

The New Plan

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The New Plan

by [Itsallfine](#)

Summary

“Boys, I appreciate the thought you’ve put into this so far,” Yuna said. “But there’s no way you’re hiding this for ten years. It is going to leak. We need an actual reasonable plan for you to come out safely and be happy so you can do this on your own terms and not be miserable.”

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The ten-year plan was never going to work. Fortunately, thanks to Yuna, Shane and Ilya now have a new and improved plan that could have them safe and happy in just a year or two's time. They just have to want it bad enough.

Ottawa a year early. Support from friends and family. Therapy. Rebranded images. A more confident and secure Shane. A public friendship hard launch. A relationship soft launch.

There's a lot to do. It's time to put in the work.

Notes

Look, maybe I’ve hockeyed too close to the sun, but at this point I’ve learned so much about trades and free agency and shit that I thought of the option described in this fic and went “huh... wonder why they didn’t do that.” So I did it. Shoutout to Threads user alicenfetland for the very informative hockey deep dives.

I am not an immigration lawyer. The path described here seems right according to my research, but please don’t take it as advice.

The PWHL didn’t exist until 2023 (it would have been the NWHL at this time) but I’ve basically picked up the current league including players and plopped it several years early so I can use their excellent examples of currently active queer couples and slyly promote them to y’all. Support women’s hockey!

Only this first chapter is all Yuna's POV. We'll be back with Shane and Ilya for most of the rest!

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

Chapter 1: Oh, sweetie. You tried.

Yuna was *not* going to call her son a dumbass.

Shane had sat across from her and David, still visibly tense and sneaking looks at Ilya every few sentences, earnestly stumbling through an explanation of his plan to move Ilya to Ottawa and hide their love for the next ten years. He'd tried, he really had, but he was also scared, and that fear was clouding his judgment. His plan was *stupid*, and it was never going to work.

Fortunately, he had Yuna on his side. She managed to make her way through most of her pasta before she couldn't help it anymore. She set down her fork and folded her hands on the table, schooling her features.

"Boys, I appreciate the thought you've put into this so far," she said. "But there's no way you're hiding this for ten years. It is *going* to leak. We need an actual reasonable plan for you to come out safely and be happy so you can do this on your own terms and not be miserable."

Shane's eyes went wide, and he shook his head, darting another look at Ilya. "But we've managed to keep it a secret for seven years!"

Yuna raised her eyebrows. "Yes, seven years when you were..."

Shane grimaced. "Please don't say that word again."

"Casual?" Ilya offered.

Yuna's mouth twisted into a little amused smirk. "Yes, it worked while you were *casual*, only seeing each other six times a year, and seeing other people in the meantime to distract from what was going on. I assume you won't be seeing other people anymore?"

Maybe that *wasn't* a safe assumption with ladies' man Ilya Rozanov at the table. Only, he quickly shook his head.

"No. Just us," Ilya hurried to answer, reaching out to squeeze the back of Shane's neck and rub at the tension there. Shane closed his eyes briefly and nodded.

"Yeah. Just us," he agreed.

"Well, then it's going to become obvious really quickly that you both have a partner you refuse to talk about for mysterious reasons," Yuna said frankly. "I think you can keep that up for maybe a year tops without facing serious questions and speculation, first in the locker room, and then eventually from the media. You more than Shane, Ilya, since Shane isn't really known for being seen out with people."

Shane tipped his chin to his chest and blew out a harsh breath through his nose, reaching over to lay a hand on Ilya's thigh. When he looked back up, his eyes were shiny.

"Then what do we do?" he asked, his voice rough. "Is this... impossible?"

Yuna's eyes softened. Hockey had asked so much of him already, shoving him into the mold of the perfect golden boy—and granted, part of that was on her—while forcing him to endure the baked-in racism and homophobia of North America's most conservative sport. Yuna was fully aware that she barely knew the half of what Shane had gone through in locker rooms growing up. For him to sacrifice something of this magnitude on top of the rest... no. Yuna could not abide it.

"Of course it's not impossible, Shane," she said gently. "We just need a better plan. David, can you clear the table? I'll be right back."

"Of course," David said, standing to collect the plates with a wink. "Don't worry, boys. Mom's on the case."

Yuna got up, grabbed her laptop from the coffee table in the living room, and started typing one-handed as she walked back to the dining table. Once she was seated again, the bullet points flowed from her fingertips, the skeleton of a plan that would actually work spilling forth.

"Mom," Shane began, but Yuna held up a finger, tapping out a few more quick notes before leaning back to study her work.

"Okay, the way I see it we have six steps," she said. "I'm sort of thinking out loud here. I'll have a more detailed plan once I have time to really go through it, but these are my initial thoughts. Just hear me out, okay?"

Ilya pressed his lips together as if containing a laugh, his cheeks growing pink.

"You are so like her," he said, nudging his shoulder against Shane's. "I love it. This is great. Please, I would love to hear your plan. Especially since I did not have to wake up at three in the morning to hear it."

