybe I changed my mind? That maybe I *wanted* to be a CUMSLUT?” Barrett scrunches up his nose, “or... PENIS? God those are bad options— doesn’t matter, what if I changed my mind?”

“Then I would expect you to come to me and make the deal, no?”

“I’m sorry I don’t want to *ask* to be blackmailed—”

What? Ilya steps back. “Blackmailed? Who is blackmailing?”

“You!! You are!” Barrett cries. “You make this deal with these guys— and you can call it a bet or a game or whatever you want, but at the end of the day, if they don’t make good on it, you have their secret. They *have* to do whatever you want, because otherwise you might tell people. You leverage secrets like currency and it makes you a fucking bajillionaire!” He breathes like he’s run a marathon, like those words have been sitting on his tongue for ages and some combination of adrenaline from near-death and being on the precipice of coming out made him release them.

But Ilya feels like he just got hit in the face. He would never out someone. He knows that but... do the guys? Have they really all been going along with him under the assumption he would use their secrets against them if he didn’t? If he died in that plane crash tonight, how many of his guys would be grateful their secrets went down with him? Ilya has no idea how to defend himself.

Because it might be true. He’s never thought about it from the perspective of one of these players. A random celebrity, the best hockey player in the world, approaches you in secrecy

at a bar, tells you he knows you're gay, and asks you to make a deal...

Oh my god. Ilya has blackmailed 50 people.

"I would never out anyone." He mutters, maybe just to remind himself.

Barrett scoffs. "Do you tell everyone that?"

"I tell the rookies..." Ilya makes it clear to the rookies that they're only to come out when they are ready, that they actually shouldn't come out right away until they know the risks. The other guys though... Has Ilya subconsciously just let them think he might do something like that? To earn himself a little power?

Harris finally speaks up, "Troy, that's not really fair, have you seen the interviews Mat Rivera gave? Or any of those guys. They always say how careful Ilya is with secrets."

Barrett mutters, "Yeah. The same way someone would protect money."

At the same time Ilya says, "Thank you, Harris."

"And you—" Harris turns to Ilya, "did you really not think about how unbalanced this is? You hold so much of these guys' lives, they really can't say no to you. Starting with the bet... like, has anyone ever declined?"

Ilya looks at Barrett, his only failed bet. Then he looks down. "Only him." It's insane, but Ilya has never once considered *why* he was so successful and closed the deal every time.

"And he's still living like you control his life." Harris says. Barrett nods, and Harris is quick to snap his head back to him, "Which, by the way, wasn't ever really valid. I thought you were closeted because you thought it was helpful for the cause, not because you thought Rozanov *controls* you."

"I didn't know you wanted to come out." Ilya admits, ashamed. He's itching to call every single one of those guys and ask their real opinion.

"Because I thought you wanted me in the closet!" Barrett wails, "I'd be CUMSLUT PENIS *tomorrow* if I knew I could!"

"Ok!" Ilya snaps, "We are getting you a CUMSLUT right now!" He gestures at the laptop.

There's a knock on the door. Fuck, they really need to be posting the audio. Instead, Ilya gets the door.

"Coach? What's up?"

"Rozanov," Coach Wiebe greets him, then looks in the door and sees Harris at the desk, Barrett standing behind him. He greets them too. "Barrett, Harris. Uhhh you guys can't be screaming obscenities, it's like 2am."

“Oh, everyone is sleeping sound after the plane crash?” Ilya asks sarcastically. Oh my god this is his coach, “Sorry. It’s been a lot. We’ll be quiet.”

Wiebe looks like he’s glad Ilya fixed himself, “Yeah.” Then he steps into the room and closes the door, “What did Crowell say to you guys? That conversation looked bad. But we haven’t heard anything about benching you which... I mean, if he looks like that, you’d think we would.”

Ilya looks at Harris and Barrett. The whole world will know soon, “He threatened us. He did a whole homophobic speech and then told us we are all dead.” Wiebe’s eyes look ready to pop out of his skull. “RogueMLH is posting the audio right now.” Harris turns his laptop slightly. Wiebe notices it.

“Ok.” He nods, “anything else?”

“The audio might out me. It’s not clear but...” Barrett admits. Ilya assumes this is the first time he is indicating anything about his sexuality to their coach.

Wiebe sighs again, “Ok.”

“And you,” Ilya adds. They have a lot of coaches, but it could be narrowed down. The head coach would be the first suspect.

“Ok.” He looks tired. That’s it? Just ok? He then responds to the shocked faces, “Guys, I’m not going to be the reason you don’t post it. I know the team has my back like it has yours. Who else?”

“It says the ringleader is on Ottawa.”

“According to our GM, the ringleader *is* on our team.” Wiebe looks pointedly at Ilya, who nods.

Harris jumps in, “And a physical therapist. But we think she’s out already.”

“Ok, let me just hear the fucking thing please?”

They play the clip for Wiebe, who points out “You know, it’s not clear if he’s talking about the Ringleader. It might be RogueMLH or even just someone who... I don’t know, played a prank on him or something. There’s a little bit of guesswork there.”

“That’s true,” Harris agrees. “We’d be able to argue something like that if anyone finds out who it is.”

Wiebe continues. “Who’s that saying that “it is”? You or Barrett?” All three breathe a sigh of relief. Through some magic luck, it really seems like Ilya really won’t be identified here. Ilya will see if Yuna has any sway with the airport, maybe she can get them to shield the video surveillance that would show the conversation was between Crowell, Barrett, and Ilya. He’ll have to text the whole team and tell them not to talk to the press about that conversation, too. They all saw the three talking.

They listen to the recording three more times before Wiebe turns to leave. “No more screaming weird shit, guys, seriously.”

Ilya is exhausted. He feels like he could fall asleep standing up, but also knows when he goes to lie down, sleep will not come easily. He rubs his face. “Ok, just post it.”

@RogueMLH

Roger Crowell threatens the lives of Ottawa players at the airport just before their near-crash. [Listen to the audio here.](#)

It’s a risk. They don’t editorialize, but the implication is clear, and only they know it could be wholly false.

Ilya ignores Cooper’s phone calls. It’s so late at night, Ilya could pretend to be asleep. When he picks up a call from Hunter and he is greeted immediately with, “What the fuck are you doing? I just talked to Lee.” He hangs up and also starts ignoring Hunter. He ignores Luca Haas texting, “Libel laws!!!” because this kid is not a lawyer. He ignores the group chats.

Council of (Mostly) Straight Elders *group chat*

Marly: Rozanov? Hayes?

Marly: Everyone ok?

Pike: It didn’t crash, they’re fine.

Vaughan: Dude.

Vaughan: Trauma is a real thing.

Vaughan: but ummm

Vaughan: I forget, are we supposed to be pretending not to know Rozanov is running RogueMLH?

Pike: why?

Vaughan: so you can get the news that they didn’t crash, but you can’t check twitter?

Marly: where else do you even get news?

Marly: where are Hayes and Roz? they’re not answering

Pike: idk JJ only told me they didn’t crash

Pike: and then I came to Rivera and Melnyks with Shane and JJ and we haven’t been checking the news.

Pike: the vibe here is already not great.

Vaughan: Ok it doesn’t fucking matter, did Crowell seriously try to crash their plane?

Marly: What??

Hayes: Sorry. I’m herfe. Iddk whr roz whent but we alliiiiivvee

Pike: ok so that's not helpful.

Pike: Roz isn't at whatever gathering that is?

Vaughan: [\[link\]](#)

Vaughan: I feel like he should have told us what to do, social media is coming up with all kinds of theories

Vaughan: we could have stopped this

Vaughan: if it gets out of hand idk I think they could be charged with defamation or some shit

Marly: the audio is bad oh my god

Marly: this is uncomfortable to listen to

Marly: Roz told Crowell he's the Ringleader!?

Marly: he's such a badass

Marly: I love that guy

Pike: is that Rozanov's voice?

Vaughan: I mean I assume so? just because who else would it be?

Pike: I can't tell, i don't think it is

Pike: Ok Shane says it's him

Pike: but no one else here thinks it's clear who it is

Marly: and holy shit yeah Crowell straight up tells them to die

Marly: god fuck this guy

Pike: Shane might kill someone tonight guys

Pike: If he hadn't had two sips of vodka he'd be driving to wherever Crowell is right now

Pike: we're all fucking lucky that plane didn't go down

Pike: well like obviously but

Pike: sorry I'll shut up

Vaughan: ok so maybe not defamation...

Vaughan: do we really think the commissioner would crash a team plane?

Hayes: wai wtf hapenned?

r/MLHcorruption

This is a forum to highlight the corruption, scandals, and coverups throughout Major League Hockey. Be respectful and keep an open mind. We now encourage everyone to provide sources. Together we can create a more transparent MLH.

u/sir1589shelf MOD 1 hour ago 📌

Ottawa Centaurs' plane scare and Crowell audio megathread

All conversation about the plane incident and Crowell audio should remain in this thread.

[Link to Article](#)

[Link to RogueMLH audio](#)

↑ 4.5k ↓ 466

u/HelloBiscus

So we're just married to the conclusion that Crowell caused the crash? Came out shady fast tbh

u/Apps-And-Zerts

Good point. A real plane tampering would only be uncovered like weeks later.

u/Faint4Taint

unless the person fucking admits to tampering with it. You people are idiots.

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r

can we ask why Crowell was being recorded?

u/HorseJailforHorses

not Troy Barrett getting listed with four other gay men... 🙄 but that could mean nothing

u/penisthedong

Isn't Troy Barrett like... very antigay? He was famously best friends with Dallas Kent for his entire career, and Dallas Kent "came out as straight" during TGS affection-fest

u/sir1589shelf

I mean yeah, and he was supposedly really bad, but the players' union has been pretty progressive since he got elected last year. You can find their meeting minutes [here](#).

u/Apps-And-Zerts

Because "famously best friends" is really a term for two straight men lmao! Give me a break. Kent and Barrett were fucking.

u/dscvrroe45780

Crowell's accusing the person of being the ringleader right? Or do we think rogueMLH? Gotta be someone Crowell hates, so can't be many other people, right? LOL

u/Faint4Taint

whichever it is could be Ilya Rozanov. He's on Ottawa and someone posted last month that the Irina jersey sales are better than MLH at this point. Bet Crowell hates that.

u/MrSirHimself

another Rozngleader clue. Can't believe people aren't behind me on this.

u/Gr4dual_Dcline

maybe it's that godawful name you've given him. Stop trying to make that work.

u/ChiefErectutiveOfficer

for real why not just go with Ringanov or Rilya?

u/Apps-And-Zerts

I know he's not ringleader bc his name doesn't work as well as Ringlander or Runtleader

u/ChiefErectutiveOfficer

Runtleader isn't real. Scott Hunter would have bragged about it by now if it were him.

u/Champ-ion-agne

It doesn't sound like Rozanov. Someone put together a compilation of him and other MLH players saying the words "it is". Rozanov has an accent, this guy doesn't. Here.

u/ScratchYourAss4me

Fredericks catching strays from Roger Crowell! I mean it's true, he doesn't seem smart.

u/PeopleSpokesperson

So can we acknowledge that Ottawa is the gayest team yet or no? A coach (we think head coach Wiebe or?), a rookie, Fredericks, potentially Barrett and this other guy? Washington who lmao am I right?

u/dscvrroe45780

it's not like it makes them better in the standings. Ottawa blows (literally I guess).

u/LiveBreatheHockey

uhhh are we looking at the same standings? Ottawa is going all the way this year.

u/99OrganizedOrgans

Look at Washington, they've been tanking since Queerivera and Wagayner game out.

u/Gr4dual_Dcline

This is lesbian erasure. Never forget the #LesboPT

u/MrSirHimself

It's definitely Brandon Wiebe. He had an affair with a teammate in 1998, it's why he was sent back down to minors.

u/penisthedong

Source? Because like... is there video? 🙄👁️👁️👉 Wiebe could get it.

u/AutoMLHCSorce_Bot

You must now provide sources for your claims. If this comment is not answered with a link to a credible source, the original comment will be removed. Check up your ass is not a source. *I am a bot and this action was performed automatically.*

u/99OrganizedOrgans

the gay rookie is def Haas right? Holmberg gives some vibes too but I heard Haas likes to draw and thats 🎨 to me.

u/sir1589shelf

thats nail art to you? I don't get it

u/61courH

Plus he wears glasses. So.

u/ClockingSideeye

Crowell is just going up to people in airports and threatening them? So much that people know to start recording when he wanders up? Seriously, why were they recording??

By 4:45am, Ilya is alone in the hotel room. Barrett left for Harris's room when they were done posting, but Ilya can't stop thinking about what Barrett said. He texts Shane everything on his mind in a long paragraph in Russian, but he knows he won't see it and translate it until he wakes up. He feels a little bad using his husband as a diary, but Shane might actually like it.

He knows what the younger guys say in their public interviews, but Ilya makes it clear to the rookies that he won't out them. Has he ever said that to any of his older players? He wonders what a respectable hour would be to call around and ask. There's one person it's never mattered, day or night. Plus, he might actually be awake for his fiber-packed cream of oats by now.

Ilya: did I force you into this?

Ilya: did you know you had a choice?

Oldest Man Alive: Near death making you think?

Ilya: yes, sorry you must feel like this every day.

Ilya: so close to death

Oldest Man Alive: Fuck off.

Oldest Man Alive: I don't think you'd out anyone, no.

Oldest Man Alive: Oh my god, Barrett knew he was getting outed tonight right??

Ilya: yes

Ilya: but you? back then?

Oldest Man Alive: What do you want me to say?

Oldest Man Alive: I didn't know you.

Ilya: I have blackmailed 50 people?

Oldest Man Alive: No, you haven't.

Oldest Man Alive: Look at how many guys wanted to come out this year at the awards.

Ilya: and I made them choose! I didn't let everyone.

There is no response. Instead, Ilya's phone lights up with a call. "Hello?"

"Hi, easier to talk someone off a ledge than text." Hunter's voice is quiet on the other line. That makes sense, it's not even 5am.

"Old people confuse me."

Hunter scoffs. "Ok, where is this freakout coming from? Why now?"

"Barrett said—"

"Barrett." Hunter cuts him off, "*Troy* Barrett? Known asshole? Ok, what did Dallas Kent's famously well-adjusted and self-assured best friend say?"

Ilya takes his point. He continues anyway, "Just that I have kept these secrets like money, and the power is unbalanced, and he wanted to come out and I wouldn't let him... and now you said about the guys who wanted to come out but I wouldn't let *them*, either..."

"What, you think they're not coming out so that... you... don't... out them after?" He says the last few words slowly. "Rozanov, they would already be out, you wouldn't have anything else on them." Wait. That's a good point. Ilya is quiet, so Scott continues, "Barrett is being a dick because he doesn't like his own decisions. If he wanted to come out, he could have come out and you would have had no more leverage over him. He's blaming you because— again, not sure how many times I can say this— *he's an asshole.*"

Ilya hums and nods, which Scott can't even see. "He is earning his keep." Ilya for some reason wants to defend Barrett. "It was his idea to put up the audio." *And frame the commissioner*; is implied, he hopes.

"I'm hanging up before I hear anything else. Cooper Lee already yelled at me tonight and I guess I can blame Troy Barrett for that, too." Scott sighs.

"Cooper will get over it."

"Ilya, go to sleep. You've had a really long day. You fucking told the commissioner it's you today— crack job at keeping secrets, by the way— and then you almost died. And now you're concerned about these guys? Go to sleep, please. I promise all of your fears and worries will be waiting for you tomorrow."

"Comforting."

"It's what I'm here for. I'm uhhh..." Scott clears his throat, "I'm glad you didn't die, man."

"Me too. Would be very embarrassing getting outlived by Scott Hunter."

@TroyBarrett17

[photo: Harris kissing Troy on the cheek]

I'm getting a lot of questions, so I need to clear the air. I gave my blessing for RogueMLH to use that audio. I knew it might look a certain way for me, but after a night like this and some long conversations with some friends and loved ones, I don't care. I'm coming out and taking the #PRICE Award . The Ringleader took a chance on me before I deserved it. I haven't been a great support, including tonight, but I'm still #45 and I'm learning how to be proud of us. Mostly I'm just mad the commissioner called my boyfriend the "bitch running social media." (He's fine with it though, he's making a shirt)

RASHYCOCK + DICK COMA + PENIS + Roz group chat

Oldest Man Alive: I'm not doing it.

Oldest Man Alive: I don't even have Barrett's number.

Oldest Man Alive: He was an asshole literally yesterday.

Lundin: Holy shit Troy Barrett is gay??

Lundin: That guy called me a "fudge packer" his rookie year not even kidding

Lundin: But I'm curious about #PRICE

Rivera: it's probably just because any midseason award is named for Ryan Price

Baldwin: Feels weird that he's getting an award with Ryan Price's name on it.

Fredericks: Ok Harris says it's the Price award for Respectability In Coming out Early

Lundin: Mean AND #boring

Lundin: Don't see that every day

Jane: he's not #boring.

Bennett: No, I think he's getting nicer. He texted me last night asking what PENIS stands for.

Bennett: Glad to see he didn't use it

Melnyk: Looks like he's using his penis a lot actually

Melnyk: His boyfriend is a cutie

Rivera: ignoring that

Rivera: Isn't he working with the union for us now?

Rivera: I've always just thought he's quiet

Rivera: He left the last salmon spring roll at the All Stars lunch buffet for me

Lundin: oh my god call the Nobel Prize committee

Fredericks: I have his number but am I even allowed to add him?

Ilya: everyone is allowed to do anything they want

Ilya: I want everyone to feel free

Ilya: I do not own you, the group does not own you

Ilya: make your decisions for yourself

Ilya: but we give Barrett a chance

Ilya: if you want.

Ilya: no one is making you.

Baldwin: What the fuck is this about?

Baldwin: Is Roz drunk? it's like 11am

Jane: Leave him alone

Jane: It's been a long night.

Jane: I'm just going to do it.

Jane added Barrett to the group chat

Barrett: oh what the fuck is this?

Chapter End Notes

Troy Barrett is out!

Nothing really for your spreadsheets today, sorry!

Coming up: STILL SO MUCH! Canon packs a lot into these few months too, but we're getting down to it! I'm fairly certain there are 2-3 chapters in this season, then one post-season. I've said before, 2021-22 will get 1 chapter (maybe 2) and then there will be a time-skip chapter, so all-in-all about 5ish more of these things.

AND!!!! @AWorldofTrees wrote [Kowalski/Cooper Lee fic!!!!](#) And it is SO GOOD!!!

Chapter 34: Heterotitanium

Chapter Summary

January-March 2021

Chapter Notes

 **SLIGHT** (positive?) **CLIFFHANGER AT THE END**  if you want to wait until the next chapter is out, that's ok! Everyone is in tact, I promise, and Happily Ever After guaranteed always, it's just... eventful.

If you haven't read the books and you've chosen to ignore all my warnings about spoilers, that's on you!

Some things about canon get a little messy here and we're attributing that to the butterfly effect (Troy isn't at this All Stars in the books, but he also wasn't at the 2017 All Stars either lol this universe is just Barrett better at hockey).

Anya does exist, Ilya gets her in early March. She's not here, I couldn't find a place to work her in, but she is alive and well and chewing up buttplugs that look too much like her toys. Haunting the narrative, etc.

SCOTT POV in here somewhere and then a very pleasant surprise POV shift later 

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

There is no official acknowledgement of Crowell's threat and the subsequent plane scare.

Media think-pieces start coming out about the possibility of Crowell sabotaging the plane, but no charges have been filed. A text from Mastur Bates says, "Not dealing with it until after All Stars next week. Optics."

But the Thursday before All-Star Weekend, Dallas Kent is arrested. It basically stops the conversation about Crowell's involvement with the plane. It's strange, why wasn't Kent arrested before?

Ilya doesn't have to think too hard about that one. Crowell would throw anyone under the bus... or, plane? to interrupt his own bad press. He waited until he needed the distraction to shove his errand boy to the authorities. Ilya is worried the Dallas Kent news will dominate the weekend and no one will remember Ottawa's plane scare. If his Thursday night game and

online commentary are any indication, it's not like they're talking about the actual crimes or the persistent problems with reporting these kinds of crimes.

No, they're talking about what a shame it is that Dallas Kent's career is cut short by accusations. So Ilya texts Kavita Kingsley to ensure the press stays with his story first.

Ilya: do not let the press move on.

Ilya: queer plane crash story first, kent bullshit second.

Kavita: Oh are we telling each other how to do our jobs now?

Kavita: Because I would have passed to Dillon instead of shooting in that one power play against Utah on Tuesday.

Kavita: I also wouldn't have INCLUDED MY VOICE IN AN AUDIO LEAK

Kavita: It is your best case scenario if the press moves on from this.

Ilya: no.

Ilya: my all-stars can do a panel this weekend.

Kavita: ...

Kavita: Fine. I'm listening.

The press puts together a panel of queer All Stars. Scott doesn't know if he'd rather be talking about a rapist with sympathizers or about a homophobic murder plot with reporters. It doesn't really matter. Rozanov told him Kavita was arranging this panel, so he came. He suspects Rozanov actually was the one to put the whole thing together.

He's hungover as shit, though. Rozanov has a way of getting Scott to stay up until ungodly hours of the evening. Scott's hotel room took the burden of hosting this weekend. He doesn't throw as good of a party as Ilya, though, and it was a lot more sad drunken confessional than fun high school rager. Plus, he's the kind of host who would—and did—take the fifth beer out of Osmo Junnila's hand. If the Finnish rookie is playing in his first all-star game the next day, he shouldn't be hungover, no matter how much Scott wants the Eastern Conference win. When Scott realized he's almost old enough to be Ossi's actual father, he kicked everyone out. Rozanov stayed behind for a cabinet meeting and *that* was the real mistake, the three extra drinks that have Scott's head pounding this morning.

Scott gets to the stage early and deliberately sits on the farthest of the four chairs and indicates Hollander should sit next to him. Rivera sits next to Hollander, and Troy Barrett sits furthest away. Just how Scott wanted it. He still doesn't like that creep. He knows objectively, on paper, Barrett has done so much for Rozanov's mission. Maybe even more than Scott has, admittedly. But his attitude has always been terrible, and Scott doesn't want to sit next to someone who dodges questions about his best friend's heinous crimes instead of standing up publicly against them.

They know what will be asked, for the most part. They all know what they can and cannot say. With the exception of Barrett, they've all been forged in fire with this kind of press. Scott was worried about Barrett's media training. They never went through the how-to-be-a-gay-

hockey-player-in-an-interview lessons with him, but Ilya assured him it's fine. The Chief Queer himself is in the back of the room, leaning against the wall. A few other players are here, so it's not crazy that he showed up, but the room is mostly press. Once everyone is settled, Scott checks to see his players are ready to go, then nods at the coordinator, who starts choosing questions.

They start light. Or, they probably *think* this is a light question.

"Mat, what's it like playing on a team with your boyfriend?" A reporter asks. Scott feels the air around Hollander tense up. God, it must be agony for them to sit and watch their ideal scenario come true for these kids. Hollander's contract must be up soon, but can Ilya really make any trade in the league happen except his own husband's? If Scott had started this whole thing, not waited for Rozanov to come around and do it, would the couple be on a team together already?

"Uhh, it's awesome." The kid shrugs, "I can't say the actual game is much different... we try to keep that dynamic out of the arena. But it's nice to finally live in the same place."

"Are you mad he wasn't chosen for All-Stars?"

Rivera, who has gotten a bit more comfortable with the press, smiles. "He's here, he's excited to watch," he points into the crowd, and Scott distantly hopes Ilya had the presence of mind not to stand with Melnyk. "But he'll compete here when he deserves to compete here." Rivera shrugs, cocky. The room giggles.

"Shane, kind of the same question. First, is your husband here this weekend? Is he playing?"

Scott is about to step in and axe the question—it's one they've firmly barred—but Shane laughs into the microphone before he can. There's a glimmer of mischief in his eyes, and Scott knows his prepared nonanswer is probably designed to irritate Rozanov, so he lets Shane have it. "Well, I'm much better at hockey than he is, obviously. But he's an All-Star in my heart." It's so condescending. Scott can't help it, he laughs at this. Scott knows he could be funny here by challenging the idea that Hollander is better than Rozanov, and if people knew about them, he would. It would be a cute back-and-forth and the soundbite would be legendary. But if he tried to say that now, it would be legendary for the wrong reasons. So instead he just shakes his head and laughs lowly with the rest of the room.

"...And on the rosters this weekend? Is he an All-Star *here*, too?" The reporter presses, no longer as light-hearted.

"Next question." Scott says protectively. The reporters here know the rules. To be honest, even the first question was a gift to them.

"Troy, one of your first acts as players' union president was supporting Lowery when he was sent off Tampa. What was your reaction when you learned he had asked the commissioner his pronouns?"

Well, shit. All four of them look at each other. It looks like even Barrett knows he was the exact wrong person for this question. To Barrett's credit, after a quick glance to see if anyone

else might step in, he takes it.

“I’ll give it to the kid, it was brave. But it wouldn’t have been my first question to the commissioner. I might have asked why Dallas Kent was still in the league, or why he was calling rookies in the first place.” Scott tries to school his shock so the cameras don’t pick it up. Barrett has never answered an interview question about anything real before, just hockey. People know not to ask, because he’ll give a noncommittal answer. This was *very* committal. Maybe something about almost dying after being threatened makes you answer questions like that.

The reporters seem excited that they might see Barrett with opinions. “Troy, you haven’t given any interviews since you came out—”

“Sorry, I’ve been playing good hockey,” Troy interrupts.

“—Yes, and Ottawa is having a good season. We wanted to get your take on the group, the guys in it, the Ringleader...?” The journalist trails off, because he’s already said the part he’s really asking about: the Ringleader. Scott breathes deeply. If this asshole ruins what Ilya has been working on, Scott will get up and deck him right here in the press room.

“Uhh...” Troy thinks for a beat, then, “I was a hold-out for a long time. I was approached way before I was ready to even think about any of this stuff. So I can’t really speak to the aspect of community a lot of the guys have.” He cocks his head in Scott’s direction, “Hunter still hasn’t taken me on as a grandchild yet.” Scott rolls his eyes. The same words out of Rozanov’s mouth would earn a quick laugh from him, probably. But then Barrett continues, “But I don’t really deserve that, I was always masking this secret by overcorrecting. I was mean to a lot of my coworkers, and I was responsible for the kind of locker room dynamic this group tries to change.”

The reporter tries again, “And—”

Barrett cuts off the question, “And I do want to apologize to the group for that, and any players who aren’t in the group but were hurt by it.” Scott is surprised this statement is so public, so much in opposition to everything Barrett usually is. “So... yeah. Anyway, your question?”

“Yes, just... the Ringleader?” The reporter seems taken aback as well, just barely hanging on to the scraps of the question.

“That guy’s an idiot. A ruthless, mean, jerk.” Barrett says with a smile, then lets it fade, “What do you want me to say? I was the only one who has ever turned down the Cup tradition, he didn’t like me as much as, like...” Barrett nods to the other three, “these guys, obviously.” Scott knows he’s fighting a smirk at how much the Ringleader likes *one* of these guys. “But yeah, everything everyone says about him is true. An angel walking among mortals, and whatever.”

“And you in your coming out post you mentioned being in touch with RogueMLH to clear that leaked audio, do you know who runs that account?” Shit, this was a question on the banned list. Did that list even get passed around?

Barrett smiles again, but Scott jumps in before he can expose Ilya or describe his boyfriend with heart eyes and give them away, “I think you know he wouldn’t be able to answer that even if he could.”

“And Troy, you’re the only one here whose coming out was not entirely your decision, or the group’s decision. How does that feel?” Scott hates this question. He doesn’t like that Barrett can blame everyone else for his idiocy.

“Listen. Four years ago, at this same event, it was my worst fear. Coming out was a death sentence for your career. But these guys made the sport better. I was so scared for a long time and now I can’t even remember why.”

Shane scoffs and Rivera gives him a look that says, *‘I know, but shut up!’*

“Scott, as the group’s vice president—”

“—unofficially,” he mutters but lets them continue.

“Was it the Ringleader on that leaked audio? Did you recognize the voice saying “it is”?” Luckily no eyes dart to Hollander. Rumor has it Shane thinks those two words were a dead giveaway, even though Scott couldn’t tell. Clearly they’re safe enough to be asked this question without Rozanov’s name coming up.

“Could be anyone.” Scott smiles playfully. “It’s really unclear.”

“What’s the group’s official position on these accusations against Crowell? Do you think he actually tampered with the plane?”

He breathes a bit more seriously. “I don’t think any of us know enough to speculate on what happened that night, but look... We can’t have a commissioner who says things like that. Notice how no one is disputing what he actually said, because if you’ve talked to him, you know that’s just who he is. And it’s not ok, it’s a hostile work environment. We’ve made our stance on the man fairly clear in my annual commandeered address, but he seems to just get worse. What consequences have there actually been for the game rigging in two cup playoffs? And Barrett had a point— why *was* he calling rookies?” Scott has more to this rant but he hears a timid voice from his left.

“Can I?” Barrett is saying, and Scott nods with confusion. “There’s a lot of press in this room. It’s kind of *your* job to be asking these questions. Not to us, but to the people who can actually answer them. Don’t ask Hunter if the commissioner tampered with our plane, ask the f— ask the *commissioner*. RogueMLH can only do so much. They don’t have the access that you do. So *when* you ask the guys in power those questions, can you also ask: Why was Dallas Kent charged this weekend? Not before?”

Rivera sits up and adds, “And why has Lowery not been reinstated by Tampa yet?”

Shane jumps in too, “Why did the Irina Foundation get a cease and desist letter to stop our most successful fundraiser?”

Scott looks at his group fondly. Even Barrett has impressed him today. He has a lot more of these, but there's one that sums them all up pretty well. "Why does that man still have a job?"

Ilya is frustrated. Nothing is *happening*.

He takes Bianca's request seriously; The audio he's holding needs to actually take Crowell down, but now he doesn't know how it can. If threatening to crash a plane didn't do it, what will?

He doesn't have time for a huge scheme. He's launching coordinated attacks on guys who repeatedly fuck with his players on the ice. His guys are employing some questionable tactics against the handful of teams who don't have a gay player, trying to prevent them from making the playoffs. Ottawa looks good, and they're on track to make the playoffs for the first time in years. But other playoff contenders like Brooklyn, L.A., and Carolina have no one to come out at the cup. Neither do New York or Montreal, despite having openly gay players. What happens if they win? Montreal hasn't been at their best, but New York actually looks good. Ilya doesn't like to think about it. He doesn't want to rig anything against Hunter. The man would never let him hear the end of it.

There's so much he could do if he didn't have constant practice and games. He can't help but think if someone with more time— maybe if one of the retired guys were in charge, Crowell wouldn't be a problem anymore.

These are Ilya's thoughts as he lines up for his Pride night game against Toronto in February. He's never seen so much tangible evidence of this movement. It's a sold-out crowd. Irina Foundation jerseys fill almost every seat; you'd think their logo is one of the teams playing tonight. There are signs in the crowd supporting Troy and Fredericks and some that say "We <3 our queer coach and rookie" and "100% that bitch running social media" and "#LesboPT". A banner from the rafters says, "Ottawa: Circus Headquarters". There are some that say "F Dallas Kent" and "We believe the women." Some Toronto fans in #8 Irina jerseys are even holding "Pay the Price" signs even though the man retired three years ago. Ilya's eyes burn with something other than just happiness and awe at the moment. He's jealous, he can admit that. He feels like he's missing out on the party happening right now, like he's just sitting at home. The feeling is temporarily eased when Bood elbows him and points up into the rafters to a sign that says, "Of course Ringleader is a Centaur."

Ilya battles with himself whether he'd rather have his name up on one of those signs or keep going with his project. He probably can't have both. That's why he has to get Crowell out, now. Because Ilya is going to win the cup this season and come out. His project needs to be done by then.

Except gay hockey isn't anywhere near normalized, and Shane isn't anywhere close to comfortable. Most of Montreal's locker room is ignoring him, at best. He's dodging fights on the ice every game, regardless of who they play. If he were on Ilya's team, he would be much better protected. But Shane hasn't brought up the prospect of moving teams at the end of this season when his contract is up, and Ilya doesn't want to make him do anything. Shane in Ottawa is a pipe dream. Still, he suspects if he told Ottawa's GM why he wanted Shane here so badly, they would try to find a way.

When Ilya complains about the distance, Shane just says the word "patience". And Ilya trusts him. So Ilya is patient. He can be patient.

Ilya's patience is only reserved for Shane. The rest of the world has gotten too much of Ilya Rozanov's patience already.

"Hello." Ilya says into the phone at the end of February, over six weeks since the plane scare with no consequences. "The leader asked me to make this call."

"Right. The Ringleader." Mastur Bates says skeptically, "The other gay guy on Ottawa with a Russian accent."

"Wh— no? What?" Ilya sputters and bites back the bisexual correction in his surprise. "What Russian accent?"

"The one on the airport recording?" He sounds like he's smiling, "Great job getting some distance between you and your goals, son."

"What do you mean?" Ilya doesn't love that this guy just called him 'son', but ok.

"We can't boot Crowell now. It's actually made it *less* likely. He's panicking because it looks like he did it. He won't let us remove him."

"What do you mean he won't let you?" Ilya whines. "You employ him."

"That's not really how it works." He sighs like he's explaining it to a toddler. "Yes, obviously the Board of Governors instates and removes the commissioner. But most of these guys have known each other since secret fraternities at Harvard, Mr. Rozanov. Before this, we had a better chance of removing him with the growing discrimination complaints, there was a little public support for those. A lot of the team owners don't want to be associated with politics, one way or the other. It's bad for business. They keep out of it, and want the league to do the same. So we might have had the ball rolling, we could've argued we're entering a new era, yada yada yada... But *now* if we do it, it sends the message that our old buddy is guilty of... whatever this is."

“Attempted murder of 35 people.” Ilya says with the tone of someone who has read these penal codes to fall asleep every night for six weeks.

“Sure.” The line is quiet for a moment, “Look... I didn’t want to say anything. I don’t want to tell you how to do your job— or your hobby? Whatever. But... you knew what to do with me. Why aren’t you doing the same thing to Crowell?”

Wait, he can blackmail Crowell for being gay?

No. “Crowell is gay??” Ilya would have known. Surely in one of their meetings he would have—

“No!” Mastur Bates laughs, hard. “No, God no. Oh my god could you imagine? No... No.”

“Five no’s.” Ilya observes offhandedly.

“No. Crowell is not gay. Or queer or whatever. You’re telling me you don’t have anything on him though? I’m assuming that’s not the first time you’ve recorded him. The man makes a threat once every fifteen minutes or so, the odds are just good.”

This is... not the tone of their first conversation. “Why are you trying to help?”

“I have a vested interest in seeing him out of office. I have an idea for his successor. And I realized you might be the perfect person to get me there.”

Oh. “You?”

He hums. “I think together we can get him out, and in exchange I can promise some leniency for your men when I’m in that seat.”

“Leniency. How?”

“Jesus, Rozanov. Leniency like not kicking rookies out of the league or rigging games. You’re not getting anywhere because you’re trying to get everything perfect. It’s not going to be perfect.”

Ilya disagrees. He thinks he can get it perfect.

And the idea from Mastur Bates, that they should blackmail Crowell, is almost a non-starter. What do they blackmail him for? For him to step down? Then he wouldn’t see criminal charges, maybe ever. For better conditions? But what does that *fix*? And what if Crowell doesn’t take it seriously? What if he knows he’s made of heterotitanium?

