

Forever is the sweetest con

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Forever is the sweetest con

by [Promised_ivy](#)

Summary

“How long?”

Shane was shaking.

“Coach?”

“How long have you been fucking Ilya Rozanov?”

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Instead of getting injured during the game after Tampa, pictures are released exposing the secret relationship between Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander. The two rival captains are forced to choose between everything they've spent years building and the person they never quite learned how to let go.

Unfortunately, neither of them has ever been particularly good at walking away.

Notes

Shout-out to my beta reader, Polli8. I'm so happy we're codependent ao3 authors on top of everything else

Chapter 1: Game Changer

Chapter Notes

I am super excited to be posting this work. I've been thinking about this for ages and have finally worked up the courage and will to write it. I hope you enjoy it.

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

Shane was actually going to kill Rozanov. He swore as Ilya stole the puck from him again, laughing as he sped off in the opposite direction, Shane close behind him. Ilya was having a great game, easily weaving in and out of players and shooting off quips about their mothers as he passed. He watched as Ilya swerved around JJ and faked a pass to Marlow before slamming the puck in between Mitty's legs, bringing the Raiders ahead once again. Rozanov pumped his fist in triumph, looked straight at Shane, and winked. He looked beautiful. Shane wanted him dead.

As he hopped back over the boards to join his team on the bench, allowing the next line to head onto the ice, Hayden patted him hard on the back.

"Don't worry buddy, we'll get 'em next shift," Hayden commented, grabbing his water bottle and shooting some water into his mouth.

"Rozanov is fucking on one today," Drapeu grumbled.

JJ scoffed bitterly. "Won't fucking shut up. How the fuck does he even know my mom's dog's name?"

Shane tried to control the smirk that was creeping its way onto his face.

"KEEP IT DEEP, COME ON!" Theriault yelled behind them, making them all flinch and focus on the game.

Shane leaned over the boards. "We're dead silent out there."

Hayden tilted his head in Shane's direction. "What?"

"Nobody's talking. Defense doesn't know where the support is. Wingers don't know where the pressure's coming from. Coach is gonna make us run communication drills all week."

JJ groaned. "Great. Love those."

"Aw, some communication practice could be good for you, JJ. Isn't Gloria still not responding to your texts?" Hayden teased.

JJ shoved him. "Shut up, Pike," he grumbled.

The game continued as it had gone the last period, with Shane and Ilya trading goals back and forth. Even if Theriault wasn't thrilled with the pace of the game, Shane hadn't had so much fun playing hockey in years, relishing each finished check and completed pass, carefully ignoring the stare of blue eyes that were never far away.

"Move your feet, Shane! You're not paying rent out there!" Theriault yelled at him, and he couldn't help but roll his eyes at the tired phrase. When Shane was a rookie, the correction would have sent him spiraling. Now, Shane was old enough to know how Theriault liked to push his players, poking at them until they broke, hopefully close enough to the other team to actually cause some damage. Shane thought it was a flawed technique but had quietly run interference for the younger members of the team, even though the broader mentality still leaked into the locker-room talk.

"Don't fuck it up, rook," Comeau called to Broz as Shane's line began to hop the boards to begin another shift. Broz blushed as he tripped a bit getting onto the ice.

"One shift, Broz. That's all you've got to think about. Win one shift." Shane called as they bolted off towards the puck.

And win the shift they did as Broz slid the puck to Shane, who whipped it into the upper left corner of the net.

"Let's go!" Shane yelled as he slammed into Broz, giving his helmet a little shake. Broz grinned brightly back at him.

Shane glanced quickly across the ice at Ilya, who gave him a little bow of the head in acknowledgment. After they finished their respective celebrations or grumbles of frustration, both teams lined up for another face-off.

"What's a lonely girl to do in Montreal?" Ilya sighed as he skated towards center ice.

"If you behave yourself, maybe I can think of something," Shane teased back. Ilya beamed. Shane rarely flirted back on the ice, but after their conversation in Tampa, Shane was a little more willing to take the risk. No one would think anything of simple hockey teasing. Besides, the real risk wasn't in the thrill of a breakaway or in a closing hotel door. No, Shane thought as he felt his heart race as he looked at Ilya with far too much affection; that wasn't the real risk.

"Ah, Hollander, but it is so hard to behave when you keep teasing me with your sexy, sexy goals." Ilya tilted his helmet and tried to bat his eyelashes at him. "It is giving me all of these thoughts and these feelings. I do not know if I can control myself."

"Down boy," Shane retorted with a smirk. Ilya laughed, and Shane won the face-off. Ilya chased him down the ice and caught him from behind, driving him into the glass so hard Shane felt his teeth clatter.

Asshole. They were both grinning.

Seventeen minutes into the second period, Shane felt a noticeable shift in the crowd. There was something different. The energy had shifted away from the tension of eager fans desperate to see their team win into...something else. The excited buzz of conversation gave way to grumbles and whispers. From the bench, Shane saw multiple people pull out their phones and stare at them wide-eyed before shoving them into their friends' hands.

He had always felt the weight of the watchful eyes of fans and coaches and teammates, and as he had gotten better and raised more trophies above his head, the weight of those stares only multiplied, especially from the people that 'didn't see themselves here that often,' as his mom liked to remind him.

But this felt different.

Now, the stares seemed to have an edge to them that he'd never felt. Surely there wasn't anything actually wrong...right? He shook his head, spraying more water in his mouth and spitting it onto the ground. He was being paranoid. The tight game was getting to him. Although he felt less assured when a girl sitting close to the bench gasped and looked right at him. They held eye contact for a moment until the girl turned back to her phone, scrolling with greater fervor.

He looked at his teammates on the bench who were shifting in their seats with similar expressions of unease. Hayden kept glancing into the crowd. JJ was staring at something across the arena with a frown.

Nobody knew what was wrong.

But everybody seemed to know something was.

"Come on, let's keep our heads in the game," Theriault called behind them, but even he turned to the assistant coach next to him and muttered something under his breath.

Shane finished the period on the ice with a frustrated groan. Rozanov had managed to sneak in another goal at the last second, leaving the game at 3 - 2 for the Raiders. God, Ilya would be merciless if the Raiders won tonight. However, Shane secretly hoped a win would put Ilya in a good enough mood to agree to maybe skip Russia this summer. And maybe come to Shane's cottage instead. Maybe.

As he turned to head off the rink, he saw noticeably more Metro management gathered near the bench in a tight circle with the coaches. He glanced over at the Raider's bench and saw LeClaire talking frantically on a phone, waving concerned players away into the tunnel.

Shane's heart sank into his stomach, and his legs felt numb in a way that had nothing to do with the intense period he had just finished playing. He glanced over at Ilya, who was already looking over at him with a concerned expression. For a minute there, it was just them on the ice, and it reminded Shane of the first time he brought Ilya into his apartment, both of them staring at each other from opposite sides of the room, daring the other to make the first move. Shane turned back and headed towards the bench with the rest of the team.

As he marched past management, he felt their hushed conversation waver slightly, with a few of the members meeting his eyes before turning back to the group.

Fuck.

The group dispersed quietly and followed behind him into the tunnel. Shane could feel the beginnings of a panic attack coming on and swallowed it down. It ended up somewhere near his lower ribs. Entering the locker room, he hurried to his locker, stripping his gloves off and grabbing his phone.

“EVERYONE LISTEN UP,” Theriault yelled, made even louder by the locker room tiling. Shane flinched and dropped his phone with a loud clatter. Theriault looked at the phone pointedly.

“No one is allowed to look at their phones during the break. I don’t want any distractions on my ice, is that understood?”

The team looked around with confused expressions.

“I said, is that understood?” he repeated more harshly.

“Yes, coach,” the team mumbled back. Shane looked at his phone still lying face down on the ground, taunting him with a faint buzzing.

“Anyone who looks at their phone is going on waivers. That includes you, Hollander,” he added harshly as Shane bent down to grab his phone from the ground, feeling the incessant vibrations bleed into his hand. He blushed and shoved it into the back of his stall, looking back at his coach, who was looking at him with a slight face of disgust that set Shane on edge. It was about his phone...right?

Theriault and the others hurried into Theriault's office and shut the door quickly, talking in hurried, hushed voices.

The rest of the team slowly thawed and began preparing for the next period, but the sense of unease didn’t leave. JJ was retaping his stick on the bench, but kept messing up and starting over, his eyes helplessly drifting from one teammate to another, searching for answers in their worried gazes and nervous laughs. Next to him, Hayden’s leg was bouncing up and down incessantly, seemingly filling the entire room with its repeated ticking, counting down to something. Around him, the jostle and noise of the locker room seemed to fade further and further away with each tap, until Shane’s heartbeat seemed to fall in line with the noise.

It was probably a trade. People got traded all the time.

Or someone could have gotten caught in a cheating scandal. There were enough adulterers in the league, or at least Shane assumed there was. He wasn’t often kept in the loop on his teammates' more scandalous affairs.

Or an accident on the ice somewhere. It happened all the time. Shane vaguely thought of Vaughn and hoped he was okay. He was probably splayed out on the ice somewhere, bleeding

out. Poor Vaughn.

Or...

No.

It couldn't be *or*. Shane refused to believe it. It couldn't be. He would have noticed if his life was over. Surely there would be some loud explosion or a siren or something. It couldn't just be pointed stares and hushed whispers.

But as the team hurried out to start the last period and Shane made eye contact with their young social media manager, he felt less sure.

She was looking at him like he was headed to the gallows.

* * * * *

Third period was a shit show. Fortunately, the Raiders didn't seem to be faring any better. Shane tried his best to focus on the ice, focus on the puck in front of him. But he couldn't help but get distracted by every flash in the crowd. Every turn of the camera, every raise of a hand. They knew. Whatever it was, they knew. And they also knew that he didn't. The audience was looking at him like they were watching a car crash instead of a game.

Shane's performance on the ice had never felt so important. Every slapstick, every check, every pass felt like it was a witness in Shane's own trial, and Shane was faltering under cross-examination.

Shane rejoined Ilya for the face-off. Neither of them spoke as they approached center ice. Shane glanced at Ilya and paused upon meeting his eyes. In his almost eight years of knowing the Russian forward, he had never seen this expression.

Ilya looked terrified.

Shane's heart sunk, and his hands shook as he leaned across the circle on the ice, looking more and more like the bullseye of a target.

"Shane," he heard Ilya whisper.

Shane snapped his head back up in shock, flinching at Ilya's unguarded face. Ilya had never used Shane's first name on the ice. The puck dropped, and Ilya sped off with it.

God, what if this was about Ilya? His father had just died. Shane couldn't bear to see Ilya's name in the news like that again, watching Ilya try to covertly look at Twitter mentions while on FaceTime and giving himself away with every flash of pained expression and twitch of a downturned lip.

It's nothing, he thought like a mantra. He's in his head. It's not about Ilya. It's not about Shane. It's not about...

The game ended without either team scoring again, giving the Raiders the victory, though neither the winner nor the loser celebrated or commiserated. Both teams made their way silently down their respective tunnels.

Was it too late to run? He didn't think he'd make it very far in skates, but he was willing to try.

The team slowly filled the locker room. A few had begun to slowly remove their gear. The rest merely stood around, anxiously waiting for their coach to bring up the rear. The room stilled when Theriault entered. The number of executives and managers seemed to have doubled since they were last in here, crowded around the door to Theriault's office. A few were talking in hushed tones on their phones, looking panicked.

Shane's entire body told him to run. He stayed.

Theriault took a few harsh breaths, pacing back and forth slightly.

It wasn't that. It was nothing. It was—

“Hollander.” Theriault spat, his tone icy.

Oh god.

No.

Please no.

“Coach,” Shane managed to squeeze out, his voice suddenly raspy.

“How long?”

Shane was shaking. The room seemed to be getting bigger and bigger. He felt like he was on a roller coaster, the chain clicking loudly as it snapped into position, dragging him upwards while Shane braced for the fall. Although this time, he wasn't sure whether there would be any track at the top.

“Coach?”

“How long have you been fucking Ilya Rozanov?”

Shane stared at him, and his stomach dropped.

The room tilted.

He heard Hayden inhale sharply next to him. Someone behind him dropped their stick, and it clattered loudly against the tile while another person let out a loud ‘what the fuck.’

“I—I'm,” Shane stumbled. He glanced around the room at the eyes of his teammates, looking at his with varying degrees of shock, disbelief, and discomfort. His breathing was getting quicker, like it was trying to get one last gulp before getting shoved underwater.

“I’m not,” he finished weakly. Theriault laughed, a cruel, horrible sound.

“You were photographed. At All-Stars. Tampa? Ringing any bells there, Hollander?”

Oh god, pictures.

Oh god. Tampa.

“I—it’s not—it’s not what it looks like.”

JJ let out a short scoff and shook his head. Drapeu looked like he was about to break something, clenching his gloves between white knuckles. Mitty let out a soft “Jesus”. He had his phone out now, his finger darting across the screen, his face white. A few members leaned over to look at Mitty’s phone with him, their eyes wide.

“And what does it look like, Hollander? Because it sure looks like my captain,” Theriault spat that word, “dropping to his knees for a rival captain.”

Shane stood frozen, his mouth hanging open slightly, trying to form words. No. No no no no no no no—

“So. How long have you been fucking Rozanov?” Theriault snapped. “Or should I say, how long has he been fucking you?”

Shane flinched. He felt hot tears welling, his face burning scarlet. He wanted to disappear into his body, but it wouldn’t let him. He was painfully aware of every wide-eyed stare and awkward shuffle away from him.

His life was over. God, this couldn’t be real. This had to be a nightmare. It was one he had countless times before.

They knew.

They all knew.

“I’m...I’m sorry,” he whispered weakly. He wasn’t sure what he was sorry for.

Therauilt scoffed. “Fucking typical. That’s all you have to say? Goddamn it, Hollander!” Theriault took a whiteboard marker from the board and flung it at him, forcing him to duck and cover his head. It clattered loudly against the stall behind him.

“Was it worth it?” he seethed. “Was it worth it? To throw away your whole career? Everything this team gave you, everything I gave you? To suck some fucking dick?”

“Did we not give you enough attention? Were the crowds not big enough?”

Shane was crying now.

"Fucking humiliating," Theriault spat.

He knocked a table over. Broz let out a little yelp.

“Now we have to go explain to the Commissioner why there are photos of his star captain kissing his rival.”

Shane cleared his throat.

“We?”

Theriahult looked about ready to punch him. Shane cowered slightly.

“Yes, we,” he sneered. “ *We* have to go out there and tell fans that no, their fabulous captain isn’t a fucking faggot and isn’t letting himself get fucked by Ilya fucking Rozanov. And that no, he didn’t just throw the game to get some dick.”

Shane felt like he was going to throw up. Theriahult took a pointed step closer to him.

“Now *we* are going to be stuck in meetings for the next twenty-four hours doing goddamn damage control. But we can't do any of that until we know how much damage we're dealing with.”

He took a long breath.

"So tell me, Hollander."

Theriahult's voice had gone strangely calm.

"How long?"

Shane’s whole body was shaking. He heard Hayden breathe a small “coach” in protest next to him. Theriahult gave him a quick glare, and Hayden ducked his head.

Oh god. Hayden knew. His best friend. He probably hated him.

Shane looked away before he could find out.

“Since our rookie season,” he said, trying to make his voice as strong as possible.

“Since the summer before,” a voice corrected from the corner.

Shane’s head whipped to the right.

Ilya.

He was here, in Shane’s locker room. He and the Raiders’ coach had slipped into the locker room unnoticed, their arrival masked by the sound of Theriahult's yelling.

Shane wiped the tears and snot away from his face, trying to clear his vision. To get a better view of Ilya’s sharp face. His bright eyes. To ground himself in something, anything.

Oh.

Ilya was crying too.

His face was red and blotchy, and his curls were sticking up, still slightly wet from the sweat of the game. He had never looked so small as he shifted back and forth, looking around at the Metros awkwardly. The sight made Shane's heart wrench.

Everything else seemed to dim as he stared at Ilya. His eyes skimmed over every crease, every mole. Every silhouette was familiar, and Shane was reminded of how much he liked every obnoxious laugh, lost tooth, and crusty fingernail. Shane wasn't alone. He had Ilya.

And he was crying.

"Hi," Shane whispered.

Ilya let out a wet laugh. "Hello."

The silence floated through the air, all eyes drawn to the scene playing out before them, daring them to witness the scandal up close. No one had ever seen the Boston captain cry or even imagined that he could.

"You can't go back to Russia, can you?" Shane asked softly, not breaking eye contact with Ilya.

Tears ran faster down Ilya's face as he slowly shook his head.

"No," he breathed, "I cannot."

The gravity of the sentiment was not lost on the room. For the first time, Theriault seemed truly speechless, his face contorting itself into something that could be misconstrued as sympathy.

Shane wished that he could be strong for Ilya. That he could be the one to stand firm and weather the arrows, shielding Ilya from pain and holding him together. But he couldn't help the tears that fell rapidly from his own eyes. He was crying for Ilya. And he was crying for himself. For what they had lost. For what he had lost.

So instead, they smiled at each other slightly and broke down together.

Being strong was overrated anyway.

"What are you going to do?" Shane asked.

"I ah—I don't know." Ilya reached a hand up to rub the top of his ear, sniffing. "I still have my work visa unless the Raiders fire me, so," he gestured vaguely, purposefully not looking at the silent coach next to him. "I can probably apply for citizenship in US as special person, but it is not for sure."

Ilya chuckled softly. "Or I can always marry Svetlana. She is old friend so..." He shrugged slightly.

Oh.

That's...that's not...

"Or you could just marry me," Shane heard himself blurt out. The silence that had plagued the locker room broke quickly as shocked, outraged gasps and voices echoed through the room.

"Dude," Shane heard Hayden whisper behind him.

Ilya's lips quirked up in a light smirk.

"Ah, finally making an honest man of me, Hollander?"

Ilya gestured to the room around them, still filled to the brim with the stench of sweat.

"This is not very romantic of you. You are not even on one knee," Ilya huffed with a quirk of an eyebrow. Shane couldn't help but smile back.

"Ilya, if you are asking me to get on my knees on this filthy bathroom floor and propose to you, you are going to have to ask nicer than that."

Ilya burst out laughing, and Shane loved the sound of it so much he thought he might have proposed a thousand times over just to hear it again.

"I don't have time for this bullshit," Theriault snapped, suddenly remembering how to use his voice. He turned to LeClaire, who was awkwardly rocking next to Ilya, looking almost unrecognizable as his Boston coach persona.

"Is Crowell calling you or me?"

LeClaire scratched the back of his head. "He's waiting for us on a Zoom call with Evan and a couple other people from headquarters. I don't have my computer on me, though, so we figured we would all join on one screen."

"Fine," Theriault replied shortly and stormed into his office, pushing aside the crowd that had amassed in front of it.

Ilya stared at Shane for a moment, still frozen in front of his locker before moving quietly to put a hand on Shane's shoulder, guiding him towards the office as well.

"Is okay, Shane. We are going to be okay," he said, seemingly trying to comfort himself as much as he was comforting Shane. He ran a thumb across the back of Shane's neck, and Shane leaned into the contact.

"Are we?" Shane asked softly, not even sure which 'we' he was referring to.

Ilya didn't respond, just continued to move him towards the door, avoiding the stares of Shane's teammates, which seemed to be burning a hole at the place where Ilya's hand was touching Shane.

LeClaire took up the back and closed the door on his way in. Theriault was hastily typing on his computer, trying to pull up the video call. The back of the room still held a number of people from the front office who Shane was unfamiliar with. Shane and Ilya automatically took the two seats that stood in front of the desk. Without thinking too much about it, Shane reached across and grabbed Ilya's hand, causing Ilya to look at him and raise an eyebrow. He didn't move his hand away, though.

Listening to the sound of the call connecting, Shane felt like he was standing in front of the firing squad, waiting for them to ask him if he had any final words. Did he have any final words? Maybe a classic, 'please God no'. Or a 'I've won two Stanley Cups, fuck you'. Or maybe just a simple 'I'm innocent.'

But as he glanced at the nervous mess of a man next to him, his hand shaking underneath Shane's and his leg bouncing up and down, he didn't feel particularly innocent. Nor did he feel particularly repentant. He hoped he was Ilya's favorite crime too.

The computer refreshed, and Theriault's screen was suddenly filled with the image of a very red, very angry commissioner.

"You boys better have a great fucking explanation for this behavior." Crowell hissed, making the computer speaker ring a little too harshly.

Shane flinched and glanced at Ilya, who was also a bit speechless. Did they have an explanation? *Well, you see, commissioner, when two young boys are very horny for each other, and then you put those two horny boys in a communal shower...*

"We ah—," Ilya began, "Shane and I have been seeing each other for a while, and we—"

"Seeing each other?" someone else on the call interrupted. They looked like a lawyer of some kind. "What does that mean exactly? Are you two in a relationship?"

"Well, we... We..." Shane had no idea what they were. Not after Tampa. Especially not after Tampa.

He looked at Ilya again, nervously biting his lip. Ilya only looked down quickly at his feet.

Crowell scoffed. "Whatever, I don't give a shit. Here's what we're going to do." He leaned forward slightly, his sweaty face pushing towards the edge of the screen. "Both of you are going to go online. You are both going to deny any sort of romantic attachment. You are going to say it was a stupid prank."

Crowell slammed his pointer finger against his desk. "And then the two of you are going to stay the fuck away from each other."

Silence filled the room as they took in what Crowell was saying. Shane stared at him.

That was it?

That was the plan?

A fucking prank?

Nobody was talking about keeping Ilya safe. Nobody was talking about his visa. Nobody was talking about Russia. Nobody seemed remotely concerned about what would happen to him if the Raiders cut him loose.

They just wanted him gone.

They wanted Shane to let him go.

Crowell leaned back in his chair and waved dismissively at the screen.

“I don’t want any of this gay shit in my league. You can do whatever you want inside your own homes, but keep it off my rink and keep it away from each other.”

He nodded firmly before turning to someone standing off-screen.

“Cheryl, contact Sarah and tell her to send the drafts of the press statements to both the Metros and—”

“I’m sorry,” Shane interrupted, still reeling, “You want us to say it was a prank?”

Crowell frowned at the screen.

“Yes, Hollander. We’ll send you all the language, you just have to—”

Shane cut him off with a sharp, angry laugh. “How fucking stupid do you think people are?”

Ilya’s eyes widened, and he whipped around to look at Shane. Shane had never spoken to authority figures like this. Not golden boy Hollander.

Shane continued, “No one is going to believe this is a prank. I mean, who would we even be pranking? Haha, we got you, Scott Hunter; we sucked each other's dicks.”

“Watch yourself, Hollander,” Crowell growled.

Shane stood up abruptly, leaning against the desk and staring into the camera. He was seething.

“You watch yourself, commissioner.”

Shane took a deep breath before continuing. “I am gay, and that’s never going to change.”

Shane had never told anyone except Ilya that, but, well, in for a penny.

“I’m not going to go lie online just to make you feel more comfortable. I wish those photos had never gotten out, but it happened. It’s out. What we’re going to need is a real plan to help keep Ilya on this fucking continent,” Shane snapped.

“Hollander, if you don’t do exactly what we want you to, you’re not even going to be in this league anymore,” Crowell yelled back.