Shane gave a gusty, dramatic sigh, and Ilya *did* laugh that time.

"Asshole," Shane grumbled, elbowing Ilya in the side. "Fine. Let's hear it."

Yuna bit back her smile and turned to Ilya.

"The way I see it, the top obstacle here is your citizenship and safety, Ilya, but I think we can get you Canadian permanent residency in about a year," she said.

Shane sputtered. "A *year*? What? How? He still plays for Boston!"

"And I suggest you change that sooner rather than later," Yuna said matter-of-factly. "I think you can get to Ottawa in time for the start of the new season, Ilya, if your contract is structured similarly to Shane's. You just completed seven years

in the league at the end of last season, so I assume your agent negotiated for a no-trade clause to kick in this summer?”

“He did,” Ilya said. “Maybe the only good thing he’s done.”

“Great, that’s great,” Yuna said, typing furiously below her first bullet point. “That’ll be relevant in a minute. So here’s the thing. If you wait and sign with Ottawa next summer when you’re a free agent, Boston gets absolutely nothing in exchange for you. Not a great feeling for the team that drafted and developed you. I know you said you have no loyalty to them, but—”

“*Mom*,” Shane snapped.

Ilya winced, glancing down at his vodka glass, which he nudged back and forth between two fingers. “Yes. It will not feel good to leave them like that. I have loved Boston, and they have given me a lot. I want to do right by them.”

Yuna smiled. “So, you do that. You make it clear to Boston that you do not intend to re-sign before your free agency, you request a trade in time for the new season, and you tell them you’ll waive your NTC *only* for Ottawa. Then, Boston gets something in exchange for you. Ottawa will have some prime draft picks to offer, considering how bad they are. I can think of a few active players who might make for good trades, and maybe they have some prospects they could throw in, I don’t know. Better that Boston gets something than nothing, though. They’ll see that.”

“And my NTC is there to protect me in case something goes wrong,” Ilya said, nodding along thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Yuna said, pointing at Ilya. “Exactly. It’s possible they’ll try to harass you into waiving for a different team once they know you’re leaving, but I doubt it’ll come to that. The Centaurs will be very motivated to put together a good package for them, and Boston ultimately can’t force you to take anything else with the NTC in place. You don’t seem to like your agent very much. Are you open to signing with someone new?”

Ilya made a face. “Yes, I need to. My agent is Russian. Obviously not going to be helpful with all this.”

Yuna shot him a sympathetic look even as her fingers flew across the keyboard, adding notes about the agent situation. “I’ll get you a list of Canadian agents to consider, but it might be easiest if you sign with Shane’s agent and tell her about your relationship.”

Shane looked like he wanted to protest for a moment, then closed his mouth and shook his head, his eyes falling shut. After a breath, he asked: “How does all this end up getting Ilya permanent residency in a year?”

“Express Entry,” David chimed in from the kitchen over the clank of plates being loaded into the dishwasher.

“Exactly,” Yuna said, bringing up the website for the program and skimming as she spoke. “Ilya, if you got the trade, you’d be a skilled worker at the top of your

field with a work contract in Canada. You'd be a shoo-in for the Express Entry program, and once you get everything submitted, it says that most applications are reviewed within six months. We could hire someone to guide you through the process, or the MLH might even have someone. You'll have to take an English test, but I'm sure that'll be fine."

Ilya gave a little half-smile. "I was good in school. I'm sure I can study and pass."

"You were?" Shane said, his eyebrows raised. "I was awful. My hockey IQ definitely did not translate to high school chemistry."

"You weren't *that* bad," David said, wiping his hands on a dish towel as he rejoined the table. "You just didn't care about anything but hockey and it showed."

"So, are we okay with this plan?" Yuna asked, getting them back on track. "How do you feel about coming to Ottawa this season?"

Ilya went quiet, tracing one finger over the tabletop as he thought. "It is a good plan. It is also a very sudden change. I did not exit the playoffs last year thinking I had just played my last game with Boston. It will take me a bit to get used to the idea."

"It's fine if you need to think about it," Shane said, squeezing Ilya's thigh. "It's big. And really fast."

"And it's also only one option, though I think it's the most straightforward and secure," Yuna said. "We can discuss other paths to permanent residency..."

"Well—" Ilya began.

Shane's expression turned swiftly murderous. His head whipped to the side to glare at Ilya and he withdrew his hand from Ilya's thigh, folding his arms over his chest. "If you suggest marrying Svetlana again I will throw your dead body in the lake and no one will ever find it."

"Shane!" Yuna admonished, immediately thrown for a loop. Shane's death glare did not waver. She was clearly missing something. "Ilya, who's Svetlana? What...?"

"Ilya thought it would be a great idea to pitch a green card marriage to his childhood best friend as a way to get a new passport," Shane spat.

Everyone turned to look at Ilya.

"It is logical!" he protested. "She is American citizen!"

"Why the fuck would you marry her when I'm right here?" Shane seethed. "If you're marrying anyone, it's me, Rozanov. Fuck Svetlana."