Still, Ilya finds himself putting together the clips Baldwin has edited down. He really just took out the awkward pauses before or after conversations start. Sometimes there’s a damning conversation between Ilya and Scott, or anyone else who might be physically present, before or after the conversation. Those have all been clipped off.

He sends a call to all his guys: If you have anything recorded, any email that is damning, any evidence at all against the league, send it to him. A wave of new recordings is processed. He adds them all to Bianca's stash. Ilya and Baldwin take impeccable records, noting the date and location for each recording in a separate list.

But he has no idea what to do with them.

So he gathers a small cabinet when New York plays in Montreal. This is the most bold thing he's ever asked of Shane—to let Ilya host a meeting in his apartment that he can't attend. But it's necessary for what he wants to do, and Shane agreed to it. Ilya gets the sense he knows there are shady things afoot and wants nothing to do with them.

Once they're settled and Shane has made himself scarce with no questions asked, Scott starts. "What are we doing here, Rozanov?" He's sitting next to Carter Vaughan on the couch, Pike is on the arm chair, and Barrett is on the floor. Ilya is pacing. Scott looks at him warily. "You wouldn't have invited this many of us if it were about... the playoffs."

Ilya smiles. Obviously Hunter doesn't want him rigging the playoffs again, this is the best New York has looked since they won the cup. But Ottawa is looking good, too. Their last win put them ahead of Montreal, something Ilya just had a lot of sex about.

"Hunter, I am winning the cup."

"—*We*. Jackass." Barrett corrects him.

Scott raises an eyebrow, skeptically. "How?"

"Get off his dick, Hunter." Pike says and quickly adds, "not... like that. Just, I don't think Rozanov is doing any... thing..." he realizes he's in mixed company with no idea what anyone knows about previous rigged games.

Ilya is winning this year. And no, unless Shane is involved, he doesn't see the need to make it fair and square. He sees what the commissioner is doing to Montreal and Washington. It would be working on Montreal if Shane weren't so good. He knows the commissioner is planning to—if he hasn't already—take Ottawa's playoff run from them, and Ilya isn't letting him. It's rigged against him, anything he does is just balancing the scales.

"Anyway." The point of their meeting provides a welcome distraction from this topic. "Crowell will not be commissioner next season."

They all make surprised gasps, as if Ilya has just announced the man has died. "Ah, I'll rephrase this. We will not *let* Crowell be commissioner next season."

Everyone deflates and Ilya can't help but feel offended. It should be as much of a fact as the first statement. Vaughan looks around at the mood shift and decides to change it, "Ok. How?"

"I am sending you all an audio file. Pike, Vaughan, you have been on the social media front. You can predict how they will react, yes? You need to listen to this and tell me."

Vaughan looks serious, "Do you want us to include memes and reaction gifs?"

“I think it’s pronounced gifs,” Pike corrects him.

Ilya powers through, “No. We will not release any of this to the public, but I need to know what is the scariest part for him to maybe... act like I will.”

“Ok. This meeting could have been an email...” Pike starts to stand up.

“Hang on,” Hunter says suspiciously, “Let him finish. Then what? What’s the play?”

“This is the question,” Ilya admits. “A friend of ours has said we should be using it against him. But I don’t know how—”

“Should we have the lawyer here for this?”

Barrett answers Scott, “No.”

“Ok.” Scott says after rolling his eyes, he leans forward, fully in problem-solving mode. “I would be really subtle, and make it seem like it’s addressing the content of the recordings. Something like ‘*this is why we need a change in leadership*’ or something along those lines.”

“No,” Barrett rudely disagrees and Ilya starts to wonder why he put these two in a room together again, “You should say ‘*step down and die in two months or these get released.*’” Right. That’s why. Barrett has good ideas.

“I think just sending it to him is enough. Just let him know you have it,” Vaughan suggests.

“But then what?” Pike snaps, “You have to make a demand or it’s not blackmail.”

Scott does a double take at him, “Sorry, do we *want* it to be blackmail?”

Barrett looks at Ilya, “How did you do it last time?” Never mind, Barrett never should have come.

“*Last time?*” Scott yelps as his eyebrows jump up. Ilya can’t tell if it’s surprise or arousal at the good gossip. He might be jealous Barrett knew about that. How *did* Barrett know about that?

“It’s different for Crowell.” Ilya says, tilting his head, and adds, “Also, I have never done this.”

“Ok. Ignoring that.” Scott rubs his face, “Send the full audio to Cooper Lee. Get him to make a list of all of the crimes he hears. Send the list to Crowell and say you have hard evidence of all of them, that you’re giving him the choice to step down now or be charged with them.”

“Yes,” Barrett agrees, pointing at Scott, who looks surprised at the reaction. Until Barrett continues, “And then turn the audio over anyway. I love it.”

Vaughan shrugs, “At that point, just put it online.”

It's tempting, and someday Ilya will make a cut that's acceptable for public consumption. But some of the best, most damning recordings expose his players, not to mention possibly himself, his station in the group, his marriage... Those need to be included and he doesn't want to doctor the audio.

So this meeting was no help at all.

The plan is not airtight. It's half-baked, really. The email contains the master audio file, and he wouldn't call the attached message a vague threat. Or extortion, really. It's not blackmail, per se. Ilya just needs Crowell under his control, so he's showing him what—ok, it's blackmail. Again. Ilya's vague email includes: "This is why we need a change in leadership. Hope to see it next season. Maybe no one else will see this. Call to arrange terms. Off the record 😊" It's not his best work, but nothing about this plan is.

He times it for when Mastur Bates will be in the MLH head offices anyway. It's a little inconvenient; it means he has to send the email from Pike's house a week after their meeting, but he needs a fly on the wall and Bianca is ready to lose her job immediately when Crowell hears the first one.

No ransom, no deadlines, really. Just a persuasive argument. Ilya carefully doesn't send this to Cooper Lee until afterwards.

He just hopes they can reach an agreement by next season. He hits "send" while sitting on Pike's couch, surrounded by Pike's offspring, before Shane asks him to go get something from the car with him. It sounds like code, and with the pit in his stomach from launching this very ill-advised, underdeveloped plan, he could use some "getting something from the car".

Bianca thinks today might be the day. Mr. Crowell's face is a lovely shade of vermillion and he's sweating despite the open window in his office. There are three league executives and Mr. Yates, chairman of the Board of Governors, in the room where it might happen. Lots of men here to lift the body, she thinks. She'd rather not touch him, even as a corpse.

She doesn't know what the email said, just that Mr. Crowell got an email five minutes ago and called these men to his office. Luckily, Mr. Yates was already in the office. When she led the last man in, she left the door open, noticing Mr. Crowell's sheen. "You need air." She had said as she propped the door open, in the bossy tone she knows he obeys. It feels dirty, she's not his *wife*. But that's the way it feels when he listens to her.

The door needs to be open, though, for the recorder on her desk. After leading the last man through the open door, she sits and listens, too.

“They have hours of me talking in that file. Some of it— I don’t even know where they would get it. Every single one of those fags must be bugged.” Bianca’s stomach drops. She knows she agreed to this, that Rozanov told her this is a possibility, she would be found out. He promised to take care of her if she loses her job but honestly, that’s not really a concern. She’s lucky enough to have been well-paid and with her wife’s endorsement deals they could easily last years before she needs to find another job. Still, when Rozanov broached the topic of opening an Irina Foundation office in New York that she could run, it sounded a lot more appealing than her current station, unless a better commissioner comes in. She almost *hopes* to be fired, now.

“Why don’t we offer them a seat on the Board? It’s one vote against our 32, we’ll still out-vote them, but it’s an olive branch.” That sounds like Mr. Yates.

“It’s the principle of the matter.” Mr. Crowell spits back.

“Ok,” another voice says... maybe the Director? *“Ok, so we slander them. Lower their credibility a little so no one believes them if this gets out. Release the evidence about the leaked plays in 2018. They must have something else. Hollander is fucking another player? Maybe he trips and falls when he plays them, throws the game. I’ll have my interns pull video of him fucking up.”*

Someone else adds, *“The others, too.”*

“Yes.” Mr. Crowell laughs, *“This is it. See Yates? Democracy? Pfft. No, I need to squash them.”*

“How long did they say we have?”

“The email said something about next season, I just got it 10 minutes ago. I skipped around in the recordings...”

Bianca tunes out as her personal phone buzzes. It’s a text from her wife.

Priya: soooo I’ll send you some food there LOL

Priya: sounds like a late night I’m sorry

Priya: let me know if you need help

Priya: or if we’re popping the dead boss champagne 🍾

What is she talking about? Bianca doesn’t have much time to wonder. The desk phone starts to ring. Her work cell phone buzzes. Mr. Crowell’s cell phone, always in her possession, starts to beep.

Bianca ignores all of them and turns to the computer. She searches, simply “MLH”.

MLH Commissioner Roger Crowell in hot water after leaked audio drops.

Leaked audio recordings apparently depict Roger Crowell engaging in terrorism plots, hate crimes, threats, hate speech.

Is the MLH trying to murder its players? Leaked Commissioner Crowell conversations say yes.

Montreal's Hayden Pike: "No Comment" after hours of audio appear to trace back to an apparent accidental Fanmail upload.

Bianca stands, shaking. She approaches the door to Mr. Crowell's office where they're still plotting.

"...in about two weeks we can tank their credibility—"

Bianca cuts them off.

"Mr. Crowell, the recordings are online."

Chapter End Notes



Coming up: not much, think I'll leave it there. **edit:** fine I'll help you out! we'll figure out what was in the file to begin with, how bad the damage is. Oh, and how the fuck that happened. And then the playoffs so I guess we're just never breathing again 🙄

For the lists:

Scott gave us the name of a Finnish rookie, Osmo "Ossi" Junnila. One weird thing about this one: This is the only person I've taken from canon and made them queer when there was no indication that would be the case (I have some theories, we can talk after). He didn't have a name in the book, but I think if you're reading this part of TLG, you'll find him mentioned. It's so late in the game that you guys won't be fruitlessly guessing other canon characters to fit into the numbers, there are none others.

And if you didn't think Bianca's wife would be named Priyanka, I don't think you know me at all.

Chapter 35: Audio Transcripts

Chapter Summary

Transcripts from the leaked audio file

Chapter Notes

I hemmed and hawed for too long about what to do here, but I think making its own chapter is a good thing.

1. Some of this is repeated content to refresh your memory. Some is referenced before but we never heard it, and some is just new. You can skip the things you've seen already if you want.
2. Each excerpt has some context but remember! If you were listening as a member of the public, you wouldn't have that information. Some voices and dates might be recognizable but we're getting a lot more information than they'd have.
3. When Bianca handed over her USB drive, she said there was harassment, hate speech of all stripes, and plain embarrassing things. This document was getting out of hand and I couldn't keep adding things, so we can assume this isn't all of it. We get some of the embarrassing things, but otherwise these transcripts are only things that are super relevant to our mission. We can assume the rest of it was actually included in the full file that got leaked.

CW: homophobia, casual racism, graphic threats

Edit: deathtongue (who is doing the incredible podfic!) [put together this audio for us!!!](#)
If you'd like to listen how people in-universe would hear it, this is your chance!

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

Fall 2018

Crowell phone call (unknown recipient)

Crowell: What the fuck happened with our refs last night? Why was Comeau taken out? ... ok. Ro-what? What are you trying to get me to do? Twitter ... dot... com... then what?
Bianca! [footsteps, rustling]

Bianca: Yes?

Crowell: Pull up this Rogue MLH thing Hank is talking about. [rustling, typing]

Bianca: That should be it.

Crowell: Thank you. [pause] What the fuck is this? Some idiot thinks they know which teams didn't take that fag back on the ice? Good, I like to see which teams are... No... No, I don't know how they would get this information. It's probably that jackass himself, getting his panties in a bunch because he fucked his life up. ... Ok. We'll keep an eye on it but... what does this have to do with last night? Ok. There's more? Bianca! [footsteps, rustling]

Bianca: Yes?

Crowell: He said there's more. Why can't you find the right thing?

Bianca: Umm... let me just... scroll for you. There it is. If you just use the wheel on this mouse you can... like this.

Crowell: I know how to scroll, I'm not a fucking nimrod. [pause] Thank you. [footsteps, rustling] What the fuck... they have videos of our refs. Fuck. How did they notice this? They've got some sort of expert on staff? Who is this? ...Well can you call Twitter and ask? ...What do you mean?Ok. Get one of the reddit nerds to do this, please? What the fuck are we paying them for?

Fall 2018

Voicemail to Scott Hunter

Crowell: Hiya Scott, how are you? Just checking in about something you mentioned a while ago. I think you said there were six teams with no uhhh players of yours, and I was wondering which teams they are. I can probably help, if we can trade people around, we can get someone on every team. Or I can ask the coaches and see if they know if anyone is interested in joining your... joining you. I thought I could help you out a little, take some burden off you and whoever else is running this thing, whoever it is. Just let me know what those six teams are, or however many... just let me know. Thanks.

Cup night 2019

Crowell phone call with Scott Hunter

Crowell: Hunter. What the fuck happened here? No, I don't care if— if you hang up, I'll wring your fucking neck. You gave me names. You said no one on Washington... You have no control over this fucking ringleader nutjob? Let that butt-fucking faggot know I'd like to kill him in person. Don't fucking tell him that, moron. Set up a meeting. If I call around and the other teams have the same issue, you're both fucking dead.

Cup night 2019

Vincenzo Marcello and NJ GM phonecall

New Jersey GM: Hey Vinny, good time?

Marcello: Sure, just watching the postgame with the team. Say hi everybody! [various indistinguishable drunk voices]

New Jersey GM: Can you go somewhere private?

Marcello: Ok yeah, just... ok sure what's up?

New Jersey GM: The commissioner asked if we have anyone... like Rivera. On the team.

Marcello: Puerto Rican?

New Jersey GM: Don't fuck around, it's serious. He doesn't like it.

Marcello: And what did you tell him?

New Jersey GM: The rumors from the locker room say you and D'Amato.

Marcello: You told the commissioner these rumors?

New Jersey GM: We had to. Not sure why he's asking, but when the commissioner asks for something, we kind of have to do it.

Marcello: Yeah, I... I get it. If it were true... about Ricky. How bad is it for him? Are we talking Baldwin or Hunter?

New Jersey GM: Depends on what Crowell wants.

Marcello: Got it. I should get back to the team. Can't wait to comply!

New Jersey GM: [laughs] Fuck off, Vin.

Cup night 2019

Shane Hollander and Theriault phone call

Hollander: Hello?

Theriault: Shane! Sorry to bother you if you're at the team's watch party.

Hollander: Oh, no sir, I'm with family in Ottawa.

Theriault: Got it. I won't keep you long. It's a little awkward.

Hollander: Sure.

Theriault: Uhh, well... look um... The GM wants me to ask you... it's so dumb really... Are there gay guys on our team?

Hollander: I uhhh... I'm not sure that's our business, is it?

Theriault: Oh, God. Ok. There are rumors, I just— Ok.

Hollander: I told the guys after we played Fredericks, they can't be beating up queer players.

Theriault: Yeah. We know about your... speech. Ok... Ok. Sorry to bother you, have a good night.

Cup Night 2019

Rozanov and Ottawa GM phone call

Ottawa GM [as if the conversation is in progress]: Only thing is— and I have to tell you I said no immediately— I got an interesting call from the commissioner's office just now, asking if anyone on the team is... I said it wasn't my place. I asked him why.

Rozanov: You should not have—

Ottawa GM: Obviously I'm going to ask why the commissioner needs to know if any of my players are gay. He shouldn't be asking that shit.

Rozanov: Ok... why did he ask?

Ottawa GM: Apparently, he is asking several different teams. He said Montreal and New Jersey let him know already.

Cup night 2019

Jethro Young and Utah Coach after the game

Utah coach: Jet, hey, thanks for meeting me, I know we're all bummed about tonight.

Young: Yeah, I'm sorry coach. I don't know what happened out there, it was—

Utah coach: We'll regroup over the summer, it's not about that.

Young: Ok. Yeah.

Utah coach: The commissioner wanted us to ask around. I guess he doesn't like that Puerto Rican kid coming out of the closet just now. You think we have gay guys on the team?

Young: No. Well, I can't say for sure, right? But no.

Utah coach: That's what I fucking said! Crowell seems to think we'd let some kind of twink play here. Can you imagine? Surprised they can even skate after taking it.

Young: Yeah. That would be...

Utah coach: Fucking disgusting is what it would be. I want to be sure before getting back to him. Beltran is Spanish too I think right? You think—

Young: No, Beltran hooks up a lot. With women.

Utah coach: Good. That's a relief. I think he's the only one I worry about. Would hate to lose him though, he's ok. You'd let me know, right?

Young: Yeah, coach.

MLH awards 2019

Crowell phone call (unknown recipient)

Crowell: Two off the same team? Fucking rodents. It's an infestation, what the fuck am I going to do? And how is Scott fucking Hunter addressing this crowd for the third year in a row? I'm firing everyone involved. ...No, Hunter isn't the one in charge. Can you imagine? He's not a leader. He keeps saying—the guys keep thanking this Ringleader. It's gotta be Shane Hollander. Who the fuck else would it be? Fucking no-name D'Amato? ...We can't get in trouble for asking Hollander some questions, no. Especially not if that cuck lawyer isn't around. What's that guy's deal anyway? Bet he's fucking one of them... No. ... No, I'll talk to Hollander tonight. I don't fucking *know* what I'm going to say. Fine. I'll think about it, I gotta go.

MLH Awards 2019

Crowell and Hollander

Hollander: I'm not sure why you're calling me the Ringleader but—

Crowell: Don't deny it, kid. The entire operation is you. Who else would this league fall behind? And that Rivera kid... It's like watching a clone of you. You, Hunter, that kid, all these... the exact same type of person.

Hollander: Sir, there are a lot of different kinds of people in that group—

Crowell: Oh, I'm sure. You think you're smarter than me, giving me that list of teams. I checked every single one of them. You played me. Second year in a row, too.

Hollander: I'm not sure what you mean.

Crowell: You know exactly what I mean. Last year was you, too. You think the public would believe Baldwin is that good?

Hollander: That wasn't us

Crowell: No? Some other group coordinated to steal plays, sabotage games?

Hollander: We didn't—

Crowell: But I'm getting in all the trouble for it. They're investigating the league. That's what you wanted, right?

Hollander: Someone should be. There are five alternating ways the games this season were advantaged.

Crowell: ...Five? Where are you getting five?

[raucous yelling]

Bianca: Mr. Crowell, I'm sorry to interrupt but there's an emergency, two players have gotten into an altercation.

Crowell: Does it look like— ok. Fine. [rustling and footsteps] Thanks for getting me out of that. Kid almost got me. I'm heading up for the night. I don't feel like being shat on by some faggot who should stay on the ice and shut his fucking mouth. I'll see what I can do. Theriault will be good.

Bianca: Right.

Crowell: Sorry. You're not... involved in this. Looks like I should shut up, too. Good night!

Summer 2019

Crowell phone call (unknown recipient)

Crowell: An investigation on me? I thought it was just the league. Are they fucking kidding me? For what? ...ok. ...yeah, ok. ...that too? So what, I don't have anything to show them. It's not like I'm a dumbass putting anything in writing. ... This is shit timing. Hunter's awful nancy dick-yankers are going to cheat this year, too. And I just have to sit and take it? Figure of speech, of course.

2019 Draft
Rozanov and Crowell

Rozanov: Hello, sir.

Crowell: At ease, Rozanov! Enjoying the view?

Rozanov: Reflecting. Was I that young, ever?

Crowell: More promising than this class, too. And you gave it all up for Ottawa. Why?

Rozanov: Wanted a challenge. Want to rebuild a team around me. Ottawa will be great.

Crowell: No, it won't. They made a mistake trading out defense. Fredericks shouldn't be in the league.

Rozanov: The defense wasn't clicking. Fredericks was cheap.

Crowell: Fredericks is causing problems. It would've been better if we let his contract die out.

Rozanov: Yes, well. He is our problem now.

Crowell: You're a good one. Have you been following all of this nonsense? Fredericks and Wagner? The Rivera kid?

Rozanov: All of it is hard to avoid. But what can be done about it?

Crowell: A whole lot, actually. But it doesn't help when we've almost got one out of the league and a team picks him up last-minute.

Rozanov: And what about Rivera? Wagner? Washington is keeping them on.

Crowell: We're seeing what we can do. Keep it isolated to one or two teams, and repercussions are easier.

Rozanov: Repercussions?

Crowell: Eh, don't worry about it. Anyway, I should go talk to the fresh crop downstairs. Just wanted to see where you're landing. But you're a good one.

Rozanov: Yes. I am.

Crowell: You let me know what's happening on the ice, right?

Rozanov: Right.

Summer 2019
Rivera and Crowell phone call

Rivera: Hello?

Crowell: Rivvy! Congratulations on the cup win.

Rivera: ...thank you?

Crowell: Sorry Wagner got playoff MVP, it should have gone to you. [silence] And everything else, how's that going?

Rivera: ...it's good...why?

Crowell: I just wanted to touch base, see what's happening. [long silence] I want to let you know the league is behind you, one hundred percent.

Rivera: That's very kind, sir.

Crowell: ...And I hope you'll be behind the league.

Rivera: What do you mean?

Crowell: Well, Hunter can say the shit that he does because he's Scott Hunter. It would be real hard to fire him.

Rivera: But me?

Crowell: No— sorry, that's not what I mean at all, son. It's just he has levels of protection that maybe wouldn't apply to you and Wagner.

Rivera: Got it. Thank you.

Crowell: Any time! Just looking out for you. And Rivvy, you'll tell me if there are others, right? There aren't. But if you hear a rumor or if maybe someone hits on you in a bathroom or something you'll—

Rivera: Uhh sure, I'll send them your way. [barely audible muffled laughter in the background]

Summer 2019
Rozanov, Barrett, Hollander, Drover phone call

Barrett: Rozanov. What do you want?

Rozanov: Here with Shane Hollander and Harris Drover. Wanted to ask you about two games last season. March 3rd and 12th.

Barrett: We played 80 something games, I'm supposed to remember?"

Rozanov: They were against Montreal and New Jersey. I'm sending you a clip from the Montreal game. [long silence]

Barrett: Oh. That's embarrassing.

Rozanov: What happened?

Barrett: What the fuck is this, Rozanov? You're going through my footage to make fun of me?

Hollander: Try the other one. Sorry, hi Barrett, it's Shane... Ilya is sending you another one now, was it the same thing? [silence]

Barrett: Wait. No— it wasn't the same thing but... That's so weird. I didn't even think about it but there were, like, distractions.

Rozanov: What do you mean, distractions?

Barrett: It's like when something takes your attention...

Rozanov: Fuck you Barrett, I speak English. What do you mean?

Barrett: I'm not sure which happened during which game but there were little things all season.

Drover: Like what? [silence] Sorry, I'm Harris. Hi.

Barrett: Hi. I don't even remember. I think there's a flash, you can see it across my face in the second video. It came from the audience.

Drover: Like someone was taking a picture?

Rozanov: People take pictures all the time, Barrett, would that distract you?

Barrett: Fuck off. No, it was longer than that, like maybe a full second. Like... I'm going to sound crazy.

Drover: No, what?

Barrett: Like you know when you were a kid and you did a science experiment with mirrors reflecting lights at specific angles? ...wait, that's another thing, there was an airhorn.

Hollander: Yeah we got the air horns.

Barrett: Yeah, like a sudden sound. It fucked up a pass to Dallas. But that wasn't in March, that was like... February? Right around when we...

Hollander: Ok, so like dumb little distractions.

Barrett: Yeah, I guess.

Drover: Thanks, Troy. Can I be in touch if anyone has questions once this is posted?

Barrett: You won't say it's me, right?

Drover: No! Of course not. You're safe.

Fall 2019

Hollander meeting with Montreal management

Hollander: Should I have my lawyer here?

Montreal GM: No, you're fine. We're here because of a rumor— well, it's pretty substantiated... that you came out to your teammates last fall.

Hollander: I did.

Montreal GM: Great, good. We have some questions, and some suggestions.

Hollander: Ok... I'll answer what I can.

Montreal GM: Do you know if there are any others on the team?

Hollander: I can't say. Probably. It's one in ten, right?

Montreal GM: You can't say because you don't know? or because you've promised not to say?

Hollander: Does it matter either way? Why does it matter whether a player is gay?

Unknown Male Voice: Because it's a distraction from our team's accomplishments if someone were to, say, come out just after we win a cup.

Hollander: Sure. But do you know how many Rivera jerseys have been sold since the cup?

Unknown Male Voice: Any cup-winner is going to increase—

Hollander: No. Just Rivera. A 230% increase in sales of that jersey, 120% increase in Wagner, while everyone else on the team saw a boost of about 70%.

Unknown Male Voice: Doesn't that show Rivera was a distraction? Shouldn't the whole team be seeing that increase?

Hollander: I think they will, when the numbers settle back down from cup hype. The fans love Washington's attitude toward Rivera and Wagner. A bunch of their players marched in the D.C. Pride parade, and this season's games will likely all be sold out.

Unknown Male Voice: These non-hockey fans are going to be short lived, and burn out—

Hollander: Why am I here?

Montreal GM: We'd like some... assurance that you won't be making the same mistake as Rivera and Wagner. And Baldwin.

Hollander: Are you asking me if I'll come out?

Montreal GM: Well, yes. We'd like to know, if and when.

Hollander: I suppose if we win the cup. I'm sure you've heard of this tradition—

Montreal GM: Yes. We're now well aware. You won't unless we win the cup?

Hollander: You wouldn't... You wouldn't throw the cup just so I don't come out, right?

Montreal GM: Goddamnit. *No*. I don't care what— no. We would be able to make other arrangements for Shane fucking Hollander. Anyway, are there any other circumstances in which you'd come out?

Hollander: If I were, like, outed, I guess.

Unknown Male Voice 2: Which— if you need *any* protection from that happening, we can help you. [long silence]

Theriault: Look. We built this team around you, you know. We don't want to lose you over something this dumb. But all the teams are being asked to... crack down... on this stuff. So we just want to keep it to a minimum. Like we said, it's not like we're going to throw the cup over this or anything, we just... don't want it to get out.

Hollander: Ok, fine. Here's my honest answer. I don't want to come out right now. I care too much about my career, and honestly, the consequences for the other players have been scary. I have— it doesn't matter. I'm not about to go rogue. Unless we win a cup. I have an obligation.

Montreal GM: About that. We've heard... and— this is ridiculous, by the way— We've heard you're in charge of this... thing. Any truth to that?

Hollander: I told the commissioner. No.

Montreal GM: I know. He's still convinced. I think I can speak for all of us when I say we don't think so, because we know you. But who is it?

Hollander: Uhh... no. [soft laughter]

Montreal GM: That's what I figured. Worth a shot. Anything else? Are we done here?

Unknown Male Voice 2: That's everything.

Montreal GM: Great. Then have a great season, make us proud.

Hollander: Will do.

December 2019

Crowell and Hunter meeting; Lee and Rozanov on the phone

As Rec. by Bianca

Hunter: Ok, can you guys hear him?

Crowell: Guys?

Hunter: Yeah, sorry it's Cooper Lee, too. [pause] He says hi.

Crowell: So what? I just talk to you and you tell me what they say?

Hunter: I think that works out.

Crowell: Alright, I'll start. You may notice I'm in a bit of hot water. The investigations—which I know you're behind—are interfering with my job. Now I know you had a hand in 2018, and I know you gave me the wrong teams on purpose last season. I have reasons to believe you are on one of those teams, because you know my suspicions, Mr. Hollander. Won't look very good for you if you gave me the name of your team when you knew what I would do with it. Allegedly.

Hunter: He agrees with that.

Crowell: And my hands are tied. I can barely have this meeting without an investigator present. So I won't be able to make any moves this season.

Hunter: Ok... So what do you want?

Crowell: Just a fair season. No one tipping the scale. [long pause] If you agree no one comes out at the cup.

Hunter: Mr. Lee? [silence] Ok, he agrees.

Crowell: Great. A fair season. And, if I get the chance, I'll help you out as a thank-you. [silence]

Hunter: God, will you stop it with this already? I said I was sorry.

Crowell: (whispered) Trouble in paradise?

Hunter: What? No. I'm— nothing. He's asking to confirm you won't be messing with the gameplay this year.

Crowell: I don't have a choice. It's not up to me. These guys are up my asshole. Not... *literally*, obviously.

Spring 2020

Crowell phone call (unknown recipient, then Montreal GM)

Crowell: Did you see this Montreal bullshit? You have to be fucking kidding me. First Shane Hollander, now this fruit? What the fuck is in the water there? We're already working hard to keep Washington down, now we have to do Montreal? Bianca!

Bianca: Yes?

Crowell: Patch Montreal in on this call. We have to take care of this.

Bianca: Ok, Mr. Crowell.

Crowell: They'll fucking pay for this— Hi! How are you, it's Rog. No, we're fine. Kids ok? You got kids don't you? Yeah, and they're good? ... great. You see this bonehead on your team... Melnyk? Am I saying this right? Yeah, good. He's fucking that Rivera kid. Oh you saw? And you didn't think to call? ... The fuck is wrong with you? ... I want him off the team! ... If he resigns it doesn't break his contract, idiot. ... Get him to resign! I don't care how you do it! Enough! Fucking Eric Bennett was one thing, he's retiring. He's smart enough to get the fuck out of my league. This fag is like 12 years old, he'll never retire. ... Then break his fucking contract or kiss your cup goodbye. Fucking Hollander. He promised no one would fucking do this, and that's on you, too. Getting real sick of Montreal. Get him out by playoffs. He doesn't play another game. I'll go up there and kill him myself if I see him on the ice again. [long pause] Bianca!

Bianca: Yes?

Crowell: Get Washington on the phone, and get me a Tums. These pulp gulpers are going to give me the shits.

Spring 2020

Hollander, Melnyk, and Montreal management

Hollander: Left practice as soon as I saw your text.

Montreal GM: No problem. We thought it best to have the captain here for this so any rumors in the locker room are quashed.

Hollander: Ok, what rumors?

Melnyk: They're kicking me off the team.

Montreal GM: We are encouraging a resignation. This is uncharted territory but we feel it's the best course of action. Commissioner Crowell said so himself.

Hollander: Why?

Montreal GM: Two male players dating?

Hollander: What about it?

Montreal GM: We thought you of all people would understand. It's not the gay thing but—

Melnyk: But your first adjective was 'male'.

Montreal GM: —But, the inherent... conflict of interest, when we play Washington.

Hollander: Are you accusing Melnyk and Rivera of throwing games?

Montreal GM: No, not exactly, just... that they might not play their hardest.

Hollander: Because they can't do their jobs?

Montreal GM: Not effectively, no.

Hollander: Melnyk— not that it matters, not that you have to answer— but how long have you been with Rivera?

Melnyk: Forever?

Hollander: Good. Have you guys watched *every* game against Washington? Have you catalogued plays that Melnyk missed? Or, because I'm almost certain this is the case, did they play harder against each other than any other team?

Montreal GM: Look, Hollander, we're just not having it.

Hollander: And Washington? What are they doing?

Melnyk: Nothing. They're letting him stay.

Unknown Male Voice: We actually don't know that yet. The commissioner was clear about his instructions here.

Melnyk: He just met with management! They're standing up for him!

Hollander: Fine. [chair scraping] Melnyk has a lawyer for this reason, and so do I. I'd like you all to know I'm married to another player. So if you're firing Melnyk for that, you'll fire me too. It'll look great to start playoffs next week.

Montreal GM: No, you're not. You don't have to do this to save this idiot's career. Don't go making stuff up just to be some sort of social justice hero.

Hollander: Do you want to call my bluff? Go for it. In the meantime, I'm getting Melnyk into practice because when our lawyer clears this up, we're going to want him in shape for the playoffs. Let's go. [rustling, footsteps, doorslam]

Spring 2020

Crowell phone call (unknown recipient)

Crowell: It's fucking Shane Hollander. I want him out of the league. He's fucking blackmailing me, that's why! He sent an email— Ringleader email address, by the way, fucking fag— saying I need to leave Melnyk alone or more people will come out. Or one big one, I bet it's him. I bet he doesn't have more people. The ego on that twerp needs to be studied. Call the refs— you know the drill. Fine, I have to call the refs? Fuck off. ... No, keep going with everything else. Montreal wins over my dead fucking body. Bianca!

Bianca: Yes?

Crowell: Get the refs, please. [long silence]

Bianca: Hi, it's Bianca from Roger Crowell's office, do you have a moment for him? Great, putting you through.

Crowell: Hey, how are you? ...Great. I need the works again. No, I know it's bad, the investigators are up my... well yeah. It's just Montreal games though. I need the queer defense guy injured, and maybe Hollander too. ...Oh and it's fair that he's fucking the guts out of another player? That's gotta be some kind of rule. ...Look, they just can't win. Can't let it happen. And my shit isn't working. I know. This is the last time I'll ask, I swear. Well last time we weren't about to have fucking Shane Hollander come out at the cup! There's no going back from that, it's another Hunter. ... Ok, thanks bud. I owe you.

Spring 2020

Crowell phone call (unknown recipient)

Crowell: This fucking snake! I'm getting an email from this homo every fucking day. I forwarded you the email he sent me, they filmed our Craigslist people coming in. It's bullshit. I want security to check the cameras and tell me who was filming them. I want the investigators to know I'm being blackmailed but... scratch that. This is such bullshit. Call me back when you get this.

Cup finals 2020

Commissioner's Box Suite

[raucous laughter muted as if through a wall, unintelligible]

Crowell: And you tried to shut them the fuck up? Who is it? If it's Jay Z—

Bianca: I don't think Jay Z attends hockey games, Mr. Crowell. Every other sport.

Crowell: Who is it?

Bianca: Shane Hollander's friends and family. The Irina Foundation.

Crowell: Fucking fags.

Unknown male voice: Rog, you think one of those poofs is coming out tonight?

Crowell: If Hollander comes out, I'll break both his legs. He'll never skate again, this is his last cup. It's his last cup regardless, that dumb fuck.

Unknown male voice: Well then let's hope Nashville wins.

Crowell: Nashville will be better, but Doblen is set to come out if they win. We can get rid of him easy, and the GM over there wants to keep their team clean. Plus, they told him it needs to be lowkey. Not a fucking clownshow like last year.

Unknown male voice: Doblen was real close with that Swedish one, right?

Crowell: Lundin. Yeah. God, we used to have a handle on this shit.

[particularly loud boisterous conversation, muted by a wall]

Crowell: but tonight... eh I shouldn't tell you this. It might not even happen.

Unknown male voice: Who are we going to tell?

Crowell: If Hollander wins... fuck, it might be two people tonight. He says he's got a husband. Can you fucking believe that? And he tried to tell Montreal management that it was another player.

Unknown male voice: It has to be someone on Montreal, right? You can't live in a different city than your... person.

Crowell: That would be for the best. I like them all on the same team, easier to control.

Unknown male voice: Montreal's won enough. [door opening sound] They don't need it again.

Yates: I disagree with you there.

Crowell: Yates! How are you?

Yates: What the fuck is going on next door?

Crowell: It's the queer convention, apparently. You got any poison gas on you? Could be handy. [other men chuckle] I'm fucking serious.

Bianca: We should be heading down in a few minutes.

Crowell: Can you believe I'm going to have to shake that backstabber's hand?

Unknown male voice: Do you even want to know where it's been?

Crowell: Don't make me gag.

Yates: Hollander does enough of that already.

Unknown male voice: Gross, Yates.