Shane scoffed. “Please, you’re not going to kick us out. I’m not some rookie you can just push around. I know my worth. I know *our* worth. The league has been happy to pocket millions of dollars from our rivalry.”

“Yes, and you’ve thrown that all away, haven’t you?” Crowell spat.

Shane balked.

Had he?

The Cups. The records. The captaincy. The little boy who had slept with skates beside his bed because he was afraid someone would take them away.

Crowell let out a small laugh, a cruel, horrible sound.

“You think anybody will support you now? Don’t be naive, Hollander. You knew this would ruin you. That’s why you kept it secret.”

Ilya twitched beside him. Shane’s secret.

“Either way, I don’t care. I won’t allow it in my league. We built you up. Don’t make the mistake of thinking we can’t survive without you. So you need to decide.”

Crowell leaned forward, leering.

“It’s hockey or him.”

Shane felt his mouth go dry and he stood up straight, blinking a few times. Ilya slowly let go of his hand. Shane glanced down at him, and Ilya gave him a soft smile.

Ilya knew Shane loved hockey.

He was giving him permission. Permission to let him go.

“Shane,” Ilya murmured softly.

The sound of his name hit Shane like it had the day he fled Ilya’s house. Back then, it had made him want to run. Now it made him want to stay.

And as Shane stared at Ilya, for some reason, he could only think about Ilya’s stupid shoes. The black-and-white slides he never put on the shoe rack and always left haphazardly in the hallway. The ones Shane had tripped over countless times, chewing Ilya out while he laughed at him again and again.

The ones Shane once threw at his head, after which Ilya had hoisted him over his shoulder and carried him into the bedroom, his anger dissolving into loud laughter.

Shane didn’t think he’d ever laughed that hard.

“I choose him.”

Ilya's jaw dropped, and his eyes widened with shock and something else.

"Shane, no," Ilya hurried out desperately. But looking into Ilya's eyes, he didn't see devastation. He saw hope.

So Shane ignored him. Grabbing Ilya's hand, Shane pulled him up and stormed out of the office, Crowell screaming as loud as he could from the computer speakers. He ignored that too.

The door swung open and slammed into the wall, making his teammates jump in alarm, who had all obviously been either gossiping to the people next to them or edging towards the office door to try to listen in on the conversation.

"YOU IDIOT," Theriault screamed, following them into the locker room.

Shane paid him no mind as he moved towards his locker, quickly stripping off his skates and changing into street shoes. He grabbed the rest of his stuff and shoved it carelessly into his bag. He'd change later. He needed to get out of here now. Theriault moved toward him, and Ilya put his body between him and Shane.

"Pathetic," Theriault spat in Ilya's face. Ilya said nothing, but he reached out to rejoin his hand with Shane's, who was now standing up again, bag slung over his shoulder. The two of them moved to exit the locker room.

"Hollander, you walk out of this room, and you're done with the Metros. You're fucking done."

Theriault was breathing hard and glaring at the two of them as Shane turned slightly to look back at the room. The room he had given years to. He looked at Hayden, who was still ghostly white and who met his gaze with pleading eyes. He looked at JJ, who was glaring at Ilya like a child who had stolen something of his. At Broz, who was still holding his phone down next to his waist as if he couldn't bear to look at it anymore. At those photos that had dragged into the open what Shane cherished. What Shane had kept secret. What he had shoved between mattresses and weak half-smiles. He looked at Comeau, whose face was contorted with disgust. Shane had been a groomsman at his wedding. This was his family.

But then Ilya ran a nervous thumb over his.

Hands shaking, Shane pulled his jersey over his head, the "C" on the breast screaming at him to turn back. He folded the jersey, as he did with all his clothes, and handed it to Theriault, who glared at him with disbelieving eyes.

The room was silent as the Metros' captain left the locker room for the last time, hand-in-hand with the man who had ruined him.

Thanks for reading! Updates will be every three days (optimistically, haha). Comments are always appreciated!

This is going to be part of a larger series/project (fics unrelated to each other) inspired by goldengalaxies' series "ways they didn't find out".

On a side note, why are there so many fics in the heated rivalry fandom that mention Mormons, haha? Is this fandom just filled with ex-Mormons? Food for thought.

Okay, love y'all xoxo

Chapter 2: Tough Guy

Chapter Summary

“Shane.”

“Yeah?”

“Did you just quit the MLH?”

“Maybe.”

“Shane.”

“I don’t know, Ilya, I’ve never quit the MLH before.”

-

The aftermath. Ilya and Shane navigate the wreckage together, one cup of tea at a time.

Chapter Notes

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

“No, seriously, what the fuck?” Comeau demanded loudly, shedding off his shoulder pads. “I mean, I might’ve pegged Hollander as queer, but Rozanov? That’s fucking insane.”

“Dude,” Pike yelled, glaring at Comeau. “Don’t fucking call him that.”

“What, am I wrong? I mean, I get that you and Hollander have been sucking each other’s dicks this whole time, but even you gotta admit he fucked up on this one,” Comeau retorted, receiving a couple of laughs and an appreciative pat on the shoulder from Drapeu.

“You guys are fucking assholes,” Pike grumbled. Broz watched Pike grab his bag and start roughly shoving things into it. Pike paused before moving to Hollander’s locker to do the same to some of his stuff, more carefully this time. No one moved to help.

“Did you know?” JJ murmured, looking at Pike with a pained expression.

“No,” Pike answered quietly, “but it doesn’t matter.”

“It matters a little bit,” JJ snapped back, shoving his gloves into his locker.

Pike muttered under his breath and kept packing Hollander's things.

Broz didn't know what to think. He felt like the entire world had been flipped upside down, and now he was expected to stand on it without falling over. He sat silently on the bench in his base layer, staring at his phone. He hadn't known what had overcome him when he flipped open the camera app. When he had hit the red button and carefully maneuvered the phone low enough not to draw attention.

All he was thinking about was that when he heard Theriault scream Hollander's name, he remembered when he had heard him say it like that before. Remembered his fourth practice with the full roster when he accidentally mishandled a pass and sent it way too far ahead. Remembered turning and seeing coach's face red with anger. Remembered Hollander quickly turning and claiming that he should have been further up the rink, taking responsibility.

Broz had approached Hollzy afterward.

"You really didn't have to do that, Captain. It was my fault, and everyone knows it," Broz had said.

Hollander had given him a soft smile.

"I didn't have to, no. You've got real potential, rook. But you're not going out there on that ice by yourself. I wouldn't want you to think you were all alone out there."

But when Hollander was standing there, being screamed at by the coach he had been with since he was 18, he looked pretty alone.

But Broz had a stick and the puck. And Hollander looked like he needed the assist.

Twenty-one minutes of video.

Twenty-one minutes of the Montreal coach screaming at their captain.

Twenty-one minutes of Hollander choosing Rozanov.

Twenty-one minutes of Broz trying to understand why.

"Dude, how much do you want to bet Hollander was checking us out while we were showering?" someone called from the other room.

"Ew gross man, I don't want to think about that. Fucking disgusting."

Broz turned his phone off and set it down beside him. He turned it back over and flipped it on.

Twenty-one minutes.

He was still fiddling with his phone when he got home that evening, but now he was scrolling through social media instead of staring blankly at his camera roll. He read page after page of hate comments. From people who were shocked, appalled, and stunned. From people calling Hollander weak, sick, and perverted. Countless people were playing clips from the game, analyzing every movement, every missed shot on goal.

Broz scrolled some more. The Metros had placed Hollander on indefinite leave pending an internal review. The Raiders had done the same to Rozanov.

Broz stared at the statement.

Three hours ago, Hollander had been their captain.

Now there was going to be an investigation. There were rumors that Hollander and Rozanov were rigging games together.

Every moment on the ice tonight was proof of something deeper, something sinister, so the internet said.

But that wasn't what had happened.

Broz had been there.

He had seen Shane fight for every shot, every goal, clawing together a team that could keep up with him.

And Broz had twenty-one minutes. And an open passing lane.

His hands shook slightly as he quickly created a new profile. He let the system generate a random name, leaving the profile blank.

Should he be doing this in incognito mode? Should he buy a new phone?

In his mind, he saw Hollander skate further in front of him, tapping his stick, signaling his position.

Twenty-one minutes.

He hit post.

* * * * *

Ilya slammed Shane's car door after climbing in. He hadn't really paid attention while Shane pulled him out of the arena. They had probably passed some cameras at some point. He didn't like the idea of pictures of him crying circulating online. Although. He guessed there could be worse photos...

Ilya hadn't seen his own locker room's reaction to the news. A pale LeClaire had hurried him out pretty quickly. He now wondered what they all thought of him. Their playboy captain. Ilya imagined Marlow laughing about it, or pretending he wasn't surprised. Ilya hadn't gotten the scolding that Shane had gotten. Instead, LeClaire had told him in hushed tones as they hurried to the opposing team's locker room. He had stopped for a moment and let Ilya fall apart in the hallway. Ilya had cried at the thought of losing his country. He had cried at the thought of losing Shane, who Ilya had assumed would want nothing to do with him now that Ilya had ruined everything. He had cried at the thought of losing his home.

But now, Shane and Ilya sat silently in the car, both staring blankly ahead, listening to each other breathe.

“Is this a jeep?” Ilya asked abruptly.

“What?” Shane looked at him with a baffled expression.

“The car.” Ilya gestured around him.

“What? No. It’s British. Practical. Good in the snow.”

“Okay.”

They sat there in more silence. Ilya was freaking out a bit. Or a lot. Probably a lot.

“Shane.”

“Yeah?”

“Did you just quit the MLH?”

“Maybe.”

“Shane.”

“I don’t know, Ilya, I’ve never quit the MLH before.”

More silence. Shane always got quieter when he was scared.

Shane groaned and leaned forward over the steering wheel. Ilya blinked. He had no idea how to comfort Shane about something this big. Usually, Ilya only had to stave off the occasional minor panic attack caused by an onslaught of ‘*oh my god, what are we doing?*’s and ‘*this is such a bad idea*’s. Those were normally solved with various applications of his mouth and tongue. He didn’t imagine Shane would be very receptive to that now, so instead he slowly put his hand on Shane’s back.

“Shane?”

“Yeah, sorry, I’m just panicking.”

“Shane.”

“I feel like I’m gonna die.”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Ilya rushed out, moving his hand up and down. “We’re good here.”

“Are we, Ilya? Cause it doesn’t feel very good.”

Ilya paused.

“You are right.”

Shane jerked his head up to stare wide-eyed at Ilya, back still slouched over.

“We should probably panic,” Ilya said simply, shrugging his shoulders a bit.

Ilya leaned forward and hunched over the dashboard, copying Shane's position.

Shane laughed a bit and put his head back on the steering wheel. They breathed together. The silence was warmer this time.

Slouched over, their eyes were level, and they stared at each other softly. Ilya brushed a loose tear from Shane's eye, dragging his finger slower than necessary across Shane's freckles. Shane's face was red, his eyes were puffy, and his nose was crusty from dried snot. He was beautiful.

He had never allowed himself to just admire Shane. Everything had always felt too rushed, too dangerous. His hands had always shook as he held back from the urge to linger, to cherish. He had always assumed that the end of the world would be hurried and panicked. And he was panicking. But no one talked about that moment in between. That moment after disaster strikes but before the consequences. The strange pause where the world has already changed, but somehow you're still allowed to sit and enjoy a quiet dinner. And so he feasted upon each freckle, line in his brow, and curve of his jaw.

“Hi,” Ilya whispered.

Shane huffed out a tearful laugh. “Hi.”

“Shane.”

“Ilya.”

“You yelled at the commissioner.”

Shane groaned and hid his face, making Ilya frown.

“That was probably stupid.”

“What! Shane, no.” Ilya grabbed Shane's chin to turn it back towards him, and looked at him seriously. “It was very sexy.”

“Oh my god, Ilya.”

“Seriously, Shane, I almost jumped you right there. They have already seen worse.”

Shane frowned. “That's not funny.”

Ilya leaned over the center console and gave Shane a quick kiss on the cheek, making Shane turn a furious shade of red. Ilya grinned. *Moy pomidor.*

Ilya went to lean back into his side of the car, but Shane quickly slid his hand along the side of Ilya's face and pulled him closer. They met for a brief kiss, their lips barely grazing

together, before resting their foreheads against each other. Eyes closed, Ilya listened to Shane's soft sniffles and raspy breathing. Ilya felt Shane slowly run his hand along Ilya's ear, through his hair, tugging at a few curls, before resting on Ilya's neck, pressing against Ilya's pulse. Ilya could feel Shane using each beat to count his own breaths.

God, he loved him. He kept replaying Shane's words over and over in his mind trying to make sense of them. 'I choose him.' *I choose him.*

"You quit the MLH for me?" Ilya whispered almost inaudibly.

Shane nuzzled his head slowly, rubbing his forehead against Ilya's more firmly.

"Yeah," Shane breathed.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

For a moment neither of them said anything. The thing between them suddenly felt fragile. Like if either of them looked at it too closely, it might break.

Neither of them touched it.

He couldn't help but feel the sinking dread blooming in his chest. The one that reminded him of the horror of all of this. The one that reminded him that these weren't just big grand romantic gestures. This wasn't one of the rom coms Ilya secretly watched on team flights with the brightness all the way down, trying very hard not to think about a black-haired hockey player halfway around the world.

No, here there was an after.

An after where Shane woke up one morning and realized what he had given away. An after where the adrenaline faded and the consequences remained. An after where Shane looked at Ilya and saw every game he had missed, every trophy he hadn't won, every door that had closed behind him.

He tried to push it out of his mind and enjoy this moment, where someone had chosen to stay.

"What do we do now?" Ilya whispered.

Shane sighed. "I don't know."

Ilya moved his hand to Shane's waist, brushing his thumb along Shane's hip, pressing softly against the bone.

"Well," Shane sighed, "we could always just go home and panic some more there. But with tea."

Oh. Shane said home. As if it was both of theirs. That made Ilya blush more than it probably should have. Not that he would ever admit that.

“With jam?” Ilya asked softly.

Shane huffed out a small laugh.

“Sure, baby. You can add jam.”

Ilya blushed even harder, and Shane started the car.

* * * * *

“Ilya!”

“What?”

“You are not saving that.”

“Yes, I am!”

“Oh my god.”

“It is a great photo of you.”

“It’s a photo of my ass!”

“...It is a great photo of you, Shane.”

“Yeah, a photo of my ass that the whole world has seen.”

Ilya turned back to the picture on his phone, frowning. Now that was a problem.

Shane shoved him in response.

“You are not seriously more upset about people seeing the photo of my ass than the one of us kissing.”

“Of course I am upset! The people do not deserve your ass.”

“It’s my ass!”

“Yes, Hollander, exactly. It is literally your ass that is on the line.”

Shane groaned loudly and threw a pillow at him while Ilya laughed. Shane’s lips twitched up in a smile. Knowing that the pillow’s absence would make him uncomfortable, Ilya let Shane squirm around for a little bit before handing him back the pillow so Shane could place it back next to him. Shane wasn’t even leaning on it, but as he had informed Ilya on numerous occasions, he had gotten used to where it lived and saw no reason to change that now.

“I can’t believe I’m stuck with *your ass* forever,” Shane said a little too fondly before looking back at his phone and scrolling a bit more.

Ilya looked back at his own phone, the smile fading from his face. Forever. Shane was stuck with him forever. Shane barely knew Ilya. He didn’t know about his mother. He didn’t know about the gravestone that would never see another bouquet of flowers. He didn’t know that some days, every step, every breath felt like the end of the world. He didn’t know about the darkness that haunted every shadow, every silhouette threatening to make itself the center of attention. Ilya was sure that if he glanced over his shoulder now, he would be able to see it.

So Ilya continued to look at Shane instead, whose face twitched with barely suppressed emotions with every scroll of his finger.

After making their respective cups of tea, Shane and Ilya had sat down on the couch together to look at what had actually been posted. Their phones were steadily filling up with more and more messages and missed phone calls and mentions. He watched as Shane quickly rejected another call from his mother. She must have called thirty times by now. Ilya knew Shane could feel his concerned gaze, but Shane just shook his head in response.

The photos were...not great. They had obviously been shot through the hotel window, but the images were clear enough. One was of Shane straddling him on the hotel bed, kissing him deeply. One was of Shane slowly sinking to his knees in front of him. One was of Shane putting on his clothes, facing away from the camera while Ilya lay on the bed mostly naked as well. The final photo was of Shane looking back at him, next to the door. That one was almost the most damning one of them all. They both were staring at each other with soft smiles. Ilya hated that the whole world had seen these photos, hated how exposed Shane was. But mostly, he hated that thousands of people had now seen that last look, that meant nothing to them, but everything to Ilya.

Fortunately, the photos didn’t get more explicit than that. He guessed they had that to be grateful for. But as he had scrolled through the comments mocking Shane, Ilya kind of wished there were more. Wished they could see Ilya bowing before Shane, worshipping him at the foot of the bed. Wished they could see how Shane made Ilya whimper, made him moan.

People kept pointing to the photo of Shane on his knees as proof of something. Proof that he was weak. Proof that he had been corrupted. Proof that he had been brought low.

Idiots.

They had no idea what they were looking at.

Shane Hollander on his knees never looked weak.

He looked deadly.

The two of them sat pressed up next to each other. Their hands were occupied with their phones, but their legs stretched out over the coffee table, one over the other, with Ilya’s foot gently touching Shane’s. Shane was still scrolling through Twitter, reading every supportive

and foul comment. Ilya was looking through his text messages. He had 206 texts, mostly from group chats, 42 missed calls, and 17 emails. The Raiders group chat was particularly active, not surprisingly, but he was happy to see that about half of the messages were ‘how the fuck did Roz pull The Shane Hollander’ (as Marlow so adequately put it). Two of the emails were from his agent, letting him know that he could no longer represent Ilya. Ilya didn’t mind. He was a friend of his father’s, so he had never really liked him. And Ilya wasn’t sure he had anything to represent anymore, so...

Ten of the calls were from his brother. Ilya deleted the voice messages and promptly blocked him. The internet was already calling him enough slurs; he didn’t need to hear them from his brother as well.

He winced when he saw his text thread with Svetlana.

12 unread messages.

Ah.

Sveta: Call me.

Sveta: Right now.

Sveta: Don’t be an idiot.

He turned off his phone and placed it face down on his lap. Well. She’d probably kill him later. Poor Shane. A widow so young in life.

Ilya nudged his prospective widow, who barely budged, still nervously scrolling through his mentions while biting off one fingernail after another. This was probably the longest Shane had ever spent on Twitter.

“Shane.”

“Mm.”

Shaaaaane.”

Shane sighed and flipped his phone over too, letting it rest next to Ilya’s on their adjacent thighs.

“We should run away,” Shane said, making circles with his finger across his own thigh. The finger slowly drifted over until it was also making circles on Ilya’s.

“It is that bad?”

“It’s pretty bad, yeah.”

Ilya didn’t mention his agent, not wanting to be a bigger problem for Shane, so he just hummed in agreement instead.

Shane hit his head softly against the back of the couch.

"I'm just so embarrassed." Tears were prickling at Shane's eyes, threatening to fall across his perfect face. Ilya leaned over to brush the first one that fell away.

"Shane. No. It is not embarrassing."

"It is!"

"No, it is sex. Everyone has sex, even Hayden Pike."

"Ilya. Hayden has four children."

"It is crazy, no? His poor wife has only had bad sex three times."

"Three?"

"Two of them are twins, no?"

Shane laughed, but smacked his thigh anyway.

"You're such an asshole."

They smiled faintly at each other. Ilya loved the way Shane's laughs settled into soft dimples and warm eyes. He wanted to squish him. He wanted to make him laugh all the time, so that he would never stop looking at Ilya like he was now.

He decided to entertain Shane's little delusion.

"Okay, so we run away. Where should we go?"

Shane bit his lip. "Well, I have my cottage. I wanted to invite you to come with me anyway after the game."

"Ah. So you take me to the middle of the woods. We live off of the land."

"It's a nice cottage! It's not like primitive or anything like that."

"Shane, I am a posh city boy. You will have to do all the hunting." Making his eyes as big as possible, he looked up at Shane and batted his eyelashes. "Will you protect me, Shane? Be my big strong husband?"

Shane groaned and put his head in his hands.

Ilya hadn't exactly meant to bring up the proposal. But he couldn't help but think about it. His mind was playing that little moment over and over like that traitor it was, trying to remind him of every little fantasy he had concocted before going to bed. Or sometimes before facing his father. Those little visions of a Shane giving Ilya permission to run away with him, to build a life with him.

He didn't know if Shane had meant it. One part of him hoped he hadn't, hoped that Shane wasn't crazy enough to yoke himself to Ilya and all of his many flaws. Hoped that Shane hadn't fallen for Ilya's trap that he had spent years building out of countless hotel rooms and deceptively well-crafted texts.

Another part of him desperately hoped he had.

"I can't believe I proposed in the Metros locker room."

Ilya laughed. "I can't believe you proposed."

"I panicked."

"Mm, same thing."

Shane sighed and leaned back into the couch. Ilya reached over and grabbed his hand, running his thumb across Shane's ring finger.

"Do you...do you actually want to marry me?" Ilya whispered. He couldn't imagine a world where Shane did. But he couldn't help but imagine. Shane standing in a very clean-cut,suit, tailored for the occasion. Waking up next to each other every day. Doing laundry on weekends.

Ilya wanted it so badly it felt dangerous to keep thinking about it. It made him want to ignore everything else, all of Shane's future plans and hopes, and lock them away somewhere so that he could have even a glimpse of that life. He had always been selfish.

"Do you want to marry me?" Shane whispered back.

They stared at each other in silence, neither of them wanting to speak. Terrified of what the other might say.

They heard a key turn in the doorknob. Shane's eyes went wide with panic.

"Oh my god."

"Shane."

"Yeah?"

"Who has a key to your apartment?"

"Uh."

"SHANE HOLLANDER YOU BETTER BE IN HERE."

Shane winced as Yuna Hollander stormed into the living room where Shane and Ilya were still sitting intertwined, having made no move to get up, with David following carefully behind her.

“Hi mom,” Shane mumbled. Ilya would have laughed at his sudden teenager-esque demeanor if he hadn’t been so terrified of whatever wrath he was about to endure. He had started drafting apologies (maybe eulogies) in his head. *I am sorry I fucked your son, Mrs. Hollander. In my defense, you gave him these big glassy eyes and what was I supposed to do? Not fuck him?*

“Shane,” Yuna stated fiercely, “I have been calling you for the last two hours.”

“How did you even get here so fast?” Shane muttered, seemingly forgetting he was speaking out loud, staring at a spot behind his parents.

“No one has heard from you in hours.”

“Ottawa is like a two and a half hour drive...”

“We called Hayden, we called JJ. No one knew anything!”

“Then you broke into my apartment, using the spare key that you shouldn’t even have...”

“Shane!”

Shane finally met his mom’s eyes. Both mother and son were teary. Yuna walked around the couch from where she had been standing and moved in front of Shane, crouching down. She reached up to cup his face. Ilya saw Shane faintly lean into the touch.

“Mom?” Shane whimpered.

Yuna let out a soft click with her tongue and pulled Shane into her, wrapping him in a strong hug. She rocked him back and forth while Shane let out a series of soft sobs.