After a beat, he added: "No offense, I'm sure she's great or whatever."

Ilya's eyes were wide. "I... did not want to assume—"

"Well, you can fucking assume," Shane cut in. "If we're really in this, then you aren't marrying anyone but me."

"Okay," Ilya quickly agreed.

"Okay?"

"Okay, yes. Of course," Ilya insisted. "We just had not said 'I love you' yet when I said that. I never thought you would..."

"I would. I will," Shane said, taking his hand on the tabletop. "One day, when we can."

Ilya gave a tiny nod, his eyes shiny. "Okay."

Yuna blinked away the sudden burn behind her eyes and cleared her throat.

"Well, I will put down marriage as one of our options, then, though it's not a quick fix. Getting permanent residency that way is slower, and I certainly don't want to rush you into something before you're ready."

Ilya laughed, then looked stricken at Yuna's offended huff.

"Sorry, no, no," he said. "It's just the idea of *rushing* after we have been at this for seven years struck me as funny. But I know what you mean. When we get married, I want it to be because we are both ready and it is what we want, not because I need citizenship."

He turned to address the latter part to Shane, who squeezed his hand and had such a stunned, lovesick sort of expression on his face that Yuna had to look away. These boys really were *in this*, and it made her feel an overwhelming swell of conflicting things to see it. Her baby, in love, talking about marriage, with *Ilya Rozanov*, and they had the whole world arrayed against them.

Well, *that* she could do something about. She cleared her throat and scrolled down to her second bullet point.

"Take some time and think about the trade option, Ilya," she said, proud at how level she managed to make her voice sound. "Getting you permanent residency is the most complicated step, but it's still only step one."

Shane looked visibly exhausted at the idea of more, but Ilya leaned in. "Yes, I would love to hear the rest."

Yuna smiled at him. Damn it, she could feel herself being won over more and more by the minute. A *Boston* player. She mentally shrugged it off.

"Step two is to assemble your team," she said. "You need to build a network of trusted friends who know about this secret and can support you."

"*Tell* people?" Shane yelped, immediately withdrawing his hand from Ilya and folding his arms over his chest. A second panic was imminent unless she could

redirect.

“It will keep you safer, Shane,” she said, keeping her voice level and soothing. “You’re less likely to get desperate and do something stupid if you have a friend you can talk to, like a pressure release valve. It’ll also help for you to have someone in the locker room who can cover for you. You could tell Hayden, couldn’t you?”

“Oh my god,” Shane moaned, tipping his head back and covering his face with both hands. “Hayden is going to lose his shit over this.”

“Hayden does not like me very much,” Ilya admitted with a shrug.

“Well, he only knows you on the ice,” David said.

“Exactly,” Yuna agreed, unable to believe the words she was about to say. “I didn’t like you either when that was my only experience of you, and that was without ever being on the receiving end of your shit talk. Now I know better.”

Yuna was immediately glad she’d said it as Ilya glanced down at the table with a wobbly smile, his cheeks tinged faintly pink. She moved on, giving him a moment to recover. “I have some thoughts about how to tell everyone, and how to make sure they’ll be good allies who won’t fuck this up for you. I want you each to think of who you’d want to tell, at least two to three people. Now, step three: We hard launch your friendship.”

“What exactly does that mean?” Shane said, suspicious.

“It means we let the public know you’re friends who hang out, leaning on the All-Stars narrative if necessary, though I’d rather stay vague. We post pictures to Instagram, mostly with other people involved at first, but then eventually with just the two of you. You let yourselves be seen out together occasionally, get the public used to seeing you together. And you go ahead and start the foundation you talked about. That was a good idea, Shane, and you should definitely do it ASAP.”

The praise seemed to chase a bit of the vaguely ill look from Shane’s face. Too bad he wasn’t going to like the next bit very much.

“Step four is really focused on you, Shane. We need to work on your branding and media training,” she said, making careful eye contact as she spoke. “The ‘whole perfect Canadian hockey prince’ thing needs to go. We need to reframe into ‘confident, secure gay man who just wants to talk about hockey and does not give a fuck what you think.’ It’ll help you in media scrums *and* in the locker room.”

“You want me to come out,” Shane said flatly.

“Eventually, yes,” she admitted. “Ilya can’t until he has residency, so it’s on you to start slowly moving the public toward the possibility of you two being together. And, truthfully, there have always been vague rumblings about you. Dating Rose helped—”

Ilya scowled, his nose giving an irritated twitch. Yuna fought down a laugh and pressed on.

“—*but* I think it might be for the best to just get the truth out there, so you can't be outed,” she said. “We don't start there, though, if you don't want to. We start with changing the way you interact with the media to present a more authentic image, a bit more of your actual personality. We give you the tools to solidly shut down homophobes in any situation and keep the focus on your playing.”

“For what it's worth, I think ‘confident gay man who doesn't give a fuck’ would really suit you,” Ilya said.

Shane groaned and buried his face in his folded arms on the table. “Can we all please stop saying ‘gay man’ over and over?”