Cup finals 2020

After Party

[footsteps and rustling as if walking]

Crowell: Sixth? Shouldn't he be first? How is his number six if he's in charge of this whole fucking thing?

Bianca: I don't know, Mr. Crowell.

Crowell: And this is defamation. Get my lawyer on the phone. First thing tomorrow morning. 'No thanks to a league...' Bullshit! This league has given that kid a life. And we can take it away. God, I'm going to ring that fag's neck. At least he didn't call a husband down, right? Makes you wonder. Probably someone disposable, he knows I can have him canned or killed. He's probably not even married. Fucking virgin pisshead.

Unknown male voice: Roger. This f— guy is selling jerseys? That's not good. We're getting legal on it, but they look like they're not infringing. The site had too much traffic, it shut down for a minute. If they're serious, it's going to cut into sales.

Crowell: Not fucking now. Bianca?

Bianca: Yes?

Crowell: Find me a spot to—

Bianca: On it.

Between Cup and 2020 MLH Awards

Crowell and unknown second male

Unknown male voice: Crowell, there's news. Have you seen RogueMLH today?

Crowell: No, I haven't gone looking for a heart attack, why?

Unknown male voice: It's bad. Dallas Kent is being accused of... well four different women have statements.

Crowell: I can't have one fucking day?

Unknown male voice: We've already talked to Toronto, they're not looking to drop him—

Crowell: I should think fucking not. What does his sexual history have to do with his hockey?

Unknown male voice: Right. And these girls are going to need a shit ton of proof to get anywhere with this case. So we just leave it alone.

Crowell: We make a statement, to show our support for Kent.

Unknown male voice: No, we don't. That's... not a good idea.

Crowell: Fine. But work with PR, people are going to be asking about it this weekend and we want a plan. We can't deal with the women?

Unknown male voice: [chuckles] Afraid not. The names are redacted.

Crowell: That's bullshit. It's probably fake. Brats looking for attention.

2020 MLH awards

Crowell, Hunter and Hollander

Crowell: Gentlemen.

Hunter: Commissioner Crowell, nice to see you.

Crowell: Hmm. And Hollander?

Hollander: Yes, sir.

Crowell: You are number 6.

Hollander: Yes.

Crowell: You let me talk to you like you were the leader.

Hollander: I tried to tell you—

Crowell: —who is it?

Hunter: Sir, you are in touch with the leader of the group already. I know you've emailed, and I've even been the operator of a phone call. But it's not Hollander.

Crowell: He said no one would come out at the cup.

Hunter: We don't control our players, sir. No one told Hollander to do this, in fact, I believe he made his plan clear to his team management at the beginning of the year.

Hollander: That's right. I wasn't asked to come out, I was just following the tradition.

Crowell: What's the point? Are you people done? You got what you wanted. The league is gay, our fans are upset, I'm under investigation. What more do you want?

Hunter: We need to be sure any progress doesn't leave when we do.

Crowell: So I just have to wait out you and your ringleader.

Hunter: I think we'll have a shorter wait than you.

Crowell: And your *husband*, is he a player in the league or not?

Hunter: You don't have to— he doesn't have to answer that. He was just trying to stand up for these kids, you wanted to ruin their careers over a relationship?

Crowell: We don't need these guys getting romantic in what's supposed to be a men's game.

Hunter: I thought they were men. Did you know they aren't men? Kind of a defining characteristic of a gay relationship in a men's hockey league.

Crowell: You know what I mean.

Hunter: What do you mean?

Crowell: Our fans, they like to watch actual men— *masculine* men. [a sound, maybe stifled laughter] ...Didn't I have a call to take?

Bianca: Yes. You can take it in the next room. [rustling, footsteps]

Crowell: Fucking faggots. What do you think they meant, outlast me? Is that a threat?

Bianca: I don't know, Mr. Crowell.

Crowell: Well I'm not having it. Get me security for the rest of the night.

2020 MLH awards
Crowell and Bianca

Crowell: I forgot to ask that flaming Hollander about the jerseys. Can you get him?

Bianca: I haven't seen him in a while, he might have left. I can get him on the phone. Or should it wait until Monday? [long silence]

Crowell: Interesting. I don't see Hunter, either. Or Marcello or Bay. Hey, can we grab security tapes for the entrances for the last hour or so?

Unknown Male Voice: I can check.

Bianca: Lots of people leave after the show, Mr. Crowell. It's a late night.

Crowell: And when you get the tape, send it to my office. I'll have an intern go through it in the morning. Anyone who left is getting fired.

Summer 2020

Crowell phone call (unknown recipient)

Crowell: Ok, and the union elections are done? Who won? ... Ok, I know Barrett. He's a good guy. Not sure why he ran... maybe to help Kent get out of this mess. Who else? Ok I know Pena and Kirby. Kirby's a good kid. Who the fuck is Madrigal? And Schwartz, which one? ...ok. Can you even be in the union if you've only played two years? It doesn't matter, are they good? ...perfect. Not even faggy supportive posts? I love it. Let them know I can meet whenever, looking forward to it. [silence] Hey listen, with that union roster, maybe we can get these contracts changed a little. I want the teams to be able to get rid of someone if they're... you know. If they're not comfortable with them in the locker room... You know what I mean. Try to send someone from legal down to help them draft something. This is good news, I'm excited. Thanks.

Fall 2020

Haas and Crowell phone call

Crowell: Luca Haas! Welcome to North America.

Haas: Thank you, sir.

Crowell: I make it a point to touch base with all the rookies every year, see what kind of talent we have. Ottawa isn't a great team but I'm sure you'll turn them around.

Haas: I am excited to work with Ilya Rozanov and Troy Barrett. And Zane Boodram. And Wyatt Hayes.

Crowell: Right. There's a sensitive topic I have to make you aware of. If you are approached by someone asking you to make a deal about the cup and your sexuality, someone claiming to be the ringleader, you are contractually obligated to inform my office. Failure to do so is a fireable offense.

Haas: Ok.

Crowell: Do you have any personal attachment to this cause, Mr. Haas?

Haas: What do you mean?

Crowell: Are you gay, Haas. Bisexual or transgender or whatever.

Haas: No sir.

Crowell: Good. Not that there's anything wrong with it! We are proud of our gay players. But it's important that you know, all the gay people in the league are out already, there aren't any more. Lots of teams don't want them, and their safety on the ice can not be guaranteed. It is wisest if any rookie abstains from making those kinds of career choices before they know the consequences.

Haas: Got it.

Crowell: Well, that's about it. Let me know if you notice anything.

Haas: Ok.

Fall 2020

Crowell phone call with Lowery.

Crowell: Mr. Lowery! Thanks for taking my call. How is Tampa so far? ...great. I make it a point to touch base with all the rookies every year, form a personal relationship with everyone in the league...yes, it is kind of me [chuckles]. Look, there's a sensitive topic I want you to know about. If you're approached by someone claiming to be the Ringleader or — you would. [silence] Can I ask, what are you? ...*my* pronouns? Normal. I have normal fucking pronouns—what do you mean? ...what are you, kid? ...Genderqueer. Aromantic. Homosexual. What the fuck is any of that— No, I know what homose— So you're not a man? You're in a men's game, f..friend. I didn't ask about that. What does that have to do with whether you fuck men? Ok. Well enjoy your time in Tampa. [Loud noise] Bianca!

Bianca: Yes?

Crowell: What's funny?

Bianca: Nothing.

Crowell: Get me Tampa. That snowflake doesn't belong in the league.

Bianca: Ok. [silence] Hi, it's Bianca at Roger Crowell's office, do you have a moment? Great, thanks, putting you through.

Crowell: Hey, how are you? Great. Bad news, the Lowery kid is trouble. We're sending him as far away from this league as possible. No, I'll make it up to you. I don't care if he was good, he was a fucking— He told you? In the interview?? ...why didn't you say anything to

me? You've got some nerve. Get rid of him. Kill him for all I care— might be better!

Fall 2020

Crowell and Bianca

Bianca: I'm heading home for the night, I just finished redoing your break schedule.

Crowell: Thank you Bianca. Wait, Bianca?

Bianca: Yes?

Crowell: You ever think... [long silence] What's the point?

Bianca: You're in a weird mood. Do you mean Scott Hunter's group or—

Crowell: No, no. They're ruining the league, that's a necessity. But... Can I tell you something?

Bianca: Ummm. Sure.

Crowell: I was signed to a country record deal when I was 19. Put out an album and everything. Did you know that?

Bianca: No, I didn't.

Crowell: I don't tell anyone that. I don't think anyone on the planet knows. It was a long time ago, it was a stage name. No one would ever even know to look for it. But sometimes, you know... what if that worked out?

Bianca: You can always go back to it? Try again?

Crowell: No, I'm just... reminiscing. Sorry, I won't keep you. You've got a family to go back to.

Bianca: I do. Are you... ok?

Crowell: Yeah.

November 2020

Crowell phone call with Dallas Kent

Crowell: What do you have for me? ...you *think* or you *know*? ...Well do they have numbers? Are they in the group? ...fucking worthless. You know you're only getting my help if you're helpful. [long silence] ...He just came up to your rookie at a bar and asked? A rookie, the Ottawa rookie? What's the name? Luca Haas? He said nothing about this during our call. ... what do you mean shit is going down in Ottawa? You can't be vague about this shit, kid. ...ok I see what you mean. The leader would send the rookie out like a human shield— it's fucked up, but I get it. So we're looking at someone on Ottawa. Ok. Alright, you're earning your keep, Kent. [silence] Bianca?

Bianca: Yes?

Crowell: Get me Ottawa.

Bianca: Ok. [silence] Hi, it's Bianca from Mr. Crowell's off— good, thank you, how are you? Good. Can I put you through? Thanks!

Crowell: Hello. Sounds like we have a problem up there, hmm? ...I'm not sure if you're playing dumb, but you're out here hiring Fredericks you must know you have gays on the team. Plural. Who do you think they are? ...ok, first of all, it's your job to fucking tell me. Second, the rookie Haas. I want him gone. ...No, I know you. You say "We'll see what we can do" and then you hang up the phone and go jerk off or something. I'm tired of Ottawa fucking ignoring direct orders. Why are we still letting you be a team? I'm looking into fixing that. Your whole organization is rotten top to bottom. If Haas plays another game, there will be consequences.

December 2020

Crowell phone call with Rozanov

Crowell: Ilya Rozanov! It's Roger Crowell. How is the season?

Rozanov: Good. I am excited to be turning the team around.

Crowell: Of course you are. Ottawa is shit. [brief silence] You run a charity with Shane Hollander.

Rozanov: I do.

Crowell: Are you aware they are selling jerseys for these fags? Our jersey sales are down.

Rozanov: I do know. The intent was not to take customers from the league, but it is a popular trend, you understand. Raises a lot of money. Good business.

Crowell: I need you to stop. You have as much pull as Hollander, right? Use it.

Rozanov: I think Hollander is upset with the league.

Crowell: Ah. You're close with him. You're "friends." You must know if his husband is a player or not.

Rozanov: He is a very private person—

Crowell: So you're not friends? Would the media like to know this? It seems like your foundation wouldn't get as much money if it's run by sworn enemies. But...If you're *friends*, you would at least know who his husband is.

Rozanov: I am a loyal friend. If Hollander does not want that information public—

Crowell: ...*Or*, I could have you fired if you don't tell me. I'm getting pretty sick of that fag, and all of them.

Rozanov: [laughs] I don't think this would be a popular decision.

Crowell: Did you know your rookie Haas is in this?

Rozanov: He is a good player. He is an important part of the team.

Crowell: Are you serious, Rozanov? ...are *you* a part of this?

Rozanov: You cannot legally ask someone their sexuality, commissioner. Be careful, do not want you to get sued by one of these guys.

Crowell: No one is going to sue. It would be a career killer. Are you going to sue me for asking if you're trying to take down the league? These guys are wreaking havoc.

Rozanov: No, I will not sue.

Crowell: Take the jerseys down, Rozanov. And I'd tell you not to come out at the cup, but Ottawa doesn't have a chance in hell.

Rozanov: You are right. We are so bad, we will never see the cup. Have a good night sir.

December 2020

Barrett and Kent phone call

Barrett: Hey Dallas, what's up?

Kent: I know it was you, fag. I know you said something.

Barrett: What do you mean?

Kent: You fucking know what I mean. I tell Crowell about a fag Cuntaur and now I'm getting kicked out. What the fuck did you do?

Barrett: I didn't do anything, Dallas. I really don't know what you're talking about.

Kent: You're trying to say there are *other* dick-suckers on your team? Get real. Fredericks doesn't have this sway. *You* fucking did something.

Barrett: What do you mean?

Kent: Fuck you, Barrett. Act dumb. I was your best friend for a half fucking decade, you don't think I noticed some shit? And I know you were behind these bitches setting me up, too. I don't know how but—*fuck*. You're going to pay for this. Crowell is gonna tell everyone and you'll be out of the league like Baldwin.

Barrett: Don't—

Kent: And I know you're in that fucking cult group, too. Fuck, you might even be the fucking leader. Why else would you run for the union like an idiot? You've never given a shit about anything. You wouldn't unless you had a reason. Or they got your secret too, huh? Sounds like they weren't as nice as me. They fucking blackmailed you? I'll just put you out of your misery.

Barrett: I...

Kent: You're a dead man, Barrett. Crowell is going to kill you.

January 2021

Phone call between Crowell and Kent

Rec. by Bianca

Crowell: What do you want, Kent? I'm at the airport. No, I can't protect you from that. If they're serious— Wait. You do? No you don't. The ringleader. Have you been sitting on this? Ok that's not long. What do you have? oh? Troy Barrett. The new union president? He's Ottawa... Bianca, can you find out when Ottawa's plane left? ...Ok, Kent. Thanks. I'll see if I can get those guys off your ass for a minute.

Bianca: It looks like they're still in this airport, B29.

Crowell: B29. Ok, stay here. I have to go handle something.

January 2021

Barrett and Crowell

Crowell: You gay, Barrett?

Barrett: I— umm... no?

Crowell: I don't have time for this. I have it on good authority you've been leading this group. And if that's true, you're fucking finished.

Barrett: That's not—

Crowell: Shut up, I can't stand these faggots. Here's what we do. You stop everything you're doing and I'll just kick you out of the league, not press charges. I'm not fucking—

Barrett: It's not me! I know Kent said it was because he fucking hates me right now. But it's not. [rustling]

Crowell: It's *you*. If it's not Barrett, Fredericks is too fucking stupid, and it's not the fag rookie. It's not the fag coach. It's not the fucking bitch running social media. It's not the lesbo PT. It's this one.

Rozanov: It is.

Crowell: This entire team is dead.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: How the public got this, putting out fires.

Some names for you:

D'Amato is on New Jersey, rumored to be gay.

Doblen was going to come out in 2020 if Nashville won against Montreal (some light speculation about whether he was too close to Lundin)

Shane, Hunter, Marcello, and someone named Bay are all missing after the 2020 awards ceremony.

Pena, Kirby, Madrigal, and Schwartz are the other people elected to the union with Barrett.

Chapter 36: Happy Birthday, Brad!

Chapter Summary

March 2021

Chapter Notes

I told you Spring 2021 is packed! And we're not even done 🤞 At least you are pretty much safe from cliffhangers this time.

edit: notice that I posted two chapters today! Chapter 35 is what the leak might have contained.

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

Hayden is always super fucking careful. He's had too many accidental children, too many mistakes on the ice, loses his keys too often. So he always doublechecks, errs on the side of caution, gets second opinions.

It's why he takes any revenue stream he can find, like recording dumb birthday messages for fans on Fanmail. Hockey could end tomorrow. He needs to be careful.

And now, with Rozanov trusting him with so much, with so many people relying on him, it's so much more important to *always* be careful.

That's why, when he received the email with the master, hours-long MP3 file of Crowell evidence, he saved it to his computer and deleted the email.

It's why, when he's filming a Fanmail video with Shane and Rozanov on the premises, he checks a million times. They're making out in the driveway like a pair of horny teenagers, so he shifts the camera a little to ensure it doesn't pick up their reflection.

It's why he doesn't trust the app on his phone to upload the file correctly, so he uploads the video to his computer.

It's why he triple checks to make sure it's for Brad's birthday and that he actually said Brad in the video, meanwhile checking for any signs of Shane or Rozanov or the ally army on his desk in the background. He watches it twice, even, before adding a file to the website and sending it off.

It's why he goes back to the app on his phone to make sure the desktop website truly uploaded it and... it did. But MP3 file, that's weird, it should be a video. Oh. *Oh fuck*. He can still delete it but... *Viewed*.

Ilya hears his name screamed from inside Pike's house like someone is hurt. The kids? He darts through the door, Shane on his heel. He runs through the living room and does a quick head count. Four. That's right, despite Ilya's insistence that the Pikes have nineteen children, they actually have four. None of them are crying or broken or decapitated. They're playing peacefully, or they *were* before Ilya and Shane bolted in looking like one of them should be hemorrhaging right now. So what's the deal?

He slows down and hears it again. A sob, coming from Pike's office. He approaches with Shane to find Pike in the desk chair, head in his hands.

"What did you do?" Ilya knows this can't be good. Shane puts a grounding hand on his back.

"I uploaded... Instead of the Fanmail video... the Crowell audio."

Ilya faintly hears Shane gasp behind him. No one breathes after that. The air is still. Ilya, usually coming up with plans on the spot, is completely blank for a minute. What the fuck do they *do*? Maybe they can get the file back somehow, convince the recipient not to post it. They could offer money. Signed jerseys, if they're fans. Hell, if they're asking Pike for a birthday greeting, surely they'd shit their pants to see Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov come to their birthday party. This guy might not even think to post the audio, he might not know what he's sitting on.

Just as Ilya finishes that thought, all three of their phones begin to buzz and ring. He closes his eyes. Fuck.

"Ok. It's everywhere." Shane helpfully supplies. Ilya turns to see his husband's eyes glued to his phone, scrolling through post after post on a hockey news site. Hayden, too, has taken his phone and is scrolling Twitter, breathing in short gasps. Ilya's phone is buzzing incessantly in his pocket.

"Ok." Ilya breathes once. "Ok. So it's out." His voice is calm, which makes both men look up in surprise.

"Well we can't use it to blackmail him now!"

"No, Pike. Obviously we cannot."

Shane nods slowly, seeing that Ilya is trying to keep himself and everyone calm. "We don't need to. The evidence is enough, they'll fire him no matter what."

"We have to just hope so." Ilya shrugs.

Pike's jaw hangs from his face, "Just *hope* so?? What are we going to do?"

“Watch it burn down?” Ilya says with a smirk. He can’t help it, the impending chaos here could be fun. He’s always found emergency situations to be a little exciting. He pulls his buzzing phone out of his pocket. It couldn’t have been more than a few minutes but— Christ. 30 missed calls... Kavita Kingsley, Cooper Lee, Yuna, Harris, Haas... and the *texts*.

“Did I just hear Crowell learn the word genderqueer?”

“I’ve never heard the word faggot so many times outside of my bedroom.”

“😂 we like our hockey players masculine??? Can’t relate, call Husbander about that”

“Wait, did he ACTUALLY try to crash your plane? What the fuck?”

“This is a fucking plane crash, I can’t look away... too soon?”

“Tell Hunter I take back everything I said about him. He could get it.”

Fifty guys, some group chats, some still individual, all blowing up his phone. The ally army chats are exploding, too. 102 new texts appear just while Ilya is reading one of the threads.

“What are people online saying?” He ventures the question to Pike, who has his social media squadron email chain up on his computer and Instagram, his domain, in the background.

Pike barks out a little incredulous laugh. “He’s fucked, Rozanov. He’s cooked.”

Despite that potential good news, there are a lot of fires to put out. Ilya returns to his battle station at Shane’s. It doesn’t have all of his stuff, but he can’t be out of commission for the two-hour drive back to Ottawa when his whole empire is in crisis mode. Shane sits in the second chair that Ilya put there for decoration. He hasn’t heard the audio, so he puts on huge, noise-cancelling headphones and listens to the recordings while Ilya fights fire.

After just a few minutes, while Ilya is still assessing priorities, Shane rips the headphones off.

“Sorry, this is just so frustrating,” he complains.

“Yes, but it’s ok—”

“No, sorry, the audio itself.” Shane clarifies, “Do you have like, a list of when this is? or even who’s talking? I’m already so confused and most of these are *about* me, I think.”

That makes sense. Ilya nods and pulls up the list of dates, names, and circumstances on his laptop to print out when he catches himself. No one else has this list, just Pike, Vaughan, and Baldwin. The public, the other players, the journalists are all listening without that context. Even Crowell didn’t get the list because Crowell knows when these are taken, who’s talking. Even if he didn’t, the point would get across. Keeping the list guarded wasn’t intentional, but it may have unintentionally kept some secrets. It’s hard to put himself in the public’s shoes and listen without knowing, but here’s a guinea pig served up on a silver platter, right in front of him.

“No.”

Shane scoffs, “You just pulled up a list, I’m looking at it. The title of the document is ‘Crowell Audio Masterfile Reference List’. How is that not a list?”

“Ok, yes,” Ilya corrects himself, “I have a list. Just... can you listen without it? I need to know what to expect from... everyone.” He’s not explaining this well, but Shane nods. He immediately gets that determined look, like when Ilya asked him to watch hockey footage and write down errors. He picks up a fresh legal pad from the desk, sits up cross legged on the chair, and puts his headphones back on. Ilya just watches with his heart dangerously enlarged. Sometimes Shane’s blind commitment to this weird project takes Ilya’s breath away. He never asked Shane if he wanted to be a mob husband for the rest of life. And this is definitely not the Ilya that Shane signed up for, in their years of hooking up or even when they got serious. But apparently Shane loves this Ilya anyway. Shane jots something on the legal pad and Ilya realizes he’s been staring, eyes misty at his husband while the entire earth is crumbling around them. So he shakes himself out and gets back to work.

Some of his players are named in the audio. It wasn’t edited for public consumption, just for Crowell to know what they had, and he obviously already knew the players he was talking about. No one is out-right outed to the public, but any association with the movement is damning.

The speculation surrounds #7, who has been an open secret for a while. #19, his teammate, is named too. Neither of them seem to mind much. It doesn’t change anything professionally for them, their team already knew. When Ilya calls them, neither is planning to put out a statement yet. It’s still unclear enough that they don’t have to if they don’t want to. Plus, #7 still really wants that cup kiss. Ilya thinks that’s not fucking likely this year. Ottawa is taking the cup. And whether Ilya will be kissing Shane... well this whole thing might have made that a lot less likely. Not that Ilya has ever let himself dream of doing that.

Other guys are mentioned but not in the context of the Gay Guild, so they are safer. #10 and #30 are mentioned in minor speculation. No one in their right mind would think Crowell— or any of these guys— has a passable gaydar. Those are easy to write off.

The leaked audio is pretty damning for #26, who was slated to come out after the 2020 Cup if Nashville won. Ilya calls him. He’s not doing well. He thinks his team will be pissed, though they haven’t reached out yet. They’ve already got a spot in the playoffs, so they probably won’t want to cut him, but he expects to be traded or worse as soon as they can. Ilya asks if he’s going to say anything publicly, and the guy is appalled at the suggestion. The recordings also speculate about a history he might have with Lundin, and #26 quickly reminds Ilya that he would never touch another hockey player. “No offense.”

He returns calls to Cooper Lee, who just needed someone to yell at for a minute, and Kavita Kingsley, who wanted a statement from the group. He didn’t know what to say beyond the usual: Hate speech is too rampant in hockey, these guys fear for their careers for a reason, Crowell can’t be commissioner anymore. She asks if there’s anything else he wants to say and waits expectantly. When he ignores the prompt for him to come out, she responds with a disappointed sigh. As if it’s a slow hockey news day. She’ll live. There’s no way Ilya Rozanov is coming out today and taking any attention off Roger Crowell.

He texts Bianca who immediately calls him back. After the initial round of shock in the office, Crowell dismissed the other bigwigs and started listening to the audio. She saw him getting closer to realizing it, and left before he could piece together that it was so obviously her. They didn't include most of the benign general workplace harassment but there are still a few recordings only she could have made, some serious breaches of Crowell's trust. About an hour after she left the office, she got the irate voicemail firing her. Ilya looks at the clock on his laptop. It's only the early evening, but Bianca sounds plastered. And happy. He says they'll talk soon about her options for future employment.

Ilya has to brace himself for his last call.

The audio is pretty clear about Luca Haas. He's named in several of the conversations. There would be room to deny it if he really, really wanted to but... it's by far the most obvious of all the guys mentioned.

"Haas." Ilya says, and swallows. "Are you ok?"

"I've been trying to call you forever."

"Oh, I never check my phone." Ilya says sarcastically.

"Yeah, ok sorry. You were busy." Haas sighs, "I wanted to tell you I wrote a statement, but I haven't posted it yet. I got Barrett and Hunter and Ossi to look it over—"

Well, that's an interesting combination of people. "Ossi? From Vancouver?"

"Yeah." Luca moves on quickly, "Do you want to look at it, or I just post it or... what happens here?"

"You are not mad?"

"No! Well, mad at Crowell, but that's pretty normal for me," Haas laughs. "No, all things considered, this is probably the coolest thing to happen to me, maybe ever."

"You are a weird kid."

Ilya hangs up feeling better about all the guys mentioned. So he can finally breathe a few times, put his head in his hands, and think about himself.

He's mentioned. He's in there so many times, and almost all of them give something away. He fires off a message to assess the damage.

Council of (Mostly) Straight Elders group chat

Ilya: give me updates

Ilya: what is social media saying about me?

Ilya: ...

Ilya: fucking tell me, cowards.

Marly: Fuck. I hate everyone in here.

Marly: Not you Roz

Marly: The chat without you just chose ME to do this. Assholes.

Marly: Ok so- Most people agree you're really involved. Like ringleader-levels of involved.

Marly: But, a lot of people are just plain dumb and are just like... overlooking the gay thing?

Vaughan: *bisexual

Marly: go fuck yourself, you threw me under the bus

Marly: anyway

Marly: We think you actually might be able to get away with it. They think you're just like... ally of the year.

Marly: Some people think you just want to see Crowell taken down and Hunter and his guys would work with you, so you put this thing together.

Marly: other people are 100% onto you.

Marly: some people have you as Husbander

Pike: But they've been saying that for a year

Marly: Not speaking to you especially

Marly: And people know RogueMLH is tied in with this stuff somehow, so they think you're maybe running that, too.

Marly: but that's not a very popular opinion because it would mean you're doing 900 things.

Hayes: which you are

Marly: eat shit Hayes

Marly: overall you're fine. I don't think you even have to acknowledge it.

Marly: you just might get asked about it in post-game press this week so be ready for that

Ilya: ok thank you Marly.

Ilya: no thank you to anyone else.

Ilya puts down the phone with a kind of relief and leans his head back to rest his eyes. The professional journalists haven't had time to sift through the audio, but for now that's about as good as he can get. With everything accounted for, they were pretty fucking lucky.

The scratching of a pen draws his attention back to his husband, who has filled out a whole page of notes. He pauses the audio and takes the headphones half off when he sees Ilya looking at him.

"How is it?" Ilya asks.

"Hot. You're really fucking good at this." Shane smiles and Ilya wants to eat his face off.

"But Crowell's voice is a boner killer."

Ilya laughs. "True."

“He really doesn’t like us, huh. I guess that won’t matter soon.”

r/MLHcorruption

This is a forum to highlight the corruption, scandals, and coverups throughout Major League Hockey. Be respectful and keep an open mind. We now encourage everyone to provide sources. Together we can create a more transparent MLH.

u/sir1589shelf MOD 1 hour ago 

Hayden Pike audio leaks megathread

Any discussion of the Pike leaks should be here. [Link to audio files](#)

We’re really not sure how to handle all of this today. We’re working on writing up transcripts, but any volunteer effort is appreciated in this, and can be added to the linked document.

u/penisthedong

Sooo... Hayden Pike Ringleader? Why did he have this file? Plus, he was the one who initiated TGS Affection Fest 2018 (with a picture of Shane Hollander, which BTW is super telling now that we know Hollander is gay).

u/Champ-ion-agne

Gay and married to another player, according to him on this tape. He told his management that and they didn’t believe him? Why not?

u/99OrganizedOrgans

because he’s not married to another player. he was just saying that to protect Melnyk. brave to lie to his GM but yeah not real.

u/intelonwatergate

Or... Pike and Hollander married? Jackie Pike beard?

u/FewYorkCities

anyone else getting a boner listening to Shane Hollander yell at Montreal management? No? Just me?

u/dscvrroe45780

Probably his husband too

u/ThiccOttawa

Did we just hear Barrett meet Harris for the first time?? SPARKS WERE FLYING!!!!

u/unfortunateusername

you’re kidding right? Barrett was a dick in that call.

u/ChiefErectutiveOfficer

why the fuck were Hollander and Rozanov in the same room trying to figure out game distractions?

u/99OrganizedOrgans

maybe Harris and Hollander were hooking up?

u/DM_me_your_mom

And Rozanov was what... applying the lube?

u/ClockingSideeye

“You’re safe” then this audio gets fucking leaked lmao ok

u/intelonwatergate

take a shot for every slur challenge impossible

u/Champ-ion-agne

Omgggg you’d die!!!!

u/Faint4Taint

there are some oldtimey ones in here! I’m low-key impressed by “poofs”.

u/penisthedong

I’m sorry, “pulp gulpers” is the funniest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r

Hang on, why are there so many recordings from Ilya Rozanov?

u/Faint4Taint

Listen to the one starting at 2:50:02. I think Hunter is on the phone with the Ringleader and their lawyer, Cooper Lee. The weird game of telephone? This is the most bizarre shit. But at least we know the commissioner is a Ringlander truther

u/unfortunateusername

Except he gets fucking iced by Hollander when he accuses him of it! Twice! I’ve never been so Hard for Hollander.

u/Gr4dual_Dcline

TBH I’m more convinced it’s Hollander than ever. I don’t care he said he wasn’t, or that he’s #6, that could be a decoy. He’s at the scene of almost every crime. Plus, Rozanov is in so many of these, he definitely told Roz to play double agent and record shit.

u/ChiefErectutiveOfficer

Ok so the ringleader is also shady as fuck. Like wydm he gave Crowell the wrong teams on purpose? And Crowell said he “had a hand in 2018”? He knew Crowell was going to rig the cup? Why didn’t he go to the authorities with that?

u/LearnToDriveAsshole3

Because the authorities have been super fucking helpful so far. 🙄

u/iinsister1

Ok but for real, if investigators didn’t have these, then Pike is getting charged with withholding evidence.

u/intelonwatergate

Yeah like... if Crowell is right and ringleader was able to “steal plays and sabotage games” we’ve got a whole other set of problems. This league is so cooked. Burn the whole thing down. Trust no one.

u/HorseJailforHorses

I’m fully in camp Ringleader Rozanov and am pissed there’s not a cute way to say it. I’ve heard Rozngleader and I hate that. Please can we brainstorm the serious matters!!!

u/Faint4Taint

It’s so weird because it really sounds like he is! But Rozanov isn’t gay

u/MrSirHimself

Maybe he’s just organizing it like, as a favor?

u/dscvrroe45780

It would explain why we haven’t heard the Ringleader come out yet. It’s actually probably safer for a straight dude to be involved at that level. Rozanov actually makes a lot of sense for that.

u/ThiccOttawa

uhh, the crimes are why the ringleader hasn’t come out yet. dude is a felon, he belongs in prison.

u/61courH

Did Crowell really just say anyone who left after the MLH awards is getting fired? That... can’t be legal. No wonder it didn’t get anywhere.

u/MrSirHimself

Fellas, is it gay to skip a boring afterparty?

u/intelonwatergate

Fucking... JUSTICE FOR BIANCA. Blink twice if you need help, babe.

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r

Just checked her LinkedIn and she's a fox too, she could get it. Sidenote: her employment at the MLH says until today's date. Usually if they're still working somewhere it says "until present". Think she got canned for this?

u/Faint4Taint

if my secretary were recording my existential crises I would be firing her no matter how hot she is.

u/ScratchYourAss4me

Uhhh I believe she's married to Mayhem Mitra, the UFC champ. [\[source\]](#)

u/MrSirHimself

And Roger Crowell has *not* been beaten to a pulp?

u/penisthedong

The one time I wouldn't call myself a pulp gulper. I would not gulp that pulp.

u/sir1589shelf

FOUND CROWELL'S SHORT-LIVED COUNTRY ARTIST CAREER AND IT IS BAD
[\[Link\]](#)

u/ScratchYourAss4me

Oh shit it's *bad* bad.

u/Faint4Taint

I thought I'd already heard the worst audio I'd ever hear today.

u/DM_me_your_mom

God this is embarrassing for him. It's so cringey, but I can't stop listening.

u/LiveBreatheHockey MOD *15 minutes ago*

[Link to Luca Haas's statement](#)

u/sir1589shelf

haas seems chill

u/99OrganizedOrgans

fucking called it I knew he could draw

u/LiveBreatheHockey

insane to be outed by the commissioner though how cool is that

u/penisthedong

cool? What the fuck are you talking about? This kid's life is probably ruined.

u/ScratchYourAss4me

actually idk if it's that bad anymore. Plus it's Ottawa so they probably actually just extended his contract when they found out.

u/Champ-ion-agne

this is one of the more outlandish theories I've seen on here in a while but what if Ottawa picked him for this reason?

u/LiveBreatheHockey

that would also be so cool. Maybe they did.

@LucaaHaas

I am mentioned in the audio. I am not upset at the leak or at Hayden Pike, but at the commissioner who threatened my life and called me names. As the second recipient of the #TOPPING award, I don't think we should let #13 name things anymore. Proud to be one of "Hunter's Awful Nancy Dick-Yankers." First of the playing #ROOKIES, too. #46 

RASHYCOCK + DICK COMA + PENIS + Roz group chat

Oldest Man Alive added Haas to the group chat

Oldest Man Alive: Wish it were better circumstances, but everyone say hi to Luca!

Lundin: who?

Barrett: Luca Haas, he's our rookie.

Baldwin: he was outed by the audio leak

Baldwin: which btw is Hayden Pike still alive or can I be the one to do it?

Fredericks: today of all days probably don't put that in writing???

Oldest Man Alive: I think it actually might be fine.

Lundin: ok I'm looking at the post now.

Lundin: what is ROOKIES??

Ilya: they are first year players.

Fredericks: Rozanov's Order Of Kids In Elite Sexualities. We brainstormed this on a roadie once.

Lundin: and remind me... topping?

Melnyk: Is that what you asked that Nashville guy?

Melnyk: Someone on the tape said you were “close”

Lundin: ah fuck

Lundin: that’s in there? He’s going to hate that.

Ilya: he told me no.

Ilya: keeps saying two hockey players together would be gross.

Bennett: it WOULD be gross.

Rivera: ok could we not?

Lundin: Can confirm. It was gross.

Lundin: so much helmet acne

Lundin: my bed smelled like a rink locker room for weeks

Lundin: everyone hug your non-hockey partners tight tonight

Oldest Man Alive: Anyway.

Oldest Man Alive: Everyone else ok? Haas?

Haas: sorry.

Melnyk: Jesus the typing dots are driving me insane.

Haas: I just didn’t think this chat was real. It’s a lot.

Barrett: Luca is a fan of ours.

Barrett: this is probably the greatest day of his life.

Baldwin: Still don’t love that you’re in here

Baldwin: Don’t say ‘fan of ours’

The next day, Ilya finally gets the call he’s been waiting for.

“Rozanov, I’m heading into the emergency Board of Governors meeting,” Mastur Bates says.