“I know, honey, I know.”

“It’s really bad, Mom,” Shane mumbled into his mom’s shoulder.

Ilya selfishly wished he could fall apart in her arms too. He couldn’t help but try to remember the last time his mom had held him like this. He wasn’t sure he could. But he remembered holding her. Remembered kicking the snow off of his boots and calling upstairs. Remembered pushing the bathroom door open.

He reached out to place a soft hand on Shane’s lower back just so he could feel him breathe.

“I know, honey. It’s going to be okay though.”

Shane sniffled. “Is it?” Ilya’s heart broke for him a little bit more, but Shane already had so many pieces of it anyway.

“It will be. Eventually. Your dad and I are here. And we love you so much.”

David had elected to take a standing position a little behind Yuna. Not close enough to get in the way. Not far enough to make it seem like he wasn’t there.

Shane sniffled again. “Even though there are pictures of my ass on the internet?”

Yuna let out a soft laugh. “Well, I would have preferred there wasn’t, but nobody is perfect.”

Shane pulled back slightly and looked down into his lap.

Tears were streaming down his face again, moving along the same lines that had been carved into his face by the last ones.

“Even though I lied?” Shane whispered. “Even though I’m gay?”

Yuna gave him a pained expression.

“Oh honey, look at me. Look at me.” She maneuvered his face so that Shane couldn’t avoid her eyes like he kept trying to.

“We will always love you, okay? Always.”

Shane crumpled into Yuna’s arms again. Ilya averted his eyes, afraid to take even more privacy away from Shane. He looked at David instead, who was now staring at Ilya with a soft expression that Ilya didn’t deserve.

The look wasn't pity. Ilya was used to pity. He was used to letting people down and then letting them make excuses on his behalf, allowing others to draft ways in which Ilya's failings were a product of his strict father and absent mother. He was used to hiding behind their sympathies and condescending half-smiles. He expected Shane to do the same once Ilya gave him enough reason to.

But David was looking at him like he was the missing piece to a particularly difficult puzzle. The one that had been buried deep in the carpet for years, only to turn up exactly where you needed it.

Somehow that made it worse.

* * * * *

“Since your rookie season?” Yuna exclaimed.

“Since the summer before,” Ilya murmured.

“Not helpful,” Shane retorted, taking another sip of tea. Yuna and David were now sitting in the living room with them with their own cups of tea in hand. Both were staring at the two of them, shocked, their mouths hanging open. Yuna was gripping her mug so tight, Ilya thought it might break.

“So you’ve been...I don’t know, seeing each other this whole time?” Yuna sputtered out.

“I was just—we were just—” Shane began but drifted off.

Ilya wasn't sure how Shane was going to finish that sentence. He didn't think that Shane even knew how to finish that sentence. They were just what? Curious? Having fun? Having sex?

He wanted Shane to say that they were engaged, but Ilya still wasn't sure if that was real. He knew that Shane only said it because he was worried about Ilya's visa status, but part of him hoped it was real. Hoped that Shane had looked across that locker room and simply decided he was done waiting. He wanted Shane to call Ilya his fiancé in front of his parents.

But Shane said nothing.

"Something," Ilya said, and all three pairs of Hollander eyes turned to him. "We were just something."

"Something," Yuna repeated.

Ilya shrugged. "We could never be anything more, so we were just..."

"Something," Shane finished softly. Ilya met Shane's eyes. Shane was already looking at him. Ilya wanted to tell Shane that he was everything. That he had always wanted more. That he hoped Shane wanted more too. But not in front of Shane's parents. Not for the first time. He didn't want to force Shane to be vulnerable in front of yet another audience. So instead he looked at Shane and hoped that was enough

"Ilya, I've gotta say I'm surprised. You've always been such a ladies man," David said, breaking the silence and gesturing at Ilya.

"It's true, I've been with many women. But with men as well. But your son is..." Ilya paused, trying to think of the word, "different."

"Different?" Shane raised an eyebrow.

"Mm, yes. Different. Special?"

"Special?"

"Yes. Not everyone can be the second-best player in the league. It is impressive, no?"

David laughed, and Ilya grinned at him. Yuna scoffed and mumbled a little "you wish."

Shane hadn't taken the bait, however. He just sighed and said softly, "Well, I'm not even in the league anymore, so I guess you'll have to chase some other hockey player."

Ilya frowned. "I wasn't chasing a hockey player."

Shane gave him a confused look. "No?"

"No, I was chasing you."

Shane blushed and took another sip of his tea to hide his face. David gave Ilya another warm smile that Ilya didn't know how to read. He wasn't sure what he had done to earn this man's

approval. He wasn't used to such easily given acknowledgment.

"Do you think you're done?" Yuna intervened.

Shane blinked. "With what?"

"With hockey. Is this...is this it?"

"I don't know," Shane said quietly, sinking lower in his chair. "I don't know if I have much of a choice."

Yuna's expression shifted slightly. The mother was still there, but the manager was beginning to emerge, the instinct to fix taking over. He could see each brand deal, each contract, each advertisement flashing across her pupils, folding themselves into neat little stacks. He could see every string that she was desperately tying to each finger to keep it from slipping away. David's face held something more heartbreaking. It held the image of a boy carefully taping and retaping his stick the night before his first game, trying to make it line up perfectly. A poster hanging on the wall, slightly discolored from the repeated touch of a small hand that grazed it for good luck every morning on the way to practice.

"I don't think the ice has seen the last of you yet, Shane. We never could keep you off it for very long. I'd like to see the MLH try," David said with a kind smile.

Shane gave him that kind of look teenagers give their parents when 'they just don't understand.' But Ilya understood. He understood that Shane needed this. Shane wanted Ilya, but he needed hockey.

Yuna nodded slightly. Ilya could see her now fully entering manager mode, sorting through plans and statements and calendars in her mind.

"Well, when you didn't answer, I called Farah, and we've been talking. We've made a couple of plans we need to run by you. The first thing we need to focus on is the legal ramifications of your suspension. Given your contract, there are a few stipulations that—"

Ilya listened to Yuna ramble on for a minute, but he tuned it out as he watched Shane become smaller and smaller. Every mention of a contract seemed to make Shane sink further into the couch. Every mention of a suspension pulled his shoulders tighter.

He opened his mouth to interrupt, but David beat him to it.

"Why don't we go over all of that in the morning? I think everyone is a bit tired and could use a bit of sleep." David glanced kindly at Shane. "Or at least as much sleep as we can get."

Shane gave him a grateful nod. Yuna frowned but relinquished.

After a few more hugs and comforting words, the Hollanders headed out of the apartment to a hotel in the area. They would normally have taken Shane's guest bedroom, but they said they wanted to let Ilya use it instead of making him take the couch. Ilya did not point out that he had slept in Shane's bed dozens of times already and had no intention of starting with the guest room now.

But now that they were alone in Shane's room, he almost missed the presence of Hollander's parents. He and Shane stood awkwardly, not entirely sure what to say to each other anymore. They had spent years sneaking into hotel rooms together. Somehow, standing alone in Shane's bedroom felt infinitely more terrifying. They had gotten used to hiding their feelings behind royalty-free art and dim side lamps. Behind four-digit room numbers and simple logistics. This? This was something new.

Ilya opened his mouth to say something. He wasn't sure what. I love you. Do you love me? You don't have to marry me. Please marry me.

He was cut off by Shane, who walked towards him slowly, his brown eyes watering slightly. Shane was looking at him with such devotion; it scared him. He wanted to tell Shane to run. Run away from him as far as he could. He wanted to grip Shane's shirt and beg him to never leave.

"Ilya," Shane whispered.

"Shane."

Shane slid a hand onto Ilya's waist and glanced down at Ilya's throat, which bobbed in anticipation.

"I—I need you."

Trembling slightly, Ilya lifted his hand and pulled Shane's chin up so that his eyes could meet his, darting back and forth between each one, looking for a sign of regret. Shane didn't need him. He needed his friends, his family. He needed his team. And here Ilya was, selfishly clinging onto him, like a child does the leg of their parent. But Shane wanted him. He chose him, at least for now.

Shane said he needed him. Who was he to say otherwise?

"Okay," he whispered and leaned in to kiss him.

Shane whimpered and dug his hands into Ilya's hair, pulling slightly. Their movements became hurried and urgent, and yet each hand felt carefully and firmly placed, as if they were trying to hold each other together. The pictures didn't show this. They showed depravity where there was desperation. They didn't show Shane savoring every taste of Ilya as if he could kiss him forever and that would be enough.

Ilya gripped the bottom of Shane's shirt and pulled it over his head, moving to kiss down his neck and stopping to dig his teeth into Shane's clavicle, running his tongue along the bone. Shane moaned loudly and hastily unbuttoned Ilya's pants, pushing them downwards. Ilya kicked them off the rest of the way, not removing his mouth from Shane's chest.

Ilya ran his hands down the back of Shane's legs and lifted Shane up, who let out a soft gasp. Their lips met for another messy kiss as Ilya carried Shane to his bed and set him down gently, pressing him into the sheets. Ilya didn't think he could ever get tired of this. He knew he was greedy and self-centered, but he continued to relish every little sound Shane gave him.

He wanted to be able to live in this moment forever. He wanted this moment to end so that he could have another one. Even knowing that Shane would soon regret him, he couldn't help but continue. Ilya devoured him, licking at his lips like he could kiss him forever and it would never be enough.

"Ilya," Shane whimpered.

"I know, lyubimy. I know."

The urgency between them eventually gave way to stillness, both of them breathing hard into the quiet of the room. They held each other for a while, neither of them speaking. Ilya lay on top of Shane beneath the tangled sheets, letting his weight press Shane deeper into the mattress, his head resting low on his chest. Shane's hand ran along his back, going in between each mole and freckle like he was drawing out a constellation. Ilya wondered what he was seeing.

He felt Shane switch directions, his finger moving to the top of Ilya's back. He smiled as he felt Shane draw a large '24' down his back.

"Shane?" he mumbled into Shane's chest.

"Mm."

"Did you mean it?"

"Mean what?"

Ilya moved a hand against Shane's ribs, feeling the space in between them.

"Did you mean to propose to me?"

Shane paused. "I don't know," he said softly.

Ilya wanted Shane to say something. To tell him all of the words he had refused to hear in Tampa. And he wanted to tell Shane. Ilya wanted to tell him he had chosen him too. That he would have given hockey up for him. That he would have proposed to Shane, surrounded by candles on a dock somewhere overlooking a lake.

He wanted to tell Shane to run away from him. He wanted to tell him to run away with him.

Instead he pressed his face closer to Shane's chest and said nothing, trying to hide his eyes away from Shane so that he couldn't see the true cost of Ilya's selfishness. Of Shane's sacrifice.

They continued to lie like that for a while, neither of them saying what they wanted to.

"Hey Shane," Ilya whispered eventually, his eyes drooping with sleep.

"Yeah?" Shane mumbled back.

“You quit the MLH for me?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because it was you.”

Slowly, the two of them drifted to sleep, still holding onto each other, leaving the majority of the bed untouched. On the nightstand next to them, their phones began buzzing incessantly with the noise of thousands of people clicking play on a twenty-one-minute video.

Chapter End Notes

Ahhh!!! I love you all so much! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

Also...my friend doesn't think Shane would use the word "baby." I think he would use it to tease Ilya a bit. Thoughts? Feelings.

Also I apologize for the five different spellings of Theriault last chapter...I'm fixing them...

Chapter 3: Heated Rivalry

Chapter Summary

People online were calling Shane a hero, calling him brave. Shane didn't feel like a hero. He felt like the captor, dragging Ilya down to hell with him.

-

In which Shane and Ilya make focaccia, do a puzzle, and try not to make everything worse. In their defense, they did try really hard...

Chapter Notes

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

@hockeysource: breaking: montreal metros captain shane hollander outed in leaked photographs with boston raiders captain ilya rozanov

@RyanKellerMLH: NEW: a twenty-one-minute locker room video connected to the incident is now circulating online.

@ShaneHollandersGirlfriend: Good lord, the whiplash I have experienced today...

@MetrosMessiahHollander: The pictures were real??? WTF???

@actualhockeyfan91: the video changes nothing. still don't want politics in sports.

@hollanovdefenselawyer: brother one of them literally proposed marriage

@goalieapologist: i am begging you to define politics

@RyanKellerMLH: League sources indicate the video has now been viewed by several active players and front-office personnel.

@RyanKellerMLH: No, I will not be commenting on which players.

@goalieapologist: twenty-one minutes is not a video. that is a feature-length film

@PuckReporter: multiple league executives declined to comment on the video. probably because they were still watching it.

@MetroManiac88: rookie season????????? ROOKIE SEASON?????????

@HockeyDad82: hope they're both okay. can't imagine living through something like that in public

* * * * *

“Hollander, you walk out of this room, and you’re done with the Metros. You’re fucking done.”

Brandon hit pause and dragged the progress bar back a few seconds.

“Hollander, you walk out of this room, and you’re done with the Metros. You’re fucking done.”

He dragged the bar back again.

There.

Right there.

He paused the video and stared at Shane Hollander’s face. He was crying, his face red and blotchy. But as he turned to hand Theriault his sweater, he changed into every inch of the decorated captain that Brandon knew him to be. Grabbing the hand of the man next to him and storming out of his own locker room, Shane Hollander had never looked so tall. Had never looked more like the leader of an army, with only one man standing behind him. The same man he had lost the war for. The same man who was the reason he had started fighting.

Brandon Wiebe was new to the Centaurs but not new to the MLH. He knew first-hand how much the league loved to suck individuals dry under the guise of teamwork and cooperation, demonizing those who dared to draw attention and stick out.

No, he was not new to the MLH. But he doubted many remembered his brief period outside of the AHL. He himself tried not to think about it outside of a few tearful nights, wrapped in his wife’s arms.

Brandon leaned back in his chair.

He really didn’t think about it much anymore. He loved his wife Ellen so much, he still couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t believe she could love him too. But the video drew him back, forcing him to remember that face. That slightly crooked smile.

Now, Brandon couldn’t help but think about it. He couldn’t help but think about dark nights and hurried hands and twisted bed sheets. He couldn’t help but think about whispered voices promising each other that this was just for fun. Just boys being stupid. Just boys being horny. He couldn’t help but think about those nights that they could have fallen into the beds of the girls they met at clubs and bars but somehow found their way back to each other.

Brandon had been in love with Eric. He knew that then and he knew that now. And he had never told anyone except for his wife and, of course, Eric. Eric had laughed at first when he had told him, wringing his hands together and standing before him like a naughty child trying to figure out how to tell their parents that they had broken the upstairs window. But then Eric’s eyes had widened, examining the fragments of glass. Brandon had broken the illusion of easy, casual sex. Eric had broken everything else.

And here was Shane Hollander, gripping that hand of Ilya Rozanov, begging the world not to take Ilya away from him. Brandon saw the reflection of his younger self standing in that locker room.

Brandon had taken comfort in knowing that they couldn't have been anything. They would never have been allowed to have been anything else. If it had ever gotten out, their unimpressive careers would be less than the footnote in history that they probably already were. It was for the best to keep their feelings tucked to sleep in hotel beds.

Shane Hollander had proved his past self right. And he had proved him so so wrong.

The video had been up for a few hours and had amassed thousands of views and comments. If outlets hadn't been reporting on the photographs before, they were definitely reporting on them now. The entire internet seemed to pause as they watched Shane Hollander get vitriol screamed at him. The hate comments were still there, but they were no longer alone. Support and outrage were beginning to flood in beside them. At once, everyone seemed to realize what they had missed in a few scattered photographs. They saw devotion. They saw two young boys who had been together for as long as the public had known them, clawing for each other as fiercely as they had ever clawed for a championship. Fighting tooth and nail for each goal and for a few brief moments together.

This wasn't scandal. This was heartbreak splashed across the front page with a careless stroke.

Brandon dragged the video back a few minutes.

"Or you could just marry me."

Brandon stared at the shocked expressions that filled the room, including Hollander and Rozanov's, and laughed.

Brandon picked up his phone.

For the first time since pressing play, he stopped looking at the past.

He needed to make a few calls.

* * * * *

"No Shane, you need to push the dough, not just rub it."

"I am pushing it."

"No, you are not, you are rubbing it."

"Stop saying rubbing it. I'm not rubbing it."

"I will stop saying it when you stop doing it. You need to push it."

"What does that even mean? What do you mean push it?"

“I mean push it, Shane. English is not your second language, you should understand.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Shane muttered, flinging more flour at the counter before attacking the dough with increased effort.

“Language!” his mom called from somewhere in the dining room.

“Sorry, Yuna!” Ilya called back, with an annoying smirk. He looked at Shane expectantly and gave him a little nudge. Shane rolled his eyes.

“Sorry, mom,” Shane said reluctantly with a grimace.

“*Sorry, mom,*” Ilya said in a mocking voice, snickering as Shane grabbed a small handful of flour and threw it at Ilya, standing out in stark contrast against Ilya’s black Boston Raiders t-shirt.

Ilya retaliated by grabbing a bit of butter with his finger and smearing it against Shane’s nose. Shane gave him an affronted look, letting out a loud whine in frustration. He went to grab a paper towel to wipe it off, but Ilya quickly stuck a tongue out to lick it off, sucking slightly.

Shane shoved Ilya off of him. “Ilya, what the fuck, that’s so gross.”

“Mm, no, it’s delicious.” Ilya licked his lips in emphasis.

Shane shook his head, a growing smile betraying him. “You’re so weird.”

Shane picked up the recipe their father had given them and reread the next instructions while Ilya took over working with the dough. The four of them had decided to flee to the comforts of Ottawa after the immediate fallout and public outrage from the video. Shane’s parents didn’t want to leave them alone, and Shane wasn’t sure he wanted to stay in Montreal, so now, they were crowded into Shane’s childhood home.

Shane had woken up to a clip of him proposing with a couple million views. He had blinked a few times, trying to get the morning dust out of his eyes, hoping that it would also erase the image from the screen. Shane had refused to watch the video in its entirety. He didn’t need to see one of the worst moments of his life replayed on a shaky phone camera for all the world to see. However, he was pretty sure Ilya had watched it at least four times during their mostly silent car ride to Ottawa. He kept glancing up at Shane, his face flushed, then dragging his finger along the bottom of the screen. So Shane made some assumptions.

Shane was pretty sure it was Broz that had posted it, that reckless kid. The video felt far more revealing than the photographs ever had. The photographs had exposed the relationship. The video had exposed Shane. Every hastily captured frame seemed determined to preserve the worst twenty-one minutes of his life for public consumption. But as he scrolled through the comments that were growing more and more supportive by the second, Shane couldn’t help but admire the risk that Broz had taken. Surely, the entire team knew it was him. Shane wondered if Broz was suffering the consequences of a moment of sheer stupidity disguised as bravery. God knew Shane was. Shane couldn’t help but send him a quick text to thank him

for his support. Broz had only managed a little thumbs-up in response, which made Shane smile a bit.

Now that they were stuck in Ottawa, there was plenty of time for Shane to read and scrutinize every single comment left on every single clip from the video. It had only taken a day of this before his dad had printed off the first bread-making recipe he could find on the internet and shoved it in Shane and Ilya's hands, telling them to put their anxious energy to some good work.

"If you can't slam people into boards, you can at least take it out on some bread," he had declared with a wink before hurrying them into the kitchen. Before that, Shane had been rotating between pacing quickly around the house and sitting on the couch to read more Twitter reactions. Ilya had been quietly doing one of his dad's puzzles, so Shane suspected the bread was more for him than Ilya. But Ilya was happy to put the puzzle down and follow him into the kitchen.

Ilya seemed happy to follow him anywhere really, keeping him in constant sight. Shane told himself it was because Ilya felt uncomfortable in unfamiliar places, but it made him smile thinking about the alternative.

His mom had made the dining room table her home base, papers spread out in tall stacks. Her phone hadn't left the side of her cheek in hours, leaving an angry red rectangle indentation. Shane tried not to linger near the dining room. Every time he passed it, he caught fragments of conversations about contracts, sponsors, lawyers, and appeals. His mom was trying to save his career. Shane wasn't sure he could survive listening to it fail.

The Metros and the Raiders had both "mutually agreed to split ways" with Shane and Ilya. If mutual included one party storming out of the locker room, then so be it. As Shane moved throughout the house, he tried to avoid making eye contact with the various pieces of Metros merch and framed jerseys scattered in every room. He had made his choice.

His choice was now taking the dough and trying to spread it out over a pan, pressing his fingers into it and leaving round indentations. Ilya looked at his work and frowned before pulling at the dough some more, grabbing the olive oil and herbs, and spreading it around. Shane looked up from the recipe and stared at the mass of golden curls that sat messily on top of Ilya's head. The light from the kitchen window filtered through the yellow strands, creating the illusion of a soft halo that bled onto Ilya's face.

He must think Shane was crazy. Once, after getting a little wine drunk with Jackie, Shane had embarrassingly googled 'how to make a guy like you back.' He woke up with dried saliva staining his face and pillow and a legal pad filled with a sloppily transcribed list of steps. Number three: 'Guys like the thrill of the chase. Make sure to play hard to get.' Shane had a feeling he was playing distinctly not hard to get. Shane had proposed to him (kind of) and then dragged him to his parents' house. Behold the blonde maiden, locked up in the tower, aka Shane's hockey-poster-filled childhood bedroom.

People online were calling Shane a hero, calling him brave. Shane didn't feel like a hero. He felt like the captor, dragging Ilya down to hell with him.

Ilya looked over at him with a bright smile.

“Moy solnyshko. I think we have made it.”

“Huh?”

“Shane. We have made the focaccia.” Ilya beamed proudly at the pan and stuck out his hands, presenting it to Shane.

Shane peered at the pan with a raised eyebrow.

“Ilya, it’s not even cooked yet.”

Ilya groaned. “Shane, you have no imagination. Is done! Now we can sit and relax, and you can help me finish the puzzle.”

He hastily shoved the pan into Shane’s carefully pre-heated oven before grabbing Shane’s hand and dragging him back into the living room. Shane hated it when his dad made him do puzzles with him, but allowed Ilya to push him to the ground next to the coffee table. He begrudgingly started searching for the red pieces. Ilya stuck his foot out so that it touched Shane’s, then looked at the pieces before him with deep concentration.

Shane didn’t know what they would do next. They were trying to pretend like their lives weren’t over. Like they were content with doing puzzles and making bread. Shane was trying not to panic. Trying not to notice that the second pile of colors he began making was blue to go with the red. Trying not to think of the words “split ways.”

Ilya slid a blue puzzle piece into his pile, giving him another giddy smile and breaking Shane’s short spiral. Shane returned the smile and went back to gathering his red and blue pieces.

* * * * *

Shane was scrolling again when Ilya snatched the phone from his hands.

“Hey! Give that back!” Shane snapped, grabbing the phone back.

Ilya leaned forward, clawing for the phone until they were both on top of each other on the floor. Reaching behind him, Shane held his phone as far away from Ilya as he could. Using one hand to shove him down, Ilya climbed further up Shane’s body and twisted the phone out of his hands.

“Ilya! Come on, give it back.”

“No.” Ilya pushed himself backward away from Shane and shoved the phone in his pants.