Oh, *Shane*.

Yuna pressed her lips together and tipped her head to one side. “Maybe the first thing we need to do is to get you a little more comfortable with yourself. You literally *apologized* to me for being gay earlier.”

Ilya's expression did something complicated and sad, and he reached over to run a soothing hand up and down Shane's back.

“Maybe we move on and talk about step five for now?” he suggested.

Yuna nodded, but left herself a note under step four about maybe finding Shane a therapist.

“Okay, step five,” she said, scrolling down. “We start to soft launch the relationship and further intertwine your public images. Joint ad campaigns. More Instagram posts with just the two of you. Avoidance instead of denial. Have you seen with some of the married PWWHL players, who you should really know and support anyway. If Ilya has his PR by this point, then maybe he comes out too.”

Shane lifted his head off the table and fixed Yuna with an exhausted look.

“What's even left for step six?”

“Confirm the relationship,” Yuna said softly. “Make it official. Whether it's something formal like a statement or an interview, or something casual like an off-the-cuff confirmation during media. Or you just stop hiding and let yourselves be seen. However you want.”

Shane's next few breaths were labored. He shook his head, staring off into the distance with his mouth pressed thin. “Mom, we can't. Our careers will be over if we come out. Scott Hunter was one thing, but two rival players together... the league will kick us out.”

“They will not,” Yuna said with pure confidence punctuated by lightning fast keystrokes. “For one, it's illegal. So *obviously* illegal they can't talk their way around it. Two, if they try to question your integrity, all your stats and awards are *right there*. They can try it, but the evidence won't pan out. Three, the precedent has already been set in women's sports. Hell, the C and the A for the Montreal

Victoire are married and on the same line. And there's those women who were on rival Olympic teams—Finland and Sweden maybe?—and they also play for Ottawa and Montreal, just like you want to do. All you have to do is say that publicly and the league can't contradict without looking like the raging misogynists they are."

Yuna could see the wheels turning in Shane's head. "Okay, but they can still make our lives hell, right?"

Yuna pushed her laptop away and folded her arms, studying her son carefully. "Pick your flavor of hell. Hiding is no picnic either. Are you willing to put up with some discomfort to have the relationship you want?"

Her eyes slid over to Ilya to see his reaction to the question, only for her heart to give a painful ache. He looked... resigned. His gaze rested gently on Shane's profile, soft and aching, and something fierce and protective rose within Yuna.

He didn't expect to be chosen.

She looked back to Shane, primed to reiterate her points, only to find him already wide-eyed and protesting.

"Wha—of *course*, Mom. Of course I am."

But was he just saying that? Was he truly ready to deal with what was to come if they chose to walk this path?

"I'm not saying it's going to be an easy road," Yuna said. "I'm saying you have to decide if it's worth it for this relationship. If you're waiting for a cake walk, it'll never come. What are you willing to do to be together? You were willing to commit to hiding for ten years with the threat of getting outed hanging over your head the entire time. Are you willing to deal with what it means to live in the light instead?"

Shane was silent for a long moment, and Yuna's stomach clenched. Was she about to witness her son breaking Ilya's heart? Was he ultimately just too scared and self-loathing to be true to himself in public? And what did that say about her as a parent if he felt that way?

Shane looked over to Ilya and reached out to take his hand.

"I'm willing to do whatever it takes to be together," he said. "What are you feeling? It's okay no matter what."

Yuna breathed a tiny sigh of relief that she had, at the end of the day, managed to raise a son who could choose that sort of bravery. She didn't miss the similar sagging relief from Ilya. He huffed a tiny laugh, his eyes soft as his smile grew.

"You already know what I think," he said. "I want to be with you. Whatever it takes."

Yuna smiled, shooting a glance at David, who sat back with his arms crossed, looking pleased. He raised his eyebrows at her and mouthed "good job." She

reached under the table to pinch his thigh, then went back to her laptop, making a few last notes.

“So? What do we think of this plan overall? Are you on board?” she asked, breaking the boys out of their lovey-dovey staring contest. Shane nodded, throwing his arm across the back of Ilya’s chair.

“In general, yeah, but I think maybe Ilya should sleep on it,” he said. “The trade part, at least.”

“Sleep *on* it?” Ilya asked, brows furrowed.

“Like, take tonight to think about it, get some sleep, then see how you feel in the morning,” Shane clarified. “Or longer, if you need. Asking for a trade is a big deal, and it’s your choice if you want to do it now or wait to sign in free agency. It’s your career. I want to make sure you feel good about whatever you decide.”

Ilya nodded, reaching over to squeeze Shane’s thigh. “Ah, yes. That makes sense. I will do that. I think I already know what I want, but it makes sense to *sleep on it*, as you say.”

“Great,” Yuna said with the air of adjourning a meeting. “In that case, I’ll take tonight to firm this up and turn it into something that can be shared with Farah once we bring her into the loop. I’ll see if she’s available for a meeting tomorrow.”

Shane blew out a slow breath and dropped his chin to his chest. Ilya gave his leg a little shake.