“This was the dumbest way for this to happen, but I think it might be enough.”

Something bubbles up in Ilya’s chest. But he has to be sure. “Enough?”

“The hate speech, the threats, admitting to unfair practices. The audio is pretty bad. I think about half of us were looking for a reason to get rid of him. Most of them just because he’s causing scandal after scandal. He’s a liability.”

“The other half?”

“Doesn’t like change, doesn’t think it’s necessary, thinks anybody would have the same issues.”

“So what happens?” Ilya doesn’t like the sound of this. If this audio leak isn’t the end of Roger Crowell, he might have to give up.

“That’s what we’re about to find out. This meeting will likely end with a vote.”

“What happens if he is removed? Who is the new commissioner?”

“Again, we’ll see. Ordinarily, the deputy commissioner would do it. But— the audio doesn’t really tell you this, so you might not know— the deputy commissioner was usually the one on the other end of that phone call, doing the bidding. He’s just as culpable, he’d come with all the same issues.”

“Ok... so who is the new commissioner?” Ilya knows what he’d like to hear. But that’s a fantasy. Not based in reality at all. He’s a full-time professional hockey player, about to enter playoffs. He’s trying to singlehandedly turn his whole team around. Still, in the back of his mind is the fact that he’s turning the whole *league* around, too. He could be doing *that* full-time.

“I think you know what I’m about to say, but I can’t nominate myself. I’ve already started talks to sell the Montreal team, I already have a buyer. Do me a favor? To start this relationship out well?”

“What favor?”

“Get Scott Hunter to call the New York owner, tell him to nominate me today. It can’t come from Ottawa, you guys are kind of a joke right now, no offense. And I don’t think Washington’s owner will listen to Rivera or Wagner. Unless you have someone else close to team management whose owner will listen to them—”

“No, it’s Hunter.”

“Ok. Do it quickly, the meeting is in a few minutes.”

“And you will help us, if you are commissioner?” Ilya wants to be sure of this. If this guy stabs them in the back...

“Yeah, I... I thought you’d be aware of that already,” He sounds confused like they’ve talked about this at length. But all he’s said on the subject to Ilya is that he’d be more “lenient” with his guys than Crowell was.

“Right. Leniency.”

“Yeah...” The confused tone is still sitting in the air between their phones, and Ilya doesn’t know what to do with it. He hates feeling like he doesn’t know something. But even more than that, he hates *admitting* that he doesn’t know something, so he can’t ask for clarity here.

Ilya hangs up and follows instructions. It feels weird and wrong to be doing the bidding of some guy who might be commissioner in an hour. But he does feel like Mastur Bates will be better in that spot than Crowell. Ilya has more leverage over him, he can force his hand easier. And he's said he'll be better about the obvious infringements on their players.

Hunter follows instructions. Then the New York owner follows instructions.

And in a few hours, the Montreal team owner is selling the Montreal team and preparing to step into the role of commissioner.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: 2021 Playoffs! Because all of these people still do actually play hockey for a living!

#7 and #19 were maybe outed by the audio

#26 was a little more clearly outed but isn't doing anything about it

Luca Haas #46 is out!

I guess I lied and I'm taking this season a little slower than I anticipated because I still don't have an accurate chapter count for you!

Chapter 37: Shane's Plan

Chapter Summary

Shane POV: Flashback December 2020, January 2021, then directly following the leaked audio

Chapter Notes

To recap, Ilya blackmailed the Montreal Team Owner/Chairman of the Board of Governors (Astor Yates/Mastur Bates) with screenshots of his grindr profile. Initially this was just to dethrone Crowell, but Ilya has been using it to call in favors and, last time, Yates called in a favor with Ilya, too. So this guy is now the commissioner-elect, if that's a thing.

Weird chapter today! First all-Shane POV chapter since chapter 3, let's see what Shane's been up to this year. You thought I would get through this story without corrupting Shane Hollander? Shane Hollander gets his hands a little dirty! Everyone cheered!!!

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

Four months ago, December 18, 2020

Shane is at the team Christmas party. Not the one at Comeau's house he hasn't been invited to in years—the official one, with the bigwigs. He knows he's not contractually obligated to attend these, but it's not really in his nature to play hooky.

He's sipping ginger ale in a circle with Hayden, Jackie, J.J., and some second-year kid who Shane thinks might be in the ally army with them. So, everyone on the team that can stand Shane. This group makes him a little sad. He wants to leave Montreal so badly, but doesn't want to leave them with even fewer people. What if there's another gay player on the team someday?

The owner of the team, Astor Yates, is here. He's a bajillionaire from old money. His family made their fortune in shipping. Or oil? Maybe shipping oil? Something like that. And he's staring at Shane. What is that about? The guy isn't starstruck, he's probably constantly around bigger celebrities.

Shane doesn't have to wonder too long. Mr. Yates approaches and asks to “borrow” Shane from the group.

“How’s it going?” he says as soon as they’re relatively alone.

“Fine, Mr. Yates. Happy holidays.” Shane thinks he might have shaken hands with this guy thrice in his life, just when he won his cups. Astor Yates shows up for the cup and then leaves until they win their next one. So far in this conversation, he’s doubled the amount of words they’ve exchanged, ever. Shane tries to remember if he’s ever even seen him at one of these events.

“You too.” Mr. Yates glances around once before lowering his voice. “I thought maybe we should chat about the deal.”

Shane has heard a lot of coded things in the last three years. Most he’s coming to understand, some he nods along with when he knows whether they have good or bad implications. This has all the markings of a code but he has *absolutely no idea* what to do with it. His blank face must give something away.

“It’s ok kid! I know it’s you, I’m not even particularly mad about it.”

“What’s me?”

Yates looks at him skeptically. “Come on. I know you told the team and Roger that it’s not you, but I’m trying to tell you it’s ok. We can work together without the middlemen or muscle, whatever you were trying to pull there.”

Oh. Yet again, Shane is being confused for his husband. What the fuck did Ilya want with this guy though? He’s the Montreal team owner, he sits on the board of a couple charities and — oh. Ok right, he’s on the Board of Governors. He’s the Chairman. How high up is Ilya’s reach? This is kind of crazy.

“Uhh ok. I’ve tried to tell people, it’s not me. I’m not the ringleader.” Shane lowers his voice for the last word. If he’s learned anything, it’s better to be clear than rely on his own understanding of social code.

Yates looks surprised. “I know that’s what the team says but— You mean you didn’t send two hockey thugs to shake me down?”

Jesus, Ilya. What the fuck? “No, that doesn’t sound like me.” Shane tries to laugh.

“I guess not.” Mr. Yates still looks at him warily. “You must know who it is though right?”

Shane nods, “Yes.” That’s common knowledge, right? It would be weird if he didn’t.

“From what everyone says, he’s quite the guy. Good leader. Just from my experience, he makes some smart decisions. He knows how to play the game.”

Well this is fucking bizarre. Astor Yates talking about Ilya like this?

He keeps going. “See, I wanted to make him a deal tonight. If he were you, that is. I think we both want pretty similar things out of the league. With some slight differences.”

Shane is a bit uncomfortable getting this close to Ilya's plans. He really doesn't want to mess anything up, and a lot of what Ilya deals with is pretty fragile. "That's really something you should ask him about."

"But you know him."

He already regrets admitting that. "Yes."

"What does he want? If he could have anything for his career or for the league or whatever, what would it be? What's most important to Mr. Ringleader?"

Shane isn't entertaining this with a serious answer out loud, of course, but he thinks of it as an exercise in how well he knows Ilya. Anything for his career? He barely *wants* his career right now. Shane thinks if it were up to Ilya, he would have jumped ship on his contract long ago and been a full time Gay-Wrangler. And Shane wants that for him. Really, he knows it would make Ilya happy, and he sees sometimes that Ilya isn't naturally happy.

But selfishly, Shane hates the idea of playing in a league without Ilya in it somewhere. And Ilya will do anything Shane wants him to. So really, Mr. Yates is asking what *Shane* wants out of Ilya's career. And honestly there's only one answer: To play together, in the same city, on the same team. There's only been that one answer since they were 17 years old, and they've only ever gotten it for an All-Stars weekend, once.

Shane would leave Montreal behind in an instant to play with Ilya in Ottawa. And Ilya, if he's staying in this career, would want that more than anything, too. There's no way they could get it to logistically work, though. It's a fantasy, but it's one Shane has thought about a lot. How could he not? Wake up together every day, even when they're on the road? Share a locker room? Maybe even occasionally practice on the same line and pass to each other? Nice goal, nice assist, kiss on the cheek?

He's lost in the daydream so long that Mr. Yates drags snaps him out. "So you know him well."

"Uhh..."

"And you said you were married to another player?"

Fuck, this is getting close to something Shane is not interested in disclosing. Surely his team told the owner this already, and Shane really can't lie that well. "That's what I told the team management." He shrugs, aiming for nonchalant.

"Ah. Ok." Mr. Yates gets a knowing look and Shane worries he's said too much, even though he hasn't really said anything. "You really *aren't* the ringleader, huh. But I can see why we all thought... this makes sense." He puts his hands in his pockets. "Ok. I'm going to throw a deal out into the air and... let's see. You, Shane Hollander, sign with whoever you want next season— New Jersey or Seattle or Anaheim or Ottawa... wherever— and don't worry your head about cap space or anything like that."

“Wh— Why me?” Shane asks before immediately asking the more important question, “How?”

You can’t just *ignore* a hard rule like the salary cap. If a team exceeds it, they get fined or worse, depending on how the league decides to punish them. And with their current commissioner feeling the way he does about Shane, it would be a harsh penalty.

“Well, your ringleader is going to take down Crowell, and I’ll take over.” He says, matter-of-factly. But this is far from a matter of fact to Shane.

Shane knows removing Crowell has been a goal of Ilya’s for a while. Is that why he was in touch with Mr. Yates to begin with? He’s Crowell’s replacement? Shane doesn’t know how far in the future that goal is. But he’s willing to bet on Ilya accomplishing it at some point. Why this guy, though?

“Are you... will you be better than Crowell? About... all of this?”

“Yes, I believe the league will benefit from your ringleader’s ideas. I think there are some impressive changes coming our way because of his work. At the very least, I won’t be firing rookies, right?”

“Right.” Shane agrees with something he has no clue about. “Is this his plan?”

“Well, we’ll see how he takes it.” Mr. Yates smiles, “But I think if I can offer him things like *you*, I might be in luck.” Shane doesn’t know how he feels about being used as a bargaining chip. But if it gets them on the same team, in his hometown, together? The more he thinks about it as a real possibility, the more he thinks he would prostitute himself for this. Maybe not literally. Maybe.

But Mr. Yates is still going, “And then, I’ll just... keep the seat warm. I don’t need it long, just until he chooses the next one. Maybe the Admiral’s GM? Seattle’s owner is good, too. Or could be Scott Hunter, that guy’s made for leadership, and he’s getting up toward retirement. Hell, if he ever comes out about it, the Ringleader himself would be even better. Once he’s done playing on the same team as his... you. Do you think that would be something he’d be interested in?”

Ilya as commissioner? Mr. Yates is saying Ilya would be a good commissioner? Shane thought at most he’d run this weird organization full-time for a while, maybe take on a staffing or assistant GM position down the line. A general manager was the extent of Shane’s vision; Ilya is practically doing that job for Ottawa already. Shane had never considered commissioner. And why not? Ilya is the best at everything he tries. Of course he should go for the highest office in hockey. Of course he would be the best candidate for commissioner there’s ever been. But still, “Why would you do that?”

“Well first, your... ringleader has some information about me that is unsavory. It’s in my best interest to keep him happy until I’m ready for that to surface.” Oh Jesus, Ilya, what did you do? “But... I also have a vested interest in what happens to you guys.”

Wait. Is Astor Yates gay? He's married, his wife is literally *here*. Maybe he's bisexual? Is that a thing old people are?

How did Ilya clock him? God, Shane thinks his husband has a gift. If this were something he could monetize... although, it sounds like maybe he *is* monetizing it. *Blackmail*, Ilya? Seriously?

"Oh." Shane says, stupidly. "Well, I'm in no place to make any deals... that's not really my thing."

"Why not?" Mr. Yates asks. The truth is, Shane has never felt conniving enough to do what Ilya does. He's not going to be blackmailing people or strategizing the way Ilya can. "Listen, I'm just asking if you want to be on the same team as your husband, because I think he might do me some favors if I make that happen for you two. If I'm commissioner, I don't have to fine the team for going over cap space, I can approve a weird trade, whatever you'd need."

"Isn't that... not really fair?" Rules exist for a reason, and Shane has always taken that as a constant. But the rules also didn't plan for the two best hockey players in the world falling in love and getting married...

"You're *really* not the leader!" Mr. Yates chuckles. "Maybe I'm even off about you two... No, it might not be fair. But it gets you where you want to be."

And Shane, for whatever reason, is actually not particularly bothered by that.

January 2021, one week after Ottawa's plane scare and Crowell's leaked threat

"Shane Hollander!" Ottawa's GM sounds happy to speak to him on the phone. "Any idea why Astor Yates just called me asking about our cap space for you? Says to keep it quiet?"

Shane is so bad at this. He has no idea what's common knowledge, what should be kept secret, or not. He knows he's a shit liar, though. "I talked to him."

"Of course." The GM sighs. "That guy's kind of slimy. Won't be surprised if he takes over Crowell's spot once the bastard is in prison. I guess he'd be a better commissioner than Crowell."

Shane involuntarily laughs at that. "Respectfully, Hayden Pike would be a better commissioner than Crowell." The GM laughs too. It occurs to Shane that this guy is great, Ilya has always spoken highly of him, and he was just more honest than most team management he's ever spoken to. So Shane feels comfortable sharing more. "Mr. Yates said he doesn't want the job forever, he'd just keep the seat warm."

"Well yeah, that's not his target. He's got political aspirations, bigger than the MLH. He'll be prime minister someday. The league is just a way for him to get some leadership experience

on his resumé beyond running a business he inherited.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense. Seems like a weird path to government.”

“Actually, a few people are eyeballing the commissioner seat right now for that reason. Everyone knows Crowell is on his way out, and whoever takes over has the job done for them. It’ll be the easiest gig in history.”

“What do you mean?”

“*Anyone* looks better than Crowell. Reversing his bad ideas will be quick. And no matter who it is, they’ll take credit for the changes R— the Ringleader is making.”

Shane’s gut twists a little at the implication anyone but Ilya will get credit for turning the league around. But he doesn’t know if Ilya ever plans to take recognition for his work. “So he wants a few easy years to claim all the changes and then what, run for public office?”

“It’s a good strategy. Hockey fans are conservative, but the changes are progressive and will be mostly popular, once people get used to them. It checks a lot of boxes. Don’t get me wrong, he might change some things to make life easier for his buddies on the way, but it’s a stepping stone for him.” The GM laughs, “Look, if we’re getting leniency to get you on our roster, I’ll take it. The guy isn’t the worst thing to ever happen to the world, he’s just a politician.” He pauses, then recalibrates, “Is this something you’d be interested in, coming to Ottawa?”

“Very. But do you even need me?”

“The depth at center would be great. Between us, I’m getting the sense one of our centers might be on his way out sooner than we thought.” Shane’s heart drops. “Do you uhh... know anything about that?”

“No.” Shane says, almost honestly.

The problem is, he hasn’t discussed it with the center in question.

Present— March 2021

Shane still hasn’t talked to Ilya about any of this. They’ve been busy with so many other things, first it’s the plane scare, and then both their teams are doing really well, and now the Crowell fallout and—

Shane is worried. If he tells Ilya his plan, Ilya might stay playing hockey longer than he really wants to. Shane desperately wants them to play on the same team, but if it stands in the way of something that would make him actually happy...

Listening to the leaked audio made Shane even more confident that doing this full-time *would* make Ilya happy. All of it was impressive: putting it together, organizing everyone who submitted audio, listening to Ilya masterfully play Crowell to his face. It was all hot in the same way Ilya is hot on the ice.

It also fortified Shane's fear that Ilya is up to some shady stuff. He trusts Cooper Lee's judgement, and if he's been signing off on this, it should be fine. Right? Plus, after hearing Crowell threaten Ilya's life so many times, Shane wouldn't mind visiting Ilya in prison. Or going to prison for Ilya. Either way, he'd like to see Crowell dead.

The weekend after the Crowell tapes dropped, Ilya and Shane are both in New York and New Jersey for games. It coincides with the weekend of Kip's birthday, so Scott has had the Kingfisher booked for weeks. It's the perfect storm for everyone to be able to celebrate, and what was going to be just the Kip party turned into the RIP Roger KIP Rager.

The bar is packed with some hockey people, but mostly those who are Kip's friends, too. Kip's non-hockey friends are there, and the public knows Crowell is on his way out, even though the news about his replacement hasn't been made public. So they understand why Scott's colleagues are there getting hammered, and it's not exclusively for Kip's birthday.

The people in attendance saw Ilya and Shane together at Scott's wedding. It's not like they can be making out or dancing together, but this is a safe place where everyone knows about them, so Shane is happy to stay out later than he normally would.

Shane goes with Kip and Scott to get the hockey table another round at the bar. Kip takes the opportunity to gossip, because that's apparently all he wants for his birthday. "Scott said Ilya's team is doing really well. You ready to kiss on center ice?" He waggles his eyebrows. As Ilya's team gets closer and closer to the playoffs, Shane knows the possibility that Ilya will come out is getting more real, and he's been trying to manage his feelings about that.

"First of all, the whole idea is very..." Shane makes a face, and then a noise. "...Blech. No offense." Shane doesn't like the idea of kissing in front of a whole arena and millions at home. He liked Baldwin's fiancé who came down, hugged Baldwin, and was just there in the periphery. But Shane knows if given the option, Ilya would pull his pants down and blow him for the Jumbotron, just to show Scott Hunter up. In the privacy of his own mind, Shane doesn't mind the idea... but in reality? Not happening. "Second, they're never going to win against us in the first round. Third, we... we haven't talked about it." Shane sighs.

"I'm staying out of it this time. I've learned my lesson." Scott takes a swig and walks away to bring the table their drinks.

"He thinks you maybe shouldn't," Kip says with an eyeroll. "But it's not up to him, is it?"

"Actually, I don't know who it's up to. I'm doing whatever Ilya wants me to do."

"Healthy. I guess your husband also being your mob boss is complicated."

“I’m just...” Shane hasn’t said this before, but Kip is someone he’s been talking to for years about Ilya and Scott’s sordid gang activities. “I’m worried Ilya’s going to get tired of hockey soon and want to do this full-time.”

“Why would that worry you? Less travel time apart, no stressful playoffs, plus the pesky little risk of death every time you start a game... I’d kill for Scott to retire.” Kip looks at his husband wistfully, “It’s a shame he looks so good playing. And it makes him happy for some reason.”

Shane ignores this. “It might be a little different for us.” He tilts his head. “What do you think Scott would do when he retires?”

“Do?” Kip laughs, “The whole point of retirement is that you don’t *do* anything.” Shane furrows his brow. That doesn’t sound right. But Kip sees that and sighs, “I guess he’s like you. He would probably hate to stop moving, too. Maybe some kind of team management position. Maybe politics. Though between you and me, he’s not willing to get his hands dirty. Ilya would be better suited.”

Shane doesn’t really want to hear about Ilya getting his hands dirty. In that way. “Ilya would want to run the league.” Shane says distantly. He doesn’t even know where the words come from, he just knows in his heart it’s true.

“He already does.”

Later, the other gay Centaurs and local players and allies have left, so it’s just Shane, Ilya, Scott, Kip, Eric Bennett, and his boyfriend Kyle at the table. Vinny Marcello comes back with another beer.

Marcello sighs, “Another season, another year they won’t see the number 7 on Twitter.”

“What are you talking about? Could still be you.” Scott points out. “You’re in the wildcard spot.”

“Yeah, playing *you* in the first round. There’s not a chance,” he responds, “Admirals have been favored to win since like, January.”

“What happens then?” Kip asks and everyone looks at Ilya.

“When?” Ilya was not paying attention. He was rubbing Shane’s thigh under the table.

“When New York wins and there’s no one to come out.”

Scott tilts his head, “Actually? Do I have a backup? I haven’t asked in a while, but I’m pretty sure I don’t.”

“No. Does not matter.” Ilya picks his hand up to wave it through the air. Shane already misses it. “New York is not winning. Ottawa is winning.” The whole table laughs at Ilya’s

confidence, except Scott, who narrows his eyes.

“Rozanov...” he warns. He opens and closes his mouth a few times like there’s something he wants to say.

Bennett interrupts whatever that could have been, “Ottawa is set to go up against Montreal in the first round. And Crowell’s not there to pin anyone’s arms back. Good fucking luck.” Shane wants to stand up for his husband, but knows Bennett is probably right. Much as he’d love to see his husband win a cup, and for his own bigoted team to lose, Montreal is actually better. Barring some insane catastrophe, Shane knows the series belongs to Montreal.

“We do not need luck,” Ilya says seriously. Again, the table snickers. Again, without Scott.

“Ilya,” he says in the same menacing tone of voice. “What are you—” Kip kicks him under the table pretty obviously.

“Ok, then let’s get ready for it,” Marcello must sense whatever’s happening between Scott and Ilya might not end well. “Rozanov, what’s the plan? What does the Ringleader coming out look like?”

Ilya thumbs at the condensation on his beer glass. His facial expression is bizarre, like his eyes are dreamy but his mouth is fixed in a frown.

“He can’t come out as the Ringleader.” Scott says unequivocally before Ilya can answer.

“People are going to put it together the second he comes out,” Bennett says. “They’d be dumb not to.”

“They *are* dumb, though.”

Shane has had a different worry, and if they’re not going to talk about it as a couple, maybe he can bring it up here. “Ilya can’t come out without exposing himself as Ringleader because he doesn’t have a number.” The table goes quiet. “He can’t say zero or say he doesn’t have a number, that gives it away.”

“He could take a retired player’s number,” Scott shrugs. “A few people retired before they could come out. 2, 9, 17, 21...” He starts rattling them off from memory, looking smug about his ability to do this.

Kip rolls his eyes and mutters a sarcastic “So proud of you, babe.”

Ilya makes a sound, appalled at the apparent sacrilege, “I cannot use another man’s number!”

“Then give yourself another! What’s the next in line? #51?” Scott asks and it’s clear he’s actually wondering.

Marcello laughs. “That’s even more suspicious than not having a number. Imagine if he started a charity with Shane Hollander, Cardinal of Gay Hockey, and had a number higher than Luca Haas.”

“Maybe I turned him,” Shane says defensively.

“That is also dishonest.” Ilya points out, unclear who he’s correcting.

Bennett keeps trying. “I’m sure one of the really closeted guys won’t mind you taking their number.”

“I am not taking another man’s number.”

“Who would even know!” Marcello whines.

“*I’d* know,” says Scott. “I know all the numbers.”

“That’s creepy. What, do you just remember all of them?”

“Worse,” Kip smiling conspiratorially, “He has a spreadsheet.”

“And!” Scott is proud of this fact, “I have every single one figured out.”

“Oh my god! He’s lying!” Kip exclaims. “He has one he can’t get. It’s driving him insane.”

Scott pouts. “You’re supposed to be my friend.”

“I will have to do something else, not a post.” Ilya quickly changes the subject. He smirks, “Maybe Marcello will come kiss me on the ice.” Shane’s stomach turns and he snaps his head to glare at his husband. “Fine! An interview then, or maybe showing up with a flag will be enough.”

“Why does that sound even more suspicious?” Kip asks, “The people are going to hate this.”

“The people are dumb,” Scott chuckles. “Ottawa’s never making it out of the first round, anyway.”

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: 2021 Playoffs and Cup!

For your lists:

Scott says 2, 9, 17, and 21 are retired.

I will be worse than usual about responding to comments this weekend, but I always read and love them all no matter what!

Chapter 38: 38

Chapter Summary

2021 Cup playoffs and final

Chapter Notes

So #5 won the cup in chapter 5, #14 won in chapter 14, Shane won in chapter 24, and now this is chapter 38, and there's a cup, but that could mean nothing.... (it actually means nothing, I'm messing with you)

As always, I have a playoff bracket if you think it will help you follow along, but it's not as necessary this year.

Some Shane POV in the middle! Happy Cup day! (Ironically enough, the "Happy Carolina Loses day. (You belong in prison.)" in chapter 5 works IRL right now, something about life imitating art something something...)

Edit: I guess I have to gesture wildly again at the Happily Ever After tag. *gestures wildly*

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

It's early in the morning on the first day of Ilya's playoff series against his husband. For once, he's awake before Shane and gets to enjoy the soft, warm half-snores next to him.

He can't stop thinking about Shane's last post-game interview going into the playoffs.

"You haven't had to face off against Ilya Rozanov in the playoffs in years, how are you feeling?"

"Feels great. Selfishly, I'm happy for what he's done for my hometown team. But it's been a while for him, right? I don't know if he'll remember what a playoff game is like. If he needs any advice, give him my name. I've been through this a few times." Shane gave the reporter a cocky little smirk. Ilya would have winked. *"But seriously, I'm glad to see him back in the playoffs. It's not the same, playing in a league without your rival."*

The whole answer was captivating for Ilya to watch, in the same way cocky Shane has always captivated Ilya's attention. But the last phrase struck him and has been echoing in his

head since. *It's not the same playing in a league without your rival.* Ilya really almost made him do exactly that.

All year, Ilya has thought this might have to be it. This is the last season opener, the last All-Stars, the last regular-season game against Shane. And, thus, this is the last playoffs. Hockey is getting to be secondary to his larger goals, and starting to get in the way of them. So, silently, he's been treating all of this as if it could be his last.

But something shifted last month. Crowell left. And it's not the same playing in a league without your rival.

Not that Crowell ever matched Ilya's skill. But Crowell's demise was his goal for so long that Ilya lost track of everything else. And now that he's gone, well... it's not the same.

And it's not like his hobby been boring since then. Lawyers and investigators have been reaching out to Hunter, Shane, Kavita, Pike, even Ilya himself, because he's on the recordings, to help bring various cases against the former commissioner.

His guys don't mind being named in the lawsuits, which is good because no one else really could be. They could drop the charges now that Crowell is out of his seat, and Mastur Bates continues to suggest that. But Ilya wouldn't dream of it. He needs to see the former commissioner squirm, and officially he isn't seeing enough of that. The Board of Governors let Crowell "resign" and have been implementing a slow transition of power so it doesn't look like an emergency. Ilya doesn't really know why; everyone who has ever heard the word "hockey" in any language has heard what happened. So yes, there are frustrations and things the Ringleader needs to be fighting for, but it hasn't been the same since Crowell was ousted. It makes Ilya wonder how much of his goal had to do with Crowell himself.

The other part of the goal, which is currently asleep on— and cutting off circulation to— Ilya's arm, is a little more complicated. Getting rid of Crowell was black and white: whether the man is in office or not defined Ilya's success. But making Shane comfortable (not literally, obviously he's so comfortable right now that Ilya doesn't even want to risk getting up to pee), ensuring he has nothing to fear, is a little more nebulous. Shane might be more comfortable if they could be out together as a couple. And maybe they could, if Ilya would stop trying to puppeteer the entire league, just shut up and play hockey. That doesn't sound like something he wants to do, but he would do anything for Shane.

It certainly doesn't need to happen right this minute. Even when Ilya beats Shane this week, and then Hunter, and then two other teams, and wins the Schumem Cup Award Trophy, and then comes out, they might not need to go public. The public might react like Scott did. So Ilya's been pushing it back. It's a problem for future-Ilya.

For the last three years, playoffs have been Ilya's favorite part of the year: a time he can watch his husband play hockey, strategize, fend off errant corruption plots, make some of his own... sure, he can do this over the summer, but that's not when the actual hockey is happening. So this year, actually playing in the playoffs, is like torture for Ilya.

Plus, this series is so fraught. He knows Scott Hunter, who is playing his own simultaneous series, is watching closely at the married couple's first playoff games against each other. If anyone were to throw a game or fix the results, it would be here. Ilya also knows he's using Scott unfairly in his mind. When their relationship comes out, footage of this series will be picked apart and analyzed under a microscope for years. It's not just Scott, he's just the figurehead for anyone who might have similar suspicions. So Ilya does his best to refrain from cheating. He has less-than-legal strategies that he can implement in the next rounds to ensure he's the one coming out. But against his husband? He definitely should be honest. No cheating.

He can't stop other people from cheating. And in game 7, in overtime, Shane falls on the ice, giving Ilya enough time to score and win the game. The elation that washed over him from winning the series instantly vanishes in favor of dread when he turns around in time to watch his husband pull himself off the ice. He watches in horror until the view is obstructed by joyous Centaurs. It feels like someone is pouring ice cold water down the back of his jersey. Maybe someone is. The Centaurs are pretty joyous.

Shane wouldn't fall on purpose, right? Above all, through everything, Shane's top priority is honest hockey. Even ahead of Ilya, sometimes, and that's a dark mental path Ilya chooses to avoid for now. Ilya likes to think he knows his husband wouldn't do that on purpose.

Did someone else? Is Mastur Bates trying the same tactics as Crowell? Did Shane see a light or hear an airhorn or something? Did someone on Ottawa trip him? Did Crowell do something just to make them look bad? Was there a thin layer of olive oil on the ice like r/MLHCorruption suggested that one time?

Or, and this is maybe the worst possible scenario, did Shane truly, accidentally trip on the ice? If there is no reason for it, and nothing to take the blame, the blame will come to him, and to them.

And Ilya knows right there he won't be able to announce his relationship any time soon.

Shane is numb. His locker room is pissed. They all lost the game together, but he's an easy target because (despite scoring more than the rest of the team combined) he was the *last* screw up. Of the season. They're going home empty-handed. Fuck.

He sits on the bench and leans his head back on the stall, eyes closed. Some of his teammates have been ignoring him for a few years, others just tonight.

Hayden sits down next to Shane and quietly says, "I know you didn't want us to win. I kind of didn't want to either but... it was a little obvious."

“What?” Shane opens his eyes to look confused, like maybe something on Hayden’s face will make it make sense.

“Just... it’s not a good look,” Hayden clarifies, “what with everything he’s done.”

Except that doesn’t clarify anything. “Who?”

Hayden is now the one to look confused, but lowers his voice to a whisper. “Rozanov. I know he had to be the one to advance, but he should have gotten me or J.J. or someone to do it.” Hayden shakes his head. Shane can’t find any words at all... does Hayden think Ilya told him to trip? “I learned a long time ago to just trust his plans but...”

“You think he told me to do that?”

“He didn’t?” Hayden looks genuinely shocked. “So *you* did it—”

“No! Is that— are people going to think that?”

Hayden swallows, “I have a lot of texts that say maybe. Well, probably. Yes. They will. They do.” Shane feels physically ill. Did he just ruin everything Ilya worked for? Their plan? “I mean like... the public won’t think that, at least right now. And the team obviously doesn’t know enough to... But when they find out— it’s not like Rozanov has ever cared about the integrity of the game.”

“What do you mean?” Shane asks, offended on Ilya’s part.

“I mean, you know about the...” Hayden trails off and asks Shane’s brain to fill in the rest. He really, really wishes people would stop doing that.

“No, I don’t know about *the!*” He’s having a hard time keeping his voice down. What did Ilya do?

Shane knows, in the back of his mind, there are things he doesn’t know. Things he doesn’t *want* to know. Things he might not like. Things Crowell hinted at on the recordings. Hell, even what Crowell said directly to Shane. Murmurs people have made that he’s been happy to let waft around his ears and never into them, swatted away with a ‘Jesus, Ilya’ and never addressed again. He knows his husband isn’t perfect, that his methods are a bit unconventional, but he’s doing all of this to create a better league. He wouldn’t actually break any *hockey* rules in order to accomplish that, right?

And there’s another inkling that has slid in and out of Shane’s periphery for years, that he also chooses to ignore. It started with the whispered ‘*it’s for you*’ the first time Shane saw the physical evidence of all this work. The idea that Ilya might be doing this to make Shane happy. And that idea can never be linked to the first. Because that would mean *Shane* is responsible for whatever has happened here over the last four Cups.

So far, he’s stayed out of it and let Ilya do what makes him happy. Shane just likes seeing Ilya focused. And yes of course it’s hot and Shane would love to blow him under the desk in his command center (again), but it also fills his heart in a very distinct way to know Ilya is

finding his purpose. Ilya sometimes asks him for help, giving Shane a specific task with instructions and it all makes Shane feel so useful. It's been perfect. But right now, Hayden is saying things and Shane is just emotional enough, filled with adrenaline, to make him actually want to know for the first time. For some reason Hayden's hint, that Shane would have let wash over him any other day, can't be ignored for another second. "Tell me."

Hayden looks like Shane just asked him to strip down on the ice, or rob a bank, or kill one of his kids or something. "Absofuckinglutely not."

"Tell me or..." Shane can't even think about what his threat would be. He knows he can't ask Ilya. "I'll call Hunter."

"Hunter will love to hear from you." Hayden puts his hands up in surrender and looks relieved that he can tap out. That wasn't the intended effect at all. Shane doesn't *want* to call Hunter. He still makes him nervous, they've never been as close as he is with Ilya. And Hunter is busy with a playoff run of his own. His series ended days ago, but he's probably still not in the mood to share Ilya's secrets. That's an off-season activity, maybe.

So over the next few days, Shane commences his research. It's not like Shane has any more hockey to play this season, and supporting your husband through the playoffs isn't as time-consuming as Ilya has made it seem. He asks around, and Baldwin reluctantly tells him about the leaked plans that Ilya got from Carolina during the 2018 playoffs. Rivera tells him about the psychological-warfare-chirps he remembers. Price finally confirms they had the confidential injuries list. He watches old tape from the 2018 finals. He watches as Litterick on Carolina misses his third pass of the game. He watches him trip and fall. Just like Shane did. Shane winces. Fuck.

This is what the public will see. Shane tripping at the last minute against his husband who has a reputation for instructing guys to trip. Any hope that their relationship could be known if Ilya wins the cup and comes out is dashed. Shane already halfway knows he was alone in this hope. The one time he brought up a Scott Hunter Affection Moment, Ilya just looked sad and dispelled the idea. Now Shane knows why, and he knows by tripping in game 7 overtime, he just made it near-impossible for them to come out as a couple. Their legacies wouldn't just be as the freak hockey husbands like Shane always feared. It would be so much worse.

It might be sick, but Shane is glad Ilya left him out of all this. He would have loved to appreciate his husband's mind in real time, but he also knows he's too wrapped up in the legitimacy of the game to have let it happen.

One silver lining to this is the new rationale for Shane's plan. The writing on the wall is clear: Shane and Ilya can't play for opposing teams ever again.

Shane knows Ilya will hear this one way, that he shouldn't be playing hockey anymore. All Shane can do is hope he tries the plan first. They'll talk after Ilya loses to Scott Hunter.

Ilya cringes his way through the trip when he sees it played back after the game. Fuck, this

looks so bad. It's not like he thought he was about to come out as Shane's husband, but this makes that impossible.

It also makes it impossible to continue playing against each other. This is the highest-stakes series since Ilya started thinking of what each microgesture is going to mean longterm, and he can't put himself— or future-Shane, when he finds out— through that stress over and over. Maybe this is his last season, after all. Maybe he'll be able to convince the Ottawa GM to take Shane.

But the downside to playing hockey full-time is that you actually can't get distracted by stuff like this during the playoffs. So the team immediately travels to go play Scott Hunter's Admirals, the odds' favorites to win the whole thing. Ilya knows better than the odds.

Hunter calls him too early the next morning. Hunter had secured the second round spot a few nights ago, crushing New Jersey in a shorter series.