“Oh please, like I won’t reach in there,” Shane scoffed, reaching forward.

Ilya grabbed both of his hands and stared at him with a pointed expression.

“Shane.”

“Ilya.”

“Are you going to post something?”

Shane frowned and scrunched his eyebrows. “Well, no, but I want to look.”

“No.”

“Why no?”

“You cannot change anything. It will only make you upset. So—” He patted the phone through his pants. “—no phone. Only puzzle and bread.”

“That’s not a treatment plan.”

“It is now.”

To make his point, Ilya took one of the focaccia pieces from the table and held it out in front of Shane’s mouth. Rolling his eyes, Shane leaned forward and took a bite. It was actually really good bread. Shane hadn’t had real bread in a few years, so he savored the scrape of the crust along the roof of his mouth.

“Fine,” Shane huffed and looked back at their almost completed puzzle. He was bored. He couldn’t believe his entire life had fallen apart and now he was bored. Ilya had always accused Shane of being boring, but Shane wasn’t sure even Ilya understood how much of him hockey occupied. Every day had always been measured in practices, workouts, games, flights, recovery, and film. Now there was just...time.

For the next few hours, Shane did, well...nothing with Ilya. They watched a bit of TV and Ilya tried to explain the rules of American football to him. Not that he knew them either. But they had fun making it up. Shane filled up on bread, which he had never done before. It left him feeling bloated and unsatisfied, but he had never enjoyed eating anything more. Eventually, Shane grabbed one of his favorite biographies from his room and started to reread it. He had offered another book to Ilya, but Ilya had looked at it with disdain, stating that he never wanted to open one of Shane’s boring hockey books. Instead, Ilya had grabbed a piece of paper from the printer and a pencil, using the book as a support to ‘draw Shane’. Shane had rolled his eyes, but hadn’t said anything in protest.

Ilya sat looking at the paper with steady concentration. He squinted at Shane, who met his eyes over the top of his book, flipping to the next page.

“How many freckles do you have?”

Shane gave Ilya a confused look. “What?”

Ilya rolled his eyes. “How many freckles do you have?” he repeated.

“Why do you want to know?”

Ilya gestured at the drawing. “I want to make it accurate.”

“How would I know how many freckles I have?”

Ilya shrugged and glared at his drawing, as if it had wronged him by daring to not capture all of Shane’s features. Suddenly, Ilya jumped forward, tackling Shane on the couch, trapping his book in between them.

“What the fuck!”

“Shhhhhh,” Ilya held a finger against Shane’s lips and then moved the finger in little dots across his face, muttering under his breath.

“Ilya, what—”

“I am counting the freckles. Be quiet, or I will lose count.”

Shane groaned but lay his head back in silence, letting Ilya run his finger across his face. With Ilya leaning over him, Shane was able to admire each little curve, each pore. He ran his eyes across the crook of Ilya’s nose and point on his chin. He sketched each line in his mind, trying to engrave every patch of skin.

They had never done this. Never just spent the day together. It felt like the dream your brain makes up at the end of a nightmare, stringing together a rushed mix of nonsensical scenes to try to burn out the bitter taste of the images that came before. Shane desperately did not want to wake up. Didn’t want Ilya to remember that they didn’t do this. That this was just the limbo state between hell and probably more hell. That this wasn’t a life. It was a pause.

Eventually, Ilya would want things Shane couldn’t give him. Crowds and noise and motion. Hockey. Freedom. Shane wasn’t sure how long he could keep pretending otherwise. It wouldn’t be enough, and Ilya would slowly grow to resent the enclosure Shane was building for him. Ilya would pace back and forth like an animal in captivity, hating each new plant or toy Shane added to try to keep him interested.

One day, he’d wake up and realize Shane had tied their futures together in the span of a single terrible night. Realize he’d agreed to a marriage proposal neither of them had meant to make. Realize Shane had built an entire future around the assumption that Ilya would stay.

Had Ilya been so desperate to escape the fire that he hadn’t noticed he was still standing in the smoke?

Shane wasn’t sure which would hurt more: losing him now or waiting for him to leave later.

But for now, he would make his home in the illusion, keeping the door to the dining room closed, ignoring his mom. Ignoring Ilya’s impending visa problems. Ignoring the future. This was all he got, so he would keep it as long as he could.

Ilya’s finger began to slow, and his eyes met Shane’s, the numbers petering off.

“Hey,” Shane whispered.

Ilya smiled. “Hi.”

A loud knock sounded throughout the house, breaking the moment. Both Shane and Ilya jumped and glanced to their side to stare at the front door. Neither of them made much of a move to get up.

“Maybe it’s Amazon?” Shane muttered.

Ilya nodded. “Mm, yes. Your parents probably speed-ordered self-help book. ‘How to talk to your gay teen.’”

Shane laughed. “Or it’s the biggest pride flag you’ve ever seen.”

“Or a rainbow puzzle for David.”

They both snickered and shushed each other as David gave them a look and went to open the door. Shane strained his neck to look over his shoulder to see who it was. He felt his heart sink, and he turned to bury himself in Ilya’s shirt.

“They let anyone be Amazon drivers these days,” mumbled Ilya, glaring at the entrance.

Hayden stopped in the doorway.

“Jesus Christ.” He looked at the scene around him. At the puzzle laid out neatly on the table. At the tray of bread. At Shane still underneath Ilya.

He blinked once and poked at the puzzle. “You guys are taking retirement pretty seriously then.”

“You would know, you’ve been retired for long enough,” Ilya said, climbing off of Shane and helping him sit up.

Hayden frowned. “I’m not retired?”

Ilya gave a loud gasp and clutched his heart. “Really? I thought you were. I have not seen you on the ice in years.”

“You literally saw me yesterday!”

Ilya waved his hand dismissively. “I must have missed you. I do not pay attention to fourth line.”

Shane gave him a sharp look and a smack on the arm. Ilya crossed his arms and flopped further into the couch with a petulant expression but stayed silent.

Hayden laughed. “Dude, he’s got you whipped.”

“Shut up, Pike,” Ilya mumbled, crossing his arms a bit tighter.

“Hayden,” Shane said.

"What?" Hayden shrugged. "You used to yell at me if I left my tape in the wrong stall. Now you're making fucking bread."

"It's focaccia."

"That's somehow worse."

Shane watched as his best friend sighed and took a seat in the armchair opposite them. For a moment, none of them said anything.

"Sorry for barging in like this." Hayden scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. "I did try to call you, but you didn't answer your phone, so I just decided to come anyway."

Ilya sheepishly stuck one hand down the back of his pants and pulled out Shane's phone, handing it to him.

Hayden gave Shane a pointed look. "Dude."

Shane blushed and turned the phone on. Sure enough, he had missed two calls from Hayden and a series of texts.

Ilya whistled. "Wow, Pike. This is a lot of texts. Should I be worried? You come all the way to Ottawa to steal my man?"

Hayden rolled his eyes. "Him? Really, Shane? There weren't any nice men in Montreal?"

Ilya stiffened beside him. Shane frowned. "I mean, probably, I don't know." He hadn't really ever looked. It had always just been Ilya.

Hayden hummed, looking at the two of them. "You know, it took me a while, but I can see it."

"What?"

Hayden pointed between the two of them. "You guys. I mean, it's still fucking crazy, but you were always weird about each other. Couldn't stay away from each other on the ice. Makes sense you did the same off of it."

Ilya smirked. "Yes, Hollander could not resist slamming me into all sorts of boards."

Shane gave him a rough shove. "Oh my god Rozanov, shut up."

Hayden made a face. "Ew. Gross, man." He shifted uncomfortably. "I mean—not gross. It's uh...it's beautiful?"

Shane made a face at that.

"Never mind, I just...I just wanted to say...sorry. By the way. I— uh— I should have said something in the locker room, I just—"

Shane shook his head. "It's fine. You didn't...it's fine."

"No, it's not. You're my best friend. I just..."

Hayden rubbed the back of his neck.

"I don't know. Everybody was yelling and I got caught up in it. And then you walked out and I realized I was standing there thinking about why you hadn't told me and about hockey when you were..." He gestured vaguely. "You know. Having the worst day of your life."

Hayden gave Ilya a look that Shane couldn't read before continuing. "Lots of things matter more than hockey." Ilya gave Hayden a firm nod and grabbed Shane's hand.

Shane frowned. "I mean," he laughed, "That's easy for you to say. You've still got it."

Hayden gave Shane a confused expression, and Ilya shifted beside him.

Hayden paused, blinking at the two of them. "What's happening next, by the way?"

Shane ran a hand through his hair. "Well...we're not sure. My mom said we would get a couple of offers by the end of the day. I think Vancouver sent something, but it's much lower than I was being paid at Montreal. It's not that I'm not happy to receive the offer, but I don't want to be paid less than I'm worth because I'm some kind of gay liability. And I think Florida sent something over for Ilya, which is good, but it's pretty far so—"

"Sorry, that's," Hayden interrupted with another confused expression, "that's not really what I meant. I mean I'm happy you both are getting offers, you obviously deserve to keep playing hockey. I just—" He paused, looking between the two of them. Ilya gave Hayden a warning expression, but Hayden continued. "I meant like, what's happening with you two. I mean," he laughed, "are you guys together, together? Should I be buying a suit for a wedding? I know you said it was casual between you and Boston Lily, but shit, man. You look so domestic here."

Shane stared at Hayden with wide eyes before glancing at Ilya, who was now looking at the floor, picking at one of the threads on the sofa. He didn't understand. He didn't really see the difference between getting asked about his future with hockey and his future with Ilya. He wasn't sure there was one. He wasn't sure there had ever been one.

"I mean...Ilya's visa status should be secured once he signs with a team. Things are obviously a bit up in the air now, but..." Shane drifted off. But what? Obviously getting married was absolutely insane. And it wouldn't be what was best for Ilya in the end. And yet he almost wanted Ilya to interject, to say that he wanted to marry Shane anyway, regardless of the visa.

But Ilya just shrugged instead. "Yes, Hollander was very heroic, trying to save me from big scary Russia. But he will get hockey back very soon, so it will be okay."

The answer sat strangely in Shane's chest. Shane's stomach twisted.

Shane frowned, but he looked back to Hayden. “Yeah, I mean...obviously everything has changed, but...I don’t know. We’ve been trying to ignore all of that. My mom is in the other room trying to save my career.” He laughed. “I mean, she’s even pulled out the color-coordinated folders, so that’s how you know she’s serious.”

Hayden didn’t share the joke, but instead furrowed his brow in concern. “I mean...you’re acting like your life is over. But you’ll still have hockey—”

“Yeah, I know.”

“—and now you have Boston Lily. I mean, have you seen the comments online? It seems like lots of people are rooting for you, now that they’ve seen the video. I know it wasn’t like that at first, but they’re all pretty happy for you. And I’m happy for you.”

Hayden gave Ilya a look. “Even if you had to pick the biggest asshole in the league.”

Shane squeezed Ilya’s hand a little harder. “He’s not that bad,” he joked. But Ilya was still looking at Hayden with a slight grimace. Ilya slipped his hand out of Shane’s and reached up to scratch his nose. He didn’t return his hand when he dropped it from his face, electing to leave it in his lap. Shane resisted the urge to grab it back, to lock Ilya’s fingers in between his own.

Shane shook it off and turned back to Hayden.

“It won’t be the same, but it will be nice to get back to it, hopefully. We’ll make it work.”

Hayden nodded slowly. Shane glanced at Ilya, who was still looking upset about something. Shane wasn’t sure what more he could say to try to reassure him, that he would still have a career, that he wouldn’t just be stuck with Shane. He didn’t want to ruin Ilya’s life, to keep him locked away in this little corner of boring Ottawa. He knew that Ilya had to be worried about hockey just as much as Shane was. They had always been drawn together by their shared love for the sport, thriving on the competition they brought out in each other.

Shane coughed. “How’s, ugh. How’s the team?”

Hayden winced. “It’s...it’s not good. They’re pretty upset, but they’ll come around. It’ll just...take them a second...”

“Oh.”

Hayden bit his lip slightly. “But I’m sure your new team will be okay. Those assholes didn’t deserve you anyway.”

“Yeah,” Shane replied unconvincingly. Ilya still wasn’t touching him, so Shane just rubbed his thighs awkwardly.

They sat there in silence for a little bit, the weight of it making all three of them tense.

Hayden clapped his hands together suddenly.

“Okay, what are we doing? We’ve got one puzzle done? Pathetic, Rozanov, I would have expected more of you. Where’s our second one?”

Neither Shane nor Ilya moved for a moment. Then, Ilya quickly nodded and reached under the coffee table to grab another one of his dad’s boxes.

“This one is 1000 pieces, so I know it will be very hard for you, Pike. You will finally have to use your eyes, which will be hard for you since you are so used to skating around with them closed.”

“Fuck off, man”

Shane continued to sit still, feeling like he had missed something. Feeling the unease of having done something wrong, but having no idea what.

Hayden and Ilya made quick work of flipping the pieces right-side up.

Ilya turned to Shane with a pained smile. “Come on, Hollander, you need to show us that your edge-work is not just good on the ice.”

Shane shook his head and leaned forward to help search for pieces. There was a weight that wasn’t there before. Just another thing to ignore and lock up in an adjacent room.

* * * * *

Hayden stayed for a while, not saying much beyond a few comments here and there, purposefully avoiding any conversation about hockey or Ilya. Shane would have assumed he would have asked a lot of questions. About how they got together. About the text messages Shane knew Hayden had seen them send each other. Instead, he talked about the weather and the new RuPaul’s Drag Race episode he had watched last night. Shane laughed a bit to himself, thinking about Hayden rushing home to Jackie and hastily trying to turn on the first ‘gay’ show he saw. But he was trying. Shane hadn’t even gotten a text from most of the other Metros players. Not even JJ, which hurt more than Shane wanted to admit.

Eventually, Hayden left when Yuna emerged from her makeshift situation room. He gave Shane a long hug goodbye.

“You need to talk to him, Shane.”

Shane frowned. They had been talking all day.

“Okay, Hayd.”

Hayden gave him a look. “Call me if you need anything, okay?”

Shane resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Yeah, man, I will.”

After Hayden left, the rest of them gathered for dinner, which consisted of takeout that his dad had grabbed in a rush. Yuna spent the dinner discussing her various phone calls and offers. A few sponsors had let Shane go. A few wanted Shane to do a couple of pride-

centered advertisements, which made Shane want to sink into the floor, but he tried to put on a grateful face.

His mom also detailed the numerous offers Ilya and Shane had gotten from different teams. They weren't the best in the league for nothing. But each offer came with a different reservation. They didn't want Shane to bring up 'the gay thing' too much. They didn't want to pay Ilya nearly as much as he had been earning in Boston. They wouldn't accept a 'no trade clause' because they didn't know what Shane would do next. It was all kind of shit, and they all knew it. The best offers were from San Jose and Edmonton for Ilya and Shane, respectively, but they would be miles and miles away from each other and in completely different conferences. The whole thing made Shane want to crawl in bed with Ilya and hold him there as long as he could, melting into the sheets beneath him.

Ilya didn't say much at dinner either, repeatedly looking over at Shane to gauge his feelings on the whole thing. Overall, it was a silent affair, aside from his mom's constant stream of information. But even she waned when she saw Shane's almost catatonic state and Ilya's silent brewing. In the end, it was David who suggested that they revisit the offers in the morning, leaving Shane and Ilya alone in the kitchen, neither of them making a move to get up from the hard wooden chairs that were slowly pressing long lines into Shane's legs.

Ilya looked down at the table in front of them, his finger poking at some of the leftover containers waiting to be shoved in a fridge.

"You liked the Edmonton offer," he said abruptly.

Shane tilted his head. "I mean, it was probably the best one I'm going to get..."

Ilya nodded, still looking at the table. "You should take it."

The words landed harder than they should have.

Shane had spent all afternoon trying to figure out how to keep them together. Apparently Ilya had spent it figuring out how to separate them.

Shane stared at him, shocked. "What?"

"You should take it," Ilya repeated. "It's a good deal."

"But..."

"But what, Shane? You want it. You would have hockey back."

But it would be so far away from you, Shane wanted to say. He didn't want hockey back if it meant he lost Ilya.

"Would you take the contract in San Jose?" he said instead.

Ilya shrugged. "It doesn't matter."

Shane gave him a look. "It doesn't matter?"

Ilya only shrugged again and twisted a used napkin in his hand.

San Jose was a great team for Ilya, Shane knew that. He knew that they could use a player like him, and with Ilya at center, they actually had a shot at a playoff run. It was a good idea. Shane hated it.

“It would be good hockey,” Shane said softly.

Ilya scoffed. “Yeah. It would.” Ilya threw the napkin at the table with more force than Shane expected.

Shane had no idea what he had done to make Ilya angry. Maybe this was already the first crack in the glass, the beginning of the end. Of course, Ilya must miss Boston, must miss his team, but Shane hadn't expected Ilya to sound so resigned. Had the little taste of Shane's desperation, of the destruction of his obsession, really driven him away so quickly? Shane couldn't bear to watch Ilya grow to hate him. He didn't care if the rest of the world, if his friends, if the Metros all already did. It would be Ilya's hatred that finally broke him.

“You really think I should pick Edmonton?”

Ilya gave a little sniff, but didn't move his eyes away from the table.

“It would be good hockey,” he murmured under his breath.

Shane shook his head, slightly angry as well now. “I don't know what you want, Ilya.”

Ilya gave him a little glare. “What do I want? I want you to stop acting like your life is over! That's what Pike said, right? You keep talking about hockey.”

Shane jolted back in surprise. “Of course I'm talking about hockey! We lost everything, I'm allowed to be upset about that.”

Ilya scoffed. “I did not lose everything, Shane! I am here, with you at your parents' house.”

“Exactly! You could be in Boston! With your team. Your friends. Your actual life.”

Ilya gave him a baffled expression. “What life, Shane? I want to be here, with you.”

Shane shook his head firmly. “No, you don't. This is nice,” he gestured angrily around him, “but it isn't real!”

“Don't say that, it is real to me, Shane!”

Shane stammered for a second. How could this be real? Real was responsibility and jobs and structure. It wasn't whatever this was, whatever today had been. This was never going to be ‘forever’ and Ilya would hate it if it was.

“I really don't know what you want me to say.”

Ilya let out an exasperated laugh. “You want to play hockey, yes?”

Shane lifted his hands up in frustration. “Of course I want to play hockey, so do you!”

“Great! Then go to Edmonton and play hockey!”

“I don’t want to!”

“Why? Why you don’t want to?”

“Because I also want you!”

The words escaped before he could stop them.

For a moment, the room went silent.

Ilya paused and gave Shane a sad expression. Oh god, did he not want Shane back? “You don’t know what you want. You will regret choosing me. I am broken, Shane. You—you don’t even know me.”

“I don’t even *know* you? Of course I know you!”

Ilya's face crumpled for half a second before he looked away.

“No. You don’t. What are we, really, Shane? We meet up five times a year, maybe six.”

Shane opened and closed his mouth a couple of times.

He knew Ilya took tea with jam. Knew how he liked his eggs. Knew every scar on his body.

He didn't know why Ilya stopped calling his brother.

Shane felt like screaming. What was he saying? Was he trying to break up with him? They weren’t even really together. He didn’t understand.

Ilya continued. “No, Shane. We don’t know each other. I will push you away, you will see. There is so much inside my head that you don’t know. That you wouldn’t want to know.”

Shane flung his hands up in frustration. “So what then? Fine! We don’t know each other. Okay, so we learn! We keep talking. But in the meantime, we can keep hockey.”

Ilya let out a mean laugh. “Yes, is always about hockey. You should have proposed to hockey, Shane. Should have saved hockey. You do not need to keep playing hero, Shane.”

“This is about the proposal? Fine! Then I take it back, if you don’t want to marry me so bad. I’m sorry you’re stuck with me forever. I’m sorry I’m so boring and unbearable to be around. At least hockey would know what it wants.”

Internally, Shane’s heart sank. What could Shane really offer Ilya? He should never have proposed. Never said it out loud. Never turned a desperate feeling into a promise.

Ilya groaned and paced around the room. He was yelling now. “You are obsessed, Shane. I don’t get you. You are crazy. It’s always about hockey for you. It is all you think about!”

Shane flinched. A few of his teammates had thrown those words at him a few seasons ago. They had been joking with a girl at the bar who was nursing a drink following Shane's polite rejection of her. 'Don't worry about Mr. Robot. He's fucking crazy.' They had laughed, but Shane had mulled over the words for a while, holding them on his tongue and letting them roll around, getting used to the bitter taste. He had tried to take pride in the fact that his insanity, his obsession, had pushed him further than most of his peers. But there were a few nights spent replaying tape from a Raiders game, zooming in on their first-line center, that his obsession felt darker. Something that would always prevent him from moving on, from closing text messages and refusing quiet invitations. Something that, now that Ilya had seen it up close, would eventually drive him away too.

The words hurt now as they did on those sleepless nights.

Shane ran a shaky hand through his hair. "Well, I'm sorry I'm not as interesting as the entirety of Boston. Good thing you don't have to marry me anymore. Thank god you can go off to fucking San Jose. Thank god you're not stuck with my crazy fucking mind."

Ilya groaned. "You don't want to marry me, Shane. You are just too nice. You think you need to save me. You do not. You want hockey. You will regret choosing me. You will hate me, Shane."

"What?" Shane stared at him, baffled. How could he ever hate Ilya? He wasn't sure his body knew how to. He had tried to force it to all of those many years ago and failed.

"I don't regret choosing you, that's absurd. But of course I also want hockey! So do you! And you should have it! You deserve it."

"I don't want to deserve hockey, Shane, I want to deserve you!" Ilya blurted out. His eyes went wide, and he closed his mouth with a snap.

Shane felt his anger evaporate, leaving something much worse behind.

They stood there silently, breathing heavily. Shane wasn't sure when he had gotten out of his chair.

Shane felt tears prick at the corners of his eyes. He took a few shaky breaths. Shane had never had someone want him so much. It terrified him.

"I—," Shane said quietly, "I don't want you to look back one day and realize what you gave up. I don't want you to wake up in a few years and resent me for choosing you. To wish you could have more than stupid puzzles and stupid bread."

"Without hockey..." Shane swallowed. "I don't know what I am, Ilya. I can't give you anything else. I mean, look at me." He let out a shaky laugh. "I can't even figure out how to spend one day without it. You're right. I am crazy. I...I can't..."

Shane's voice wobbled, and he looked down at his feet, feeling a few tears escape. He felt the illusion crumble around him, the voices crashing into the house. All those little fears leaked in through the windows of the Ottawa house, shattering the performance of calm, of

domesticity, of home. This was real life coming to take the helm. Shane wished he had a few more seconds. Just a little longer to pretend this could be enough.

Shane could feel Ilya step closer to him. He felt a hand lift his chin up, and he was met with Ilya's fierce green eyes. They were also wet with tears.

"Shane. I want the stupid puzzles and stupid bread." Ilya wiped a tear from Shane's cheek. "You think you were the only one that made a choice in that locker room? I am a big hockey player, Shane. If I did not want to get dragged out of there, I would not have been."

Shane stared at him, not sure what to say. So instead, he slid his head down onto Ilya's shoulder and wrapped his arms around him. Ilya did the same, holding him so tightly it almost hurt.