“Too fast?” he asked.

Shane shook his head. “No, no. I mean, *yeah*, kinda, but I’ll be fine. It needs to be done. I’m gonna freak out a little bit at every new thing, but that doesn’t mean that I’m not committed to this. Okay?”

“Okay,” Ilya said gently, leaning in for a quick peck. Yuna’s heart gave a warm little thrum. Damn it, she *liked* Ilya Rozanov for her son. They were good together. And they needed her. Yuna was going to do everything in her power to make sure these boys got the future they deserved.

“Okay, then, boys,” she said. “How about we meet for breakfast in the morning and talk more then?”

Shane looked to Ilya for confirmation, then nodded. “Sure. Why don’t you come over to our place? We’ll cook. Just... text before you come.”

Yuna waved that away. “Why don’t we just say we’ll come around eight thirty?”

“Please text first,” Ilya reiterated.

“We’ll text,” David said with odd emphasis, putting an arm around Yuna’s shoulders and shooting her a look.

Oh. Right. Okay.

“Well. We’ll... see you then,” she said in an awkward, stilted cadence. “We’ll just... walk you guys out.”

It was a good thing she had hours of planning and contingency making ahead of her. She did *not* want to think too hard about why it was so important to text.

The next morning, Yuna texted not once, not twice, but *three times* at David’s behest before heading over to Shane’s cottage, a bowl of freshly cut fruit perched atop the laptop bag in her lap. Once they pulled up beside Shane’s Jeep and got up to the front door, they knocked loudly before letting themselves in. Voices drifted from the kitchen.

“If you need to think longer, it’s okay,” Shane was saying. As Yuna walked into the room, she saw them standing close, Ilya’s hands on Shane’s hips and Shane’s arms thrown over Ilya’s shoulders, one hand tangled in those riotous curls.

“No, no, I am sure.” Ilya looked up and met Yuna’s eyes as she entered. “Good morning.”

“Morning, boys,” David said, setting the fruit bowl down on the table. “Sounds like you’ve been busy already.”

“We have,” Ilya said, stepping back and taking Shane’s hand. He took a steadying breath and then nodded once. “I want the Ottawa trade.”

The words hung in the air, heavy with significance. Step one. A huge step, the biggest of them all except perhaps the final one. Ilya was entrusting Yuna with his career, his safety, his life.

She would not let him down.

“Okay, then,” Yuna said, setting down her laptop bag and unzipping it. “Let’s get to work.”

Hopefully these boys really were all in, because things were about to start moving fast.

Chapter 2: It begins.

Chapter Summary

The team gets to work on Step One of the plan. Shane and Ilya feel *so fine* about everything.

Chapter Notes

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

Shane really needed to practice coming out in the mirror or something. Or maybe to one of those therapy dogs that kids could practice reading to at the library. Could he borrow one of those for an afternoon and just tell it he was gay over and over again until the words lost all meaning and power?

Maybe his mother was right. Maybe he needed help.

Ready or not, he was about to come out for the third time, this time to his agent, Farah Jalali, who had watched him grow up since his mid-teens. A small part of him wondered if she already *knew* somehow, the way she always seemed to know everything, anticipating his needs and responses before he'd hardly had the time to think. But regardless, he'd need to say it. Out loud. Again.

I'm gay, and I have a boyfriend, and you'll never guess who it is!

Shane barely managed to contain a semi-hysterical laugh and rubbed a hand over his face. Hopefully he didn't look as dead exhausted as he felt. He'd spent a second night in a row lying awake with plans spinning through his head, though this time they were someone else's grand designs instead of his own fumbling attempts. He still couldn't quite believe that his parents not only knew about him and Ilya, but that they were actively helping them have a real future together sooner rather than later. And the first step of the first step was this: telling Farah.

"It's going to be fine," Ilya said, rubbing a reassuring hand up and down Shane's thigh as the Skype call started ringing on the laptop. Shane had it angled so only he was in view of the camera for now, until he'd made his big reveals.

Okay. Time to become Captain Hollander, the version of himself who commanded a locker room and had led a team to two cups, a professional hockey player who *had his shit together*.

He clicked to accept the call, then slumped back with his hands buried in the front pocket of his hoodie.

"Shane, good afternoon," Farah said. They exchanged brief pleasantries while Farah added his mother to the call as well, even though she was only sitting on

the other side of the table with her earbuds in. She flashed Shane a quick smile before joining the call and greeting Farah.

“So,” Farah said once everyone was settled. “I must say, I was surprised to hear from you this time of year, Shane. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything is fine, I just...” Shane took a breath. *Captain Hollander. Captain Hollander.*

“I have some things I need to tell you,” he said, his voice coming out even and sure. “And some plans to bring you into the loop on. My mom will say more about that in a bit, but first...”

Do it, do it, do it.

“I’m gay,” he said, proud of how the words didn’t waver at all. There, that was a little easier than last time. He swallowed and pushed on. “I’m gay, and I have a serious boyfriend, and we have a long-term plan for coming out that’s honestly pretty complicated, but we’ll definitely want you on board for it. So. Yeah.”