"I'm going to choose my words very carefully."

Ilya's heart sinks. Of course Scott is going to think Shane tripped on purpose. "This is a new thing for you. Kip finally said something?"

"Ok. I won't choose them so carefully. I fucking *know* you're not planning those shenanigans against me."

"I don't know this word... she-what?"

"You do," Scott says bluntly. "It was on your birthday invitation last year."

He's right, it was. "You have this memorized?"

"Fuck off, it was memorable. And— you're trying to distract me. Ilya, you know what I'm going to say. I need you to ensure me that—"

"I will beat you fairly. Promise." Ilya makes a poorly-timed joke, "Besides, you would not trip if I asked you to, anyway. So disloyal."

Hunter makes a choked sound like he's speechless. Or maybe he's finally dying.

He doesn't die. He actually does really, really well in their series... like bizarrely well. Like a man who thinks the game is rigged against him and thinks he can out-rig it by playing hard enough. He scores about a million points. But the rest of his team didn't get the memo, and Ilya's team is still playing like they have something to prove. Ottawa wins and advances.

Then he has to play #38 in Columbus. It's a tense series and it feels like all of Ottawa is on Ilya's back. But he doesn't crack under the pressure, and they coast through.

Ilya hasn't really been paying attention to the Western Conference, what else is new? But only a few teams had no gay members at all, and Ilya knows, especially since he'll be the one playing them, one of those teams will not take the finals. Luckily enough, those teams were

wiped out in the first round, and Houston will be the one to fight Ottawa in the final matchup.

Kavita Kingsley calls him between games two and three of the final series.

“Ilya! Congratulations, it’s been a good run.”

“Thank you, Kavita,” Ilya sings.

“Listen, usually we’d be reaching out to Scott to book whoever comes out at the cup, but I thought maybe I’d start with you because...” She trails off expectantly.

“Because...?” Ilya teases her like he doesn’t know what she wants.

“Well obviously, we’d like to book whoever is on Houston, because they’re definitely going to win.” She hits back and then gets more serious. “But Ilya. You kind of owe me. We’ve been talking about this for years.”

Owe her? For what? For sitting on information that could have gotten Crowell out of his job years earlier? He knows it’s irrational to blame her exclusively, but as always, Kavita is the stand-in for all the press in his mind.

Still, she has been quiet about what she knows, and has never really exposed any crucial information... “Fine. What do you want?”

“Let me do an interview, hit post if you win. Maybe even if you don’t.”

“An interview to say what? I need just two sentences: I am bisexual. Thanks.”

“That’s all you’ll be saying? You have a title, you have a marriage. You have an underground journalism avenue. None of that is coming out with you?”

“No.” Ilya is disappointed. But he can’t say one of those things without saying all of them, and even coming out is risky.

“Is this because of the trip? Can I ask if that was on purpose?”

“No.”

“No I can’t ask? Or no it wasn’t on purpose?”

“Both.” Ilya sighs, and gets her off this subject. “Fine. You can have the interview. Over email, please.”

It’s actually pretty ideal. Ilya might not be asked to give a number. It feels weird to give an interview that might not ever be released. Still, they exchange emails for days to come up with a good interview on the chance Ottawa takes the cup.

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Interview

Thank you for letting us tell your story, Ilya.

(I'll ask you some softball questions, you don't have to answer anything you don't want to, but please give me something.)

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

No problem. You have been good for Scott Hunter's cause, which is special to me.

(You gave me no choice, what kind of greeting is this?)

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

Why is this night in particular so special for you?

(If you can give me literally anything that says you might be involved in the organization, I will be so grateful)

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(You owe me)

I have been waiting for my turn since 2017. It has been fun to watch my friends come out and celebrate. This one will be the best celebration, though.

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

Humble. Why?

(You didn't actually come out yet, remember?)

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(Right.)

It is special to me because I am bisexual. So this is all very personal for me.

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

So you joined this movement at the beginning?

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

Yes, it was nice to watch it grow.
(I hate this question. Why are you making me answer this question?)

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

And what can you tell us about the infamous Ringleader?
(Trust me, it will be weird if something like this isn't included)

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(Fuck yourself, Kavita)
He is a great hockey player.

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(That's it? You have to sell this at least a little bit, Ilya)

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(What do I say? He is unqualified to do this job and people trust him too much. He blackmailed countless people, he failed to make the actual players in the league less bigoted, and he actually made it less likely for my relationship to be made public. Plus, I think he is having sex with my husband.)

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(You cannot say any of that.)

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(Fine. What about)
He has not committed any crimes and his means are morally correct.

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(Ok. I'm not putting that. We're going to skip the ringleader question for now. This one would also be weird not to ask.)

You're on the leaked Crowell audio a lot, how did that audio happen? Were you instructed to record?

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

Yes, and I am able to follow directions, unlike other people.

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(Weird beef. I guess I'm skipping that one too)

How has this community changed hockey for you?

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

It has made it more fun, I think. I have made some unexpected friends.

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

Like Shane Hollander? Did you meet through this community?

(Sorry)

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(This is annoying, it could have been about Scott Hunter or the kids.)

No, obviously we knew each other before. But we were able to set aside the rivalry at these gatherings, and we learned we had a shared interest in philanthropy.

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(You really don't want to give me anything else about that?)

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

But I cannot ignore the rivalry entirely. I should not let him get away with being the only one to announce he is married on cup night.

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(fucking THANK YOU ILYA)

Married?

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

Yes, I have a spouse.

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

Why has that been a secret?

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaur.com

Subject: Re: Interview

He is not a woman, so telling the world about him would mean coming out. And I was waiting for a cup for that.

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(really weird way to put that, but ok.)

What can you tell us about him now?

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaur.com

Subject: Re: Interview

Not much. He is a very private person. Not very into hockey.

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(I'm scratching that last part. I don't think I can knowingly publish a lie, I'm sorry.)

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaur.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(Fine. Maybe:) He is not very good at hockey (?)

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(Stop that. This is not the place to be ragebaiting your husband. Just say he's nice and attractive, that's all you need to say.)

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaur.com

Subject: Re: Interview

He is nice. And attractive. *(Stay away from my husband Kavita)*

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(Could not be less interested. But I am going to include your aside, because it's cute.)

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

(Ok.)

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

Ok I'm done, that should be good. Thanks for doing that, I know it's a weird situation. Did you want to add anything else before I start making these into workable answers and writing up the adjoining story?

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

Can I say Fuck Roger Crowell?

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

Like, just to me? Or in the interview? I mean, if you really want to.

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

Both? Fuck Roger Crowell.

From: KavitaKingsley@RSM.com

Subject: Re: Interview

I should also point out that it's in your email signature. Has been since last month.

From: Rozanov@OttawaCentaurs.com

Subject: Re: Interview

Ah right. Well, still.

It's game seven against Houston in the Cup finals. And with one goal more than his opponents and only one minute left, Ilya is coming out tonight. At the start of the game, he had no idea what he would do if they lost. Maybe he still would have come out, just because #16 has always been a little bit of a dick to him and it would be nice to steal his thunder. Then again, #16 has been gunning for Ilya to come out for a while. He thinks it's not fair, or something, that Ilya gets to stay in the closet and force everyone else out. He's not wrong. So Ilya has to come out.

He's glad it's #16, though, because he's starting to think other guys might have thrown the cup just to give him the chance to come out. Actually, would #16 do that, too...? This series

was pretty easy, despite having to push a seventh game.

As the clock shows thirty seconds remaining, Ilya distantly thinks how he will *never* be able to come out as Ringleader after the luck they've had in these playoffs. Ottawa was good this season, but this is some sort of underdog story for the ages. That luck includes the trip that also extended the time until he is known as Shane's husband indefinitely. But he can come out for himself. That's still one thing he has autonomy over.

In fifteen seconds, Kavita Kingsley will post the interview. Then, Ilya will post a statement. He doesn't have any family coming onto the ice, just like he didn't in 2014, but Hayes told him not to worry about it. Harris is probably bringing out a flag or something.

Shane is ready for the second Ilya can get away from the press. Hopefully right now he's paying some arena staff member to stand guard outside a supply closet somewhere. A bunch of guys have flown in from everywhere to celebrate. Right now there are caterers with NDAs diligently setting up an afterparty. Basically, it would be really awkward if Houston won tonight.

Ilya lets himself worry about that for another five seconds before getting lost in a pile of overzealous Centaurs as the buzzer rings.

Chapter End Notes

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ILYA ROZANOV RASHYCOCK ILYA ROZANOV 🎉

For your lists:

#16 is on Houston, has always been a little bit of a dick to Ilya.

#38 is on Columbus

Coming up: The box suite during this game, the afterparty, and a final chapter count (42, I think). Edit: and, because you might be mad at me right now, a happy ending!!!

Chapter 39: Box Suite 2: The Box Sweetening

Chapter Summary

Cup Night 2021

Chapter Notes

Ok I know I fucked you up last chapter but I think that's the last time! It's ok, nothing but joy from here on out! (except the first part of this chapter) (and then maybe like one other thing later) (really, it's fine though!)

This is another cup winner I had to make up but I don't think anyone is complaining about it! Speaking of which...

There is something VERY dumb in here taking up a lot of words that matters to me and only me (and maybe Shane). No one else had this concern until I brought it up, so I could have left it alone, because we have more important things to be worried about. But! I wanted it and it's been sitting in my draft waiting for months for the right moment. You might want to pull up the index cards from the end of [Chapter 3](#) in another tab, but that's not necessary.

And we have a chapter count!

CW: celebratory alcohol overconsumption

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

"Thanks for tuning in and joining us on hockey's biggest night, Ottawa vs. Houston for the seventh and final time in this series."

"Big night for the Centaurs, Jim. This could be the first cup in franchise history."

"You're right about that, it's the first time they even saw the playoffs in decades."

"You gotta thank Ilya Rozanov for that."

"I think you have to thank homosexuality for that." Both men laugh. "But seriously, after the season the Centaurs have had, I'm not sure anyone is rooting for Houston tonight. These guys survived a near-death experience, two of their players were outed by commissioner audio, some rumors about their coaching staff along the same lines... hell, even the so-called Ringleader is rumored to be on the team. I think it's happening for Ottawa tonight."

“You know what’s not happening tonight? ...that cup tradition. It had a good four years, but this is it.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Three Centaurs are already out of the closet. You have to think Troy Barrett and Luca Haas were the ones slated to come out if there was a cup win. How many could possibly be left?”
They both laugh again.

“There was some funny speculation and online memes earlier this week about pulling someone from the farm team just for the occasion, but now that we have the final roster for the game, I think we can rule that possibility out. Maybe the coaching staff rumors are true and we’ll see a coach come out, or maybe one of the straight teammates ‘come out’ as the Ringleader.”

“You want to make any guesses for Houston?”

“Not a chance. Can we talk about actual hockey? Who do you have winning the first face-off between Rozanov and Kakogiannis?”

Shane knows why he can’t go down to the ice when the game ends in twenty minutes. It still sucks. His eyes haven’t been dry all day, and he’s stopped trying to hide that. He’s been vacillating between excited for his husband’s potential cup win and the dread of watching him celebrate, even for ten minutes, without Shane on his arm. He still wants Ilya to win, obviously. And it’s been a nail-biter, even though Ottawa is ahead right now.

He tries to control it, but he has the face of a worried husband, and occasionally the cameras cut to their box and catch it. Viewers at home probably wonder why Shane’s nameless, faceless, spouse isn’t there in the box with him, offering him another ginger ale while he watches his best friend on the ice like his life depends on this game. He wonders if there will be affair rumors when Ilya comes out tonight. He almost wishes there would be, then they might have to go public regardless. Anything to quell the guilt Shane has felt since he learned what messing up in a game against his husband actually means.

He is wearing an Irina jersey with nothing on the back. Even a zero would indicate the Ringleader is playing in this matchup, and he doesn’t want to wreck things even further for Ilya. Wearing his own #6 tonight feels a little tacky, and he wouldn’t be caught dead in another Centaur like #29 or #45 or #46. Ilya would murder whoever’s jersey got precedence over his. No, a plain Irina Foundation jersey just looks like he’s supporting his friend and cofounder.

Ilya is electric on the ice, as always, and Shane can’t take his eyes off him. This— actually playing the game they’re paid to play— has been a tertiary priority for Ilya recently. For years, really. And Shane suspects coming out tonight and getting his moment is the last goal on Ilya’s list before he retires. They haven’t talked about it, except in vague conversations where they both echo *“I’ll support whatever you want to do in the future”* back and forth at

each other until their jaws hurt and their mouths are dry and the words don't sound like English anymore. But Shane needs Ilya to hold on. He wants the joy of playing on the same team as his husband, even just for a minute. It might be selfish. But he can't help the buzzing excitement he gets when he thinks about potentially wearing the same jersey.

The overstuffed box suite is fancy, and Shane is pretty sure Crowell is right next door, ready to kill everyone in this room. He's surprised they allowed the former commissioner into the building. The rumors say he wouldn't relinquish the tickets to tonight's game, and Astor Yates gave him the opportunity to join him as a guest in the suite. Crowell's definitely not used to being there without Bianca, though, and Shane knows she's not with him. She's here, in this box somewhere, with her wife, talking to Rose and Svetlana last time Shane checked. If this were any other occasion, he'd be trying to play good host, making sure everyone's enjoying themselves and being introduced properly, ensuring the Pike twins aren't harassing Bianca's wife. Apparently they're fans of MMA right now.

But this isn't an ordinary party for Shane. His mom is taking on hosting duties for the Irina Foundation. Shane wouldn't be able to interact with people if he tried, he's so nervous. He's only been torn away from the game once, when Astor Yates himself came into the box to mingle for a moment. Ilya's gay ducklings were hesitant to let Yates in, thinking it might out them, but the invitees to the box are a solid mix of queer and straight. Ilya knows what he's doing with the guest list. And between his parents and Scott Hunter, Shane's had someone acting as a buffer for him all night so he doesn't have to interact with anyone for very long. He'll be more sociable at the afterparty.

If Ilya wins and comes out tonight, it's poised to be the biggest celebration in the history of the sport. Even if people don't know he's the Ringleader, it's still a big deal, because it's *Ilya Rozanov*. His husband is the most beloved figure in hockey. Sure, Shane rivals him in actual talent, but he never had Ilya's personality and magneticism. Even the people who hate Ilya Rozanov *love* to hate him. The world doesn't know what's about to hit it.

There are about a hundred people tailgating or waiting in random sports bars until they can go down and party at Ilya's house, the designated safe space for the evening. Typically, the after-cup celebrations would include bar hopping, and sure, some of the team will do that. But the gays and the allies— so, most of the Centaurs— will head to Ilya's so his other, unofficial team can join, even if they're not out publicly.

It's a stark difference to Montreal, where Shane's afterparty included just four teammates. It confirms he's making the right decision in making the Centaurs his future team. He hasn't signed anything. He wouldn't, without talking to Ilya. But the offer is there and he's going to take it. Even if Ilya is leaving the sport tonight.

Surely Ilya would have told him if he were leaving the sport tonight.

It's getting to be time. Shane swallows, prepared to be consoled by whoever is going down to celebrate with Ilya on the ice. Everyone told him not to worry about it, Ilya won't be alone.

Shane can't imagine who would be there. His parents certainly can't. Shane wishes he could put on a mask or something, maybe a bag over his head.

Of all people, it's Scott Hunter who pats Shane on the shoulder, and Shane closes his eyes and breathes before he has to look up at his stupid pitying face. He braces himself and then does.

Scott looks oddly neutral, almost happy, even, and says, "Come on."

...*Come on?* As if Shane can just *go*? This is cruel for Scott to say. Shane scoffs with hurt. "We talked about this. I can't go down there."

"*You* morons talked about this, like a month ago. *We* made it so you can go down there. Now let's go. You're welcome." Scott's strong hand directs Shane out into the hallway where he finally releases him. Shane's traitorous feet don't get the message that they're not allowed to be going wherever this is.

"What are we doing, Hunter? I want to be able to see the game." Shane voices the immediate anxiety of losing sight of the ice.

"I think we'll be able to see the last few minutes down there. Actually? I'm not sure. I've never done this either."

And the other anxiety, "He doesn't want me there."

Scott literally stops walking to roll his eyes dramatically enough. "Ok," he says sarcastically and proceeds.

That's fair. That one didn't really have a leg to stand on. Maybe he didn't phrase it right. "How would I even see him?"

"We had something of an idea. A few weeks ago, actually. It was Melnyk and Rivera."

"Hi," Rivera's voice is breathy from trying to catch up with them but now the two kids are striding behind Shane and Scott. They get to an empty elevator just in time for all four of them to get on.

"If it's just a bunch of gay guys kind of... welcoming him into the fold? It's not so suspicious." Scott explains. "They're allowed four guests, so we got the three most famous, current, out players, plus Melnyk, and people will just think it's like, chosen family or something."

"Most famous ones who aren't on the Centaurs," Rivera corrects, like it matters, "You could make the argument for Barrett—"

Scott interrupts him. "Barrett would not be invited regardless." He continues, "So we'll just all go out there. As his *friends*." There's a heavy emphasis on that last word.

"You just can't tongue-fuck each other when you get on the ice. Unlike *some people*," Melnyk adds with a pointed look at Scott.

“I’m sorry, *me?* Are you *kidding?* You two made BuzzFeed’s Top Ten Most Lewd Public Kisses of the Decade.”

“Hell yeah, we did.” Melnyk raises a high-five to Rivera, who rolls his eyes and ignores him. The banter washes over Shane’s ears. Is he really about to go out onto the ice to celebrate with Ilya? It sounds like Ilya didn’t approve this plan. Is he going to be ok with this?

The elevator opens to a hallway full of Centaurs family and friends. There are exceptions to the four-guest rule if you have 900 children or something. So it’s a pretty big crowd, and they cheer when they see who is walking up.

Shane still isn’t fully grasping any of this. He was prepared to just sit and mope and watch from the box. The change in plans is stressful and he refuses to let himself feel hopeful about it.

He’s never really thought about what happens in this corral. His parents were always too distracted on the night of the cups to tell him. But a large television on each wall of the wide hallway plays a live stream of the game. Ottawa is still up by one with three minutes left.

Since Shane learned some more of what the role of Ringleader actually entails, he’s been taking an interest in his husband’s hobby. He asks Scott, “What’s the statement like? Are you posting it for him?”

“Weird.” Scott answers truthfully. The statement is weird? “I guess maybe it’s just weird that it’s happening. Kavita is posting the interview, so he really didn’t need to do a statement at all. I still don’t really think he should... that was the whole point of the interview.” Shane can’t wait. He puts his hand out to indicate Scott should give him Ilya’s phone. Ilya wanted his statement to be a surprise, but it’s going to be a surprise now, or in thirty seconds when there will be too many distractions to read it. Scott hands over the phone with nothing more than a stern facial expression from Shane.

Huh. It *is* weird. And Shane blushes. Yuna Hollander approved this? But as predicted, he doesn’t get much time to look at it before the buzzer sounds and the crowd around him screams. The joy is infectious and even Shane has to smile— his husband just *won*. Scott takes the phone back to press Post.

Lisa Hayes is flinging a bisexual pride flag into Shane’s arms and a standard rainbow one into Scott’s. She yells over the noise, “We didn’t know which one he’d want, so just let him choose out there!” If Shane knows his husband, he’ll probably take both.

It’s a few awkward minutes, during which they watch some of the celebration happening on the ice through the TV screens, before they are pushed forward down the hall. They were some of the last to arrive, so most of the families are on the ice by the time they get to the entrance.

Shane spots him right away. There’s Ilya, by himself smiling and laughing with Boodram and Troy. Boodram has his wife and small baby, Troy has his arm around Harris, with two people Shane can only assume are his mom and maybe dad.

The reason to bring Melnyk onto the ice is quickly evident. He is muttering an endless stream in Shane's ear, "don't run over there. You can't look like you want to fuck him. Stop with the heart eyes, you need at least one heart in your body. Are you literally drooling? Get a hold of yourself, Hollander. You can hug him for 2 seconds. I'm counting. No tongue."

Scott catches the end of that one. "You don't have to remind people to hug without tongue."

Melnyk raises an eyebrow, "You've never been more wrong in your life."

Shane agrees with Melnyk but stops listening when Ilya finally sees them coming. His face crumples into the most adorable sobbing smile and he meets them halfway to hug Shane within an inch of his life. It makes Shane glad for the reminder to hug without tongue. Melnyk and Rivera have grounding hands on both of them, and Scott pushes in for the next hug quickly, matching the intensity and length of Shane's hug.

It's choreographed, Shane suddenly realizes. How long have they been planning this? It doesn't look like Ilya knows, either. He takes both flags that are offered to him and smiles at Shane again after Rivera and Melnyk have hugged him in the exact same way, too. Now he's *really* glad he didn't hug with tongue.

Television cameras are pushed into their faces, and Shane tries to wrangle his take-me-right-here facial expression into more of a happy-for-my-friend-and-coworker one. He's infinitely grateful for their friends at that moment, because if it were just him, the camera would already have caught graceless acts Shane wouldn't want witnessed even if they *were* out. But there's constantly a hand on his back or arm, as if someone might need to remind him where he is or even hold him back. They're not wrong.

Shane hugs Troy and Luca and Fredericks, then the rest of the Centaurs. He's excited for this to be his team. He's excited to do exactly this next year but with his tongue down Ilya's throat, wearing a Centaur's uniform.

The afterparty at Ilya's house is debauched. Ilya doesn't think he's taken his hands and/or mouth off Shane once, and that includes during conversations with other people. There are caterers with very robust NDAs providing everyone with unlimited food and drink, and everyone, including Ilya, is taking grotesque advantage of the *unlimited drink* half of that deal. He probably shouldn't let himself get this polluted in front of people, with all the information he knows. At least he had the foresight to lock the door to his Bisexual Batcave this morning before about a hundred people started descending on the house.

He also locked their bedroom but kept the guest rooms open, hoping anyone who needs it would opt for privacy. No such luck. Zane and Cassie Boodram dropped the baby off on the way here and are maybe trying to make another one on Ilya's outdoor furniture. Troy and Harris keep disappearing. Ilya's not sure Wyatt and Lisa Hayes made it here. He doesn't even like the way Cooper Lee and #4 keep glancing at each other as if they're being sneaky about it. He lost track of Luca a long time ago, but doesn't even really know who could be missing with him, because there are just so many people.

Too many, really. Ilya doesn't know what the big deal is. These people aren't here for the Centaurs, and he's just another guy who came out. But people flew in from all over the place to celebrate. Even #16 is here, and he just lost the cup. And he hates Ilya.

Ilya stumbles through his house, half-leaning on Shane like they're in a three-legged race. Scott Hunter is holding court in the sitting room with six guys from the queer legion when Shane and Ilya enter.

"...So he had to have made the bet in the Fall of 2017, in December, in between when Rozanov got Young and Henderson," Scott is explaining, even though his words are a little slurred. Ilya's not inebriated enough for this to go over his head, and this subject is firmly off-limits for him. He tries to leave the room and act like they were just passing through, but Shane plants himself to stand in between the two sofas. Ilya's stomach sinks. He clenches the hand around Shane's waist. He's going to have to leave Shane's proximity for the first time tonight, because he can't be here for this conversation.

"Ok, well he's here now, just ask him!" All eyes turn to Ilya and Shane.

"I am not here," Ilya turns to leave.

"Ask who what?" Shane asks. His arm around Ilya's hip grips him tighter to keep him in place. Normally he wouldn't complain about that but right now, he knows what's coming, and it's not good.

"Who's number 24?" #18 asks from his spot on the arm of the couch. Ilya grimaces involuntarily.

The group, in all of its attention-deficit glory, plunges into a cacophony.

"Not like you, Shane. Like in the army."

"Oof. Now that I think about that, can you imagine being number 24?"

"Shane doesn't mind, he's not like a jealous dude."

But Shane certainly *looks* like a jealous dude right now. "...I guess I never thought about there being a number 24."

Ilya looks at Shane and tries his best telepathy to say '*don't make me do this*'. But he's always worse at telepathy after alcohol.

"Who is it?" #16 asks.

"He..." Ilya sighs. "He is retired. Not in this league. And he died." The words blurt out like the vomit that's also threatening to expel.

Silence falls on the room, or as much silence as possible when there are 90 other people on the property. "Those are three different things, Rozanov."

"Yes. All three."

Scott starts to look suspicious. "...Can you tell us his name?"

Shane finally recognizes Ilya's discomfort, so he addresses the group, and Scott, who should know better. "Ilya doesn't like to out people, he's only ever told me like... one. And I don't even think that guy counts." He glances out the window to where Troy and Harris are laughing on the deck.

"Is this number 24 guy *that* closeted?" Someone asks, but Ilya doesn't see who. He's turned fully to face his husband.

"Shane. My love." Ilya cups Shane's face in his hands. "*Please* do not make me do this."

Shane must see some sort of panic on Ilya's face. "Ok! Ok. Hey." He takes Ilya's hand and directs him to take a step away from the group, as if the distance makes them less audible or gives them any privacy at all. If anything, it turns the conversation into a performance, like they're on a stage.

"I cheated, Shane," Ilya sobs as quietly as he can. Shane drops his hand like it offended him.

"What?"

"You are going to be so mad at me. Everyone is going to hate me," Ilya whines. Maybe he's overreacting in his intoxicated state, but Ilya feels like nothing worse has ever happened in his life. Shane has a stern, angry kitten expression that looks like he's expecting Ilya to explain. So Ilya starts explaining. "When Henderson turned me down I was so relieved I thought—"

Shane balks. "Henderson?? ...turned you down."

"Wasn't he like fifteen years old when you met him?" #3 asks from the sofa, breaking any illusion that this might have been a private conversation.

"No," Henderson answers for himself. He had entered the room while Ilya's head was turned. Ilya looks over and realizes that's not the only newcomer. The performance is now for about a dozen guys. Henderson continues, "I was 20, my rookie season. Rozanov came up to me in a bar and came out swinging, asking about Scott Hunter and homosexuality. Straight up asked me if I was queer."

"Smooth, Rozanov."

"He asked me if I have any gay friends."

"I thought he was going to hit on me."

"I thought he was going to *kill* me."

"I was convinced that was it, the tabloids were getting me the next day. I came out to my mom that night."

"It took me fifteen full minutes to figure out what he was trying to say to me."

"Anyway." Henderson brushes off the peanut gallery, "I had no idea I even was! So I said I wasn't. Then I went home and told my roommate what happened," he looks at his roommate-turned-fiance who is sitting next to Rivera on one of the couches. "And I guess I figured it out from there. Got in touch with Roz like a week later."

“That’s very cute, but how does that mean Rozanov cheated on Shane with you?” What? How did this conversation get so far away from Ilya? In his own house, on his own cup night. This is his worst nightmare.

“No! I did not cheat *on Shane!* I...” Ilya trails off. There’s a possibility he can salvage some of his secrets tonight, but the chances of that are dwindling quickly.

“Wait,” Scott narrows his eyes, “Then in what way did you cheat?” Ilya gulps. This whole conversation has made him feel sober, and now he feels like he’s being chastised by his father for drinking too much. Or lying. Or making his father lie to millions of people. He finds an interesting spot on the floor and stares. “Rozanov, do we have to have a private conversation? Is this something I should know about?” Scott sounds confused, like he doesn’t know if he should be angry or not. “I hate when you do this. It’s *my* face on this thing.”

“Henderson would have been 24,” Ilya explains quietly. “And it was making me sick.” Leave it to this stupid group to make him go through this tonight of all nights.

“Gee, thanks.” Henderson rolls his eyes.

“But he said no and I was so relieved. I realized I could not have a 24.” Ilya braces himself. This is what turns his guys against him. It was only a matter of time. Luckily none of them can out him now that he’s out. They’ll just tell the press about his marriage and then Ilya will have to quit hockey to save Shane’s legacy. Ilya can do that. He can be a full-time house husband for Shane. He breathes and starts his confession. “I lied, I made Hunter lie to everyone in the world.”

“You *what??*” Scott has decided he can be angry.

Ilya powers through. “The 28 close friends. It included someone who...” Ilya wouldn’t be able to explain this correctly, even sober, even in Russian. Even with a mindreader. “24 does not exist.”

“So you made someone up?” Scott is back to confused.

Haas sees it another way. “You *created* a gay??”

Ilya shakes his head, “No, he is bi.”

“Who is?”

“Is this a real person or not?”

“Or did you actually make a backstory for him?”

“Is he single? I could finally tell my mom I’m dating again.”

Shane has a different takeaway and mutters, “You lied to everyone?” It’s so quiet, if it weren’t spoken almost directly into Ilya’s ear, he might not have heard it. The guilt settles deep in Ilya’s gut. He has to look in his husband’s eyes and tell him he’s a liar. He turns to do just that to find an unexpected expression on Shane’s face, “...for me?”

He smiles back weakly, “Could you imagine me writing the number 24 next to some other name?”

“Ilya.” Shane says seriously, “Go get his card. I want to see it.” Because he already knows his husband would have made a card for a fictional player.

Ilya tries not to catastrophize as he gets the card from his lair. He re-locks the door, heads back to the group, which grew even more and is now about fifteen people, all numbered members of his group and some of their partners. He hands the card to Shane. The room is silent and tense as they wait for a reaction. Shane quirks his lips up and tries not to smile. “He’s single.” Shane says, glancing at #7, who asked.

“...and??”

“Rozanov literally made a card for a dead guy?”

“He’s not dead, he’s retired.”

Shane is still smiling as he passes the card off onto the couch holding Hunter, #7, and #10. The rest of the guys quickly gather around.

“*Wainwright Strainer?*” Hunter holds the card and reads the first line incredulously. “What kind of name is that?”

Ilya winces in embarrassment. Best to just get it over with. “Wayne Colander.”

“*No!*” someone roars and the room erupts in hysterics. “Shane Hollander’s bizarro twin, Wayne Colander??”

Scott raises his voice to get the attention back on himself. “*Wainwright Strainer,*” he reads again from the card, “*Team: the Blue Jays*”?? Like, the baseball team?”

“Go Jays Go!” David Hollander yells from the next room.

“...Is David Hollander’s team,” Ilya says bashfully.

“So he doesn’t even count, he doesn’t play hockey.”

“I told you this,” Ilya reminds them. “Not in this league.”

“Right. Guys, it’s not that hard.” #15 stifles a laugh at each new word that leaves his own mouth, “Obviously, he plays hockey for the... Toronto Blue Jays...”

“Hope he’s not a goalie with the last name Strainer.”

“Colanders would make good goalies, the whole point is they block the pasta and only let the water pass.”

“Goalies aren’t supposed to let *anything* pass.”

Scott is ignoring most of this to rattle off more of the card. “*Orientation: bisexual. Relationship status: Single. Certainty—*’ Certainty? Why is that even a line on here?’”

Ilya shrugs, too embarrassed and maybe not sober enough to explain his methods. He doesn't need to explain that writing down the percentage of certainty gave him courage to approach people he was on the fence about. It acted like a test of whether he was procrastinating because he was scared to do it or if he really wasn't sure. He got over the nerves pretty early, but never broke the habit of writing down a percentage. "Want to be sure."

"Ok. But why is Wayne's 18%?"

"I was not sure of him," Ilya starts to smile a little. He really did have fun making the card.

"It's 81 backwards." Shane says quickly. Some people make noises of appreciation.

"*Evidence: Talks about it constantly.* '...Hang on, do you have one of these for all of us? With the evidence and stuff?'" Ilya tilts his head a little in affirmation.

"That's a little fucked up, right?" Barrett points out.

"Yes," Ilya agrees.

"Ok, it looks like you approached Mr. Strainer but— oh, sorry guys," Scott tsks and puts on a dramatic frown, "It'll suck when the Blue Jays win a cup. He turned us down, for the bet and for any additional activities."

"Hey!" Barrett protests, "You said it doesn't count unless we made the cup bet! This guy shouldn't have counted toward the total!"

"*That's* why he shouldn't have counted??"

Scott continues onto what Ilya recognizes as the last line. "'Notes: terrible player. Loves loud noises. Hates sex.'"

"So you created a gay..." Scott concludes.

"...A bisexual..." Ilya mumbles.

"Right. You created someone who is the exact opposite of your husband in almost every way?"

"Maybe he didn't want to be tempted."

"Shane would have gotten jealous of Strainer."

"Ok, is anyone more concerned with the fact that Rozanov has a card like this for everyone else in the league?"

"No! I'm still hung up on the fact that I lied to millions of people." Scott shakes his head. He doesn't actually seem that mad about it, though. He's giggling with everyone else.

"Oh my god, how will the public ever forgive Captain America?"

"Fuck off."

“Hang on.” Shane interrupts the bickering. “Why aren’t you using 24 as your number then?” It looks like he really, really likes the idea of Ilya taking that number. Ilya has considered it, but it’s probably not a good idea.

“I mean,” Scott confirms Ilya’s suspicion, “That would definitely invite some kind of association between you two.”

Luckily before the mood can be ruined again, Boodram comes in to announce they’re setting up beer pong. Wainwright Strainer plays every single round.

@IlyaRozanov

[photo: Centaurs all cheering on a bus, looking like they’re celebrating a win]

I love Ottawa!! Very excellent series, Houston. Apparently not even hockey’s own loudest linemate and nicest dick escapes #RASHYCOCK.

Thanks to my team for the cup, my other team for the Schumem Award (Scott Hunter’s Award for the Newly Emancipated), and my husband for everything else. Proud to be the #ASSHOLE of the group. 🏳️‍🌈 #pulpgulper #fuckrogercrowell

@FanGirl81 inquiring minds!!! What’s your number????

@IlyaRozanov I don’t give my number out

@FanGirl81 NO not like that, your number in the group! I want to buy an Irina jersey for you!

@IlyaRozanov It is embarrassing. Buy Baldwin’s instead.

@FanGirl81 The number is embarrassing but writing RASHYCOCK in a coming out post isn’t???

@IrinaFoundation

Congratulations to our co-founder Ilya Rozanov and the entire Ottawa Centaurs family! We cannot sell Ilya’s group number but encourage you to browse through our other options.

r/MLHCorruption

u/MrSirHimself 3 min. ago

Rozanov's number theory?

Sooo crazy theory (what are we here for?) but I think Rozanov's TGS number is #24 because a) he said he's embarrassed about it (it's Shane Hollander's number) and b) the Irina Foundation can't legally sell a #24 jersey because it might imply Shane Hollander.

↑ 102 ↓  12

u/ChiefErectutiveOfficer

Or it's zero, because he's Ringleader. RingIlyeader. Rizleanov.

u/dscvrroe45780

How do these names keep getting worse???

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r

Maybe he was super late? That's why he's embarrassed?

u/intelonwatergate

What if he doesn't have a number? Rozanov isn't like the best team player. Barrett says he was the only one not to make the cup deal, but Rozanov probably also wasn't super involved.

u/99OrganizedOrgans

I agree. Ringanov truthers are dumb, he's not an organized person.

u/Faint4Taint

Maybe Irina Foundation is abandoning their knock-off jerseys now that Crowell is gone.

u/sir1589shelf

Days like today I miss the Crowell plants. Wonder what they'd be saying right now.

u/ScratchYourAss4me

Honestly they'd probably have a fun reason why the top scorers in the league are gay and bi. Something about the power of Carly Rae Jepsen or poppers. Maybe how drinking sperm gives you hockey powers? #pulpgulpers

u/penisthedong 15 min. ago

This is stupid sus

You're telling me both Shane Hollander AND Ilya Rozanov had a whole secret husband they kept under wraps until they won a cup?