On the table next to them, Shane's phone started ringing. Ilya frowned at it.

"I thought your phone was off."

Shane shrugged, grabbing it. "I turned it on after I missed Hayden's calls."

He stared at the unknown number. It was from Ottawa. Without thinking, he hit the accept button.

A voice rang out into the kitchen. "Hi, is this Shane Hollander?"

Shane blinked. "Ugh, yeah, this is him."

"Great! This is Brandon Wiebe. I'm the head coach of the Centaurs."

"Oh."

Shane blinked.

"Congratulations?"

Ilya gave him a little exasperated expression. Shane shrugged in return.

Wiebe laughed. "Thank you, Hollander. That means a lot coming from you. Listen, I'm sure you have a lot of teams trying to snatch you up, but I would love it if you considered us."

Shane blinked again. "Us?"

"The Centaurs. We would love to have you guys. We don't have a ton of wiggle room in the salary cap, but with a couple of trades, we think we can offer you something. It wouldn't be the same as your Montreal salary or Rozanov's Boston salary, but—"

"Wait, wait. Are you talking about Ilya or me?"

Wiebe paused for a moment. "Well, I mean, we'd love to have both of you, if we can. We know Ottawa isn't the most desirable location, but we've got a great bunch of guys here who

would be excited to have you both.”

Shane and Ilya looked at each other with wide eyes. Both?

There was a pause over the phone. “Listen, Hollander. I watched the video. It was...” Wiebe took a deep breath. “It was one of the bravest things I’ve ever seen. I wish that...I wish that I could have been that brave when I was your age.”

None of them spoke for a moment.

Wiebe let out a sigh again. “We would love to have you here. You have a team standing behind you in Ottawa, whatever you decide. Take the night to think on it. My people should have just sent something over to your agent and your manager. If I’m not mistaken, they’re currently the same people for Rozanov, but if not, could you pass on the message?”

Shane nodded before remembering that Wiebe couldn’t see him. “Uh, yes, sir. I can do that. Thank you for the call.”

Wiebe let out another small laugh. “Sure, kid. Hang in there, okay? There are a lot of people rooting for you two.”

The phone went dead, leaving Shane and Ilya alone again in the dining room. They stared at each other, neither of them daring to speak. This was far deadlier than fear. It was hope.

Chapter End Notes

...they're not great at communicating...they'll get there though

thank you all for the support! I love reading your comments <3

After reading your comments, I realized I needed more reactions from outsiders and a bit more material (peep the new chapter count), so I hope you enjoy the bit of social media at the beginning. There will be more social media moments in the upcoming chapters as well.

Chapter 4: Role Model

Chapter Summary

“Do you...” Shane began nervously. “Do you want to do it? Play on the same team?”

“Do you?”

“I asked first.”

“I asked harder.”

Shane sputtered. “What does that even mean? You can’t ask something harder.”

“Can. Did.”

“For fuck’s sake, Ilya—”

-

Role models. Some chosen, some accidental. And one very dark rink in Ottawa.

Chapter Notes

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

@MetroManiac88: the whole time? The whole—THE WHOLE TIME??? WDYM THE WHOLE TIME???? **@ShaneHollanderMLHPlayer???** **@IlyaRozanovOfficial????**

@hollandersmouthguard: My whole life is a lie. How can I tell my boss that I need the day off to emotionally recover from the longest enemies-to-lovers plot this continent has ever seen

@MetrosMessiahHollander: tagging them is crazy

@RozanovsHelmet: imagine risking your entire career and then still being unable to confess your feelings normally

@PucksAndProblems: "or you could just marry me" brother that is NOT a counterargument

@emotionalsupportpuck: the real victim here is whoever has to explain to shane hollander that he is in fact engaged

@RyanKellerMLH: Sources confirm multiple teams have contacted Hollander and Rozanov.

@BradWilcox22: don't care who they date. keep it off the ice.

@hollanovdefenselawyer: brother, you’ve never even seen the ice. You wouldn’t know the ice if it smacked you in the face

@hollandersmouthguard: THEY ARE IN LOVE YOUR HONOR

@ShaneHollanderDaily: i used to spend my free time arguing about this man's zone entries. now i'm crying over a twenty-one minute coming out video.

@goalieapologist: communication skills: 0/10. devotion: 100/10.

@emotionalsupportpuck: if they break up i am suing the league

@sadbookgirl: this isn't a sports scandal this is a 200k-word fanfiction

@RozanovsHelmet: You're laughing. Shane Hollander survived the great Ilya Rozanov ho phase of 2014 and you're laughing

@HollanovDefenseSquad: i'd like everyone to know that i got laughed at in 2012 for saying they looked at each other weird

@HollanovDefenseSquad: AND I WAS RIGHT

@HollanovDefenseSquad: I DEMAND AN APOLOGY

@somewhereinSK: i didn't know anyone like me played professional hockey.

That last tweet made Sam stop his scrolling. His mouse hovered over the tweet. He clicked on the profile. The profile picture was of a generic hockey rink, and the bio gave nothing away, not even the age. But based on the username, he assumed the tweet had to be from another kid in Saskatchewan. Another kid who might have been sitting in another Saskatchewan bedroom staring at the same screen.

He looked at the tweet again. He hovered over the like button. He liked it. He immediately unliked it. He liked it again.

He stared at the little red heart on his screen. He pulled open the page that had been sitting open on his computer for the last 34 hours. He clicked on the photo again and zoomed in. Not the one of Shane and Ilya semi-nude (but like holy shit, if Sam wasn't gay before...). Not the one of Shane Hollander on his knees that had launched approximately eight million inappropriate comments. Instead, he stared at that last look, Hollander's hand resting on the hotel room doorknob, his head turned back towards Rozanov on the bed. He'd never seen that look. And he'd never imagined that it could exist in hockey.

He loved this sport; he always had. But the older he had gotten, the more suffocating it felt, the more impossible. Bag skates he could live through. The other stuff he was less sure about. He didn't know how long he would have been able to play hockey without feeling like he was putting 100% of himself on the ice, and he had known that he would never be able to have that. Not on the ice, where slurs were used as chirps, as harmless weapons. Not in the locker room, where jokes were cruel and common.

But then there was this. There was a twenty-one-minute video of the best hockey player in the league facing Sam's greatest fear. And there was this picture.

He felt tears welling up, threatening to fall down his face. He would not cry. He wasn't a pussy. He wasn't a...

He moved his cursor back to the profile. He clicked 'message'.

To @somerwhereinSK: Me too

* * * * *

Scott Hunter was having a really weird week. First, his boyfriend had broken up with him, to which Scott had responded by very calmly and casually writing 103 reasons why coming out was a bad idea, trying to counter the one reason he needed to do it anyway.

And then Shane Hollander had been photographed kissing Ilya Rozanov.

Huh.

Ever since, no one seemed able to shut up. The Admirals group chat certainly had not quieted since the first photo was released. He thinks Wagner alone had probably sent about fifty links to interviews and games that should have hinted that something was up. Everyone seemed shocked that a gay hockey player, let alone two, could have slipped right under their noses. How could they not have known?

Scott had waited for the slew of homophobia. The name-calling. The threats. But it never came. Well. Brisebois had made a few distasteful comments, but Scott really couldn't tell if they were coming from a place of hateful ignorance or just really, really strong curiosity.

For fuck's sake, Vaughny was sending them shipping videos now. And he was sending way too many of them for anyone to believe his 'I just think they're funny' lie.

Scott knew what he should do. He did. He knew he shouldn't leave Hollander standing alone in that horrid locker room for one minute longer than he had to. Not publicly. Not when Scott had a platform and a voice and a list in his nightstand that had just gotten a lot shorter. But as he opened up the Admirals' chat to type out his message, he knew that it wasn't really for Hollander. And it certainly wasn't for Ilya fucking Rozanov.

It was for himself.

He was just the coward hiding behind others' worst nightmare.

* * * * *

Ilya's coffee was far too sweet. He liked a lot of sugar, obviously, but not this much. It was just that he liked the look Hollander gave him as he scooped in more and more spoonfuls of sugar so much that he had gone a bit overboard. All great artists suffer for their art, he supposed.

Shane silently sipped his own black coffee beside him. Ilya was starting to get used to a silent Hollander. It had been two days since they had argued, and they still hadn't sat down and

really talked. They were both too scared to, Ilya supposed. Both too scared of being something. And of not being something.

It's one thing to let out small admissions in dark, hot hotel rooms in between gasps, brain drunk on desire. It's a whole different thing to say it sober in a well-lit cafe after having made eggs for your not-so-casual-sex-partner's parents.

Wiebe was sitting across from them, acting as if he didn't have the two biggest names in hockey and sex-scandal lined up opposite him like they were interviewing him. Ilya wasn't sure why Wiebe had suggested meeting in a public cafe, but he found he wasn't as upset about it as he thought he would be. It was its own kind of thrill to be outside in a public space with Shane Hollander on his right, his hand firmly held within his own, despite the eyes and cameras that kept trying to subtly turn toward them. He gave the hand a little squeeze and saw the corner of Shane's mouth turn upward.

“—Obviously, we'd have to test out a few line combinations, but the plan would be to keep you both as centers, but join you for the power play. I know you would be coming in mid-season, but the boys would be thrilled to have you. I think Haasy built some kind of shrine in the locker room, but obviously, we would have him take that down before you got there. Well...except the scented candles...”

Wiebe looked up at the ceiling as if he were actually considering it. Ilya had to stifle a little laugh. Against their will, they were the first openly queer men in the league, and Wiebe was thinking about putting them in a locker room with a bunch of other naked men. And he was talking about candles?

Ilya wasn't sure if he was ever going to bring it up. They'd already been here for one hour, and so far, they had covered salaries, trade clauses, term length, performance bonuses, and for some reason, Dykstra's music taste, most of which had already been covered in calls with Yuna and Farah (except the music. And Ilya was horrified to think about the sheer amount of country music he might be subjected to soon.)

Shane must have been thinking the same thing because the pen he was using to take diligent notes faltered, and he opened and closed his mouth a few times, trying to form his words carefully.

“I mean...this all sounds great, but...won't it be difficult with both Ilya and me there?”

Wiebe nodded and scratched the back of his neck. Ilya braced himself.

“Yeah, well. Like I said. We'll have to try a few different line combinations, but honestly, the depth at center is an excellent starting point to be at for any team.” He laughed a bit. “I mean, honestly, I hope the wingers can keep up with the two of you, but they all seem willing to try their best to do so.”

Ilya and Shane blinked at him.

Ilya leaned forward slightly, as if to try to hear him a bit better.

“No, that is all good but...” He glanced at Shane. Had they not just spent the last two days reading contracts all containing little reservations here and there? *Mr. Hollander will keep his social media posts restricted to team-approved content. Mr. Rozanov will not engage in inappropriate relationships with external league affiliates and teams. Mr. Hollander will be given access to a separate shower station for his own privacy. Mr. Rozanov will not suck anyone’s dick—*

Shane cleared his throat. “I think what Roz is trying to say is, what about our...relationship? Do you have any additional conditions regarding all of...that?”

Wiebe stared at them. “Well, normally you would probably have to disclose your relationship with HR, but I’m pretty sure everybody already knows,” he said with a wink. “Besides, you boys probably have enough heat coming from the league about the legal necessity of disclosure and sports tampering.”

Ilya and Shane gawked at him. Wiebe’s lips twitched upwards slightly.

Ah. He was fucking with them.

Ilya leaned back in his chair, smiling now. “Yes, the league is very, very worried. Who knew they cared so much about proper paperwork?”

Wiebe grinned at him openly now. “I’m sure this has been a tough time for them. Send Crowell my best next time you talk to him,” he said, nodding at Shane, who blushed deeply.

“We would send him a fruit basket, but—” He gave Shane a pointed look. “I am not so sure he likes fruits.”

Wiebe let out a loud laugh, startling the girl sitting at a table over, making her drop the phone she was trying to hide behind her cup. Ilya gave her a look, and she blushed before shoving the phone into her purse.

“Listen,” Wiebe said more seriously. Ilya and Shane both leaned in slightly, their amusement fading slightly. “I’m not going to sugarcoat it; it’s not going to be easy. The press is going to be relentless. They are going to hound you at every conference, every interview. And we’re not going to keep you tucked away, hidden in the locker room. We’ll be with you the entire time, but with you two playing together, there will always be more questions, more scrutiny, more replays. Your audience is going to be bigger and louder, in good ways as well as bad.”

Wiebe looked between the two of them. “This doesn’t go away if you play on the same team. There’s a lot of reasons why you might consider playing in completely separate conferences, on teams that can pay you a hell of a lot more than we’re offering.

“But,” Wiebe continued, tilting his head, “if you can play with each other. If you *want* to play with each other, then I want to give you that chance.”

Ilya froze. That was everything he wanted. Surely it couldn’t be this easy. There should be someone trying to stop them. Someone keeping him from dragging Shane to the Centaurs’ practice facility and chaining him to the ice.

And then he thought about the last two days. About Shane's silence across the kitchen table. About how they had managed to spend eight years communicating easily on the ice and apparently not at all anywhere else. The ice had always been the easy part. It was everything after the final buzzer that undid them. What would happen when their 'off the ice' included a locker room with a team that depended on them?

He wanted to say yes. He always wanted to say yes to Shane. That had never been the problem.

Wiebe hesitated. "I...I know firsthand what it's like to play on a team with someone who you were...a bit too close to. I know it can be painful. But I also know there is a version of me who would give anything to be back on that team and have it all go a bit differently. You two changed a lot of people's lives, even if you didn't mean to. It meant a lot to a lot of people. It meant a lot to me."

Wiebe sighed and drank the last bit of his coffee. "We'd love to have you on the team if you want to be there."

Ilya and Shane sat there silent. The noise of the cafe floated through the air, each clamor of conversation, each loud steam puff from the espresso machines behind the counter creating a symphony of lively activity. Maybe that's why Wiebe had brought them to this cafe instead of a sterile office or conference room. To remind them that they were still alive, and people were still moving. Coffee orders were still being taken and handed out, emails were still being sent, and customers were still going in and out, the bell ringing with each swing of the door. It was hard to remember all that sitting in a little office. Or at a dining room table.

If you want to be there. Of course, Ilya wanted to be there. He just didn't know if he could survive it. He didn't know if he could go on and off a bench, always seeming to miss Shane by a shift.

And he knew that Shane was scared, too. He could feel the anxious desire radiating off of Shane's body. Ilya knew it well. He could always tell when Shane wanted something desperately, but knew that he shouldn't or knew he should consider it longer with more spreadsheets and planners.

So neither of them said anything.

Wiebe didn't seem to care, though. Pulling out his keys, Wiebe unclipped one of them from the ring and slid it to them across the table.

"This is a key to the training facility. Nobody is there for the rest of the day, if you want to get a feel of the room."

Moving mechanically, Shane took it and slid it into his pocket. Feeling it was time to leave, Ilya stood and extended his hand to Wiebe, who took it and gave it a firm shake.

"Thank you, sir. We will call you later."

Shane mimicked the action, and Wiebe gave them both a warm smile.

“I look forward to it.”

* * * * *

The car was silent as they drove back to Shane’s parents’ house. Shane didn’t listen to music because he was a freak, but Ilya was almost grateful for it now because he knew that the long silence would eventually stress Shane out enough to force him to make small talk.

“So, uh...traffic’s not as bad heading back.”

Ilya smirked. Right on schedule.

He gave Shane a pointed look that he knew he could see even though his eyes were focused on the road, because he blushed a little bit.

“Shane.”

Shane winced. “Yeah?”

“The traffic?”

“Well, it really isn’t as bad,” Shane mumbled.

Ilya let out an exasperated sigh. “Oh, is it?”

“Shut up,” Shane responded, blushing harder. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel once, twice. Stopped.

“Do you...” Shane began nervously. “Do you want to do it? Play on the same team?”

“Do you?”

“I asked first.”

“I asked harder.”

Shane sputtered. “What does that even mean? You can’t ask something harder.”

“Can. Did.”

“For fuck’s sake, Ilya—”

“Shane. Just tell me.”

Just tell me you don’t think we should do it, Ilya thought. Tell me that it’s a bad idea. Tell me it will be too hard, that it will hurt our careers. Tell me you need me, not just in your bed but in your locker room, in your house.

“I think—” Shane hesitated. “I think it would be hard to be professional.”

Professional? What the fuck? Ilya slumped back into his seat and stared at the road. Fucking professional?

“You...you are worried I will jump you in the shower?”

“What! No! I just—” Shane took a deep breath. “I just don’t know how to separate you from hockey.”

Ah. He should have known. Shane had never even liked it when Ilya texted (okay, maybe sexted) Shane before a game. He should have known that Shane would see Ilya as a distraction. He probably was.

He tried not to seem as hurt as he was.

“Okay. I understand.”

Shane pulled his eyes from the road for the first time to look at Ilya. He also seemed hurt for some reason, which was stupid. Ilya had done nothing but agree with him. Neither of them said anything. The silence in the car was a different kind than before.

The moment was interrupted by a faint buzzing from Shane’s phone. Ilya picked it up from the cup holder and peered at the contact name in confusion. He looked at Shane. Shane was focused on the road. Ilya looked back at the phone.

“Who is it? Is it my mom?” Shane asked, glancing at the cars around him before signaling a lane change.

“Ah, no. Is Scott Hunter.”

“What?”

“Scott Hunter.”

“No, yeah, I heard you, but why is Scott Hunter calling me?”

Ilya shrugged and accepted the call, putting it on speaker.

A voice sounded through the phone.

“Hey, Hollander. It’s, uh, Hunter.”

“Shane,” Ilya said wide-eyed with a dramatic gasp. “The dinosaurs. They’ve found us. Run.”

“Jesus. Rozanov? Well, glad to know you’re at least scared of me.”

Ilya nodded. “Mm, yes. Terrified. I worry every day that you will fall and break hip. Is so sad that old people cannot retire in America. Must work when they are one-hundred years old.”

“Fuck off, man, I’m only three years older than you.”

“Yes. Ancient. You are...” He clicked his tongue. “Shane, what is word your father use? For the crossword?”

“Geriatric?” Shane flatly filled in.

Ilya snapped. “Yes, thank you. Geriatric. You are geriatric, Hunter.”

“Wow. Hollander, I expected better from you.”

“I have no idea why,” Shane responded dryly. “Anyways, why are you calling me?”

“Oh. Well...I just...”

There was a long pause on the phone. *Oh my god, he finally died*, Ilya thought.

“Well, I’ve told my team, so they all know. So it’s not going to be a secret for very much longer. And I’m posting it soon anyway, but I thought that you should know. I know I haven’t really reached out before, but I thought you’d appreciate hearing it from me, so I wanted to tell you—”

“Hunter, you are making no sense,” Ilya called into the phone.

“—I’m gay.”

Shane and Ilya both froze.

What?

“Are...” Shane began, “Are you fucking with us?”

“What? No, why would I— never mind, the point is, I’m gonna come out. Publicly, that is. I, uh...”

There was another long pause.

“...I know how you ended up here wasn't exactly by choice. Getting outed has always been my worst fear, so I’m sorry that’s what happened to you. Somebody had to be the first, and I never wanted it to be me, but...if I come out, you guys won’t be the only ones.” He laughed a bit. “They can’t kick us all out, can they?” Ilya wasn’t sure if he was trying to convince himself or them. To be honest, Ilya was mostly concerned with the state of his gaydar. He had always taken great pride in it. Maybe too much. Maybe the pride was his downfall. Who would have thought?

“Hunter, I...I don’t know what to say,” Shane stammered.

“You don’t have to say anything. I just figured...People already like me. I know how I’m seen. I’m the good-boy hockey captain. And, well, if somebody’s gotta do all the interviews and pride campaigns and whatever, it might as well be me. I think the league is going to want their model gay man, so...I can do it. I've been thinking about it for a while. This just made it easier to stop thinking and start doing. And you two can both just...live.”

Live as what, though, that was the question. Ilya had spent the last week quietly preparing himself for the answer. He had watched Shane shrink every time Yuna mentioned a sponsor, every time a contract came with a condition. He had seen what some of the teams were already trying to build: a different kind of performance, pride flags instead of hockey sticks, progress statements instead of press conferences.

He would have done it for Shane.

And Shane would have done it because he had to.

But Scott Hunter was offering to do it instead.

Scott fucking Hunter.

Of all the people. Of all the people in the world.

Ilya glanced at Shane. Shane was looking at the road, his hands steady on the wheel, but his jaw was doing the thing it did when he was trying very hard not to feel something in front of someone. Ilya had learned that particular expression a long time ago.

“Thank you,” Ilya said softly. Shane looked over at him for a moment, seemingly waiting for a punchline that wouldn’t come. Ilya watched something move across Shane’s face that he couldn’t quite name.

There was a brief silence.

“Yeah,” Hunter said quietly. He coughed a bit. “Yeah, man. Listen, uh, that’s all I wanted to say, so I’ll let you guys get back to the rest of your day. Let me know if there’s anything I can do for you. You’ve got at least one team behind you here in New York.”

“Yeah, thanks, man. Sounds good,” Shane added quickly.

Ilya smirked. “You know, Shane is very excited you are gay. I have seen his childhood bedroom now. He has this massive Scott Hunter poster hanging—”

“Okay, Hunter, thanks! Bye!” Shane yelled and smacked the phone in Ilya’s hand a couple of times to get it to hang up while Ilya let out a loud cackle.

Shane glared at him. “You are such a fucking asshole!”

“Eh, you love it.”

A warm silence drifted over the car.

Ilya shook his head. “I can’t believe the dinosaur is gay.”

“I know, right? I mean, he’s hot, but I just never imagined—”

“Oh, you never imagined? Never imagined Scott Hunter fucking other men?”

Shane made a face. “Ew, no. That’s like imagining your grandparents having sex. Gross.”

Ilya burst out laughing, and Shane grinned. Taking one hand off the wheel, Shane reached over and took Ilya’s hand, giving it a firm squeeze. Ilya squeezed back.

God, Ilya loved him so much. When his mama died, there was an older woman sitting at the back of the church who had approached him briefly after the service before quietly walking out. Trying to offer some comfort, she had said that grief was just love in a different form. Ilya had hated her for saying it then. It hadn’t felt like love at the time. It had felt like abandonment. Now, sitting in Shane’s car, Ilya couldn’t help but disagree with her once more, but for a different reason. She was wrong. It was the other way around. Love was just grief. Looking at Shane, Ilya couldn’t help but feel his heart wrench and eyes water. He couldn’t help but prepare eulogies for him, reminiscing on the moments that were gone and the moments they might never have. He wanted to lay flowers at Shane’s feet and tell him he missed him.

He couldn’t believe that he was standing on the precipice of having everything he’d never dared to imagine, especially following what he had always assumed would be the worst and last thing to ever happen to him. He couldn’t believe a team was offering both him and Shane a position. He couldn’t believe Scott Hunter was willing to share their burden. He couldn’t believe that he was driving back to Shane’s parents’ house, where he was sure Yuna was waiting with a collection of new emails for them to go through, and David was just starting dinner, ready to ask Ilya to come help him.

Or at least, that’s where he had assumed they were driving.