Farah smiled, something a touch more genuine and warm than her typical polished, professional one. “Thank you for telling me that, Shane. You’re far from alone right now. Agents across the league have been getting calls like this all summer since Scott Hunter came out.”

“Really?” Shane said, glancing over at Ilya to see his own surprise reflected.

“Really,” Farah confirmed. “I mean, statistically speaking, in a league of over 700 players, there are a lot of closeted guys out there. Most people aren’t wanting to come out, but Hunter has certainly prompted a tidal wave of honesty and paranoia.”

“Wow,” Shane said, leaning back in his chair. “I mean, I knew we weren’t alone, but that’s... well, anyway, I’m not ready to come out right now either, but probably sometime in the next year. That’s where the plan we need to tell you about comes in.”

Shane turned and raised his eyebrows to ask Ilya if he was ready. Ilya nodded, so Shane turned back to Farah.

“So, the whole being gay thing was actually the easy part. My boyfriend is here with me, and I’m going to introduce you for... reasons that will become obvious. So, uh...” Shane reached out and turned the laptop so he and Ilya were both in view. “Surprise?”

Farah went silent, blinking for a solid five seconds. Then, her lips twitched like she was trying to hold in a laugh.

“I see what you mean,” she said. “A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rozanov.”

“You as well,” Ilya said. “I am seeking new representation and wondered if you might be willing. We thought it would be... easier, maybe? To deal with both of us. If that’s not too much of a conflict of interest for you.”

Ilya had drafted the email to his old Russian agent in bed that morning. Curt and to the point: *I am terminating our agreement effective immediately. Thank you for representing me for the last ten years.* Shane had found it maybe a bit *too* curt for ending a decade-long partnership, but Ilya had insisted that he couldn't give the man an inch to work with. No reasoning, no details, nothing. Shane had shrugged, thrown back the covers to give Ilya a morning blow job, and moved on with his day.

Farah cleared her throat and seemed to mentally reset herself.

"I would be more than happy to represent you, Mr. Rozanov," she began.

"Ilya, please."

"Ilya, then," she corrected. "I agree that it will make things easier going forward considering your involvement. I'd love to hear about this plan of yours."

"Mom, take it away," Shane said, gesturing across the table to his mother, who smiled and unmuted herself.

"Thanks, Shane. Farah, you should have a document in your inbox, and I've got a slide deck to share as well..."

The recap of the plan took half an hour, with considerable time spent on the Ottawa trade, which Farah seemed to think was perfectly reasonable. Once they'd reached step six, Farah sat back in her chair and sipped her tea for a moment, thinking.

"You've given me a lot to work with here, everyone, and I think this is a very solid plan," she said eventually. "You have my full support. I think the only other thing I need right now is a timeline. Not of the plan, of your relationship. If anything from your past were to leak, it would help for me to know what to be prepared for ahead of time, and it'll also help with constructing a narrative for the league if it comes down to it."

Shane and Ilya exchanged a look. They'd very specifically *not* shared much of a detailed timeline with his parents because it was, frankly, *a mess*. They must have been silent too long, because his mother huffed an annoyed breath.

"It's not that hard of a question, is it?" she asked, her tone professional, though Shane could tell she was personally dying for answers.

Shane pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "So, uh, please keep in mind that we were teenagers when all this started. Don't judge us for being idiots, I guess?"

"Just start at the beginning, Shane. When did you know you liked each other?" his mom asked.

It sounded like such a straightforward question, but everything with them was fucking complicated.

"Do you want the hindsight answer or the real answer?" Shane asked.

Ilya raised his eyebrows. “For me they are the same. But for Shane I imagine they are very different answers.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Shane said with an eyeroll.

“Tell me I’m wrong,” Ilya said, gesturing for Shane to speak. When he didn’t, Ilya pressed on. “Okay, I’ll start. I was interested from the moment you introduced yourself to me.”

“And that was when, exactly?” Farah asked, taking notes.

“World Juniors, 2008. We were seventeen,” Ilya said, grinning at the memory. “This pretty boy with his pretty freckles and sweet smile introduced himself to me and shook my hand and I thought, oh, if I ever get the chance...”

“And then you were a dick to me,” Shane said flatly.

“I barely spoke English!” Ilya protested. “Harmless chirping. Basically flirting. What about *you*?”

Shane ran his tongue over his teeth behind closed lips, trying to find a way around admitting Ilya was right. He found none. “Okay fine. I didn’t realize it until the night of the draft when we were in the gym.”

“I didn’t even know you saw each other after the draft,” his mother said, studying Shane with a raised eyebrow. “What happened there?”

“I flirted and Shane had his first gay panic,” Ilya said with a wicked grin. Shane covered his face with both hands.

“Didn’t you break up with Jessica the very next day?” his mother asked. Of *course* she would remember that.

“Did you *really*?” Ilya asked, delighted.

“Shut *up*,” Shane said from behind his hands. “None of this is useful information.”