↑ 13 ↓ 9

u/MrSirHimself

Right, I don't think either of them are actually married.

u/intelonwatergate

Damn imagine this rivalry out at a gay club if they both had their eye on the same guy.

u/sir1589shelf

I feel bad for these poor husbands! "Sorry honey, can't wear a ring until I win a cup"??
Both these guys are such assholes.

u/Champ-ion-agne

You should feel bad for the husbands because Rozanov and Hollander are 100% fucking each other. I know that's been a dumb RPF theory for years, but holy shit if Roz is queer this is a game changer. Tumblrinas probably losing their shit tonight.

RASHYCOCK + DICK COMA + PENIS + Roz group chat

Oldest Man Alive: Didn't have to add anyone!

Oldest Man Alive: Ah hang on a second.

Oldest Man Alive has changed the name of the group

RASHYCOCK + DICK COMA + PENIS group chat

Barrett: It's beautiful 😊

Barrett: we don't have to look at his name anymore

Lundin: ASSHOLE?

Ilya: Yes?

Lundin: but like... what is it?

Melnyk: Do you really not know what an asshole is?

Ilya: Authentic Spouse of Shane Hollander, Our Leader's Escort

Fredericks: Well that's fucking adorable.

Baldwin: Is it?

Henderson: Are we all calling it the SHANE award from now on or is that something only Rozanov can do?

Henderson: Was that on purpose?

Oldest Man Alive: You're not THAT new here. You know it was on purpose.

Bennett: CUMSLUT was definitely on purpose.

Melnyk: omg get over it!

Bennett: Sorry we didn't all want to put SMEGMA!

Bennett: also can't believe we're actually using RASHYCOCK out loud.

Haas: I think Mrs. Hollander and Harris have been vetting Ilya's official posts recently, so they probably ok'd it.

Jane: don't like being reminded that my mom had to read the words "hockey's nicest dick" and "pulp gulper" thanks.

Barrett: You just don't like that you don't have hockey's nicest dick according to your own husband

Ilya: never said I had hockey's nicest dick

Ilya: Shane has hockey's nicest dick

Lundin: and you've tried enough to know?

Oldest Man Alive: Can I change the subject to announce I now know all of the numbers?

Jane: Kip says you're still lying.

Chapter End Notes

Eeeeeee!

There is a name we've seen before we can now connect to Houston 🧐🧐

#24: Wainwright Strainer, plays hockey for the Toronto Blue Jays

Coming up: MLH Awards! State! of! the! Gay! Union!

Edit: To clarify what I meant about beer pong, I think Wainwright Strainer is an inside joke the rest of the night (/forever if you ask). If a beer pong team is losing they say they need to "call in the Colander" to pinch hit for them.

Whenever anyone is trying to tell a story, someone interrupts to say "Was Strainer there?"

What did he say about all this?"

When someone spills a drink everyone simultaneously blames Wainwright. Etc.

"Classic Strainer!" is a phrase that gets tossed around a lot.

Chapter 40: State of the Gay Union, 2021

Chapter Summary

Leading up to and including the MLH Awards 2021

Chapter Notes

1. Third-to-last chapter!
2. I am emotional, thank you for asking.
3. News in the end note.

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

Ilya and Scott don't have to go through their annual standard mandatory media training because Ilya already knows what he can and cannot say. Right?

The morning after the cup, he's already in a Skype interview, hungover as hell. How did the rest of them do this?

He barely understands the interviewer— he might still be a little tipsy— and immediately regrets not practicing at least a little bit beforehand.

“Big night! You won the cup and came out, how do you feel?”

“Hungover.” Ilya answers honestly.

“I bet!” The interviewer laughs like that's a joke. “You were tied with Holmberg for FanDuel's 2021 Best Bet to Come Out— the odds had you both at 5 to 1— but no one predicted you'd also pull out a husband! How does he feel about all this?”

“Probably also hungover.” He knows Shane is not awake yet, and he might be mad at Ilya for letting him sleep through this. But he is, along with a lot of other people in Ilya's house right now, still dead to the world and going to wake up miserable in four or five hours.

This also gets a laugh. “You surprised a lot of people. We've always thought of you not only as straight, but not very monogamous. Were you playing up the philandering for the public?”

“No. I was actually a slut. Was very fun. Being married is more fun though.”

“How long have you been with your husband?”

Ilya swallows. This clip will likely be replayed whenever the identity of his husband is discovered. So he's careful. "Feels like forever. We have been married for two years." That will become public knowledge, eventually, anyway. Their whole story might not.

"Why didn't he come meet you on the ice last night?"

"Good question." Ilya smirks, "Maybe he does not love me as much as Scott Hunter and Shane Hollander do."

"Speaking of whom, you matched your rival by meeting his ante, also coming out with the cup and a husband one year ago. You two are friends now... are there double dates for the Irina Foundation co-founders?" They tell every interviewer to name-drop the foundation with a question about it, and Ilya doesn't think this counts.

"Ehh... no. Neither of us could be seen out with our partners. A double date would be hard."

"But you've met him? What can you tell us about Husbander?" A Husbander question before a Ringleader question, weird. Is that really the public's priority?

"He is a catch, very attractive man. And he loves Shane Hollander a lot. Probably too much. Hollander is not *that* good at hockey." Ilya flashes a cocky grin.

"Did you and Shane Hollander become friends through this queer hockey community?"

"No, you in the media have made sure we know each other well anyway. But the community has helped us."

"How?"

Ilya should have practiced. He tries to put himself in the shoes of his guys. Wait... he *is* one of his guys. "None of the guys are alone. We stand up for each other. They are all very fun. It's a little like a family... I can call on them for anything. And I do." That might be a step too far, so Ilya stops.

"And you said in your interview with RSM that you were approached early on. You didn't say anything about the Ringleader then or in your statement, so I'll ask now. You must know him, what can you tell us about him?"

"He is good at hockey." Ilya sticks to his original answer, but hears Kavita's (typed) words in his head: *you have to sell it a little bit*. "He is perceptive. He knows you like men, sometimes before even you do."

"Was that your experience?"

"No," Ilya laughs. This is bizarre. "I have always known."

"So he picks these guys based on what... vibes? Good gaydar?"

"He has a gift." Ilya doesn't want to inspect why he is ready to brag about some things and not others.

“Did you say yes to the bet right away?”

“The deal,” Ilya corrects. He always tells his guys not to call it a bet publicly. He wants the group to avoid the unnecessary association with sports betting, if possible. “I thought about it for like one second before shaking hands. We all thought Hunter would be enough, people would just start being ok about it once he was out, and that was the appeal. No one wants to be the first, and Hunter had the best shot at the cup.”

The interviewer looks a little surprised. That’s fair, that was way too much information. It implies Ilya joined up before Scott came out. He really should have practiced instead of playing the third round of beer pong. Wainwright Strainer did *not* do his share of their team’s drinking.

8-years-of-journalism-school asks “Then what?”

“It was not enough. Nothing shattered. We had to hit it over and over. It was annoying. Every time someone would come out, they would get sent away or hurt badly.”

“Do you get the sense things are better now?”

“Yes.” Ilya answers definitively and then sharply inhales. It’s true, but his answer still surprises him. Things *are* better, Ilya can’t deny it. And that was him. He did that. Is this how the guys feel when they sit in these interviews and praise Ilya until he has to mute the television? There are tangible results from what they’ve been doing the last five years, and they exist in that simple three-letter answer.

“So why did you wait for a cup? Why didn’t you just come out?”

“I had a duty to my group.” Ilya is offended. This guy has never heard of camaraderie? “Also, it is not... well-liked in Russia. My marriage protects me now, but if I came out I would maybe be in trouble. Players were losing their jobs, I could not afford this with my visa. The commissioner was putting pressure on teams to remove queer members.”

“Speaking of which, the transition period is officially over, and Crowell is completely gone. You put “eff Roger Crowell” in your statement. How did you feel when it was announced he was leaving?”

That’s hard because there was never one moment for Ilya. Mastur Bates told him to call around and get him nominated, then later that day he called to say there would be a transition team. Ilya never got to hear ‘*Crowell is leaving*’ for the first time, or any time. It still hasn’t set in. Why does Ilya feel like he is postponing... grief?

Because, as much as it pains him to admit it, Crowell was what made a lot of this fun and rewarding. If Ilya wants to rig a game or two now, he has to admit it’s for himself, not because there’s some injustice or the commissioner is counter-rigging. Mastur Bates was always annoyed by Crowell’s dishonest tactics, he won’t be doing the same thing. So really, there’s no one he’s fighting against. The league isn’t the same without your rival.

If he thinks about it hard enough, *this* is the first time he's really hearing that Crowell is leaving, or that he left, the transition is over and he's done. Ilya thought he'd be elated, he'd throw a parade, and then not leave his bed with Shane for days. But right now he doesn't feel like doing any of that. Well, except Shane. That's a constant.

It's anti-climactic, and he feels empty and dissatisfied. His therapist has tried to get him to pinpoint the 'why' behind his emotions, and he comes to this one quickly: No one knows it was *Ilya* who took Crowell down. He has to smile and answer this reporter as if he didn't work for five years to get to this point. The reporter can just assume that Ilya heard about the news, that he didn't cause it himself.

"It feels good. He had to go." This interview is live, but Ilya sends an asterisk in the chatbox. It's the emergency brake for the producer, who obviously gets the message to her host to stop asking questions.

"And it looks like *we* have to go..."

Once the Skype window is closed, his hangover still pounding his head, he makes an executive decision. He pulls up a contact on his phone and hits 'call'.

It rings so many times, he thinks maybe he'll get voicemail. Instead, he is finally greeted with the raspy, groggy voice of Cooper Lee. "Rozanov. It's 8am and we were all at your house until..." another voice mutters something in the background. "We are? Oh. We're still at your house."

"Ah. Good. Get Hunter up and meet me in the office." Ilya hangs up and texts Hunter the same. He made it clear that no one should be driving last night, and between sofas, guest beds, and the inflatable mattresses he paid the caterers to set up, there are probably 30 people asleep in this house. Hunter is probably one of them.

Sure enough, minutes later, with coffee and Advil in hand, the three convene in Ilya's office. Scott has said he knows most of the guys, but Ilya still warns, "do not look at names" as they enter.

Cooper and Scott's mouths hang ajar, taking in the room. Ilya will admit he goes overboard in his record-keeping. Shane had a similar expression when he saw the much smaller, less detailed Boston headquarters.

Scott finally finds some words as his eyes scan yet another wall of materials, "Are you... planning to murder every one of us?"

"Don't answer that." Lee says, maybe kidding, but also wide-eyed at the strategy whiteboard.

"Sit." Ilya points to two leather arm chairs. His offices are not designed to have guests, but he always has some chairs for decoration. The two men obey, but Ilya stays standing and paces. "How much trouble is the Ringleader in, legally?"

Lee sighs. "No one has talked about bringing any charges. At most, it's withholding evidence. But a case could be made that all *pertinent* evidence was actually handed over.

Then, most of the... whatever happened in 2018 was not solely you. Litterick would be the one to get in trouble for that, and I haven't even heard anyone going for him. The one loose end would be Yates and between you and me—"

"And me," Scott mumbles.

"—I actually got a chance to speak to him in the box last night and I sincerely doubt he'll do anything. He credits you with getting him where he is, and he's a little scared of you, to be honest. He thinks you could sink him, and I don't think it's just the... information you have about him. He thinks you have some power. He's worried you'll Crowell him if he crosses you."

"I would."

"Why— God it really is *so* early." Lee rubs his temples, "Why are you asking?"

"Is it terrible if I want people to know it is me?"

Scott groans but Lee sighs again and takes the question, "No. I think it's understandable, and I've been half-expecting you to start feeling like this. I think professionally I'll advise against it, just to be on the safe side. But I haven't heard anyone investigating the Ringleader's crimes or trying to find a suspect or anything..." Ilya hums in consideration, so Lee continues, "...But, I think there are more important things to consider."

"More important than the law? To Mr. Lawyer Man?"

Lee shares a glance with Scott that says they are on the same page. Ilya doesn't even know where they got the same *book*. Scott speaks for both of them, "If you want to be public about your marriage, I wouldn't brag about organizing all of the... things." Scott waves his hand in the air like the 'things' are minutia. "Everything will be found out eventually, but I know Shane, and I know you. I know what I would come forward with first."

"You think I can?" Ilya is surprised. Hunter has always been against the two of them coming out with anything.

Scott tilts his head. "Look— some of us might have talked about this last night during one of your frequent disappearances." Ilya would blush if he were anyone else. "The guys are saying, and they're right... too many people know. It's a matter of time before word gets out."

"And then it looks like you're hiding it for a reason." Lee explains.

"I *am* hiding it for a reason." Ilya whines, frustrated.

"Ok. There is no evidence that you have ever broken a rule in favor of your husband, and vice versa. You have a demonstrated track record of being public rivals, and your statistics—I looked at *hockey statistics* for this, Rozanov— speak to a mutual competition. Public opinion might differ, but legally you are clear."

"Shane likes public opinion."

“Maybe...” Scott hesitates. “Maybe *we* are not the best people to be talking about whether you and your husband will go public?”

“In my defense, I did not ask about this. I asked about Ringleader.”

“I have another thought about that, too.” Lee says, “Now that you’re out, the recording from the airport makes it sound like you’re probably Ringleader. But, Kavita and I were talking—”

“You talk to Kavita?” Scott sounds surprised. Ilya is not. He’s annoyed because it sounds like literally *everyone* has been talking about him behind his back.

“Where do you think you got my number? *Yes*, I talk to Kavita.” Lee rolls his eyes, “Anyway. The less damning explanation, if anyone asks, would be to say you run the RogueMLH twitter. That whole thing will be less necessary now anyway, if Yates’s regime is more transparent. And that explanation satisfies most of what’s in the audio.”

“Kavita just doesn’t like the competition.” Scott points out. “Of course she’d say that.”

Lee glares at him but moves on. “It also might satisfy your need to be recognized, for something, at least. Without nuking your whole... life.”

“I will think about this.” Ilya settles in his desk chair. There’s a beat of silence.

Until Scott breaks it: “Can I see my card?”

Ilya has a DICK COMA decision to make. Last year, he took a vote to see who would come out at the MLH awards. But in the few months since the Crowell audio was leaked, some of the guys are a little more concerned they will be the next big scandal. Any information can leak at any time. A lot of them want to get their identity out into the open with no fanfare. If you’re not an extroverted showman, it’s better to put out a small statement than bring your husband on the ice, or sit for an interview, or get photographed making out in a club. For some of these guys, even a statement that dominates the news cycle on a slow week is anxiety-inducing.

Behind this is an acknowledgement Ilya never thought would come: Some people think it’s less stress to be an openly queer hockey player than it is to keep the secret.

That’s one of the things that makes Ilya consider his next move differently, along with the removal of Crowell and Ilya’s need to be recognized for it. And Shane’s contract renewal, which as far as Ilya knows, is still up in the air.

He’s worried Shane will want to stay in Montreal, so he hasn’t brought it up. But he also can’t imagine Shane anywhere else, because it would be too far from him. The dream scenario is moving Shane to Ottawa, and Ilya’s connections could bend some rules to get him here. But Shane would probably be uncomfortable benefiting from that kind of deviance.

Despite the legal all-clear from Cooper Lee, he doesn't want to say he's the Ringleader. Public opinion doesn't care about legal verdicts. They will eventually find out what the Ringleader did, and they will eventually find out he did it for Shane. As long as Ilya can delay that to protect Shane's image and career, he will. Shane's legacy is more than "didn't get in legal trouble for game fixing." He's the second best to ever play the sport.

But Cooper Lee—and, fine, *Kavita*—were right. RogueMLH can be known. To the public, it might look like RogueMLH was behind the leaked audio and therefore responsible for Crowell's downfall. Plus, an announcement like that would ignite the media frenzy to let some of these guys come out without dominating the headlines. He texts 30 guys separately.

Ilya: You are still in the closet. DICK COMA this year will be anyone who wants to come out when there is a big story to distract from your announcement.

Ilya: I will make an announcement this weekend, media will go crazy, and you can do it then.

Ilya: Many Individuals Coming Right Out, Provided Emergency Escape with the News.

“MICROPEEN???”

“No thanks, still going to wait.”

“Ok, yeah, I've been scared that TMZ is going to find out at the worst time.”

“What are you announcing? 🙄”

“I would do it if we weren't calling it MICROPEEN.”

By the time the awards roll around a few days later, Ilya has several players interested in MICROPEEN.

In all the playoffs, cup celebrations, and scheming, Ilya hasn't even thought about the awards. He didn't think to control it this year. Turns out, he didn't have to.

Fucking Scott Hunter wins playoff MVP. In playing like he didn't want to get cheated, Hunter scored more points in the playoffs than anyone else, including those who played all four rounds.

“Finally!” Scott says when the crowd finishes clapping for him, “The one year I didn't need to win.” Well, that was a risky little aside.

He looks at his notes and settles into his typical public candor. “I've spoken for a lot of people from this stage. Tonight, I want to speak for myself. ...Don't look too disappointed, I'll get to the State of the Gay Union eventually. And it's not just thanking my husband and team and coaches for everything, though... yeah. Thanks.” He laughs sheepishly.

“I wanted to tell you how grateful I am for everyone who is falling on the right side of history. There's a whole series of tunnels under the organization that I represent. We have this army of queer players, but also allied players, queer staff, retired players, WAGs, even online fans... I will not give you a number this year because I don't think we even have one. It's growing too fast. Every person in every group has been incredibly useful to this movement.” He pauses to breathe and there's a loud round of applause.

“There’s one person in particular I’d like to thank. I know you’re getting sick of us talking about him, I am too. The first year, I called this guy the Ringleader on a whim, and the name stuck. It’s not just that he has organized so many people to accomplish so much, but I want to acknowledge the sacrifice he makes to be this leader.

“He’s a man shrouded in mystery for all of you, and I’ll tell you it’s not much better if you talk to him every day. I do know the story, though. He started all of this to normalize gay hockey partially so we could live more freely. But now that there’s progress, he can’t be fully known in public because of who he is to the movement.” He pauses, this time to silence in the room. “It’s sad, right?” Still silent. That’s fair, how do you react to that?

“As hockey players, our legacies are measured in numbers, and this Ringleader... he is an *okay* hockey player.” Scott smirks. “So his numbers will be fine. But right next to his stats should be the number of people he’s amassed, the people whose jobs he’s saved. To me, the most impressive number will be the number of years it takes for a player to feel comfortable coming out. We’ve gotten it down from my decade-plus to Fredericks’s 7 to Rivera’s 2 to Luca Haas’s 1 year. Lowery thought it would be ok to come right out at the *beginning*, and it will be, now that the commissioner isn’t firing rookies. That’s crazy— we might be on the precipice of never having to hide yourself in the MLH if you don’t want to. It’s mindblowing. And that’s the statistic I want this guy to be known for, and that *I* want to be known for helping.” Scott pauses, and the audience cheers a little as if that’s what he was asking for. “But I also want the Ringleader to feel like that, too. And I hope the day is coming soon when he feels free to tell you everything himself.”

He shuffles the cards in his hands and clears his throat, “But just because the top scorers in the league are married to men, and the commissioner is now someone who might come to the negotiating table with us, or at least not threaten to kill us like Roger Crowell did, and the union has made it harder for teams to discriminate against us, doesn’t mean there’s not still work to do. Here is what we can accomplish this year...”

After the awards, Scott grabs Ilya’s arm. “The guys are setting up the party, you need to stay and smile for a minute.”

“Why? I am not MVP.” Ilya is not salty about it. He’s not.

“Isn’t this a good time to make your RogueMLH announcement? There’s always a ton of press asking questions, it’s like a casual press conference. Then when we get to the party, all of the statements from the guys—”

“The MICROPEENS.” Ilya corrects him.

“Can’t believe you’re calling them that... anyway, this is a good opportunity.”

Shane approaches, looking like he's been crying. Of course he has, he does every year, except when he was having a silent panic attack on stage with Hunter. It's not noticeable to anyone except Ilya, but Ilya wants to hug him here in front of everyone anyway. His voice is quiet, "Can I just... hang out with you guys?" Ilya settles on a nod.

The press portion of the room is mostly asking about Ringleader stuff, and Scott and Ilya are not disclosing anything along those lines. The reporter next to Kavita sees Shane with them, so they ask their favorite question. Shane hasn't had to sit for any post-game press since the first round of playoffs, so he's been fairly off-the-grid. Now that he's here and capable of talking, the reporters are like sharks in the water.

"A lot of opinion articles have been written about the inherent conflict of interest if you are actually married to another player as the leaked audio confirms. They're saying Melnyk got himself traded to Washington because there was no other choice, any other scenario is asking for trouble. What do you say to that opinion?"

Hunter cuts in, "The audio doesn't confirm anything, and Shane has answered this question hundreds of times. It implies two players in love can't do their jobs if—"

"Actually, Scott?" Shane interrupts him. "I agree."

Ilya snaps his head to look at him. He tries telepathy but Shane isn't looking back. He tries Hunter, who understands. Scott looks at the press and says, "Give us a minute?" The three of them step to the side.

Before either of them can say 'what the fuck?' Shane is defending himself. "It's going to keep coming up. And I have a solution."

"What is the solution?" Ilya asks. Shane doesn't answer, he just puts on a devilish smirk. Ilya is simultaneously terrified and very very aroused.

"Do you trust me?" Shane asks, and Ilya is a little offended that he even needs to. At the same time, there's a difference between trusting someone who has all the information and someone who might not. Shane continues after reading his mind, "I know what you've done. All of it. And I know how it looks. And I think this will help." Then he adds, because he knows Ilya is wrapped completely around his finger, "Plus, I love you. Scott was right in his speech: it *is* sad. And this is what I want to do."

Ilya has a feeling he knows what Shane is about to do. He ignores the pit of guilt in his stomach that Shane somehow found out about his misdeeds. He drags his eyes away from his husband to look at Scott, who shrugs, "You know how I feel about your priorities." Then he clarifies for Shane, "That's you. You're all of the priorities."

"Ok." Ilya surrenders, "What is this plan?"

Shane smiles. "I think you'll like it. You said you wanted a media distraction this weekend anyway. This will be the media distraction for the decade." He squeezes Ilya's shoulder in what looks and feels like a masculine gesture of manly friendship. Then he breaks off from their huddle and rejoins Kavita's small circle of waiting reporters.

“God forbid you talk to *each other*.” Scott mumbles as they quickly take a spot standing on either side of Shane.

“Ok, write this down.” Shane addresses the small group of reporters who do not know how lucky they’re about to get. “I know, and my husband knows, that there has been no misconduct and there never would be. We both like winning too much. But we also know the optics are bad. They shouldn’t be, it’s insulting that they are, but you all insist on making this a big deal. I am not going to answer this question for the rest of my life, and I’m going to be married to him for the rest of my life. So to ease any remaining doubts, I’m signing with my husband’s team this summer. I’ve been in talks with them, the contracts are ready.”

What? Ilya’s heart races. He thought maybe Shane would tell the reporters about their relationship. He didn’t know how he was going to frame it, but Ilya just trusted his husband. At no point did he consider Shane already has a *plan*. He doesn’t even need to say it’s Ilya right now, it buys them time to say that separately. He kicks himself for underestimating his husband so grievously. And Shane is moving? Ilya might pass out.

Shane is only looking at the reporters. “If we’re playing on the same team, there’s no plausible conflict of interest. Not that there would be otherwise, but this should take any doubt out of anyone’s mind. Plus, I kind of like him, and I’d like to be able to live in the same place, play on the same team.”

Ilya needs to quickly calculate all of the reasons they weren’t being public, but he’s too distracted by the bombshell. Luckily Kavita has the same question Ilya does, “You’re leaving Montreal?” She is jotting notes down, but all of these reporters are definitely recording, too.

“Yes. And I would be anyway. Montreal has been clear about their priorities when it comes to these issues, so I feel I can be clear about mine. I want to play for a team that values me wholly, not just the part of me that’s good at hockey. To be honest, I think the gay part of me *is* the part that’s good at hockey, if these two are any proof of that correlation.” He gestures to Scott and Ilya. The group laughs but the words wash over Ilya. He’s still staring at his husband. Shane is *moving*?

“And what team does your husband play for?”

Shane finally looks back at Ilya and tries to say something telepathically that Ilya can’t quite make out. It’s a question, definitely. Ilya takes a guess, surrenders, nods, and mutters (out loud), “Yes, you can.” Because Ilya would do anything Shane wants after what he just heard. And before it. Ilya looks back at Scott to ask for permission, he *really* doesn’t want to be the one to make this decision, and Scott will stop it if it’s a bad idea. But Scott is shifting away from them with a nod, standing more on the reporters’ side of the circle.

Shane ignores the last question. “I think there’s another reason you can tell I haven’t been throwing games for my husband.” Shane says, taking his eyes off Ilya and back to the reporters. “Because, for years, everyone in this room has commented on how competitive I’ve been with him. You’ve all compared our stats and speculated about who is better... but no one more than us. He makes sure that losing to him is torture, and I think I’m the same way.” Shane looks vaguely in Ilya’s direction like an invitation. Ilya takes a deep breath.

“You are. It is awful to lose to you. I am glad I will not ever have to again.”

Kavita smiles before any other reporter can process this. “You are saying Ilya Rozanov is your husband?”

“I am.” Shane says, still in press mode. The question could have been ‘are you happy with your team’s defense?’

“Ilya, you look just as shocked as we are, what’s your reaction to this news? Did you really not know?”

Ilya shakes himself out of it and also puts on his media voice. “Hollander is very professional. Keeps me out of his decisions.”

“What’s your reaction to the news?”

“Sad I will not get to beat him anymore. But I am excited to win one hundred thousand cups because you people could not understand how professional athletes work.”

The group laughs at their own expense, but Kavita looks at him with skepticism. “There is nothing else you would like to announce tonight?”

She’s referring to RogueMLH. But Ilya doesn’t have to, this is a big enough story to work as the distraction. It’s probably ten times bigger than announcing he was some crummy Twitter handle. It might even be more of a story than his identity as Ringleader. Kavita will have to survive. He will offer her an interview later in apology. “What else would there be? That is the biggest news story of the year, maybe the next several years, and you all just got it.”

The scrum breaks into a bit of chaos, sensing that Ilya and Shane are close to done sharing with them.

“When did you get together?”

“Is this why you moved to Ottawa?”

“Shane, do your Montreal teammates know?”

Scott looks at Shane and jerks his head toward the door. Ilya is glad they are telepathic now, too. It means they can all three turn simultaneously and walk away.

“So, same team, huh?” Scott asks as they walk toward the exit.

“Same team.” Shane responds dreamily.

Scott shakes his head slowly. He laughs a little but asks, “Do you have any idea what you’ve just done to the league?”

“I don’t care.” Ilya says honestly, staring at his husband. “Hunter, go host the party for me, we will be there in ten minutes.”

“Twenty.” Shane nudges him.

They're met with a Scott Hunter eye-roll and an exasperated sigh. "I'll tell them an hour."

Chapter End Notes



Coming up: Afterparty, honeymoon season #queerjoy, and HEA, trust me!

The next chapter might take some time. As always, updates on updates can be found on Tumblr.

Tell me your favorite loose end!

I don't think anything for the spreadsheet today? Ok.

News:

In the next week or so, I'll be setting this up as the first part of the Continuing History of Ilya's Players Series. The first other fic in there will be a #7 (Vinny Marcello) POV 2019-21. His HEA story should have been a few sentences in the next chapter, but it got away from me. I also have thought about writing some of the group chats, social media reactions, other OCs, etc. so they will go in the series too if/when they happen. Plus, I have a decent amount written on an Evan Dykstra reaction video to Crowell's country album. Where the fuck else would that go? I will also put any fic anyone else writes about this story (which are always welcome and cherished! #ChipsSmutCompanionPiece?) if the author is ok with it. Basically, this story will be done soon but if you want to keep living in this world, I'll probably be here too.

Edit: the series is up, right now it's just this and "Interesting Men" (which you should absolutely check out!) but more will join them!

Edit: I've added a [#7 POV](#) that could either go before or after the next chapter.

Chapter 41: Honeymoon Season

Chapter Summary

Preseason until playoffs 2021-2022

Chapter Notes

Let's just start with some queer joy and count our wins? And then we'll get a plot. And a lot of references to iconic tv and movies.

Still emotional, thanks for checking.

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

r/MLHCorruption

u/sir1589shelf MOD *1 day ago*

Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov announce their marriage(???) in front of four reporters.

[Link to Kavita Kingsley article](#)

[Link to RSM video of the mini-presser](#)

[Link to Dilly Dickinson article](#)

[Link to Werthington Westwood article](#)

u/Champ-ion-agne

that is... not real. Rozanov called him "Hollander". If I called my husband by his last name he'd be so weirded out.

u/DM_me_your_mom

is your husband a professional hockey player? Are you both?

u/penisthedong

it's not real because it's so fucking PR. They both have husbands they can't show to the public so they pull this shit

u/Faint4Taint

I checked all of the open databases in the US and found no marriage records. You can't search for marriages in Canada, though....

u/Gr4mofs1lv3r

is anyone else fucking terrified of Ottawa next season? Do we just fucking give up?
Asking for 31 other teams.

u/LiveBreatheHockey

Might as well. Ottawa is going all the way again.

u/PucknPull

i thought we weren't supposed to support individual teams on here, but youre
always bricking up for ottawa dude

u/ScratchYourAss4me

anyone else get the sense this was a diversion from Rice, Helthson, Garza, Rayan, and
Bay ALL coming out at the same time? The whole thing is fishy. Ringleader up to some
shit rn smells like a distraction.

u/souroursrouse

Right? and they all had those statements prepped and ready, all posted within 15
minutes of each other.

u/dscvrroe45780

not sure how this is a shock, we know they all have group hangs. One at the same
time as the MLH awards makes sense, especially when Helthson and Bay were already at
the awards. I bet these 3 went there after this too.

u/61courH

ok you didn't hear it from me but I know a guy who works at the hotel where they
have the MLH awards and they said every year they play "who's not here" after the
show because so many guys leave. Then they started noticing it was Hunter's whole
TGS gang. The guy gave me a list last year and Rozanov and Bay were both on it.
Hollander was on there before he came out. I won't share the list but the other guys on
there seem... probable.

The 2021 MLH awards homo-afterparty is the largest one yet, with almost 30 people in
attendance. Sure, there are more guys out of the closet and therefore more can show their
faces, but more players who weren't invited to the actual awards booked the plane ticket and
came anyway.

#26 has never wanted to be known, but he makes his first appearance at the afterparty. Ilya
still feels guilty that this guy was basically outed by Crowell's audio leak. He was one of
Ilya's skittish ones and the only player, in years of doing this, who was truly unwillingly

outed. He was understandably pissed after the leak and Ilya thinks they've been avoiding each other since.

So it's surprising when Ilya finds him in good spirits at the party. When he finally approaches to talk, Ilya discovers this guy's world didn't end. What might have been a death sentence five years ago is now just a line on #26's Wikipedia page.

His team management wasn't crazy about the idea of a gay player, but they already knew from when the team was in the 2020 finals. They didn't even need the union's new, more robust anti-discrimination scolding. His jersey sales weren't really notable before, and with a conservative fanbase in the Southern US, this was the scariest part. But his sales actually saw a little bump. Very few people knew his name before, now he is at least known for *something*. So he is, for the most part, fine. He apologizes to Ilya for being upset when the leak happened, and he says his life is a little easier now. Ilya breathes a sigh of relief, but he almost liked it better when there was a player who hated him. It makes him uncomfortable when they all worship at his feet. He leaves the conversation and immediately tries to find #16. He can trust that guy to give him some sort of grief.

That night, the five MICROPEENS, #10, #20, #22, #36, and #40, all come out simultaneously. This means there will be fifteen openly queer players to start next season. Both the full RASHYCOCK+DICK COMA+PENIS group chat and the more exclusive JACKOFF one are both way too crowded, but the new guys are added to the chats anyway. The ally army was warned about the influx of social media statements, but Ilya hasn't really heard reports of anything crazy from them. None of the guys coming out are huge celebrities. He thought maybe the introduction of a nonbinary statement would kick the internet trolls into high gear, but it's no worse than the others, the trolls are just being a different flavor of terrible.

The rookies coming up next season will be able to come straight out without threat of termination by Crowell. And #26 has shown them all that a scandalous outing might not be catastrophic anymore. It all leaves Ilya with the feeling like maybe things might be different next season.

The other huge difference will be Ilya and Shane. They hold hands at both the homo- and hetero-afterparties. They shirk the heterosexual afterparty quickly for an actual gay bar hosting an Ilya Rozanov night. The bar has done this every time there's a RASHYCOCK winner since Scott Hunter, but so far most of the winners have thought the idea is too corny to go. But Ilya doesn't want the night to end and for once, Shane is too invested in being attached at the hip to go back to the room early. Being able to let loose and just be *normal* in public with his husband and his friends is proving to be an unbeatable high.

After that day, Ilya and Shane are posting on their social media accounts together and they're going on dates. Actual, public dates. Shane gets settled into living full-time at their house in Ottawa, and over the summer he signs the contracts to become a Centaur. It's all happening.

So naturally, Kavita Kingsley is a menace until Ilya agrees to let her interview the couple together. They schedule the interview for August at the cottage.

He warns not to ask about the timeline, the Ringleader, or the group. She agrees pretty quickly; she knows the drill.

Though she is a print journalist, Kavita's editor made the decision to film it, saying a video of the interview would bring hits to the website. The interview starts with fluffy questions, which Kavita begrudgingly admits the people want. No one else has seen them interact as a couple, really, so the public is very interested in just watching their dynamic. Kavita finds the best way to do this is conversational, light questions. They are characteristically adorable, giving a good representation of their relationship to the public.

Then, because it's still Kavita Kingsley, it gets a little more difficult.

"There is some speculation that this is a publicity stunt, and people are having a hard time believing you. They're saying it's surprising. Is that something you'd like to clear up?"

"I moved to Ottawa." Ilya deadpans, because it's a stupid question. Then he shakes his head, "And publicity stunt... I have never needed one. Shane has never wanted one. Shane would like a... opposite of publicity stunt. Non-publicity stunt."

Shane adds, "I'd also say they could ask any number of people. My parents have known for the longest, then Scott Hunter, the guys in the group, some of the ally group, our friends... to be honest, by the end this was a pretty poorly-kept secret. I think my running mental list was high double-digits."

"Kavita, *you* knew about us."

"Ilya..." Kavita groans. "Can we just— let's move on, ok? Yes, I can vouch for them." She sighs something about their lawyer and journalistic integrity, then visibly resets. "How has the league changed on this issue since you two joined?"

Shane looks at Ilya like he should take this one, so he reluctantly does. "Much more attractive players are in the league since we joined." Shane elbows him. Ilya can see what he's trying to do. It's annoying, though. Ilya doesn't want to think about this kind of progress because it means maybe owning it. That's probably exactly why Shane wants him to be the one to answer it. He briefly wonders if Shane and his therapist have been talking. "Five years ago, we could not have this interview. We are able to be married in public, that is something. Almost every team has a guy, some are out to their teammates if not publically. Teams can no longer drop someone for a stupid reason without controversy. Guys are scared to say homophobic sh— stuff on the ice."

"And racist and sexist stuff, too." Shane adds, "I think there's just more empathy in general, it's not just queer players."

"What still needs to be done? What does your ideal league look like?"

They both pause. Ilya looks at Shane with the same question. If he's being honest, he wants to hear Shane's answer, too.