Shane had been quieter since the phone call. Not upset, quiet. Different. The kind of quiet that usually preceded terrible ideas. Shane took an earlier exit off the road, and Ilya turned to him with a raised eyebrow. Shane shrugged and kept driving.

Shane drove into a lot and parked the car. Ilya blinked and looked around.

“Is...is this the Centaurs’ rink?”

Shane looked at him with a weak smile as if he was trying not to portray his own eagerness.

“Yeah.”

Shane fiddled with his keys and held up the one Wiebe had given them

“Do you want to play some hockey?” Shane asked with an air of excitement.

Ilya stared at the key. A few days ago, he had thought it was over. He had left Bell Center thinking it would be his last time on the ice.

Now, he grinned wildly. “Fuck yes.”

* * * * *

Ilya was pouring sweat, and his lungs burned. He felt drunk with how much fun he was having. Hockey had always been something he enjoyed because of how good he was at it. But as Shane grabbed for the puck, pushing his stick to the side and darting away, Ilya had never loved the game more. He beamed and chased after Shane, who let out a loud cackle of success as he managed to evade Ilya once again and fling the puck into the back of the net.

Ilya crouched over, breathing hard. Shane skated up to him, stopping quickly to let a spray of ice fly at Ilya.

Ilya sputtered. "Asshole!"

Shane smirked. "Getting tired, Rozanov? Had enough?"

"Never," Ilya replied with a grin.

They were lucky that all of their hockey gear had been in Shane's car, neither of them wanting to touch it after shoving it in the trunk following the Montreal game. They had already been skating for about two hours, running through a variety of crazy drills that Shane made them do before Ilya had convinced him to switch to one-on-one. Not that he was very hard to convince. All it took was a bit of light goading before Shane was eagerly racing him down the ice, the competitive bastard.

They played until they switched to lazily skating around the rink, passing the puck between each other. Ilya had played with Shane before, but the thrill of it never seemed to go away. Each movement, each turn was perfectly in sync. He hardly needed to look to know where Shane was and where he was going. He wished that off the ice, their passes to each other could be as smooth and easy.

Shane must have been thinking the same thing because he paused for a moment with the puck, handling it back and forth along the logo on the ice.

He looked at Ilya with a sad smile. "We're not so great at the talking thing, are we?"

He knocked the puck towards Ilya, who smiled back. "No, we are not."

Ilya slid the puck back to Shane. They were both standing still now, near center ice.

Shane held the puck still for a second, looking at it. His brows furrowed in concentration, like he was watching game tape and taking avid notes on each player's flaws and strengths.

"I did have a poster of Hunter in my room. It was on my wall until four days ago, when I ripped it down and hid it while you were downstairs talking to my dad," Shane hurried out, slamming the puck across to Ilya, who caught it on reflex.

Ilya stared at Shane with a stunned expression.

"I know. I went to steal a hoodie and saw it crumpled up in the closet." Ilya wiggled his eyebrows. "Is okay. Apparently, Hunter knows the closet well."

Shane let out a short laugh before slamming his mouth closed. "That's not funny."

Ilya shrugged. He lifted the puck onto his stick, balancing it.

“When I was eight years old, I stole all of the left socks from my brother.”

Shane laughed. “What did you do with the right ones?”

Ilya smirked. “I left them in the drawer.”

Shane laughed again and took the puck Ilya passed to him.

They kept passing back and forth, letting a new confession slide out along the ice alongside the puck.

They had never been good at talking, but they had always been good at hockey.

“I once lost my skates, and I told my mom another kid had stolen them. She sent my coach a long email about bullying, but at least she didn’t yell at me when she had to buy me new ones.”

“First time I smoked weed, was actually oregano. But I still pretended I was high. Svetlana made fun of me for years afterward.”

“I’m so sick of salmon. It’s perfect for my diet, but I’m so tired of it.”

“I painted my bathroom blue because the color looked like your shirt.”

“I still have the clothes you let me use that one time. They’re hanging up in my closet in Montreal.”

“I hate your car.”

“I hate *your* car.”

“I have not had sex with anyone other than you in months.”

Shane paused. “Months?”

Ilya nodded slowly. “Yes, months.”

Shane blinked at him, and Ilya shifted awkwardly on his skates. He slid the puck to Shane, who took it calmly.

“Me neither,” Shane said softly.

Ilya rolled his eyes. “Oh. Really.”

Shane’s nose scrunched in irritation. “Shut up.”

Shane fiddled with the puck for a moment.

“I’m gay.”

Ilya gave him a look. “This is cheating, Hollander. You said this at All Stars.”

Shane shrugged. “Felt like I should say it again.”

Ilya returned the puck. “I am bisexual.”

Shane paused again, looking more nervous. “I’ve always been jealous of you. You have always been stronger and more masculine than me. And being gay was hard for me to accept for many reasons, but it was also hard to accept because I knew I was already perceived as more feminine for being Asian.”

Shane swallowed hard before continuing. “I was jealous of your confidence, your energy, and your ability to control the room. You were the person my teammates wanted me to be, even if they never said it. I’m not surprised that they are upset that I’m gay, but I always hoped that it would be okay if I kept being good at hockey. I hoped that being good at hockey would mean people would be able to overlook everything else.”

He slid the puck to Ilya, who felt like he was about to cry. Well. Scratch that. He was pretty sure he was crying. He felt sick to his stomach. He wanted to offer Shane something as well.

He took a deep breath before beginning. “I was jealous of you, too. I watch you and your family, and I wish I had that too. Your parents are so proud of you. My—” He stopped, for a moment, trying to swallow down the emotion that was threatening to overwhelm him. “—my mama. She died when I was twelve and...” He broke off with a small cough.

Shane looked like he wanted to drop his stick and rush towards him. But they weren’t done yet.

“How did she die?” Shane asked quietly.

Ilya gave himself a quick shake. “By accident. She accidentally swallowed a whole bottle of pills.”

Shane’s eyes went wide with horror. “I’m so sorry, Ilya.”

Ilya shrugged. “Was a long time ago. But my dad was so hard on her. And he was hard on me too. I worry, sometimes, that I have her same sadness. That my father ruined us both.”

They both stood silently on the ice. Shane opened his mouth before closing it again.

“I don’t really have anything similar to tell you.”

Ilya laughed before settling into a soft smile, looking at Shane. “Is okay to be boring, Hollander. We cannot all be sad orphans.”

Shane didn’t share the joke, frowning instead. He looked down at the puck in front of him before pushing it silently towards Ilya. Ilya took it with a confused expression.

Shane took a long breath.

“I want to play for Ottawa. I want to play with you. I want it more than I’ve ever wanted anything. I want to go to practices and games with you. And I want to go home together afterward. I want you to have dinner with my parents, and I want them to be your parents too. I know it’s selfish and you’ll probably hate it, but I want it anyway. I want Ottawa. And I want you.”

Ilya gawked at him.

Holy shit.

He pushed himself forward until he was standing two feet away from Shane. He nudged the puck towards him, letting it tap softly against Shane’s stick. Shane looked up from the ice and stared at him with watery eyes.

“I love you, Shane.”

Shane blinked.

He blinked again.

Fuck, he’d fucked up. Fuck fuck fuck fuck—

“I mean—” Ilya hurriedly added.

Suddenly, Shane raised his stick, making Ilya flinch backward slightly, and slammed the puck towards the end zone. The puck hit the back of the net with such force that it made a loud smack, reverberating loudly off the boards.

Ilya whipped his head back to Shane.

“What the actual fuck—”

“I love you too.”

Ilya’s eyes widened. Neither of them said anything for a moment until Ilya collapsed into Shane, whose arms quickly dropped his stick to catch him, the stick clattering loudly against the ice. Ilya’s stick followed.

“Fuck, Hollander.”

Shane lifted Ilya’s head from his chest and gave him a firm kiss, his hands moving into Ilya’s hair. Ilya returned the kiss, grasping at Shane’s jersey, fists white from how hard he was holding him.

Ilya pulled back after a moment, looking at Shane’s bright brown eyes.

“I thought you would choose hockey. I thought you regretted choosing me”

Shane frowned. “You know,” Shane began while sliding his hand along Ilya’s jaw. “People always said I loved hockey more than anything. I’m not sure when I started to mix the two of

you up. Maybe it started back in Saskatchewan. Because it was just...you.”

Shane shrugged slightly, rubbing his thumb against Ilya’s neck, making him shiver.

“It was never hockey or you,” Shane continued softly, “it was always just you.”

Ilya blinked at him. “Oh,” he whispered.

They stood there at center ice, in the same spots they would for a face-off. If Ilya focused really hard, he could almost hear the roar of the crowd, but as always, the dull noise faded when he looked at Shane, ready for the beginning of the game. They held each other, with Ilya’s head still in Shane’s hands, and Ilya felt like he was quieting the voices in there, too. Of course, he was still probably going to ruin Shane, but for the first time, Ilya didn’t think Shane would mind so much.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is slightly shorter than the last one. But don't worry. I'm going to make up for it with the absolute monster that is the next chapter. Should the next chapter be two chapters? maybe. Am I going to make it two chapters? no.

So thank you for sticking with me through my terrible pre-fic planning. My second multi-chapter fic will be better, I swear.

Hopefully, I did all of these scenes justice. I have been sitting on some of these moments since the beginning, so I hope they turned out well.

And once again, thank you for the comments on the last chapter! I loved getting me quoted to me. My new favorite thing.

And finally, if anyone has any "hayden has a bisexual crisis" fic recommendations, please send them my way 🙏

Chapter 5: Common Goal

Chapter Summary

“So, the rivalry...was what? Was it all fake?”

“No, Rozanov and I have always been competitive with one another. It’s one of the things I’ve always liked best about him. I’m sure we will find new ways to be competitive while playing on the same team.”

Next to him, Ilya smirked and leaned closer to the mic, making sure everyone picked up his next words, eyes looking straight forward.

“Was good foreplay.”

Somewhere in the back of the room, a camera operator choked.

-

Luca Haas has a very bad night. Shane and Ilya have a very good one. Eventually.

Chapter Notes

Has anyone read that fic where Ilya is mic'd up and dedicates his goal to Shane before absolutely biffing it? This feels a bit like that. But a promise is a promise, so here's to you, HaeltheInsaneBitch.
Enjoy!

TW: homophobic language, a hockey fight, and jokes about suicide (in a 'literally gonna kms' way)

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

@RyanKellerMLH: BREAKING: The Ottawa Centaurs have signed both Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov.

@MetroManiac88: THEY GOT CUSTODY OF BOTH OF THEM????

@TorontoForLife: Now which one of y'all do I have to blame for this? They couldn't have come to Toronto??

@Rozanovshelmet: Who tf would go to Toronto??

@PucksAndProblems: ottawa really said "what if we simply put the boyfriends on the same team"

@goalieapologist: this is either going to be the greatest hockey team ever assembled or the most expensive workplace romance in human history

@ManInTheCrease: goalies everywhere just felt a disturbance in the force

@DailyRoz: imagine trying to explain to your grandchildren that the ottawa centaurs rebuilt their franchise around a situationship

@hollandersmouthguard: EVERYBODY SAY THANK YOU COACH WIEBE

@SportsByGrant: Attendance requests for Ottawa home games have reportedly surged since the announcement.

@ShaneHollanderDaily: this is somehow the closest thing hockey has ever had to a happy ending

@BobHendricks: still don't think any of this belongs in sports

@CentaursNumberOneFan: Can you just let me have this for one second

@HollanovDefenseSquad: WE WON

@HollanovDefenseSquad: THIS IS OUR STANLEY CUP

@HollanovDefenseSquad: PARADE AT MY HOUSE

@CentaursNumberOneFan: ALL I DO IS FUCKING WIN

@CentaursNumberOneFan: ISTG IF ANY OF YOU FUCK THIS UP FOR ME I WILL SUE

@RyanKellerMLH: New York Admirals captain Scott Hunter has publicly come out as gay.

@goalieapologist: wait. WAIT.

@MetroManiac88: SCOTT HUNTER????

@EmmaFieldsMedia: Hunter's statement emphasized support for Hollander and Rozanov while encouraging young players to remain in the sport.

@QueerOnIce: i don't think people understand how important this is

@DailyRoz: scott hunter really looked at the situation and decided "fine, i'll do it myself"

@emotionalsupportpuck: hunter saw two drowning men and threw himself into the ocean

@buckpunny No way hunter's gay. He's just doing this for attention.

@scottsbananasmoothie yes. Of course. Two-time MVP and Calder winner Scott Hunter told a homophobic, conservative league he was gay. For attention. You've really cracked the case on this one.

@SportsByGrant: Several current and former players have publicly expressed support for Hunter.

@HockeyDad82: proud of all three of them honestly

@AdmiralsOfficial: Captain Scott Hunter will participate in next month's Hockey For Everyone youth initiative.

@FormerFourthLineGrinder: played pro hockey for twelve years. if you'd told me there would be three openly queer players in the league someday i would've laughed in your face. glad i would've been wrong.

@PuckReporter: Several youth hockey organizations have reported increased registration inquiries following recent events.

@goalieapologist: not to be dramatic but i think we're watching hockey history happen in real time

@EmmaFieldsMedia: Hunter spoke today about creating safer locker rooms for young athletes. "Nobody should have to choose between who they are and the sport they love."

@goalieapologist: scott hunter got gay for approximately six minutes before being assigned homework

@somewhereinSK: three. there are three of them now.

* * * * *

Luca Haas was going to kill himself.

He stared blankly at the screen.

You have exceeded the number of login attempts allowed and have been locked out. Please follow the instructions below and contact customer support to reactivate the account.

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

How was he supposed to remember the password to his old Tumblr account? And how was he supposed to remember the password to the email he created when he was eleven to get the 'recover password' message Tumblr was trying to send him?

Fuck Tumblr.

And fuck Gmail.

And fuck @Ilyuca81 for being so goddamn stupid.

Luca slammed his head down against his desk and groaned. Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander were joining his team (his team!!) tomorrow, and if he couldn't figure out a way to get on Tumblr and delete his account, he'd simply have to throw himself out of his window. Although his window stood right above the playground attached to his apartment complex, so...maybe not *that* window.

My God, he had published so much fan art. Ilya Rozanov skating. Ilya Rozanov doing an interview. Ilya Rozanov shirtless. Ilya Rozanov kissing an unknown man who looked... not dissimilar to Luca.

He had also drawn Shane Hollander, of course. But always with Ilya Rozanov...in potentially, possibly, maybe compromising positions.

Maybe he had drawn Ilya Rozanov kissing Shane Hollander.

Maybe he had drawn Shane Hollander kissing Ilya Rozanov.

Maybe he had drawn Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander getting married.

Maybe he had drawn Shane Hollander holding a very Ilya Rozanov-looking baby.

Maybe he had drawn Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov posing for a family Christmas card with three children and a golden retriever.

Fuck.

Oh my god, he was so fucked.

He should just delete the internet. Let's burn the whole thing. He bet he could get Rozanov and Hollander to agree with him. Down with the web. Down with Bill Gates. Paper only.

Although...Luca leaned down to open the bottom drawer of his desk, pulling out a folder. He flipped it open.

Fuck.

The originals.

Why he had brought this folder all the way from Switzerland, Luca would never know. Maybe he was still just as crazy as his eleven-year-old self. Food for thought.

LaPointe stumbled into the kitchen at one in the morning, bleary-eyed, and blinked at Luca, who was hunched over the sink with a lighter in one hand and a burning piece of paper in the other. Luca dropped the lighter and slammed the folder next to him closed, still holding the smoking paper. He dropped it quickly with a wince when the flames reached the bottom of his fingers.

They stared at each other.

“Luca...what...”

“It’s not what it looks like.”

LaPointe blinked. “Buddy, I don’t even know what this looks like.”

Luca laughed nervously at his roommate, who was also unfortunately his teammate. Why hadn’t he anticipated this exact situation when he had asked Pointy to live with him? Stupid. Dumb. Idiot.

“Don’t worry about it, just go back to bed. Sorry for waking you! I’ll see you in the morning,” he said with a nervous giggle and an unconvincing wave.

Pointy furrowed his brow but started backing into his room slowly.

“Okay, man...good luck with...this.” His face lit up briefly. “Hey, first day with Rozanov and Hollander tomorrow! It’s going to be great!” he called before closing his bedroom door.

Yes...it was going to be great...

Luca reopened the folder to burn the next drawing.

* * * * *

“How has your off-ice relationship impacted your playing on the ice? Did you ever throw games for each other?”

“Rozanov and I have always played a fair, clean game. There was no tampering or game-throwing, and suggesting otherwise is offensive to both of us as players and captains.”

“Hollander would kill me if I let him win game. We always play hard on the ice.”

Shane kicked him under the table, and Ilya gave him a little wink. God, this press conference had been going on forever. Harris, the social media manager that Shane had met only thirty minutes before being guided into the press room, was standing nervously in the corner, obviously trying to restrain himself from ending early. They had decided it was best to get as many questions out of the way as they could. It would be easier to shut down invasive questions later on, but for now, they would let the reporters poke and prod at them. It wasn’t ideal. And Harris had told them they could turn down any comments that were inappropriate or made them feel uncomfortable. But short of explicitly asking about sex positions, it seemed like these reporters were treating every question as fair game.

Shane could feel Ilya becoming slowly angrier and less filtered, answers coming out brasher and more sarcastic. Shane was also becoming less willing to stop him.

“Can you explain your relationship with Rose Landry in light of the current information? Were you cheating on her?”

Shane shook his head harshly. “There was no cheating involved. Rozanov and I had not been seeing each other exclusively until now, and I did not see or talk with Ilya while dating Rose.

My relationship with her was enlightening, and I am truly grateful for the friendship she offered and continues to offer me now.”

Shane could see the reporter pause, his eyes sharpening.

“So you are confirming that you two are now in an exclusive, committed relationship?”

Shane glanced over at Ilya, who gave him a short shrug before leaning forward towards the microphone.

“Yes,” he said simply.

The room stilled for a moment. Surely this wasn’t too much of a surprise, Shane thought.

“Are you actually engaged?” another reporter called out from the back.

“No comment,” Shane responded quickly. Ilya looked at him out of the corner of his eye but didn’t say anything.

The press didn’t deserve that. They had so much of them already. This was still theirs, for now. Shane was going to hold it close to his chest, just like he was holding onto a small ring box that was currently stuffed at the bottom of his sock drawer.

He pointed at a reporter from Sports Weekly, who had their hand raised.

“So, the rivalry...was what? Was it all fake?”

“No, Rozanov and I have always been competitive with one another. It’s one of the things I’ve always liked best about him. I’m sure we will find new ways to be competitive while playing on the same team.”

Next to him, Ilya smirked and leaned closer to the mic, making sure everyone picked up his next words, eyes looking straight forward.

“Was good foreplay.”

Somewhere in the back of the room, a camera operator choked.

“Alright! I think that about does it,” Harris called, clapping his hands together quickly.

“That’s all for today. Rozanov and Hollander will be available again for questions as we get closer to the game in three days. Anything else can be forwarded to Kendra, our communications director.”

Harris hurried them out of the room and down the hallway.

“Well, that could have gone worse. Thanks for putting up with that, guys,” Harris said, stopping after they made a turn around a corner.

“Is okay. I am a natural in front of the camera. Is easy,” Ilya said with a shrug.

Harris squinted his eyes. “Yes, and I can tell it will be sooo easy with you. You’ve never given me anything to worry about.”

Ilya nodded seriously. “I have been to many media trainings, so I am the best.”

“Ah, and how many of those media trainings did you actually listen to?”

Ilya gasped and clutched his chest. “Harris, I listen to them all! I take media very seriously.”

“I’m sure,” Harris said flatly. He turned to Shane. “You holding up okay, Shane?”

Shane shrugged. “Nothing I’m not used to.”

He liked Harris. Harris was the first person they had met in Ottawa, and Shane had been surprised and happy to see a little pride pin stuck to the corner of his lanyard. At least the Centaurs were putting their money where their mouth was. Or at least it seemed like it. The only other person from the organization they had met was Bood, who had given them a brief welcome and discussed captain expectations. For consistency, Bood would remain captain for the remainder of the season, but they would reevaluate afterward. Which made sense to Shane. The rest of the meeting had gone...fine. He couldn’t help but feel like Bood was slightly uncomfortable the whole time, but Shane guessed he would have to get used to that. He couldn’t expect people to openly accept him and Ilya on day one, no matter what Wiebe had seemed to promise.

With a quick glance down at his phone, Harris hurried them down the hallway, guiding them back to the locker room for the start of practice.

Shane hadn’t felt this anxious for a simple practice since he was a rookie. God, did he have to get hazed again? A few of the veterans on the Metros team had always taken it upon themselves to make the rookies work through a series of different tasks and humiliating rituals. Shane distinctly remembered when they made him and Hayden run naked through one of the hallways in search of their missing clothes. The clothes in question were found thirty minutes later in the middle of the ice.

Shane had done his best to try to remove some of the worst hazing traditions during his time as captain, but he always knew things were happening when the vets thought he wasn’t looking.

He really didn’t want to run naked again. It was already going to be hard enough being openly gay in a hockey locker room with his boyfriend by his side.

As they reached the locker room door, Harris turned towards them, checking his phone again.

“Alright, I’ll leave you two here. Come by my office tomorrow, and we’ll see if we can’t get both of your welcome videos done.” In response to Shane’s progressively paling face, Harris added, “Don’t worry, it’ll be really easy questions. Nothing to worry about.”

Harris walked away, and Shane had the insane urge to call out to him, to beg him to go into the locker room with them, holding him like a gay shield. Surely the Centaurs were aware of Harris's sexuality. *Hey! You've known a gay man for years, and it's been fine!*

Ilya was looking at him with worried eyes. Shane gave him a face in response that he hoped read as 'I'm totally fine' rather than what he actually felt, which was 'I'm going to throw up the second I enter that room.' Shane took a fortifying breath and pushed open the door, Ilya trailing behind him.

The chatter that had been leaking out of the room in a steady hum stopped abruptly. Twenty-one pairs of eyes stared at Shane and Ilya before hastily looking away, turning back to their respective lockers. Shane thought he heard a small squeak sound from the corner.

Bood was the first to break the silence. He came up to them and slapped Shane on the shoulder.

"Glad you guys could finally join us! Was media as fun as it looked?"

Ilya slowly rested a hand on Shane's other shoulder, and Bood quickly dropped his own down to his side, but kept the smile.

"Yes, was fun. They have lots of hockey questions, and I am the best at hockey, so..."

Bood laughed loudly. He seemed to do that a lot. "I bet. Anyways, like I was saying yesterday, we're all very excited to have you, so make yourselves at home," he gestured to two open lockers right next to each other. Made sense. Contain the problem.

Ilya trudged over to the one with his name on it, loudly moving his stuff about. Shane followed suit, but with more hesitation.

Conversation slowly started to come back, but no one had yet approached Shane except to give him a little awkward nod or wave. Not that he needed the introductions. He had spent all of last night memorizing all of their names and stats. But it would have been nice. Although he wasn't trying to be picky.

Luca Haas (Age 19, Right wing), who had a locker right next to Ilya's, looked like he was about to throw up. Shane knew the feeling.

Shane watched Ilya gaze around the room at the unlooking faces before landing on the rookie next to him, who was staring at him with wide eyes.