“You’re right,” Ilya said, still far too gleeful. “The *real* start of everything was at the CCM photoshoot in the summer of 2010, right before our rookie year. That was our first—”

Shane dropped his hands and whipped around with a glare. “ILYA.”

“Kiss! I was going to say kiss!” Ilya protested, holding his hands up in innocence.

Shane groaned. “God damnit.”

“But now you have let *that* cat out of the bag,” Ilya said with a giggle that Shane resented with his whole being. His mother and Farah at least *attempted* to hide their amusement.

“No, this is actually good information,” Farah said, making more notes. “You were both consenting adults before anything of an intimate nature happened, and that intimate relationship predates your time playing in the league.”

“Yes,” Shane confirmed, soothed by the clinical nature of the words. “We’d just turned nineteen.”

“God, you really were just babies,” his mother said, looking at them with an expression Shane couldn’t quite parse. He huffed.

“You and dad met in college. You were probably nineteen, too.”

“Eighteen, so don’t let your mother give you any crap about it!” his dad called from the living room. His mom visibly flushed and waved a hand.

“Let’s move on,” she said. “What next?”

Ilya grimaced. “There’s not much else to say. We saw each other whenever we were in the same city, which was not often, and we texted, and we pretended there were no feelings involved for as long as possible. That was it for years. We were not in an exclusive relationship until January of this year, after we talked at All Stars.”

Farah held up a finger to interrupt. “Sorry, Shane, but I have to ask. Rose Landry?”

Shane winced as Ilya scowled, looking away.

“That was, uh... another gay panic, I guess,” Shane said, reaching over to hook a finger in the pocket of Ilya’s shorts.

Ilya thumbed at his nose and stared off to the side. “Yes, I made him a sandwich and called him by his first name, then he ran out of my house like it was on fire and got a girlfriend.”

Shane yanked at Ilya’s pocket and leveled a look at him. “Hey, remember that time you ghosted me for six months back in 2014 right after we—”

“Yes, yes, we have both fucked up. The point is, we were not seeing each other while he was with Rose Landry,” Ilya said, turning back to the camera. “That is what you really need to know, yes?”

“Yes, thanks, Ilya,” Farah said, making a note of that. “Is there anything else you think I should know? Anything that might come to light that it would help to know ahead of time?”

Shane looked to Ilya, who shrugged.

“I think that’s it?” Shane said, the last seven years unspooling in his mind. It was *all* dangerous, illicit, absolutely forbidden, not a moment of it safe for public knowledge. Was any particular moment truly worse than the rest?

“Okay, then. I appreciate your candor, gentleman, and your trust. I’ll take it from here,” Farah said, already typing away. “Can I have your permission to bring the agency’s PR team into the loop so we can all strategize and monitor the situation together?”

Shane looked at Ilya and shrugged. “I guess. I mean, I assume they’ve signed stuff that means they have to keep quiet, right?”

“Yes, of course,” Farah assured. “Every employee of this agency is both committed and contractually obligated to your privacy and support. Ilya, that’ll mean you, too, as soon as you sign the agency agreement, which I’ll send you right after this meeting. As soon as you sign it, I’ll get to work on your behalf. Our first step will be to meet with Boston and request the trade. Would you like to be in that meeting, or would you prefer I just handle it?”

“I would like to be there. In person, if possible,” Ilya said. “I feel I owe them that much.”

Farah nodded. “I’ll send you the meeting details as soon as I have them, but I’d expect it to be soon. I assume you aren’t in Boston right now, so you may want to go ahead and get yourself there.”

“I will do that,” Ilya agreed, meeting Shane’s gaze with a regretful look. It hurt to have to give up any of their time together when they got so little, but this was in service of getting *more* time in the future. A necessary sacrifice. “I know trades are a GM thing, but can we request that Coach be there too? Is that okay? I want him to hear it from me.”

“I’ll ask,” Farah said. “I’m sure so long as he’s in town, he’ll agree to be there.”

As the call wrapped up, Shane zoned out and, for the first time, finally allowed himself to picture it: Ilya, just two hours away year round. More falling asleep together. More mornings together. Maybe a house in the middle so *more* could become *even more still*?

Outrageous dreams. Too much.

But maybe... possible?

Maybe *too much* could be *just right*, once it was all said and done.

Ilya sat beside Farah at a massive conference table, his thumbs poking and prodding at one another on the tabletop as he tried his best to keep the rest of himself still. Farah typed away on her laptop, phone face down on the table, the very picture of calm professionalism. Ilya, on the other hand, was fighting the urge to crack a joke, to deflect, to magically procure a glass of crisp, cold vodka and float away—or at least drown out the voices inside his head.

You are useless, Ilyusha, you are lazy, you are a traitor. What, you do all this for some boy? You think he will still care for you a year from now? He will see what you really are. Needy, pathetic. He will get sick of you. You will come out, and everything will burn, and he will resent you for ruining his life. And then where will you be? In his home, on a team of strangers, no chance at the cup, nothing of your own.