Shane shrugs and tilts his head in consideration. “I guess zero assholes would be the goal, but that would never happen no matter what. We could be working on that forever. But really, our jobs are safe and not miserable. We know what teams are good so if one team isn’t, we know where we can try to go. It’s not the end of the world anymore. It used to be scary, and you had to be brave to be out. Well, you still do— all these guys are incredible role models. But I don’t know, it’s just normal. Not so scary.”

Just before the season starts, Ilya calls Scott Hunter. “We missed our annual planning meeting.”

Scott laughs, “It’s not my fault you were two hours late to the party.”

“90 minutes.” Ilya rebuts, carefully *not* recounting those 90 minutes in his head while he’s on the phone with Scott Hunter. “What’s the plan for this year?”

“Plan?”

“Goals, Hunter. Here is what I think—”

“Rozanov.” Scott cuts him off. “How long are we going to do this?”

“Maybe a half hour? You have a date?”

“Not what I meant. You have the union, and the Board of Governors, and the refs, and the commissioner. They’re all on our side. So maybe sit back? Let them work, do their jobs? They know what we want, and they’re all working on it. Let them come to you with any issues.”

Ilya furrows his brow. Usually Scott has *some* idea for the season’s goals. “Ok, then, recruitment—”

“Didn’t you say someone reached out to you directly? I know I gave you some numbers of people who asked me.”

“Yes, but—”

“Ok. So if someone wants to come out, and be a part of this thing, they will. Carter said the ally army doesn’t even reach out to people anymore, people just find them. Plus, I know my sixth sense about this isn’t as good as yours, but I honestly think we have every queer person in the league.” Ilya wants to object just to say he knows more than him, but Hunter is kind of right. “It’s just the incoming rookies who might need approaching. And they can just come to one of the out players. There’s so fucking many of us now, it’s hard not to know one.”

It sounds like Scott is aggravated, and Ilya doesn't recall doing anything wrong or being more of a dick than normal. So why is he being difficult? They plan every summer. "What's wrong with you, Hunter?"

Scott sighs. "Why are you doing all of this? The whole thing?"

"Shane—"

"Shane said himself in that interview, it's not scary for him. He feels normal. He's happy. For fuck's sake, you're both out—together—and playing on the same team. Which, by the way, is going to be shit for everyone else. So it's not about Shane."

Ilya can't find an argument, so he reaches for another reason. "The rookies?"

"The rookies are very content. They know there are people like them, the league isn't going to be shitty for their whole careers. They're only waiting to come out because they're clamoring to come out with one of the titles. I wouldn't be surprised if you have to take a vote for CUMSLUT next year. It's not about the rookies."

"...Joy of camaraderie?" Ilya tries again.

Scott laughs lightly, "Ok? You can get that without scheming. I'm pretty sure the MLH would give us a ballroom in the hotel at next year's awards to plan our party."

"Crowell—"

"Is gone, and in trouble. He's appealing and settling out of court where he can, but I think there are literally dozens of charges. Unless you want to tell them to stop prosecuting him, you don't need to do anything. Cooperate with that investigation, like we have been. Lee said they might ask for a deposition but— anyway. Not your problem anymore. Out of your hands." Scott finishes, and Ilya wracks his brain to give him another jumping off point to start their planning. While he's trying to figure it out, Scott asks "Do you want to know what I think?"

"Not particularly."

"You did it for you. You got addicted to it. And now that it's not a full-time job anymore, you're going to miss it." Scott sighs again, "Go back to just playing hockey, Ilya. Enjoy being married and living with your spouse for the first time in your life. Be present in the moment."

"But I liked it," Ilya says, "I was good at it."

"You were. And you're sort of good at hockey, too. Don't tell anyone I said that."

"Wish I was recording this."

"I assumed you were."

So Ilya, for the most part, lifts his hands from the steering wheel. He doesn't have much of a choice.

There are some mandatory duties, obviously. The influx of rookies who want to join is really just a logistics question of when he's playing them to enable an in-person meeting. The leftover caution to ensure they're not a spy from the commissioner is very unnecessary, given how supportive Mastur Bates is being. Ilya is still cautious. It's more fun that way.

After that, he coordinates some hits on the few guys who still insist on pestering his out players, but the refs are pretty much taking care of those guys for him. A team tries to bench one of the MICROPEENS so he has Cooper Lee write a threatening letter, and silently wishes *he* could be the one threatening the team's management directly. Lee insists they try the legal way first, and Ilya tries not to get too disappointed when it works the first time.

Some of his guys get comfortable and start losing some of their hardwired caution. Like #7.

One night in the middle of the Fall, Ilya gets some interesting information from Hunter.

Oldest man alive: Keep your boys in check.

Oldest man alive: Kip's friend just sent us this from a gay bar in Brooklyn.

Oldest man alive: [photo]

Ilya: oh shit

Oldest man alive: He only recognized Vin from the wedding, he didn't even know he was a hockey player.

Oldest man alive: Thought he was cheating on his date from our wedding.

Oldest man alive: A year ago 😊

Oldest man alive: Vinny doesn't even remember who he took to my wedding.

Ilya: who taught you emojis

Oldest man alive: Asshole. Do you even see who he's making out with here?

Oldest man alive: Did you have him in the group already? It would have to be recent, I have up to #48.

Oldest man alive: Are they out? Is this a soft launch? Why are they making out in public?

Ilya: first emojis, now "soft launch?" Did your grandson finally visit the home?

He opens the picture and sighs. This is not the first picture he's gotten of #50 from afar, doing something he shouldn't be. He has a better rapport with #7, though, so he texts him.

Ilya: wtf are you doing

Ilya: why am I getting a picture of you tongue deep in someone on a dancefloor?

#7: because i AM tongue deep in someone on a dancefloor.

Ilya: ???

#7: idk we connected

#7: he agreed to help me with something

Ilya: was the something an erection??

#7: the something was an erection.

#7: thank your husband actually.

Ilya: please do not thank my husband for your erections.

Ilya: so you are just out now? both of you?

#7: first of all cool your jets

#7: the picture isn't posted anywhere

#7: and we have a plan

Ilya: ???

#7: well it's not like either of us are winning a cup ever again

Ilya: not with that attitude.

#7: Not with your team in the league, asshole.

So, even things like choosing who comes out and when is no longer the Ringleader's duty. And clearly, recruitment can be done without his help. After years of pulling every string in the league, Ilya feels like he has no control.

If Ilya were more distracted, like he had been the last few years, he might not have noticed the problem.

The first game could have been a fluke. Winning against Brooklyn in the season opener wouldn't be *that* unheard-of, and the hockey husbands' first game together was bound to be thrilling, both of them still competing with each other despite being on the same team. They both score hat tricks, but Shane provided an assist to Troy, so he thinks he won.

He didn't, the Centaurs won. Again, two of their players scored hat tricks in the same game. And there were two other points. Of course they won.

The Centaurs win their second game, too. That team is a little better, but they look awful against Ottawa. If anyone asks Ilya who won, he will say he did, with 2 goals and 2 assists to Shane's 2 goals.

The official MLH rankings will say the Centaurs won.

The next game, Shane scores more points than Ilya but the Centaurs still win. The game after that is the opposite, but the Centaurs still win. And the next, the husbands adorably have exactly the same number and Shane jokes they shouldn't have let the game end with a tie. The game actually ended 4-1. The Centaurs won.

While Shane, Ilya, and the Centaurs are invested in this fierce tug-of-war, the rest of the league is not a competition at all. The whiteboard on their fridge shows the important numbers, but all of the official league scoreboards everywhere else show a series of high-scoring games where Ottawa's opponents never stood a chance. The undefeated streak starts threatening the league record and there's no sign of stopping.

Hunter brings it up in a careful phone call. "You're not... right?" But the tone of his voice suggests he doesn't actually think Ilya is cheating. The team is simply stacked. It's not just Shane and Ilya. Barrett, Haas, and Boodram are scoring more to try to compete with the husbands, too. So even Ottawa's third line is better than anyone else's first.

Scott asks because he, like every other captain, is getting questions about it constantly in post-game interviews. In one viral clip that Harris posts on Ottawa's pages, Hunter says, "The team won the cup last year and then added Shane Hollander. Why is this surprising?"

Privately, Scott tells Ilya it's a bad look, but Ilya brushes that off. The other teams need to get better, Ilya argues. How else will they improve?

Ilya takes it a little more seriously when Shane himself raises the issue. He says he feels guilty, and that's when Ilya knows things are doomed. Shane *never* feels bad for winning too much. Ilya has watched his husband put full effort into a foot race with a seven-year-old at their hockey camp. When Shane's parents wanted to stop playing Canasta after Shane won five rounds in a row, Shane complained loudly. He's a sore winner when beats the Pike kids in Candyland. And winning once is never enough. No matter the game or the result of the game, Shane always requests a rematch.

So the fact that *he's* concerned about Ottawa's streak is cause for alarm.

It's not bad enough that he'll stop trying. Neither of them do. No one on the Centaurs wants to give up their new dynasty. But Ilya can start to silently admit it: maybe they did something wrong.

By the Spring, with Ottawa ranked #1 by a long shot and no question about how the playoffs will go, public opinion starts getting to them.

"They should never have let Rozanov and Hollander on the same team."

"I'd rather them be throwing games for each other. At least that was subtle."

"Astor Yates waived the salary cap penalty to make this happen?"

That last one is causing the most problems. Some details about Shane's contract indicate he was favored by the new commissioner, and it's not long before the blame for the anomalous season is pinned on Mastur Bates.

"Ilya. It might be time." Shane announces just before playoffs, settling up against the doorframe of Ilya's bunker in their house. *Their* house. Where they both wake up every day unless they're on the road. Ilya rolls the desk chair over and takes his husband's hand just because he *can*. He's there, they're together, and that hasn't gotten old. It never will. Ilya doesn't know how they survived before.

Shane has his phone in his other hand. "There's another thinkpiece about unfair advantages."

"Is not really unfair advantage, they need to get better at hockey."

Shane sighs. "No, I kind of see where they're coming from. And this one is blaming Yates for allowing it to happen."

"Another saying he needs to resign?"

"Yeah, basically. This is like the fifth one."

"Ok." Ilya breathes in with excitement at the predicament and starts to plan how to choose the next commissioner. Shane must mistake all the mulling for sadness because he collapses into Ilya's lap.

"I'll just go play for Montreal," Ilya teases and Shane smiles against his face. "Or you could retire, Shane." Shane stills. "Pop out the babies, stay here and wait for me to come home from roadies." He relaxes when it's clear Ilya is kidding.

"Don't make fun of me. You would hate that, too."

"True. I would be jealous. I want to pop out the babies."

Shane laughs and pushes himself off of Ilya. "There's no way we can do this another year. The league will burn down." He looks actually sad to think about it. If Shane is responsible for the End of Hockey, he would launch himself into space. They leave the conversation at that. It's still the two of them, afterall. They can't be solving things with honest, open dialogue this close to the playoffs.

The morning of their first playoff game, Ilya is pulled into a meeting in Ottawa's front office. He's excited. One thing he can still do is help the GM pick out good players for his cause. Ottawa still needs to be the best, most welcoming, queerest team in the league, and they still need his input on their roster. It's weird timing, it's after the trade deadline... maybe it's about the draft this summer? When he walks in, he expects just the GM, not approximately seventeen old rich-looking white dudes in suits.

"I am underdressed." He says, in sweatpants.

The guys laugh. Ilya scans the group. He thinks it's mostly team owners, some other GMs, and some league executives. No Astor Yates, though.

"You're fine." Ottawa's GM leads him into the room. "We want to discuss some options with you."

"Me, Ilya? Or me...." He hopes his GM will understand. Do all of these men know Ilya's full identity?

"The other you." One of the men says, one Ilya doesn't know.

"Who are you all?" *And why do you know who I am?* Is left unsaid.

"We used to be the ones who would choose the next commissioner. But it seems like you do that now."

"We just had a new commissioner." Ilya argues, "He has not even been there one year."

"And look what happened!" Someone barks. "The league is ruined."

"...Ok. Calm down, big guy." Ilya thinks it's a bit dramatic to say the league is *ruined*.

"They're saying..." Ottawa's GM starts, "and I gotta agree, just because I don't like the scrutiny on my own team... Yates has to go, and we have to fix... this—" he gestures at Ilya, "by next season."

Ilya swallows. He knows it just as well as they do. He knows Shane is unhappy without regular competition. And this team is not sustainable if the rest of the league still wants to sell jerseys and tickets. Ew, when did he start thinking of league priorities before his own team? Regardless, something has to give. But what does that have to do with him? He doesn't think his station makes him *that* powerful, but he does hold influence over the current commissioner and about a third of the players in the league. He has the players' union, plenty of retired players, staff, half the fans... but these are the guys who actually can create a rule, name a commissioner, and effect actual change.

"And you need my help?"

"You know that already. We can't make Yates leave without a good reason and—"

Ilya interrupts him, "Is Shane's contract controversy not a good reason?" He's genuinely wondering. The men all look at each other uncomfortably.

That can't be right— Are they afraid of Ilya? Maybe they think separating the husbands will pit Ilya Rozanov against them and they'll suffer the same wrath as Crowell.

"It *would* be a good reason..." Someone says carefully. "But it would mean doing something about that contract."

"Ah." Ilya nods but he can't imagine being on separate teams now that they've been through a season together. Living in a house without Shane would kill him. Maybe these guys are

right, and he would seek vengeance on anyone who tries to split them up.

“We have an idea.” Ottawa’s GM says. “It’s a blow to our team, and requires a lot from you, but it solves the problem. I want you to hear me out before you reject the idea.”

“Ok...” Ilya says slowly.

“The commissioner spot was pretty coveted last year... but now everyone is a little afraid you’ll tank their career on one misstep.” He voices Ilya’s suspicion. This is so weird. Ilya has never tanked a career. Well, except Crowell. Maybe Montreal’s GM because they fumbled Shane. Astor Yates might not be long for this world, but is that his fault? Tiny Dickman comes to mind. And Dallas Kent. Baldwin, unfortunately, and Price and Lundin and Bianca...

“I might.” Ilya gets out before it becomes a guilt-spiral, “So who will take over commissioner?”

“That’s the issue. No one wants it.”

“Crowell.” Someone says, and others laugh nervously.

Ilya’s heart pounds. There’s someone who wants it. He’s here in the room, are they saying he could take it?

It’s quiet while they wait for Ilya to respond. When he doesn’t, some little scrawny guy says, “Maybe someone like you wants the position.”

“Someone like me.” Ilya crosses his arms so his hands stop shaking. His head buzzes. “As commissioner.”

Commissioner? Obviously, it’s where he would have the most power. Running this operation, officially. Not having to scrounge for leverage. Able to truly change things for the better—there’s still so much he wants to do that’s currently out of his control. It’s not like Ilya never thought about it, but those thoughts are always concealed in caution and quickly put away. He’s never let his hopes get that high. The dream was some kind of executive job with the team. If he’s honest, Ottawa’s GM should have worried about his position. Or Ilya was going to ask Shane if they could save up to buy a team when they retire and get on the Board of Governors himself. *This* was never a realistic option in his mind. But now that it’s on the table, Ilya will settle for nothing else. He wants to be as clear as possible, and obviously these people are too chicken to outright ask him, “You come to me on the first day of playoffs and ask me to be commissioner?”

“Ilya, we can’t do this another year.” Ottawa’s GM tries to reason with him, like maybe Ilya needs convincing, like they didn’t just suggest he could leap-frog over his 20-year-plan.

“Even if Yates stays in the position, we’d need to separate you two.”

Another GM clearly sees dollar signs for his own team, “Or you could trade out Haas, Barrett, Boodram, and Hayes. Maybe Dillon and Dykstra, they’ve been good this year. You’d need to load up on some really terrible players to hold you down.”

“This is bullshit.” Ilya imagines his team broken up and sold off in parts, “We will not be penalized because we are both good.”

“You can both be good. You would have to be good on two separate teams.”

“Or one on one team and the other... not playing.” Ottawa’s GM cautiously continues. “Ilya, no one else wants this job, you’ve kind of scared them all off. So really it’s just you.”

Ilya swallows, his heart racing. Is this happening? His breathing is shaky but he allows himself to entertain the idea a little bit. “How would this go?”

His GM relaxes. “Our team can come forward and say you’ve been making some of our executive decisions, because you have, so you have experience. The Board of Governors can say they want a former player, someone who will represent the players as a peace offering, so you would make sense for that, too. You might want to put out a statement saying you threw your hat in the ring for the job after this season because of our team’s unnatural success, like maybe you want to change that kind of corruption. And Scott Hunter can say the Ringleader approved you if you don’t want to make *that* public...” Ilya hadn’t even thought about that. He hasn’t thought about any of this. How could he have? Until 10 minutes ago, this was a completely impossible concept. “It fixes the problem of you and Hollander on the same team. You work from the New York offices when he’s on the road, work from here when he’s here. The job is pretty mobile to begin with... Really, everyone wins.”

Ilya thinks about this. “Shane would still be playing. He will not be leaving the league.” He tries to say it like a threat. Some of the guys nod. “So the conflict of interest if I am in a position of power...” he finally says that part out loud.

“If we frame it like we’re doing this in order to level the playing field again, you shouldn’t come under scrutiny for that. Unless your first directives are exclusively in Hollander’s favor.”

Ilya smiles, “It is more likely I would try to make things *harder* for Hollander. If I stop playing, my statistics will stay where they are, I cannot have him too far ahead of me.”

“Well, you can’t be doing that, either,” someone sighs. There are other dubious murmurs, wondering if this is a good idea afterall. Ilya has a sudden, inexplicable, impulsive need to prove them wrong.

“Ok.” He wants to accept this plan. It sits on his tongue, but in a superhuman feat of impulse control, he holds it back. He has so much to think about. He wants to tell Shane, ask Shane for advice, lay his head on Shane’s stomach and listen to his heartbeat to help him think. He wants to talk to Cooper Lee, and Hunter, and the rest of his braintrust. But all these guys are looking at him in anticipation.

His GM saves him, “Think about it. We just can’t do another season like this.”

This, Ilya can agree to. “I will think about it.”

Chapter End Notes



Coming up: The Cup, the MLH Awards, the future??? I'm taking my time with the last chapter, maybe a week? So much needs to get tied up!

For your lists:

We got the names and numbers of the MICROPEENS? And we now know there is a #50!

More on that in #7's story, which will be posted to the series I hope before the final chapter. In the meantime, you can find "Interesting Men" (#4 Kowalski/Cooper Lee) by AWorldofTrees in the series too! (If you haven't looked in a while, there are new chapters! and I have it on good authority there might be more potential chapters!)

Edit 7/7: Soon! In the mean time, I've added a [#7 POV](#) to explain himself here.

Chapter 42: 42

Chapter Summary

The remainder of the 2021-22 season, flashes forward (2024, 2030, 2041, 2051)

Chapter Notes

THIS IS THE LAST CHAPTER there was a link to this chapter that breached containment so I don't want anyone to start the fic here.

If you missed it, I posted [#7's story](#).

I won't spoil anything, so credits are in the end notes, but if something sounds familiar, good! I love everyone who has contributed to this story in the comments and side headcanons on Tumblr and other fics!

If there's skepticism leftover from last chapter, just know I really considered changing things around after reading the comments, but nope! I like it. I think you'll come around to see things Ilya and Shane's way. And as always, your faves are morally(/legally) gray. You can @ me about either of those all you want but I'll be staying at Rivera and Melnyk's poorly-designed house for the foreseeable future so I won't respond (But if you like it, I lied, I'll still be here).

Anyway, here's 10k of outlandish, unrealistic wish fulfillment. The mantra for this whole story was "what if this got...more?" And I'm taking all of that to the furthest logical conclusions.

CW: Very minor character death. It's no one you like. You can skip the last flash forward if you don't want it (but you're gonna want it)

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

Spring 2022

From the desk of the Ottawa Centaurs—

For the last few years, Ilya Rozanov has been quietly conducting the majority of our trades and roster decisions. These decisions have clearly set the team on the course it is on today, both winning us a cup and creating a more welcoming and diverse group of players. These values are a priority for our team because of Mr. Rozanov's

determination. He has instilled a sense of community that goes beyond the ice. Other teams are following our lead in this regard and we could not be more proud to be trailblazers for this phenomenal cause.

Mr. Rozanov has been hand-selecting draft picks, organizing trades, and green-lighting new contract acquisitions. The only exception was the contract of Shane Hollander, which was solely facilitated by our General Manager.

After conversations with Mr. Rozanov and his loved ones, we all feel his talent off the ice is just as valuable, if not more valuable, to the league. Today we are celebrating the dissolution of his contract effective at the end of this season. [...]

"Mr. Rozanov, there are rumors you are slated to be the league's next commissioner, is that true?" The reporter in the post-game interview is almost yelling to compete with the other questions. Ilya thinks this is dumb; they probably all have the same questions, and they all already know they won't be answered.

"Can I finish winning the cup with my husband first?"

"Is there a conflict of interest if the commissioner's husband is still playing?"

"Ehh, no. Have you met my husband? No reason for any conflict of interest. I could say, 'Hey new rule, Shane Hollander has to play with a 2-foot stick and flip-flop sandals,' and he would still win."

Shane angrily pushes in toward the microphone. "—*If* he is commissioner. *God*, Ilya. He's not confirming anything..." Shane huffs, and then thinks about the question. "But seriously? Have you met us? You think I want this... jerk to become commissioner while I'm still playing? No. But the benefits of having a former player represent the league outweigh my personal rivalry. A former player in that position would benefit all of the current players, regardless of who it is. Ilya will be annoying, but better than someone with no experience in hockey."

Ilya smiles goofily at his husband's lack of control, so he slowly sounds out: "And again—not confirming anything..."

Shane turns pink. "Right. Fu— Sorry. Yeah, not confirming anything."

The playoffs are well underway. The rumors, though they are still just rumors, are true: Ilya Rozanov will be the next commissioner. The conversation with Shane was quick and painless. He was fully supportive, and even happy this is what Ilya wants to do, but he didn't seem too surprised that the job was being offered. Ilya didn't look too closely at that, primarily because the idea of Shane scheming behind his back was so distractingly hot it took three tries to even finish the conversation.

Ilya spent the time between the first and second round of playoffs in Mastur Bates's office, trying to figure out what this job actually entails, and it really is as cool as it sounds. The commissioner is in charge of enforcing rules, overseeing player contracts, the league finances (Ilya isn't looking forward to this and vows to become very familiar with the league's Chief Financial Officer), being the figurehead for the league... it's all stuff Ilya really was doing already. The paperwork and boring stuff is all done by lackeys, leaving only the powerful decision-making to the commissioner. That's what Ilya is good at. The added power, like handing down official punishments, makes his brain buzzy. Hunter will have to be on speed dial to curb Ilya's dictatorial streak.

Since this became an option, every minute spent actually playing hockey has been weirdly bittersweet. He loves playing with Shane, obviously, but he can tell Shane misses the challenge of playing against an actual opponent, not just a scoring race with a teammate. The team finished the regular season with league records for wins *and* goals scored, and the playoffs thus far have been a breeze. The last face-off against Scott Hunter was a little sad, and Hunter looked genuinely angry when Ilya used it to chirp at him during the game. It's ok, the pair has always been more solid off the ice.

And Ilya continues to feel like he completed the job of Ringleader. Between things running themselves and the downtick in salient homophobia in the league, he's no longer needed. And one thing he's learned in five years is he really, really needs to feel needed. He remembers when it felt like a lot of pressure and wants to go back in time and kick himself. That's when it was the most *fun*, idiot.

His legacy as a hockey player will probably be forgettable. He doesn't know, he doesn't really look at his stats anymore. To be honest, he hasn't been paying much attention to his hockey career for a while. His legacy now is much more tangible. It's people coming out right and left, some making statements and some just coming out of the woodwork with a partner. Some drop the bomb during interviews. Some are still not coming out at all, and Ilya thinks the fact that they have a choice is a win. His players aren't confining themselves to the bet or the other named awards, except a group of young guys who have decided there is some clout to those acronyms. Marcello awarded himself and #50 what he's privately calling a "Bisexual Announcement in the Mid-Fall (BAMF)" coming out. Kowalski is the CUMSLUT who was awarded the PENIS in the spring. Umnov claims TOPPING, citing the fact that the only previous two recipients of the pre-playoff award, Melnyk and Haas, have gone on to win the cup weeks later. Ilya wants to laugh in the face of this reasoning. Seattle doesn't have a chance. They're good, for the Western Conference, if they can beat Anaheim. But they would still have to meet Ottawa in the finals, and no one is beating Ottawa.

So all in all, he is prepared for things to run themselves if he leaves for the commissioner seat. There are some obstacles, obviously. For example, the Board of Governors told him they need to investigate the shit out of him before they can commit him to the role. They probably used better language.

One day between the second and third rounds of playoffs, Ilya is back with Mastur Bates in the New York office when he asks about it. "How is my background check?"

“What?” Mastur Bates looks confused and then shakes his head, brushing a hand through the air, “Oh, you’re fine. There have been commissioners who’ve literally killed people before.” He chuckles. “They just want to see your skeletons are staying firmly in the closet— no pun intended. And they are. They just don’t want a scandal right away.”

“They don’t want a scandal, and they chose me.” Ilya looks out the window. He wishes he could tell some 21-year-old version of himself who found his picture in a tabloid, leaving a bar with two women. Or the 23-year-old Ilya whose tweet about the World Cup got him cancelled for six months. Or the 25-year-old who nabbed a public intoxication charge when he found out about Shane and Rose. He always thought that was a little uncalled-for— it’s Boston, everyone who’s anyone is publicly intoxicated. And did they even know what he was going through?

He never minded the scandals as long as they weren’t the *big* thing. If Shane was safe, he didn’t care. His father always called him, manic, after something like that though. Ilya was a ‘public nuisance’ according to his father. What would he say now, weeks away from being the most esteemed name in hockey? His mom would be proud, probably. He doesn’t like to think about it.

Mastur Bates chuckles. “You’re less scandal than me right now, does that help? Leaving the job in disgrace? A fairly public divorce?”

Ilya turns to look at him and winces. “Hadn’t heard. Sorry.”

“Eh, it’s for the best. You know that.” The commissioner looks at him for a moment. “You *did* that. It wouldn’t have been ‘for the best’ a few years ago. But Gez and I can reframe the whole thing—” Wait.

“Gez— *my* Gez? Gerald Nash?” Ilya raises an eyebrow as he gets a nod in response. He had sent Mastur Bates’s contact info out to a bunch of his single guys... did someone really get something out of that? “Shit...”

“If this doesn’t work out, start a match-making company.”

“It’s never because of *me!*” Ilya whines.

“Rozanov. It’s *always* traced back to you.”

June 2022

Shane and Ilya have usually tried to keep their on-ice celebrations cordial this season as teammates. Shane spent the first two weeks on the Centaurs cataloguing how each player celebrated goals and wins with his husband, and chose to stay in the middle of that pack. Not quite as friendly as Boodram, who kisses Ilya’s helmet and receives a butt-smack as they hold each other, but not as distant as the fist bump from Deacon, who they’re all convinced is one

of the remaining homophobes and just knows to stay quiet about it. So Shane usually does a side-arm hug to celebrate with his captain. Shane is trying to stay professional, obviously, but Ilya thinks it's partially his husband just trying not get a boner in the middle or end of a game.

Tonight, though, as the buzzer sound is engulfed by Boodram and Barrett screaming in his ears, the defensemen skating over to collide with them for the group hug, and Hayes tackling them all, Ilya hears one thing more clearly than anything else.

"Oh my god— Fucking go! Oh my god!!" And within seconds of the game ending and the Centaurs pouring from the bench onto the ice, Shane is grabbing at Ilya's face. Ilya is too shocked to actually kiss back, but that's ok because Shane is muttering "I love you so fucking much" onto his lips instead. The team eventually pulls them apart, or jostles them hard enough that they snap out of it and allow the team into their celebration. Not in the same way, obviously. Well, Boodram does plant a smack on Ilya's cheek, but that's just normal.

"That's it folks, the Centaurs have won the cup for the second year in a row."

"What a night, Jim, and we've got our interns refreshing the pages of every one of these guys, so we'll let you know as soon as we see anything..."

"I'd say we already have all the LGBT Centaurs but I said that last year and ate my words, big time."

"...And now Rozanov is eating Hollander's face as evidence you were wrong." Both men chuckle.

"Well I might be right, because it looks like no one is finding anything on social media."

"FanDuel has the best odds on no one coming out tonight, but they said that last year, too. We were all wrong."

"Let's wait until the families come out on the ice."

"Vegas is watching Holmberg and the last minute pull-up from the farm team carefully. \$78 million has been placed on this prop bet in total."

"And this year, both DraftKings and FanDuel have committed 100% of the profit from that bet to the Irina Foundation."

"That's a lot of money. You wonder who made that deal."

"I think we know who made that deal."

Ilya is about to win MVP for the first time in 8 years. No one is letting anyone else say it's the last time; the Centaurs and some other teams have made him quite aware he can have a second chance if he wants one.

Frankly, he doesn't want one. Even at 31, he's years older than the average player. Most guys retire before 30. Maybe if he hadn't won a cup with his husband by his side after a near-perfect season, it would be different, but he is content with going out on the best season in hockey history.

"Sad?" Shane hugs him from behind and looks at him in the mirror, in a bathroom outside the Vegas award show ballroom.

"No," Ilya says honestly. He turns so they can face each other. "Are you?"

Shane has a warm smirk. "No fucking way. Now I can beat you in the scoring race every year. I'll have double your points by the time I retire."

Ilya loves this competitive asshole so much. He locks his hands on the back of Shane's neck. "Yes, but you are getting so old and bad at hockey and your career averages will look so sad. Mine will be young forever."

This is a debate they've had almost every day, with a list full of statistics to compare retiring vs. playing. At first, Ilya thought Shane was trying to convince him to stay, like it was a pros/cons list. But no, his husband really is just that competitive. Leaving and letting Shane Hollander rule hockey forever is the best gift Ilya could give him. Shane leans into Ilya, straining his head back so he can be close and still look at his face.

"Yeah, but I'll be married to the commissioner."

"I'll *be* commissioner."

Shane giggles. "You ready to head back out, commissioner? It's like fifteen minutes before this thing starts."

"Not yet. I need a minute. Especially if you are calling me that."

"Ok," maybe he can see his husband needs some time alone. It doesn't matter too much, they're sitting together for the first time, so they'll see each other in a few minutes regardless. "We'll leave separately, for old times' sake." Shane kisses him sweetly and walks out.

Ilya tries to collect his thoughts— everything his therapist has ever said to him comes rushing back to him— but he finds he's much calmer than he thought he'd be. He's still coming to this event next year. Hell, he'll be *running* this event next year. Even if it's not as commissioner, Shane will always want a plus-one...

There are footsteps outside the bathroom less than a minute after Shane leaves. Ilya was slightly hoping Shane would come back, so his heart lifts. But when the bathroom door opens not to Shane's sunny, happy, positive vibes, but instead to dark, evil, mildewy ones, Ilya curses and starts his pocket recorder.

This fucker shouldn't even be in the building. When Ilya was complaining about this earlier today, #15 said they're probably giving him a lifetime achievement award. Ilya honestly wouldn't be surprised.

Roger Crowell puts his hands in his pockets and faces Ilya directly, standing exactly where Shane stood minutes ago. Ilya is less likely to draw Crowell in by the waist and press up against him, though. Maybe that would fix him. It's the one thing he hasn't tried.

"Rozanov." It's immediately clear Crowell was waiting for Shane to leave to talk to Ilya, because he gets right to the point. "I'd like to talk about these lawsuits."

"There are so many, Roger. You will have to be more specific."

"You're a powerful guy now. You could stop them."

Ilya tilts his head. "Why would I?"

"Let me rephrase. What will it take for you to call your dogs off? And I'll assume I'm being recorded this time."

Ilya breathes a laugh. "You approach people for bribes when you are being recorded?"

"Fucking—" Crowell loses whatever cool he had. His pinkish hue darkens to a rose color. "That's not a bribe offer and you know it." Ilya doesn't actually know that. It sounded a little like a bribe offer.

"Ok." Ilya nods, clamping his lips so he doesn't laugh, "It was an out-of-court settlement. *Very* out-of-court. First... *in-bathroom* settlement ever. And thank you for reminding me to record." Ilya takes his phone out of his pocket performatively, as if the digital recorder in his breast pocket hasn't been going this whole time.

Crowell puts his hands up. "Seriously. I'm surrendering. White flag or whatever. I give up, now what do you want?" Oh, he's actually scared. Is there really a risk of harm to him? Could he actually go to jail for this stuff? Ilya doesn't want to get his hopes up. He's already frustrated enough with the speed of the legal system, he doesn't have much faith in the results.

"Ok, you are surrendering." Ilya responds sarcastically, nodding. He stops when Crowell doesn't get his joke. "This is not a surrender. You can only surrender if you were in control." He takes a step forward. "But you never were. I have always controlled this. You are not in jail because I let you walk too many times." It's bold, Ilya knows, but he can't control himself around this numbskull. If he can't admit it here, he'll never be able to.

"I'm not in jail because you're a pillock, a dumbass. You messed up at every turn. You're a meathead jock, you're not meant to *think*. Or strategize. You want my job, you think it's easy? Ad sponsors like exciting games, cities need teams for tourism. We're consistently in last place for major sports viewership..."

"Women's—"

Crowell brushes this off with a hand gesture. “Women’s leagues don’t matter.”

“This would have been a nice quote for the leak.”

“Your fucking poorly-planned leak. You’re trusting milksops like Hayden Pike and you think you can do this job?”

“Sorry, you wanted to ask me for a favor?” Ilya laughs, he can’t help it. “Here is what I will suggest: go home, Roger. No one here wants to talk to you. Spend some time with your guitar and any remaining friends before you are jailed.”

Crowell narrows his eyes and thinks for a beat before he starts. “I could tell you about the long hours and the travel that makes it impossible to keep a family. Or the constant scrutiny from urchins like you, never a moment of privacy. But you know the worst part about this job, Rozanov? Everyone hates you. No matter what you do, it’s always wrong.” Crowell shakes his head. “You’re not ready for that. You’re a people-pleaser and you want to be liked. But that ends the second you take that role. You’ll never be liked again.”

Ilya swallows. It’s not something he’s thought much about, and he hates how correct Crowell is.

Obviously he takes too long to respond, caught off-guard by Crowell’s sudden precision. “You’re gonna fucking hate this job. You won’t last, and it will take everything you have away from you in the meantime.” Crowell turns to leave and interrupts whatever Ilya was going to impulsively blurt to prevent him from getting the last word. “Good fucking luck, *commissioner*.”

Ilya is still off-kilter as he steps up to receive his award. He’s only distracted from his conversation with Crowell when he remembers he has to address the crowd. He did this 8 years ago, he’s had in various presenter roles since, he’s watched Scott Hunter do for years, if he’s commissioner he’ll have to do it every year. But this feels different than all those.

“Thank you,” He starts as the applause dies down, “You probably are expecting Scott Hunter by now, and he is there, waiting.” Ilya looks off stage behind the curtain. Is Hunter... tearing up? That can’t be right. The lights are really bright, that must be it. Ilya is only taking the spotlight from him for thirty seconds, the man needs to chill.

“But you know, Hunter is just... second in command. He has always been a good public face, and we would not have it any other way. Even when much more attractive, better hockey players, much younger ones came out, we still needed Scott Hunter to speak for us. We always will.”

Ilya purses his lips and looks at his cards. He has something written here, one column in Russian and the other in English, just in case. He really didn’t want to slip up.