"Ah, Haas, yes? I hear you will be Hollander's winger? You should be very scared, Hollander likes to make his line do bag skates until they puke. They can never be fast enough, right, Hollander?"

Luca looked about ready to keel over and die. He let out a little noise as Ilya smacked a hand onto his shoulder. Ilya frowned and slowly dropped his hand and examined it as if it had been the culprit for eliciting this kind of behavior from the rook. Shane should have warned him.

Men don't like to be touched by queer people. They didn't want to even risk the chance of being hit on.

"I promise I will work very hard, Mr. Hollander," Haas squeaked out. Shane and Ilya both stared at him, baffled. Holmberg (Age 21, Defense) looked like he was trying to hide his face in his locker, his back shaking silently.

"Er, he's just fucking with you, Haas. You're gonna be fine, I'm sure. And you can just call me Hollzy," Shane said reassuringly.

Luca's eyes widened further, which was honestly impressive. Shane hadn't known eyes could get that wide. "Okay, Hollzy," he said quietly.

"Come on, Haasy, buck up," said a voice behind them. Shane turned to the source of the voice and was met by the large mass of goalie pads that was Wyatt Hayes (Age 32, Goalie). "Roz, Hollzy. It's good to see you on the other side of things. I'm Hayes, but everyone calls me Hazy."

Ilya cocked an eyebrow. "We may have to think of some different nicknames."

Wyatt laughed, but sombered up quickly, face turning serious. "Hey, uh. I just wanted you two to know that what you did was incredibly brave. Some real superhero shit. I'm glad you're on our team now."

Shane was stunned. "Thank you, Hayes," he said, quickly turning back to his locker. He didn't want to see the other players' reactions. Hayes fidgeted for a moment before stumbling back over to his locker.

Ilya leaned in closer to him. "*Moy lyubimyy*, are you okay?" he whispered, glancing around everyone else, who were not so subtly trying to turn away from them.

Shane nodded firmly. "Yeah, of course." He finished putting on his gear and grabbed his stick. "Let's get out there."

* * * * *

Practice was...fine. Shane was on a line with Haas and Young, and their passes were connecting well enough. Ilya's line looked like it was shaping up to be something great, what with Bood on left wing. Dillon wasn't excellent, but he was manageable.

It was all fine.

But everyone was being really fucking weird.

Shane had expected some homophobia here and there. What he hadn't expected was the silence. Shane had complimented a pass from Young who then immediately dropped his stick to the ice wordlessly. Ilya had tried to make a joke to Dykstra during one of their drills, and Dykstra had just laughed nervously and slowly skated backward. Even Hayes had a moment during a shooting drill, after Shane had shot a particularly impressive backhanded goal to show off to Ilya after some light taunting. Hayes had slowly removed his mask and just stared

at him from across the rink while Ilya laughed and clapped him on the back. Shane really needed to talk to Ilya about the touching. It probably wasn't helping.

He knew that they would be uncomfortable. But this was all starting to feel a bit bizarre.

Shane could tell Ilya was trying to make him feel better by goading him into little competitions here and there. Even if the team never accepted them, at least he had this. At least he had little speed and goal-scoring competitions with Ilya. He could live with that. He could survive on that. Even if every time they finished a challenge, Shane could feel the whole team gawking at them.

But Shane wasn't sure it was enough for Ilya. By the time they went back into the locker room, Ilya was noticeably pissed. The final crack came when Ilya moved to sit on the bench, and Chouinard jumped out of the way, almost smacking his head on his own locker shelf.

Ilya flung his gloves onto the bench.

"Okay. What is it?" Ilya glared at the room that gave him slightly horrified expressions in return. "You are acting like you are scared to make eye contact with dentist. You have questions, yes? Okay then. Ask," Ilya spat out. He looked around the room, daring one of them to speak.

For a moment, no one said anything. LaPointe slowly raised his hand. Ilya rolled his eyes before pointing at him.

"Yes, Pointy. Thank you. Please speak," Ilya said harshly, making LaPointe wince slightly.

LaPointe swallowed hard. "Is it true you have a spreadsheet ranking every goalie in the league?"

Shane blinked.

"What?"

LaPointe blushed. "I just heard from a buddy of mine at the Metros that you have a spreadsheet for the goalies in the league. I was just wondering if it's true."

That was the question they were starting with?

"No, it's not true." Some of the team looked a bit relieved for some reason. "I have a spreadsheet with all of the players in the league. The goalies are just one tab."

LaPointe's jaw dropped. Holmberg was rocking back and forth slightly, muttering something.

Another hand.

Ilya, who looked just as perplexed as Shane felt, called on Young.

"Is it true you played an entire period with a broken finger?" Young said, looking at Ilya.

Ilya shrugged. "Yes. Is just playoff hockey. It happens."

For some reason, that seemed to break the damn. Suddenly, Ilya and Shane were flooded with a whole slew of questions.

"Is it true you once chirped a ref in Russian so he couldn't penalize you?"

"Is it true you used to watch game tape on Christmas?"

"Did you memorize each other's shot patterns? Because watching the 2014 playoffs, it genuinely looked like you knew exactly where the other was going."

"How do you skate that clean on your edges after a full shift? Nobody recovers that fast."

"Did you really score four goals on four consecutive shifts and then pretend you weren't tired?"

Ilya held up a hand to silence all of them. Shane was speechless. Were they messing with them?

"These are the questions you have? Not about—" he gestured between himself and Shane, "—us? Our relationship?"

The team all looked around at each other. Dykstra shrugged.

Looking like he would rather do anything else, Haas slowly raised his hand. He glared at it as if it had a mind of its own.

Shane nodded at him, bracing himself for what was coming.

"Was it the CCM 2010 photoshoot?"

Shane felt Ilya twitch beside him. Shane cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, what?"

Haas bit his lip hard. "You...you said since the summer before your rookie season. Did you start dating then?"

How did he even remember that photoshoot? Shane thought briefly. He glanced at Ilya, who shrugged. "No. We did not start dating then. We started dating one week ago. Before that, we were just...casual. But we did kiss for the first time at photoshoot," Ilya stated calmly.

The entire room went silent.

Then it erupted.

"You were casual for *seven* years?"

"A week ago? A WEEK—"

"I think I'm gonna pass out."

“Holy shit, they’re crazy. They’re insane.”

“Was Hollzy in the worst situationship of all time?”

“Forget Hollzy, man, did he rebound from Ilya with Rose Landry?”

“Oh my god, they’re the opposite of U-haul lesbians. They’re dodge ram gays.”

“—A WEEK??”

Ilya silenced the room again. He looked every member in the eyes, who all seemed to be somewhere in between giddy astonishment and pure, unfiltered shock.

The knot in Shane's stomach loosened so quickly it almost hurt.

“So...all the weird stuff today...it’s not because Ilya and I are dating?” Shane asked slowly.

Bood groaned loudly. “I told y’all to be chill!”

“Well, how the fuck are we supposed to be chill, Bood?” Chouinard yelled back. “It’s fucking Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov!”

“I had pictures of them on my wall as a kid,” Young said quietly.

“As a kid?” Dykstra yelled back. “Haasy probably *still* has posters on his wall.”

“He does, I’ve seen them”

“Pointy, I’m begging you to shut the fuck up.”

“What, like you’ve been the pinnacle of chill? You were burning mysterious papers over the sink at like two in the morning, man.”

Dillon gave Haas a look. “What were the papers?”

Haas muttered something to himself that sounded an awful lot like ‘Fucking Bill Gates.’

Hayes shrugged. “I’m just happy I only have to be behind the net against you during practices. I think I entered fight-or-flight mode at some point out there. I don’t know how the other goalies haven’t all just quit.”

“Goalies? Forget goalies. I’d be surprised if everyone wasn’t either drafting retirement statements or begging to be sent to Ottawa. Fucking Ottawa, man!”

Dykstra gasped softly. “Shit, did we make y’all think we were homophobic or something?”

Ilya tilted his head. “Yes,” he said simply.

The room burst into noise again, making Shane wince slightly.

“Chouinard, I told you you needed to be checking harder.”

“I didn’t want him to think I was hitting him because he’s gay!”

“Great. So you made him think you didn’t want to touch him because he’s gay.”

“IT’S A FINE LINE!”

“Bet you wished you had asked them to sign your stick now. They’re gonna leave us forever. I can’t believe we fucked it.”

“We haven’t fucked it! They’re still here, aren’t they?”

“Yeah? See how long they stay with Young’s disgusting, unwashed socks lying around.”

“Man, don’t tell Shane Hollander about my socks.”

“Hazy’s sister is literally a lesbian.”

“I can’t believe you just ‘I have gay friends’d them.”

“Well, I do have gay friends!”

“Harris doesn’t count.”

“Harris so counts! I’m going to tell my gay best friend Harris you said that.”

“Dude.”

“We’re not homophobic! Haasy has literally had a crush on Rozanov since he was eleven, and we’re all fine with that.”

“Die.”

The arguing continued, but the room was loud. Normally, Shane would have disliked all of the noise, but now, the loud laughs and friendly teasing felt like a door to something new.

Ilya slowly looked at him and beamed. Shane couldn’t help but grin back.

* * * * *

Since God hated Shane, the first game they were scheduled to play was against Toronto. It was probably payback for the gay thing. *Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned*, Shane thought bitterly as he lined up in the tunnel to go on the ice. Although as he stared at Ilya in front of him wearing a matching Centaurs sweater, Shane couldn’t help but add a quick, *But Lord help me, I am going to sin again*.

Ilya was rocking back and forth, shifting his weight from one skate to the other. They had both admitted to each other how nervous they were about this first game back. Against the odds, they had a team that supported them. Almost too much. Shane had to stop Young from covering his whole helmet and pads in rainbow tape. Young had conceded to only putting the tape on his stick, but he had also passed it around to all the other players. Everyone had made

sure to use it, but they had run out quickly, so some, like Dillon, just had one long square of it on their blade.

So, no, it wasn't the team he was worried about. It was the Guardians. It was the rest of the staff. It was the crowd.

"The boos can be just as exciting as the cheers," Ilya had reminded him while curled up around him last night. Ilya was used to boos and jeers, though. Shane had worked hard to create a reputation that would make those boos hard to justify, but he didn't have that reputation anymore. He wasn't sure anyone knew what to make of him now.

At least it was a home game. At least the crowd would consist mostly of Ottawa fans, if there were any. (They had never been the most popular in the league, not with their losing streak.)

Shane heard the arena music start for warm-ups and took a fortifying breath before shuffling his way down the tunnel. While normally Bood would have led the rear, the team had insisted on letting Shane and Ilya have the honor of going last onto the ice. It didn't feel like a fucking honor now. The two of them stopped right before the exit. Ilya turned to him and leaned in close to his face. They were now inches apart.

"Shane Hollander. Will you disappoint them?" he asked with a smirk, reminding Shane of many years before.

Shane gave him a weak smile back. "Never, Ilya Rozanov."

Ilya gave him a quick kiss before walking onto the ice. Taking another deep breath, Shane followed him out.

The stark shift in noise was deafening. Shane stumbled slightly and blinked a few times to focus his eyes amidst the glaring arena lights.

Holy shit.

Across the crowd, Shane saw dozens of pride flags. There were signs and banners with his and Ilya's names on them. There was also a number of Montreal and Boston jerseys, some of which had been painted over to say 'Centaurs' instead, but still carrying the Hollander or Rozanov name.

The crowd rose to its feet. Shane skated forward a bit so that he was standing directly next to Ilya, who was also gawking and looking around. They were giving them a standing ovation.

The Centaurs had all stopped to join the audience, clapping their sticks against the ice. The Guardians were trying to get their players to stop staring, starting their drills with a few harsh glares thrown at the couple. Kent in particular looked like he was about to charge, his nostrils flaring wide as he stared the two of them down. But Shane found he didn't really care.

The fans had come. They were here. For him and Ilya. They still loved them.

Shane turned to Ilya with tears in his eyes and saw matching ones in Ilya's. He had spent so long trying to make himself someone the crowd would forgive. He hadn't considered they

might just love him anyway. Ilya grinned and began ‘Princess Diana’ waving (as Ilya liked to call it) at the crowd, who only got louder. Shane let out a wet laugh and raised his hand as well.

“Come on, Hollanov! Give ‘em a kiss!” LaPointe yelled.

Hollanov. This was so fucking insane.

Ilya let out a loud woop and gave Pointy a wink before grabbing Shane’s head with both hands and giving him a big, dramatic smooch.

The crowd went wild, and Shane gave Ilya a quick shove back towards the ice.

Yeah. They’d be okay.

* * * * *

Shane collapsed next to Ilya, breathing hard, as third line switched onto the ice. Both Ilya and he were playing like it was game seven of the conference finals, neither of them willing to let up under the heightened scrutiny of their first game together. They would show them. They would show them that they were better together on the ice than they ever were apart.

Despite their efforts, it was still a new team. And the old team had still been one of the worst-ranked in the league. Passes were still struggling to connect here and there, and despite the increased number of shots on goal in comparison to Ottawa’s previous games, it still wasn’t enough to get past Toronto’s goalie.

As such, they were currently down 2-1 in the middle of the third. They would come back, though; they had to.

However, Shane’s body was growing sorer and sorer by the second. Sitting on the bench, Shane gave his shoulder a quick rotation, and Ilya shot him a concerned look. Not that Ilya was any better, subtly leaning to the left to relieve some of the pressure off of his right ribs. As much as his teammates were trying to block the hits, the Guardians seemed determined to smash both Ilya and him into the boards at every opportunity, finishing every check without hesitation. Kent in particular seemed eager to follow Shane around, throwing chirps here and there. Barrett at least seemed to be keeping his distance, which Shane could have taken as an offense, but instead chose to count his blessings. The refs had called some of the dirtier hits, but not all, and Shane’s body was paying for it.

“God, are they trying to kill us out there?” Chouinard gasped out, climbing over the bench to sit next to Shane while Ilya flew out on the ice. He winced as Dallas Kent made another particularly harsh check. He saw Kent say something to Ilya before pushing off of him to chase the puck. Ilya’s face went red with anger before hurrying after the puck as well.

“I’m not convinced they’re not,” Haasy mumbled as Kent skated past the Centaurs’ bench with a smug grin. Shane shot Ilya a concerned look as he flew past them as well. Ilya gave Shane a quick nod before stealing the puck from Barrett and pushing back towards the other side of the rink, taking another shot on goal.

Another miss. Damn it.

Shane's line wasn't faring any better, but was starting to look better. Haasy masterfully took the puck Shane had sent him while pinned between a few of the Guardians before flinging it in Young's direction. The three of them flew down the ice, nearing the goal. Receiving the puck, Shane shot it in again in Haas's direction.

He felt a sharp shove from behind and felt his body hit roughly against the ice.

His ears were ringing. He yawned away some of the reverberations and pushed himself to his knees, taking a couple of deep breaths. He could hear outraged sounds from his approaching teammates. He looked up at the shadow approaching him. Dallas Kent had an ugly grin on his face.

"Mm, I can see why he likes it. You look better on your knees, you fucking fag," Kent sneered.

And then he fucking spat on him.

Shane's ears were ringing now for a whole different reason. He felt his blood curdle and stood to his feet a little too quickly, making his head spin.

Don't take the penalty, don't take the penalty, don't take the penalty—

Suddenly, Kent was flung sideways by a fist, landing hard on his face. Shane whipped to the side to see who had hit him, expecting to see a seething Ilya.

But there was Troy Barrett, standing shocked and looking at his own red fist with a dazed expression.

"Troy, what the fuck!" Kent yelled, clutching his nose. Barrett stood there gaping at him, unable to form any real words. Fortunately for him (or unfortunately), he didn't have to, because a mass of Centaurs descended on them.

Dykstra was pulling Houde in by his jersey. Young was on the ground trying to throw another punch at Aucoin while the refs tried to pull him back. Haasy was even trying to take on Price, who simply lifted Haas off of him and set him to the side. And then, of course, there was Ilya, who had jumped over the boards the second Shane went down and was now doing his best to pummel Kent into the ice. Kent had managed to slip in a few good hits himself.

"Ilya!" Shane yelled, grabbing Ilya's back to try to pull him away. Ilya brushed him off and landed another hit to Kent's nose, which, if it hadn't been broken before, was definitely broken now.

"Ilya, stop!"

Ilya's raised hand froze. His other hand was still holding Kent up by the front of his jersey. Ilya looked back at Shane with a furious expression, but it softened when their eyes met.

"Hello, *malysh*," he said with a bloody grin.

And, oh.

Well.

That—

That was—

It absolutely wasn't hot. It wasn't. Shane felt his entire face burn scarlet as his eyes darted over Ilya's injured face. His eyebrow was cut, and blood was running along the side of his face in a jagged line down his cheekbone. His lips were tinged red from the blood that was building inside his mouth.

Shane stared. His body was shaking. From rage. And concern. Of course. Nothing else.

Ilya eyed him, and a small smirk started to form.

"You called for me?" Kent was still wriggling in his grasp.

"Oh. Uh, yes. Put him down, please," Shane stammered out.

Ilya's smirk grew into a grin, but he did release Kent, who landed with a loud thud onto the ice and moaned. Around them, their teammates were getting pulled back by refs and shuffled away from the injured Guardians. The refs began to circle up in order to determine penalties.

Shane groaned. "I thought we said no fighting. That's a game misconduct, Ilya. Fuck!"

Ilya had the sense to at least look a little ashamed. Or at least, that was what Shane assumed the expression he was looking at was. But as Ilya tilted his head down slightly to look at Shane through his lashes, making Shane blush, he found he wasn't quite sure anymore.

"I'm sorry, *malysh*, I couldn't help myself," he said in a low, sultry voice, the cocky grin continuing to spread like a plague. Shane was going to kill him. "Are you okay?" Ilya asked more seriously.

"I'm fine, it just knocked the wind out of me for a second."

"Shane—"

"Ilya."

Ilya gave him a hard look but then sighed. Grabbing his stick from the ground, Ilya leaned forward and gave Shane a quick kiss on the cheek before making his way over to the refs.

The kiss left a bloody imprint behind.

Which Shane felt completely normal about.

Ilya did end up getting a game misconduct, but so did Barrett, who still looked white as a sheet even though he hadn't participated in any of the rest of the fighting himself. Both

players made their way off the ice, but before entering the tunnel, Barrett looked back at Shane with wide eyes. Shane gave him a little nod. Barrett responded in kind, something seemingly resolving itself on his face before exiting for good.

Shane didn't envy the amount of shit he was going to receive from the league in the upcoming days.

The refs handed out a series of five-minute majors for fighting while handing Kent an additional two-minute penalty for charging, leaving the Centaurs with a power play. Without Ilya, they had to shift around some of the players, but even the less talented players seemed riled up by Kent's comments. The fans sure were, many of them banging on the glass surrounding the penalty box where Kent sat with a disgusted sneer.

Shane managed to score on the power play, but with Ilya gone and most of the Centaurs sporting a handful of injuries, Toronto scored again, 20 seconds before the buzzer.

As he walked off the ice to a wave of cheers, Shane couldn't even find it in himself to be that disappointed. They had played a good game and managed to hold their own against a consistent playoff contender. Not bad for the worst team in the league.

And as Shane watched Dykstra holding his ribs, throwing Shane a wink, and watched Holmberg grab a pride flag from a girl leaning over the boards to wave it around enthusiastically to the excited crowd, he couldn't help but smile.

On his way out, Shane grabbed a marker from the supplies manager, took the flag from Holmberg, and quickly signed it, handing it back to the girl.

No. Not the worst team at all.

* * * * *

"Shane."

"What?"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm checking for bruising," Shane responded curtly, leaning forward to look closer at his cheek in the mirror on the car visor.

"Mm. So you are not admiring my handiwork?"

"What?" Shane said, confused, turning towards him. Ilya cocked an eyebrow and gestured to the red kiss that was still printed onto Shane's cheek.

Shane slammed the visor up. "No," he said quickly, dropping himself back into his seat.

"Okay," Ilya said with a sharp nod. "But you did not wash it off."

"It's stained on," Shane murmured.

“Oh. Is it?” Ilya remarked with a disbelieving look.

“Shut up,” Shane said, sulking slightly. Ilya laughed and reached over to take Shane’s hand, which Shane gave willingly.

They spent the rest of the car ride discussing the game, highlighting points where they thought the team could improve. Shane had always loved sex with Ilya. But God, talking hockey felt like sex, the conversation flowing back and forth, each of them taking a little and then giving back even more. Ilya’s tongue would graze over a new topic, and Shane would snatch it up with ease, sliding a hand along an added suggestion. Every comment felt like one of them was asking the other, ‘Is this okay?’ To which the other would respond enthusiastically, as if he had been dying for them to do just that. And they were damn good at both.

Shane had never had anyone match him beat for beat when talking hockey. Hayden had tried many times, but he had gotten tired easily, as if each mention of stick-handling were personally draining. Ilya, on the other hand, seemed invigorated. And Shane couldn’t even tell if it was because Ilya liked it so much or because he liked that Shane did. But neither of them could restrain the identical smiles that grew on their faces as they continued talking. Shane felt like he never wanted to talk about hockey with another person ever again. Just Ilya.

They pulled into the garage beneath the apartment that Shane had insisted they rent while they looked at houses together. Staying at his parents’ house had started to get in the way of...things.

Ilya grabbed his and Shane’s bags from the trunk, and Shane gave him a look.

“Ilya, your ribs—” he began, but Ilya interrupted him by sticking out his tongue at him and blowing a little raspberry.

“Fine, go on IR. See if I care,” he mumbled, following Ilya from behind through the front door.

Ilya set their bags down in the front closet while Shane automatically straightened the crooked photo on the wall. (It was always this one. The picture showed Shane and Rose smiling across a restaurant table, and Shane had begun to suspect that Ilya nudged it crooked every time he walked past.) Meanwhile, Ilya lined up both pairs of shoes neatly on the rack before ushering Shane farther into the apartment.

“Go take your shower, I will take care of food.”

Shane went without hesitating, eager to stand under water with the right pressure and the right soap. He could have asked Ilya to join, but Shane had always liked a moment of privacy after games to unwind. Hayden had quickly learned to allow Shane this space when they were on roadies, and even Ilya had learned over the years of hooking up. Even if the shower sex would have been great, Shane felt more at ease with himself by having this. Although he still prepped. He wasn’t an idiot.

After, he threw on one of Ilya's larger t-shirts and a pair of boxers and wandered back into the kitchen, where Ilya was putting one of his meal-prepped dishes onto a plate. Walking past Shane, Ilya leaned in and gave him a quick kiss before heading into the bathroom himself.

Shane smiled and moved closer to the counter to start eating.

He froze when he saw the plate.

There was nothing wrong with it; Shane had made sure of that when he had packed it into neat little Tupperware containers. All of the food was even perfectly separated into different sections, just like Shane liked it.

No, it was what rested beside the plate.

A full-size Snickers bar with a little sticky note on top of it. It had a heart on it.

Shane picked up the Snickers bar.

It was totally against his diet, Ilya knew that.

He hadn't had a Snickers bar in years, but it was his favorite candy growing up. Shane didn't know how Ilya knew that.

He tore open the wrapper and stared at it.

He took a large bite.

Holy shit.