“But Hunter has to wait for a minute so I can say a few things on behalf of the Ringleader. Because the Ringleader once told me ‘do not let Scott Hunter speak for me and tell everyone lies.’ And I follow orders, unlike some people...

“So, you all should know this: the Ringleader is a pathetic romantic sap and did all this so he could kiss his boyfriend in public. When this started, it was impossible. So in a moment of boredom or angst or both, he decided to do something about it.

“He put together this pact in hopes that when one person came out, they all would, and maybe he could too, someday. He asked Scott first, then later that weekend Baldwin, then Shane Hollander I think was a big win for the movement, but I might be biased... He got Franco after that who retired immediately at the end of the season, the asshole. He got Lundin. And then he watched the finals in 2017 on the edge of his seat, the whole world on the line.

“I want you people to understand how miserable it was, really, to feel like you were alone. I never have felt like that, I always knew there were people like me here. But some people have just terrible gaydar. So they don’t know. They are just lonely.

“I think there will always be a need for this group, and hopefully we have proved that hockey players are better if they are a little bit gay. Ottawa is proof of that.

“But I also know from my personal experience that this game is only fun if you have a good rival. I was blessed with a good, hot one from the beginning. Where is Hollander?” Ilya squints performatively at the section where Shane’s seat is. Some people laugh. “But if your rival leaves, you are left with nothing. There is no conflict, no drama. This is not fun. The Ringleader’s opponent was Roger Crowell, and now he is dead.” There are some gasps, and Ilya rolls his eyes, “He is not actually dead, he’s here, why is he here?” Ilya shakes his head out of the tangent. “So if I were this Ringleader, and my rival left, I would leave. Wouldn’t be fun anymore.

“I said this to Mr. Ringleader and he agreed because I am the smartest of them. He will not let me tell you who he is, but he says this ring doesn’t need leading anymore. It is self-leading now.

“So. Thank you for this award, thank you to the world’s sexiest man, Shane Hollander. And his parents. And my team. And all of these guys...” Ilya won’t cry, he just won’t. “I will let Scott Hunter come here and bore you to sleep. Be kind to him in his old age, is very late for him to be up.” Ilya turns away from the standing ovation.

Hunter walks across the stage with his head down, trying to hide his face. Ilya can see now clearly he was standing backstage openly weeping.

He shakes Ilya’s hand but halfway through thinks better of it and hugs him. “Don’t be such a ninny.” Ilya mutters in his ear.

“You can’t make homophobic jokes if you’re the diplomat of gay hockey.” He murmurs back.

“Good thing I am *not* the diplomat of gay hockey.” Ilya gestures at the podium and the applause dies down.

Scott gets to the podium and clears his throat, “As usual, this is fine as long as the MVP stands up here. I’m actually surprised no one has made a rule to prevent us from doing this at any point.”

“Would be my first change, if I were commissioner.” Ilya says, and winks at the crowd, who laugh a little.

“Better not be,” Scott grumbles. Then he looks at Ilya and back out at the room and gets a devilish grin. “Anyway. This means Ilya has to stand here and listen.”

Oh, no.

Ilya hadn’t thought this through at all. A week ago, they decided they’d still have Hunter speak. Why mess with a good thing? Ilya doesn’t plan to tell anyone he was the Ringleader unless he has to, especially not before his new job is secure. Through the audio recordings and some well-researched evidence from internet sleuths, the public is starting to understand that the Ringleader— whoever it is— acted a little dubiously at times. This is what Ilya has always feared by coming out as the instigator of this pact, that he would be tied to that lawlessness. So they decided to continue as normal, act like Ilya was just another guy. He’ll get credit for his work eventually, and as commissioner he’ll do so much more that will secure his legacy, too...

But he hadn’t considered the fact that he’d be standing up here, stuck, in front of a room of his peers, bosses, and cameras, while Scott Hunter talks about him. And Scott could not look happier at the prospect of making Ilya squirm. At least Shane usually makes the squirming worthwhile.

Scott begins, “You might have noticed something different about this year’s cup. While between Ottawa and Anaheim, there were more openly queer players in the final than ever, no one used the opportunity to come out. All of Ottawa’s many queer members were out already, and Anaheim, sorry, but you’re supposed to *win* before you come out.” There are some scattered laughs. Rayan is out, but #15 is still waiting for the cup to do it, so the joke is landing differently for everyone in the room. “Coach Brandon Wiebe did release a statement last week, and we’re all proud of the first ever coach.

“The cup tradition had a good five years, but it did its job. It took long enough, and we’re here now. It was designed to get the ball rolling, so there were five years when someone came out with the cup and now, one when no one needed to.

“And we wouldn’t have done it without one guy in particular.” Scott sneaks a glance at Ilya. He would be mad at that clue, but weirdly enough, no one *needed* a clue. The room slowly cascades into applause again. It’s more enthusiastic than it was for Ilya’s MVP award.

It turns out, in a room with 500 people, between the queer guys themselves, the ally army, the Board of Governors, various staff... About half the room knows the Ringleader. Ilya hadn’t

really considered that. Scott's got a smile on his face like he tried to tamp it down and couldn't.

"Ok, ok." Scott tries to get the attention back on himself. He adds, coyly, "I don't know why you'd all react like that..." As the room starts to quiet, he refocuses. "So this one guy— who could be anyone, really— approached me in 2017 with this stupid idea, but since then, the community we've built here is better than I thought it would ever be, and I found myself with friends. Not teammates or coworkers but actual real life friends I can go to for anything day or night. Whether they're in the closet or out, whether they're retired..." he glances at Ilya and his gaze snags. His eyes are welling up again. Who is he, Shane? "Retiring because they're too old to play anymore." The room laughs and Ilya rolls his eyes. Scott keeps his eyes on Ilya, "They're family. Best thing I've ever done with my life. I wouldn't trade it for the world."

He looks back at the crowd, breathes shakily and shakes out his shoulders. "Now, we understand that Astor Yates is stepping down. Here are some demands we would make of a new commissioner stepping into the role..."

Oh, fuck. He's about to be mauled by his own monster.

2024, two years later

"Big five year anniversary coming up, huh?"

"You've been married five years?" Some rookie is asking Ilya in the Irina Foundation box at game seven of the Cup Finals. Since taking on the commissioner job, Ilya has gone back to being shit about names. The updated list of queers is up on his wall, still, but without checking he just knows this kid is in the 50s somewhere. Shane tried to keep up the index cards for the whole league for a season, because he's developed some sort of fetish for office organization... no clue where he got that. But there really wasn't a point anymore. The rookie turns to Scott Hunter, who he knows will have the real scoop, "How was the wedding?"

"Uhhh," Scott shrugs, "I wasn't there. No one was, I think just Hollander's parents. That's it."

"Wait, there was no wedding?" #49 gasps. Right, he wasn't around for this, he came in the same year as Luca.

"I mean, we got married." Shane argues. "There was a wedding, it was just..."

"No party." Ilya summarizes.

"Still can't believe you of all people let that happen, Roz." Barrett joins in. Ilya can see this is about to become a room-wide conversation, and there are about 30 people here.

"Yeah, were you, like, trying to save money?" The original rookie asks, confused.

Ilya doesn't know what to do with that question. All the older guys look at each other. "We weren't out..." Ilya says slowly. The facial expression on the kid doesn't get any more understanding. "If we had a party... people would find out."

"So?"

Scott blinks a few times. Ilya blames himself. No one is sitting these rookies down and giving them any sort of education. He wonders if the Board of Governors would give him a hard time if he tried to push through a mandatory history course.

"Even five years ago, we both might have been kicked from the league."

The kids are looking at all of them skeptically, like that can't be true, like they're overreacting. Really, the youngest rookie here is only about 13 years younger than Ilya. But Ilya realizes with some distress that Scott Hunter had come out before this kid entered Juniors. It's not just the league, he's never known *hockey* without this group. It's only been a few years, how could so much change so quickly?

Unaware that everyone surrounding him is growing 5% grayer with each passing second of silence, the kid moves on, unaffected, "So you never had a party? That's sad."

Ilya didn't know what he was expecting from the discussion about his wedding. Probably that the conversation would be completely forgotten. It's a fair concern, Ilya has thought about how different their wedding was from, say, Scott's, or the other weddings of their friends they've attended since. It's never bothered him, and he knows it never bothers Shane. Shane would probably have liked it this way no matter who he was marrying. For someone who lives his life in the spotlight, he doesn't really love non-hockey spotlight on him.

Ilya did *not* expect Scott to hold him so long at the post-MLH Awards handshake hour. They've been heading straight over in a group to the homo after-party in recent years, still meeting away from the awards for the few people who want to exercise caution. But he and Hunter recently butted heads about a player's contract dispute, so he decides to placate him and stay if he wants him to. Plus, as commissioner he really should stay a little longer at these things.

He also didn't know Barrett and Haas had Shane up in Barrett's hotel room, under the pretense of a team meeting.

So when Ilya and Scott exit the hotel onto the street to head to the homo after-party, he's surprised to find Shane, Barrett, and Haas also leaving. But he shrugs and takes his husband's hand. He's still not over being able to do that, after all.

They make their way to the familiar restaurant and Barrett and Haas go in. But Scott stops Ilya and Shane with a hand on one shoulder each.

"Wanted to say I'm really happy for you two."

Ilya and Shane exchange a confused look. Shane croaks out “We’re... happy for you, too?”

Scott shakes his head. “I’ll say a lot in there, but I won’t get to say that you two kind of grew up together. Not many people meet their husband at 17. And it’s crazy because it’s not like you just settled like some kind of high school sweethearts. You worked for it, for so long.”

“Hunter.” Ilya refuses to let Scott make him cry over literally nothing outside of a routine party after a routine award show. “Are you dying?”

“Ok. Well, I tried.” Scott removes his hands from the couple’s shoulders and gestures to the door. “Enjoy this. You guys are so loved.”

Shane and Ilya are back to looking confused. Still, Ilya opens the door and they descend the stairs to the meeting room they practically own at this point. In fact, he needs to ask Shane and Yuna about purchasing—

“Surprise!” A chorus of voices screams.

The room is more packed than he’s ever seen it, by about tenfold. It seems like every gay on his roster, the retired ones, even some of the closeted guys. Plus some allies, all of the Centaurs, the Hollanders, is that Svetlana and Rose Landry?

“What is this?” Ilya asks into the ether, hoping one of the... god, hundred? people will answer.

Barrett appears behind him again. “Some of the kids thought it was sad you never got a wedding party. So, happy wedding day, guys.”

Shane squeezes Ilya’s hand, so he looks over. “Did you know about this?” He asks Shane.

“No,” Shane laughs shakily. “Is this why my mom took the party planning off your hands this year?”

“Oh my God. She said I was too busy for it...”

The room itself is different. More tables, obviously, and there’s an altar set up with more flowers than Ilya has ever seen in his life.

Hayes materializes, “We didn’t know if you’d want to do a whole ceremony or not. We told Hunter he’s officiating, so even if you don’t want the ceremony, don’t tell him that. He’s acting very annoyed about the whole thing. It’s fun.”

“This is a cool space,” Pike comments, “why were we never invited to these parties before?”

Vaughan shoves Pike’s shoulder. “You’re an idiot. Have you even read the materials Lowery keeps sending us??”

There’s a clinking of glass and the room falls silent.

“Hi everyone,” Hunter begins. Loud groans emanate from most of the room.

“There’s not even a microphone we can take away!”

“If Hunter doesn’t have attention, he’ll combust.”

“Hunter, we’re throwing you a surprise retirement party next.”

“You already *got* married, dude!”

“Well, so did Ringlander, this is just the party.”

“Are they still going to do the line about objecting? I’m thinking of shooting my shot with the CILF.”

Scott clears his throat, “Ok, guys?” Once the room is silent again, “No one is shooting their shot with anyone married tonight. And if you are, I really, *really* want to know.”

He continues, “Anyway. We wanted to throw a wedding party for Shane and Ilya because they never got one. Everyone here has helped out in some way to make this happen. What better place to do it than where you got engaged?”

“They’d have to go to the bathroom for that.”

“Right. Ignoring that. We have a small dance floor, there’s food and drink so eat up, and we’re leaving it up to the “newlyweds” whether they want a ceremony or not. I’ve been roped into officiating so—”

“So he desperately wants you to do it so he can speak for longer.”

Scott rolls his eyes, “So what do you think?”

Ilya looks at Shane. A year on the same team did wonders for their telepathy, and it’s now fluent. Ilya knows this is what Shane is thinking, too. “No ceremony, I don’t think. Just…” he looks back out to everyone sitting at round tables. “Thank you. I never know why you do this kind of thing for us, but I won’t complain.”

Shane nods and adds, “We had to stay secret for so long, and I don’t think either of us ever pictured an actual wedding with so many people.”

Someone scoffs, “You’ve been public longer than you’ve been a secret now.”

Shane and Ilya look at each other confused again. “Ehh, no?” Ilya says. He doesn’t really understand where that’s coming from.

“Sure, if you got married in 2020. And revealed it in 2021. Even if you were together for a little before you were married…”

Oh. Ok, no. This sounds like it will devolve into a discussion of the timeline, and Ilya still can’t let that happen. His talented and gorgeous husband is still playing hockey, and can’t have people thinking the degenerate husband has been fixing games for him. “Anyway…”

“They were together in 2018.” Jethro Young points out unhelpfully. The room murmurs.

“Actually, 2017.” Vinny Marcello is a backstabber and a traitor.

“Ok, you got them.” Hunter tries to get the attention back on himself. “2017. So longer than they’ve been—”

“Didn’t Rozanov say he started all of this to be with Shane though?”

“He moved to Ottawa after dating for a year?”

“They like, hated each other though.”

“No.” Ilya says with authority. “We did not hate each other—”

Shane interrupts, “—I don’t know about that, I sometimes—”

“Not helpful.” Ilya wraps one arm around Shane’s waist to his side, a weird mirror of four years ago when they told a smaller version of this crowd they were married. “We never hated each other. And I *did* do this for Shane. Hunter’s onscreen invasion of Kip Grady’s mouth made it possible, we started dating that summer. This is the truth. 2017.” Ilya grits his teeth. It pains him to take away the years before that, because he knows now it’s always been real for them. But this is the answer that makes his game rigging a little less suspicious. After Shane’s cups.

“How did you know he liked you?”

“What a dumb question, have you seen Rozanov?”

“Plus, Hollander is not subtle about it when he likes someone.”

Someone interrupts with a “Guys.” and Ilya’s stomach sinks when he sees who has the proverbial talking stick. It’s Hayden Pike. “You’re all wrong. Ilya was Lily in Shane’s phone in like... 2016, is when I think I noticed it.”

Lundin gives a conciliatory head nod, “That’s before... anything I know of. You’re definitely the first PROLAPSE.”

“Prolapse?”

“President Rozanov’s Official Lovers’ Award for Players Sexually Engaged.”

Coach Wiebe whispers something to Scott and Scott’s eyes widen. “Ok... Nope. They were not the first PROLAPSE.”

“Could still be them. It was earlier than that.” Marly unhelpfully announces, “Ilya was texting a Jane in 2015.” Ilya takes a break from side-eyeing Wiebe to balk at his friend. Surely it can’t get worse than that.

Except it does. A soft voice clears its throat.

“Shane bought a property in Montreal in 2013 that reportedly sat vacant for years until it was sold the same month as Ilya’s Boston home.”

The room falls silent at the information and turns to stare at Luca Haas. He shrugs. “What? Reddit speculated for years about that property. Some people thought it was where Shane went to transform into a werewolf.”

Still, silence.

Ilya opens and closes his mouth a few times. Luckily he knows this crowd will have a reaction even when he is too stunned.

“A *werewolf*??” Someone cries, and begins the chorus of similar outcries around the room.

“If anyone’s a werewolf, it’s Ryan Price.”

“Hollander is like a gnome or something.”

“Rozanov is definitely a vampire.”

“Then what was the building for?”

“It was probably a gym.”

“He probably practiced ballet or some girly shit there.”

“Are you seriously coming out swinging with misogyny in this room?”

“We should never have invited straight people.”

“Hey! I’m bisexual. I’m in the group! You know that.”

“Guys shut up for a second!” J.J. barks, “How the fuck do you get anything done like this? Shane is here, let’s let him tell us the perfectly normal reason he would buy a building and let it sit there.”

The room looks at Shane, who appears to be weighing options in his mind.

Fuck it, people will think what they want no matter what, and any criminal wrongdoing will be found regardless of what they say tonight. At least he can leave Shane’s sex condo dignity intact. “Shane is not a werewolf.” Ilya announces.

“Secrets will corrode a marriage, Hollander.”

“Sounds like something the husband of a werewolf would say.”

“Sounds like something a vampire would say.”

“But,” Ilya cuts them off. “You are all wrong. It was 2010.”

The room sits in familiar shocked silence. The group must know to count to a certain number or something, because, like clockwork,

“*2010??*”

Fall, 2030

“Mr. Rozanov, there’s a lady here for you.”

Ilya sighs. He never would have given Jade Pike this internship if he knew she would stop calling him Uncle Lily. That was, without a doubt, his dumbest abuse of power. And he has abused his power a *lot*.

“Ok, yeah.” Ilya braces himself, knowing who it is, “Send her in.”

Kavita Kingsley has been a thorn in Ilya’s side since he assumed this role. Shortly after he retired from hockey, he sat down with her to establish what he hoped would be a mutually beneficial relationship. She crushed that dream with, *“If you think you can break rules with this job and say it’s for the greater good, you should know I’m watching.”*

So no, it has not been the buddy-buddy friendship he’s known from her in the past, and Ilya wouldn’t have it any other way. First, because it keeps him almost halfway honest, at least trying to hide the really reprobate corruptions. And second, Ilya would not know how to operate without a nemesis. For the first few years, it was actually Hunter, Shane, and Barrett, who seemed to overestimate his power and pressed him to do all sorts of weird stuff. Then, Kavita snuck up on him with an exposé on the environmental impact of the league. It meant he had to stop taking a private jet on a near-daily basis whenever Shane was traveling. So Ilya got a new enemy.

But he loves seeing her because he never knows if he’s getting the old friend or the equally-exciting foe.

Kavita is grim as she sits down in the chair across Ilya’s desk. “I have to warn you about something.” Ok, friend today. Cool. Ilya’s not disappointed. He’s not.

“If this is about 10,000 people getting food poisoning at that arena in—”

“No, but god, Ilya, how did that happen?” Kavita shakes her head, “It doesn’t matter. I’m not on that story.” She sighs, “Off the record, you should know someone is working on a documentary about the group 2017-2022.”

“Who is doing this? My guys? Or yours?”

“Are you asking if it’s a bootlicking documentary or if it will tell the truth?”

Ilya shrugs.

“It’s coming from a journalist. So, it should be good. I know the guy, and his tactics are not always ethical. You’d actually get along.” Kavita smirks and then looks around, “I know you have this place bugged to high heaven, so I won’t say much. But they’re digging around, and they don’t like you.” She pauses before adding, “They’re calling you the Rig-leader.”

“Clever.” Ilya says honestly. Game recognizes game. Then he considers it, “I’m not concerned. They have dug before, they find nothing. Even when they find things, I’m still fine. Best job in the world. But why are people still interested in this?”

She shakes her head, “You never understood it, did you? What you did was important. You don’t want recognition?”

They’ve been through this hundreds of times, because Kavita always wanted to be the one to break the story: *Ilya Rozanov is the Ringleader*. But the story never broke. It’s been a slow leak of speculation, and the Ringleader moniker just slowly started to fade out after Ilya

became commissioner. Instead of people thanking the Ringleader in their speeches and posts, they thanked Ilya by name. The public could assume it's for his work as commissioner. His players know the truth.

So the Ringleader has died out, becoming a thing of legend. Of course there's tons of speculation that it was him. He gave them RogueMLH a few years ago, when they got too close to the scent, before he realized he really could get away with a lot and it might not matter if anyone knows he was the Ringleader.

He wanted recognition at first, when he was still playing. But he's actually done a lot as commissioner and it seems to be more important than getting a bunch of dudes in the same rolodex over a decade ago. He's recognized for his official progress all the time, with awards from both the U.S. and Canadian governments, and some talk of international accolades every year.

So, "No. I don't need the recognition for that. What's this about, Kavita? You are jealous someone else will break a hockey story for once?"

"Honestly? *Yes.*" She huffs, frustrated. "Ilya, a story about your group, with your input, would win me a fucking Pulitzer—" she sees the look on his face, "Fine. *Another* fucking Pulitzer. You already know you're made of teflon, just let me do it."

He shakes his head. He has people he has to keep safe, and not everyone is secure as he is. "This documentary uhh... have you talked to Hunter? Is he..." Ilya shifts a little, uncomfortable with his next question.

Kavita seems annoyed by the shift back to the original topic. "He'll be fine. There's nothing on him. We've checked, a zillion times." Ilya knows this, he just needs to hear it so his breathing can even out.

"Cooper Lee?"

"Also clean."

"Mastur Bates?"

"It would be great if we could get you to stop calling him that, so we don't have to bleep his name every time we play it, but yeah, it might affect his reelection."

"Hmm..." Ilya doesn't like that. He likes his politicians *in office*, thank you very much. Kavita said this documentarian's tactics are shady? That means Ilya can get some dirt on him, get the guy discredited and ostracized. Maybe ask Cooper for some well-worded cease and desists... Yeah, that documentary will not be happening. Instead, in two years, Kavita will get her (next fucking) Pulitzer, and he can pick and choose what gets included. "We'll see about that. Crazy how a little scandal can wreck a person's career. Remind me not to run for office."

"I will literally send you a daily text with that reminder if that's what keeps you from running."

January, 2041

“Get in here, it’s about to start!” Shane’s voice breaks Ilya from his thoughts in the kitchen of a mansion in Washington, D.C.

“Ok, ok. I’ve seen this before, though.” Ilya picks up his refilled beverage and follows his husband the long walk back to the TV room where there are dozens of people gathered.

“Did you get lost?” Vinny Marcello smirks at Ilya. “This place is a maze, I need a map. Haven’t been so confused since your RASHYCOCK party in 2021.”

“I know. Who puts a kitchen on the opposite side of the house from the TV?”

“Hey Rozanov? Fuck off.” Melnyk sneaks up and lightly shoves him. “My husband designed this house.”

“Your husband should stick to hockey and underwear modeling.”

“Underwear modeling in particular.”

“He hasn’t modeled underwear in years, no one wants to see that grandpa in panties.”

“Speak for yourself.” Melnyk says defensively. “And if you don’t like our house why don’t you ask some other D.C. resident to host you?”

“They’re all busy today. And I’m Canadian, they wouldn’t have me. It would be an act of war.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” Troy Barrett butts in, “We don’t claim you. Your papers might say Canada, but you’re not Canadian.”

Shane looks appalled, “Wow, Barrett. His ‘papers’? Because he’s Russian? What the fuck?”

“What? No!” Barrett pales, “I was talking about Boston! It was a joke!”

“Will you guys shut up?” Rivera turns up the volume on the TV, where a man is giving a speech.

“We’ve heard this so many times,” Ilya groans.

“What are you talking about? A speech at a hockey award show is not the same as—”

“Oh my God, shut *up!*”

Ilya rolls his eyes and returns his focus to the screen. There's a reason he hasn't been looking at it— his face twitches trying to hold back a smile.

"My fellow Americans," Scott Hunter is saying, "I pledge to uphold the constitutional values we hold dear..."

Shane's eyes are watering as he rubs Ilya's back and whispers, "You did this, you know."

"I can't take credit for the U.S. presidential election, Shane." Ilya responds quietly, "My rigging days are over."

"You know what I mean." Unfortunately they're not quiet enough.

"And you *did* rig it, a little—"

"Not by that much, he would have won either way."

"Plus, they never catch Russian interference."

"*Shut up!*"

Ilya kind of knows what Shane means. He still remembers Hunter's retirement party at the Kingfisher where Scott pulled Ilya into a private booth before either of them got too plastered.

He looked nervous, and weirdly enough, Ilya already knew what he was going to say.

"I'm thinking about my next steps."

"Like, while you're walking? You should, at your age. Hips are not forever, Hunter."

"Fuck off." He was quiet for a minute. "Do you like being commissioner?"

"Yes." Ilya didn't hesitate to answer. He had already accomplished so much, and his work in hockey had seeped out into other sports, other parts of the world. He's using his platform to advocate for change in countries like Russia, too, and that's not even counting the Irina Foundation, which provides scholarships for queer youth in homophobic countries to go study in safe ones. His job lets him follow Shane around when he wants to, lets them live together, lets them think about starting a family where both parents don't constantly travel. So no hesitation needed, Ilya could say yes. But that, in conjunction with Scott's 'next steps' made Ilya a little suspicious. "Why? You will not come for my job. I will not be Crowelled."

"No one is going to *Crowell* you. Although... unrelated, I think you should know about the weekly collection of recordings of your bad jokes that Bianca circulates."

"I know who I hired." Ilya got Bianca back almost immediately upon entering the office. She's not an assistant, though, she runs a whole department. "Why are we here, not taking body shots off our husbands? My retirement party was more fun. What's going on?"

"I wanted to run something by you..." Scott looked nervous, "I've been thinking about it for a while, and you'd probably know better than anyone—"

“Get to it.”

“What if I ran for office?”

Ilya smiled. Why was Hunter acting like this would be a shocking revelation? Of *course* he would run for office.

“You aren’t *running* anywhere else...” Ilya continued before the inevitable ‘fuck off’.

“Hunter. You were made for it. If Mastur Bates can run—and win—you can, also.”

“Does it mess anything up for you? I don’t think it would, but people might accuse you of—”

“Have you been around the last few years? People accuse me of everything.” Ilya waved a hand through the air. “It doesn’t matter.”

They were quiet for a minute before Scott said, “Mayor of the city. I think. I don’t know... something where I can talk to the public and make it easier for people who know what they’re doing to do their jobs. I just liked being useful in that way...”

“...and? The power is nice.” Ilya said with a smile.

“I think we got very different things out of this experience.”

So yes, as it happens, maybe it was Ilya who gave Hunter the green light initially. And talked him down from a million panic attacks during his first campaign. And went on the road to do rallies across New York State during his next one. And maybe orchestrated some less savory back-alley deals so Hunter’s hands stayed clean but his agendas were still successful. This is how they’ve functioned for a long time, and it’s always worked for them.

Before he was even elected, Hunter offered Ilya a spot in his cabinet. With Shane retired and the kids almost grown, he could have picked up and moved for it. Since Shane retired they’ve been spending more time in their New York City apartment anyway, as it’s closer to league headquarters and the official RASHYCOCK headquarters, the Kingfisher. Becoming a U.S. citizen wouldn’t be *that* hard, now that he knows the... well, in twenty minutes he’ll know him.

He told Hunter no, and then Hunter offered to help Ilya run for office, too. But truthfully, Ilya is right where he wants to be. Sure, he’s only technically in charge of one measly sports league (the most popular sports league in North America, *thankyouverymuch*), but his connections and influence mean he can get almost anything imaginable underway within minutes. Unfortunately, the means by which he achieves those goals would not always be acceptable for someone in political office. Never anything super illegal... or, nothing that would send him to prison, at least. He’s not *Crowell*, after all.

He’s toyed with the idea of running just to show Hunter he could also win a popular vote, by a higher margin, but that’s not a reason to do it. Plus, they both know he’d crush Hunter in a landslide if they ever ran against each other. Hunter is lucky he’s Canadian, Ilya thinks as he watches Hunter speak.

He doesn't need to listen to the actual speech, Hunter practiced it to Ilya all last week while Ilya pretended to complain and chirped his honest feedback. He doesn't need much help, the guy was born to be a politician.

Ilya looks around the TV room at the hall-of-famers, along with some current players who made the trip. They still gather annually at the awards, so the old coots get to know each incoming class of rookies. Ilya still keeps a roster, unwilling to let anyone else be the Curator of the Queers, and his secret goal is to hit #100 before he stops. He's getting close. Being queer in hockey is nothing, now.

Once Shane and Ilya came out, the public realized that a team without a gay person hadn't won the cup in nearly a decade, probably even before. The fact that Carolina won it in 2013 extended the streak when Aldir came out. And Jacobsen, in his rookie year on St. Louis the year before that. Retirees coming out proved the point further—the streak of (known) queer players on cup-winning teams goes back years.

Hockey is historically pretty superstitious, so the general consensus linked the two factors: having a gay player is mandatory to win a cup. Now, it's considered pretty bad luck not to have one, though no teams will admit to letting that affect their hiring. A team without a gay member has not won the cup in decades.

Similarly, at some point a few years ago, someone started a rumor, maybe loosely based on statistics, that it's bad luck to come out during the season. So the RASHYCOCK tradition has continued in ebbs and flows, never taking more than a year off. But with players becoming more nonchalant about their sexualities, and rookies coming into the league already out, there aren't too many people left to come out.

It didn't help that Shane led the Centaurs to more cups, even after every possible queer on the team had come out. In 2022, at least they had Coach Wiebe to do it. But in their next cup finals, the team all sat around before the last game, wondering what to do. Holmberg suggested they all write down their hallpass list and the one with the most dudes on it has to come out. Hayes suggested they all make out with each other, because he's always weirdly game for that. Upon hearing these ideas, Ilya privately didn't really understand the issue, it sounded like there are at least two guys who could honestly still come out. But it was Boodram who suggested that they could make an official post about Sharon, the bisexual PT who Crowell kind of outed. They let her come down on the ice during the cup celebrations and hoist the cup, like a member of the team.

Each team eventually ran out of people to come out and they all handled it differently. Many chose to spotlight retired queer players who left before they could win RASHYCOCK, which worked for a while. Some teams approached the league offices to see if there's anyone not affiliated with any team who would like a chance. Bianca went down to celebrate on the ice for the Admirals at one point. Usually the winning team can find *someone*. Once, a player's son came out. In one legendary moment, the *mascot* of a team pulled the furry head off to make out with her partner after a cup win. At first, it was an effort by the teams' gay players and allies, but eventually the teams' Public Relations departments took it upon themselves to

organize it with constant oversight from the CIRCUS group. Really, the tradition is being kept alive through sheer force of will.

The DICK COMA award is a little different. The year Hunter retired, they paused the tradition in his honor. Since then, that award now goes to the best queer player of the year, usually on the winning team but sometimes a retiring player or one with a particularly robust philanthropic year. It's a legit award now, with a trophy in the shape of Scott Hunter. No cash prize obviously, or people would be faking their sexuality to win it. But it's become one of the more prestigious awards, just based on the recipients— they include some of the most well-respected names in the sport. And obviously they couldn't keep calling it the DICK COMA, but "Distinction of Class" was presentable and vague enough and meant they could still call it The D.C. or just The D.

Giving Shane the D was one of Ilya's happier career moments, second of course to when he spoke at Shane's hall-of-fame induction.

As commissioner, he *has* to speak at the hall-of-fame inductions. But during Shane's, the title also meant he could take twice as long as the usual hall-of-fame speech to recount every single thing he loves about his husband in excruciating detail. Shane made him scrap an entire page and a half because it wasn't "work appropriate" and "yes, you still work for the league, Ilya" and "our children are going to be there." The joke was on him, because Ilya just read him those ones in private where Shane was maybe even more uncomfortable hearing them. Shane spoke at Ilya's induction, too, where he was crying before he even took the podium.

Spring, 2051

Shane and Ilya are cuddled in bed enjoying a dreamy morning. A dog snores on the rug, sunlight is streaming in, and birds are chirping outside. The smell of coffee almost overpowers the scent of clean sheets. Shane is reading the news on his phone, Ilya is texting their children with his head on Shane's stomach.

"Your book is on the Bestseller list again this week." Shane boredly announces, though it's not a surprise. It's been selling well for months.

"Jealous?" Ilya looks at him upside down and smiles. Their relentless, lifelong competition pissed off their agents and publishers when they declared that they'd be releasing their memoirs on the same day to see who's did better. What started as a romantic bet was probably a very bad business decision in retrospect, but to Ilya's benefit. His book swept the floor with Shane's book.

Shane scoffs. "Not really. My record number of cups and I will be fine."

"Ehh, you are counting the ones you coached. They don't count."

“Fuck off, of course they count.” Ilya hums placatingly in response and they turn back to their screens. They absolutely don’t count.

Ilya snorts at his son’s text. “Wayne wants me to remind you to bring your meds to Vegas when we go to the awards.”

“How did we raise such an anxious over thinker?”

Ilya blinks at his husband. “No clue.”

They return to their screens once again.

Ilya’s pillow, Shane’s stomach, suddenly becomes less comfortable. He looks up at his husband’s furrowed brow. Ilya sits up, worried. “What is it?”

“Roger Crowell died.”

“Oh.” Ilya settles back down. “You scared me, I thought something bad happened.”

So, overall, a perfect morning.

Chapter End Notes



Some credits for this chapter:

- The surprise wedding is inspired by [@lorevelvet’s fic](#) for this story on Tumblr.
- Holmberg’s whole deal is a reference to [Secret Society of Stickhandlers](#) by @gurlsr00l, the reason I read the books in the first place. It took every fiber of my self-restraint not to name one of the gays after Archie Simmons. If you liked seeing these idiots in a group chat, you should be heading over there.
- @Eipthor commented VERY early that a physical Scott Hunter trophy would be funny, and it’s been in my notes since then.
- [The lists from @MonkeysNPlaybills](#) were extremely helpful especially this chapter, I used them to cross-reference what I had already said, and the peer-reviewed information was very clutch! For the COLONS: my goal was to give you at least one fact about every number, and I *think* I did for all but one (which is a fact in itself, if you think about it).
- @stevecarlsberg said there would be a bunch of MLH players’ kids named some variation of Wainwright, Strainer, Colander, etc. I just took that to its logical conclusion.
- The comment section in general has been incredible for letting me workshop these little details (namely, what would happen if they ran out of gay people to come out)
- The idea that you can’t surrender if you never had control is a reference to the same corny Ben Folds song where the title originates (“Do it Anyway”). Been sitting on that for a while.

So this is actually emotional for me? Thank you to everyone who made it to the end, kudos'd, commented, shared the fic anywhere, or felt compelled to make stories/lists/art/podfics/TikToks/edits/translations[edit:/A SONG!]. I've made some very incredible and weird friends, and you people have enriched the last few months of my life so much. Thank you for treating my comment section like a watering hole and/or townhall meeting. I have never in my life seen an ao3 comment section like this and I love it so much. If you've never scrolled to read the comments, please do! They're always like a continuation of the chapter. You people are very funny.

As promised, in the next few days/weeks, I'll post (on Tumblr) my spreadsheet, my list of unused acronyms, and I'll open the google doc of "what-if's". I'll also be going through and trying to find typos/awkward sentences, but I won't change anything of substance. [Edit: and tags! let me know if there are other/different tags I should be using!] Subscribe to the series for any future installments. I'll probably post some non-Chips fics first, because I'm excited for the next projects [edit: seriously thinking about making a poll to pick which idea is next?], but I'll return to this series whenever I miss it (likely often). I'll be writing in this fandom as long as it'll have me, because at this point I'm sort of hooked.

And I live on Tumblr (@exactphoify) if you want to keep in touch! You are all RASHYCOCK to me!

edit: [*The list!*](#)

End Notes

I love you all so, so much! The love for this fic is overwhelming! I read every single comment I get, and I try my best, but there's no humanly possible way I would be able to respond to everyone thoughtfully. So just know they're so appreciated and they feed me and I love them all!

I'm on tumblr: [@exactphoify](#)

In fact, I started a [TCASTF Hall of fame!](#)

I'm also on threads: [@icopythefax](#)

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