Shane nearly ran into their bedroom, ignoring the ensuite door that was slightly open, letting steam rush out, and dropped to the ground, grabbing the package that he had shoved under the bed two days ago. He opened it and looked inside.

This was fucking crazy. It was way too early, and he had so many plans. He had cleaners going by the cottage in three weeks. His dad was taking off work. Even Hayden had agreed to drive up to help set up.

It was crazy.

He thought of the crooked heart drawn carefully in blue pen on a yellow piece of paper.

He was going to do it anyway.

He rushed over to the dresser and opened his sock drawer, grabbing a small black box from the back, a few socks falling to the ground. He didn't bother to pick them up.

Ilya walked into the living room, scrunching his hair in a towel, right as Shane was turning on the fifteenth battery-operated candle. He glanced towards the rest of the box with a sigh. He had so many more candles left...

Ilya froze and stared at him, slowly lowering the towel from his head.

“Shane? What is all this?” He picked up one of the candles to examine it. “Why do you have all of these cand—”

“Will you marry me?”

Ilya’s eyes widened, his brows raised.

Shit.

“Shit, wait, no, sorry. Fuck, I’m messing this up. Sorry, I was supposed to do better. Hold on.” Shane pushed down to one knee and grabbed the ring box from the coffee table. Ilya was still gawking at him silently.

Shane cleared his throat, staring up at Ilya, who was blinking slowly at Shane’s crouched position. “Ilya. I have loved you for about as long as I have known you. You are the best person in my life, and I want to be on your team, on and off the ice. You are—”

“Yes.”

Shane almost dropped the ring.

“What?”

“Yes, I say yes.”

“Oh.” Shane paused, glancing at the ring, feeling a bit stunned. “Do you want the rest of the speech? I memorized it. Technically, the proposal was supposed to be in a few weeks at the cottage, but I...well...it’s happening now, I guess. Oh God, my mom’s going to kill me, she hired a photographer and everything—”

“Shane.”

“Yeah?”

Ilya let out a loud, giddy laugh and grabbed both of Shane’s elbows, pulling him up into a searing kiss. Without thinking, Shane flung his arms around him, still holding the box with one hand, and returned the kiss with equal passion. Shane wanted this forever. He wanted this so bad.

Shane could still feel Ilya laughing through the kisses, but he didn’t care, using his arms to pull him in closer. Ilya guided his legs backward until they reached the couch, letting them fall onto the cushions on top of each other.

Ilya broke the kiss and grinned at him, looking at Shane the way he did on the ice, as if there were nothing else worth watching. He smacked his lips together thoughtfully.

"Mm," he decided. "You taste like chocolate."

“Yeah, I know,” Shane said breathlessly, still clutching Ilya close to him. “I just ate some of the Snickers bar.”

Ilya’s smile grew even wider. “And what? It was so good you decided to marry me?”

“Yeah, something like that,” Shane said, blushing.

Ilya poked Shane in the side, furrowing his brow in pretend anger. “This is not fair, Hollander. I was supposed to propose. It was my turn.”

“Well,” Shane said with a smirk, leaning down to give him another kiss before pulling away. “I’ve always been faster than you.”

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter 🥰. It will be a shorter one :)

I'll have more notes at the end of the next chapter, but I feel so close to the end, what with chapter 6 just waiting in my Google Doc for me to go through and read my beta reader's comments.

This one's definitely a more humorous chapter, so I hope the jokes land. The Ottawa Centaurs have my whole heart and soul.

I love you all so much. The comments on the last chapter literally made me cry. I'm so glad you all liked it!

Also, btw. I've started working on the next fic in this series, and I'm literally so so so excited for it and want you all to read it, so stay tuned. There will be a brief summary at the end of the next chapter.

Okay love y'all! See you very soon xoxo

Chapter 6: The Long Game

Chapter Summary

“Eh, I like you only so-so.”

Shane laughed. “Fuck you.”

“Later,” Ilya replied with a smirk.

Shane gave him an exasperated sigh and leaned slightly closer to the Russian captain.

“Ya tebya lyublyu.”

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” Ilya replied softly.

Shane reached for Ilya's hand without looking. Ilya took it just as automatically.

Together, they disappeared down the tunnel.

-

In which one game ends, and another has just begun.

Chapter Notes

<3 <3 <3

Edit: my sister has informed me that the chapter five update emails were not super successful. So if you didn't read chapter 5, go back because otherwise this will make no sense

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

The camera flicks on and focuses on Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander, who are standing in the middle of a locker room

“Shane.”

“No.”

“Shaaanne.”

“Say my name again, Rozanov, I dare you.”

“Ooooo, he is so mean to me, Harris.”

“I swear to god, Ilya—”

“Do not worry, internet, I am right where I want to be.”

Ilya sends the camera a wink.

“I’ll kill you.”

“Promise?”

— cut —

“Hi, Centaur nation. I’m Shane Hollander, and this is—”

“Ilya Rozanov, your king. Bow before me.”

Shane rolls his eyes and gives Ilya a quick smack. Ilya lets out a fake moan, which gets him another smack.

“Hey guys, let’s keep it professional, okay.”

“I am the most professional. Everyone says this. Right, Hollander?”

“Uh huh.”

“Okay, let’s get this started. Do you guys play Mario Kart?”

“Yes, of course. I win every time. Shane is very bad and very slow. Just like he is on the ice.”

“The *bleep* I am! You can’t even stay on the *bleep*-ing road. You don’t even slow down on the turns.”

“Is called drifting, Hollander. You would not know. You take turns so safe, so slow, like grandma.”

“Drifting? You were drifting when you fell so many times, the game started glitching?”

“Shortcut.”

“Alright, boys, let’s focus up. Who is your go-to character to play as?”

“Oh, I usually do Luigi.”

Ilya scoffs.

“Makes sense.”

“The *bleep* is that supposed to mean?”

“Is a super gay character. And you are super gay.”

Someone snorts off camera.

“How is Luigi gay? And stop saying I’m super gay! I’m not super gay! I’m normal gay.”

“Mm, no. Is not normal the way you do it.”

“That’s literally so homophobic.”

“I’m not homophobic! My boyfriend is literally gay...super gay.”

“Jesus. Well, Ilya usually plays as Wario because he is a *bleep*-ing bully.”

“You are just mad I kept hitting you with shells last game.”

“Yeah, right. You wish you could get that close to me.”

“I could always be closer to you, Hollander.”

Ilya wags his eyebrows suggestively, and Shane swallows hard.

“Guys, you know HR follows this account, right?”

— cut —

“Which one of you plays harder on the ice?”

“Shane definitely plays harder.”

“There are literally going to be kids watching this.”

“They should know. You are very motivated.”

“Oh my god—”

“Wait, I don’t get it.”

— cut —

“What’s your favorite ice cream flavor?”

“I like cookie dough. Shane does not eat ice cream. Only likes the tears of his enemies.”

“I...what?”

“Mm, he licks them off faces like ice cream, laughing and skating away.”

“Ilya. What?”

“Yes, *moy kotenok*?”

“You’re such a freak.”

“Yes. We are freak for freak. This is what internet tells me.”

“What side of the internet are you on?”

— *cut* —

“Do you have a song that’s stuck in your head?”

“Um. Well, I don’t really listen to music. So I guess no?”

“Yes, Hollander is crazy. He drives in complete silence.”

“I like to take the time to organize my thoughts!”

“And it is for sure helping.”

“*bleep* off. Oh! Ilya showed me a song the other day that I liked. Do you know ‘All the Things She Said?’

“Hollander, literally everyone knows that song except you.”

“Yeah, well, I liked that one. So that’s my answer.”

“Mm. Boring. I have been listening to Starboy, Headlines, Naughty Girl, and Cowboy Like Me.”

“Cowboy Like Me? Like... by Taylor Swift.”

“Mm, yes. Is not my usual taste, but I listen to it because I thought it would remind me of Shane.”

“Oh. That’s actually kind of sweet—”

“Because he is my favorite cowboy. He loves to ride—”

— *cut* —

“I think I’ve aged five years filming this video.”

“You and me both, Harris.”

“Okay, final question. What are you most looking forward to this season?”

“I am looking forward to playing with Shane.”

“...that’s it?”

“Yes. I do not need anything else. Maybe we win some games. That would be nice. But I want to play with Shane the most. He is excellent hockey player, even if he is only second-

best. He is great on the ice. And he is even better in the locker room. You should see how he trains the rookies. I would not be surprised if they become almost as good as him. Almost.”

There’s a long pause as Shane and Ilya look at each other with warm smiles.

“Same.”

Ilya rolls his eyes.

“Is that all?”

“Yep.”

“You are such an asshole.”

“Learned from the best. No, but really. I love playing with Ilya. The end of last season was a good test for what we could do together. But now that we’ve been working with the team for a while and built chemistry, I think we have a really great season ahead of us. But it was great before too, just to play with Ilya. Even if we were only on the ice together for the power play. Having him on the bench with me and in the car on the ride home was something I never thought I would be able to have. It’s...it’s hard to describe, really. I am also excited to see Ilya as a captain again. He’s always been so good at leading a team; it’ll be fun to be on the other side of that.”

"Mm. I am looking forward to hearing 'Yes, Captain.' 'No, Captain.' 'Whatever you say, Captain.' Will be very hot."

“Okay, I take it all back, *bleep* you. You can *bleep* right—”

— *cut* —

* * * * *

Hayden Pike had known Shane since he was twenty years old. Hayden liked to say they'd been inseparable ever since, but that wasn't entirely accurate. More accurate would be to say that Hayden had dragged Shane into a close friendship, kicking and screaming. But once Hayden had latched onto him, Shane had seemed content to stay, slowly opening up over the years.

There were many things that Hayden would say that he knew about Shane that not many other people did. Shane had a dry sense of humor that was unmatched. And if he let Jackie get one glass of wine in him, he was brutally sarcastic, often giving scathing reviews of different players, including their attractiveness (which, looking back, should have been a massive sign). Hayden knew that Shane preferred his chicken cooked on a stove rather than in an oven. He knew he preferred white rice, but would always insist on brown rice anyway. He knew he was great with kids, always patiently letting Hayden's girls paint his toenails (which he could hide a lot easier from his teammates than his fingernails. Not a foolproof system, though. Andropov had caught sight of them in the shower that one time).

On top of all of that, Hayden and Shane had built up great chemistry on the ice. Hayden often came close to leading the league in assists with how often he was able to pass Shane the winning goal. Hayden had always enjoyed playing wing, but he loved it with Shane.

And so, Hayden used to be comfortable saying he knew Shane better than almost everyone else.

But now, skating across the ice from him as Shane knocked a pass to Ilya for another goal, Hayden realized how much he had missed. There was a lightness to Shane's playing that he had never seen in all of their many seasons together. Shane Hollander, the notorious hockey robot, was smiling brightly, accepting a kiss on the cheek from his husband.

They had gotten married during the off-season. The wedding was...unique. There were probably forty people there in total, including the entirety of the Centaurs team, a handful of Raiders, and three metros: Hayden, JJ, and Broz, who kept looking over his shoulder as if someone was going to tackle him at any moment. They didn't even have a ceremony, just a reception at Shane's cottage after Shane and Ilya finished up at the town hall with only Shane's parents as witnesses. Hayden kind of wished he could have at least heard the vows, but he understood why they did it. They had already promised each other so much in public. They wanted a chance to do it in private as well.

Besides, Hayden kind of felt like he was watching their vows play out in front of him. Each slide of the puck felt like a 'I promise to be with you always,' every check a 'for sickness and in health,' every goal an 'I do.'

How had he missed so much? He guessed that he had gotten so used to looking at Shane from the right, gearing up to send the puck his way, that he had forgotten to look forward at the thing that had always been right in front of him.

* * * * *

The final buzzer went off, signaling the end of the game. The Centaurs had beaten the metros 3-1. Ilya grinned and ran to join his teammates in a dogpile in the middle of the ice, smacking a few of them on the top of their heads. The Centaurs were on their first winning streak since 2006, and it felt good. Ilya felt Shane's gloved hand loop around his waist. He couldn't see him amidst the mass of hockey players, but he knew it was him. Scratch that. It felt great.

Ilya pushed away from the group and started skating over to his position near the player gate. On his way over, he gave Broz a quick pat on the shoulder.

"Too bad you play for terrible team. Should get traded to our team."

He mumbled something that sounded a bit like 'I'm trying, man,' before heading off in the direction of his own gate. The Metros had gotten better after last season, but they still weren't great, especially under Comeau's captaincy. It should have been given to Pike (not that Ilya would ever, ever tell him that), but Pike was still too strongly associated with Shane. And Pike had grown distant from the rest of the Metros after their continued poor treatment of Shane.

In the first few games against his old team, Shane had gotten incredibly anxious, falling too far into his own head and edging closer to a panic attack at the start of every play. The Metros still targeted Shane every time they played, finishing every check and slipping in the occasional ugly chirp. But Shane had changed. Every supportive text, family dinner, and good morning kiss seemed to hold him a little steadier, a little less willing to believe the things shouted at him.

“Pike!” Ilya yelled across the ice. Pike turned to him with an annoyed expression.

“What do you want, Roz?”

“Are you coming to Bood’s barbecue tomorrow?”

“Yeah, of course. Jackie is bringing the kids, too.”

“Oh good, my favorite Pikes! Tell Jackie I am going to give her a big kiss when I see her.”

“I will not,” Pike responded flatly before heading down the tunnel.

Meanwhile, the Centaurs had begun to line up to head off the ice, each giving Ilya a little fist pump on their way out.

“I love you, I love you, I love you—” Ilya called to each Centaur as their skates hit the rubber mats, each player responding in their own way.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

“Fuck off, Roz.”

“Run away with me.”

“What would your husband say about that?”

Others just returned the sentiment, except Haasy, who always turned bright red, silently stumbling into the locker room.

Shane was always the last one in line. He approached Ilya with a grin and stuck his fist out. Ilya gave him a firm tap.

“Eh, I like you only so-so.”

Shane laughed. “Fuck you.”

“Later,” Ilya replied with a smirk.

Shane gave him an exasperated sigh and leaned slightly closer to the Russian captain. “*Ya tebya lyublyu.*”

“*Ya tebya lyublyu,*” Ilya replied softly.

Shane reached for Ilya's hand without looking. Ilya took it just as automatically. Together, they disappeared down the tunnel.

* * * * *

"I still think we should have brought the pasta salad."

"Is fine, Bood always cooks too much food. No one ever brings anything, you know this."

"I know, I know. It just feels rude."

"What is ruder is bringing your disgusting pasta salad."

"What's wrong with the pasta salad?"

"Shane. There is no dressing. The pasta is whole grain. You are trying to kill our teammates."

"Luca said he liked it."

"I'm sure he did," Ilya responded flatly.

"Whatever," Shane said, sulking in his seat. "You're not getting any next time I make it."

"Oh no. How will I ever survive?" Ilya said sarcastically.

"Shut up."

They pulled up to Bood's house and parked on the side of the road, waiting in the car for a little bit, both of them scrolling through their phones. They had arrived three minutes before Shane's 'fifteen minutes is fashionably late' marker, so Ilya knew he would want to sit in the car for the extra time.

When they finally made their way into the backyard (at 5:15 exactly), Ilya was pleased to already see more than half of the Centaurs lounging around and chatting.

"UNCLE ILYA!" a tiny voice screamed, a small blur attacking his legs, another one following quickly behind.

"My girls!" Ilya cried, picking Ruby Pike up and flinging her on top of his shoulders, while Jade continued to hold firmly onto his right leg.

"They're still not your girls," Pike said grumpily, holding Amber.

"Not yet. Jackie, you will still tell me when you decide to divorce Pike, yes?" Ilya called to Jackie, who was walking over to join their circle.

"You fucking assho—"

"Swear jar," Jackie said, laughing. "And if I remember correctly, you're still married too."

Ilya hummed and waved dismissively. “Was just green card marriage. Means nothing. Is nothing like what we have, Jacqueline.”

Jackie laughed, and Shane smacked his arm with an outraged huff. Ilya leaned over and gave him a quick kiss on the corner of his scowl.

“Yo! Hollander-Rozanovs! Come grab some food before Dykstra eats it all,” Bood yelled at them from across the yard.

“Bood. How would I even eat all five hundred steaks you decided to buy?”

“I saw what you did to the potato salad last time.”

The two continued to bicker while Ilya hobbled across the lawn to the table, with squealing Pike children still clinging to his leg and back. He made a large plate for himself and then a slightly smaller plate for Shane.

“Jesus, Roz, you want to carry me too?” Barrett said, cozying up next to Ilya.

“Don’t tease, Barrett. I would sweep you off your feet the second you asked me to.”

Barrett laughed but became distracted quickly, glancing at a spot behind Ilya. Ilya turned his head slightly to look at what had caught Barrett’s eye. He smirked.

“Although I do not think it is me that you are hoping will carry you out of here.”

Barrett blushed and peered over at Harris again, who was happily chatting to Young, a bottle of cider in hand.

“Shut up, Roz,” he murmured into his drink.

“Mm, no. I think not.” Ilya wiggled his eyebrows slightly before sighing. “Poor Harris. He is all alone, stuck talking to boring Young. If only there was someone who could go over there and save him.”

“Rozanov. I’m begging you to shut the fuck—.”

“Baaaarrett. Language,” Ilya sung, pointing to the giggling children above and below him.

“Oh my god, I can’t. I’m just gonna—”

But Ilya grinned as he watched Barrett, not so subtly, make his way over to join the conversation, Harris smiling brightly as he approached. Ilya moved back over to join the Shane-Pike posse, handing Shane his plate. Shane started eating without breaking his conversation with Pike. Shane didn’t bother complaining about the greasy food that Ilya had chosen for him, but he saw Pike shoot him an almost grateful look as Shane took a particularly large bite of meat.

The group kept talking as more players and partners filled the space around them, creating a cacophony of happy noise.

“Hey! Captain,” Hayes called, walking up behind them. Both Shane and Ilya shifted to greet him.

“Yes?” they said at the same time before quickly turning their heads to look at each other.

“Oh, shi—shoot,” Shane said, glancing at baby Arthur. The rest of the Pike children were long gone, running somewhere in the yard, too bored with all the ‘adult’ conversation.

“Sorry, sorry. Force of habit.”

“Nah, it’s okay. You two merged into one entity a long time ago. Bood has finally agreed to let us light up the fire pit, if you want to join.”

“Finally!” Ilya yelled, grabbing Shane’s arm and dragging him closer to the gathering circle of Centaurs. After a few long summer nights at Shane’s cottage in front of the fire pit Shane had installed, it had become one of Ilya’s favorite pastimes. At first, he hadn’t understood it, the joy of just sitting and watching the flames. But as he had lain on Shane’s lap, a hand running through his curls, watching the fire snap and blaze and scream before settling into a soft glimmer of hot coals, he had started to get it. Who was he to be opposed to a loud fire that settled into something softer?

As the light began to dim, the loud talking settled into a relaxed hum of voices. Shane was sitting close beside him, his arm wrapped around Ilya’s waist, slowly running his hand back and forth along his hip. Bood laughed loudly at a joke Dykstra made. The rookies were throwing little pieces of napkin into the coals, watching them burst into small flames. Chouinard was entertaining Pike’s kids with a couple of silly ghost stories, his arms gesturing wildly. Leaning slightly towards Pike, Shane was discussing a couple of the Metros’ new rookies, softly cradling baby Arthur in the crook of his left arm. Ilya had never had a happy family. But he imagined it would look something like this.

“Roz, can you tell us a story?” Young called from one of the campfire chairs.

Ilya smiled softly. “Which one do you want to hear?”

“Oh, oh! Can you do the MLH awards one? You promised you would tell us what happened after you won MVP,” Holmberg cried.

“Nope. Absolutely not,” Shane said firmly.

“But—” Bergy began.

“No.”

“What about the CCM photoshoot?” Haas suggested quietly.

LaPointe groaned. “Ugh, Haasy. We’ve heard that one a thousand times.”

“What! It’s a good one.”

Ilya stared at the group of rookies for a moment, his eyebrows raised. He glanced at Shane, whose eyes were reflecting the fire in front of him. He smiled.

“Okay,” Ilya clapped his hands together loudly, gaining the attention of the rest of the circle. Pike rolled his eyes. Dykstra shushed Barrett, who had been whispering something to Harris, who giggled in response. Jackie stared at Ilya with a knowing smile.

“To tell the story, we must begin two years earlier, outside of a little rink in Saskatchewan—”

* * * * *

Since Ilya was the one driving, they got to listen to music on the way home. Shane was reading something on his phone, humming along. Ilya smiled. Shane was a truly terrible singer, but he loved to hear him anyway. For all of his many perfections, Shane could not hit a single note on pitch. Ilya wouldn’t have had it any other way.

They took the time to chat about their friends and the girlfriends and boyfriends they were or weren’t getting. They chatted about what they thought would happen on the next episode of The Great British Bake Off. (Ilya remained convinced Dan was going to ruin bread week.) They debated whose turn it was to do laundry. Ilya asked if David and Yuna had texted them updates from their trip to Japan, and Shane refused to show him photos while he was driving, even though Ilya told him to just put his phone next to the wheel.

In summary, they talked about nothing. It was everything.

After parking their car and making their way through the garage door into the house, Ilya found himself pushed up against the wall in the hallway. He smiled as Shane leaned in and kissed him hard, clutching at the blue linen button-up that Ilya had stolen from Shane’s side of the closet. Not that they really had sides anymore. Ilya kept shoving his sweatshirts into Shane’s half of the closet in the hope Shane would accidentally wear one. Somehow, those accidents kept happening.

Shane let out a pleasant hum as Ilya deepened the kiss. They stayed like that for a while, trading lazy kisses before Shane broke away, patting Ilya on the cheek, his eyes bright.

“Bedroom, Ilya. Now.”

Ilya grinned.

“Yes, captain,” Ilya replied with a small salute.

Shane slid his hand down Ilya’s arm, took the keys from his hand, and gave him a quick shove toward their bedroom with a laugh. He hung the keys on the hook by the door—the one Ilya always forgot to use.

Ilya hurried down the hallway with Shane chasing after him. He kicked off his slides without looking where they landed.

Shane didn’t even yell at him for it.

EDIT: I'm putting this here too. Ao3 apparently was inconsistent about updating for chapter five and I did not dedicate 12 sleepless nights alla Taylor swift for people to think I didn't write it. There is a chapter five. It's out. It just didn't update people so if you haven't read it yet, that's why.

Well friends. I have officially passed the middle school NaNoWriMo word count, making this the longest piece of fiction I have ever written. Thank you so much for sticking by me. I genuinely thought I was going to make this a one-shot when I started writing, but I felt like I had more to say and that our boys had more story to tell. I didn't think I had the willpower to do it until I started receiving your comments and support. It meant everything to me and motivated me to write all of this so much faster than I otherwise would have.

The comments also motivated me to start my second work in this series of alternative reveals! I'm obsessed with it, and I hope you guys are obsessed too. I know I promised you a summary of it, but...I've decided to post the entire first chapter along with this one. So give it a look, give it a read if you are so inclined. You are also welcome to go read my 'Shane dies on the ice' fic if you feel like crying.

Thank you for helping remind me that I like writing. Thank you for helping me do justice to my 13-year-old self who always wanted to be a writer but never felt like she had enough to say.

<3

Ivy

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