Then his phone vibrated.

Jane: *I love you. Thank you for doing this for us. I don't think I've said that enough.*

Jane: *Let me know how it goes when you're done. ♥*

Something in Ilya's chest unwound.

Shane loved him. Shane had stayed up all night spinning plans for them to be together, even though they'd eventually gotten shot down by his own mother. They had a new plan, now, one he'd agreed to. It was a *good* plan, and he wanted the future it promised with a quiet desperation that sometimes felt like it would suffocate him. It had been easier, before, when they were *something* but not yet *everything*. The distance was awful, but there was nothing to be done about it, nothing promised or owed, and every meeting felt like an unearthed treasure. Now, with love spoken aloud, with this promise dangling in front of them, Ilya felt *ravenous* for time.

And Shane felt the same. He said he did. And now the wheels were turning.

It was all happening so fast. Ilya wanted it so much it was terrifying.

I love you too, he texted back under the table. *I tell you everything after.*

"Sorry to keep you both waiting," a booming voice said as its owner rushed through the doorway, hustling to a seat across the table. Boston's GM, Mike Reilly, was followed by the assistant GM and Coach LeClaire, and they all sat across from Ilya and Farah with expectant expressions. Ilya slid his phone into his pocket and folded his hands on top of the table, once again trying not to fidget.

"Your meeting request was a bit vague," Mike said, leaning back in his big leather chair. "Are we kicking off negotiations for your new contract? Are there problems we need to know about?"

Farah looked to Ilya, who sat up straighter and summoned up the words he'd practiced endlessly in his head on the flight to Boston. There was no going back now.

"I love Boston and I love this team," he began. "I will always be grateful to you for drafting me and trusting me with captaincy. Winning the cup for you was one of the highlights of my life."

Coach LeClaire's expression visibly fell as he took in the words, clearly hearing the "but" that was coming.

“But, I will not be re-signing. For personal reasons, I need to be in Ottawa,” Ilya said. “I can wait and sign there in free agency, but I do not want to hurt or disrespect this organization after all you have given me. So, I want to give you the opportunity to trade me there instead so you can at least get something in exchange.”

Farah nodded, taking over. “Ilya has agreed to waive his no-trade clause, but *only* for Ottawa. That is our starting place for negotiations.”

For a long moment, no one spoke. Disappointment hung so thick in the air Ilya thought he might choke on it, but he maintained eye contact and a straight spine, reflexes honed under the duress of much harder men than these. Finally came the question he’d been dreading.

“Is it a girl?” the GM asked frankly.

They’d discussed this inevitability in advance, so he let Farah be the one to say: “Personal reasons are personal.”

As planned, Ilya added: “As I said, I love Boston. I would not do this if it were not absolutely necessary.”

After another agonizing silence, the GM heaved a massive sigh.

“Well, son, I can’t say this isn’t a massive disappointment, but we’ll see what the Centaurs can offer us,” he said. “But you have to know that we are going to be doing everything we can to keep you here.”

“You’ll be the highest paid player in the league,” the assistant GM said, speaking up for the first time. “Full no-movement clause. You want a relocation package for your girl, we can do that. Performance bonuses. Perks—”

“I appreciate it, really,” Ilya said. “But the trade is only thing I want.”

“You say that now, but these guys know how to pull out all the stops,” LeClaire said. “Promise me you’ll consider it.”

“We’ll make you an offer you can’t refuse, Rozanov. Just you wait,” the GM assured. “We’ll bring you our biggest and best. Hear us out?”

Four sets of eyes seared Ilya’s skin. He didn’t *want* another offer. He didn’t *want* to feel this pressure, this responsibility, this *guilt*.

“I will hear you out,” he said finally. A broad grin broke across the GM’s face.

“That’s it, son, you won’t regret it,” he said, as if it were a done deal. “We’ll hop on the phone with Ottawa and get to work on our own offer with Farah here tomorrow. You should hear from us soon. Will you be in town?”

“Ah, no, I am headed back to Canada right after this,” Ilya admitted.

“Gotta see that girl of yours, I get it, I get it,” the GM boomed. If there weren’t a table between them, Ilya had no doubt he’d be receiving a hearty unwanted

backslap. “Well, we won’t hold you any longer, then. Just keep an open mind for us.”

“I will, sir,” Ilya said, standing to receive a handshake across the table. He repeated the gesture with the AGM and coach, remaining standing until they all filed out of the room. As soon as they were gone, he collapsed back into his chair and blew out a breath, covering his eyes with one hand.

“That went about how I expected,” Farah said, making a few notes before closing her laptop. “Just remember, Ilya, you have all the power here. No one can force you into anything you don’t want. When all’s said and done, I’m confident you’ll be on your way to Ottawa.”

“Yes. Thank you for doing this,” Ilya said, accent thicker than normal. “I know this is ah... unusual situation.”

“Not at all,” Farah countered with a smile. “It’s completely normal for players to make career moves with partners and family in mind.”

“Not players like me and Shane,” Ilya said, unsure why he was bothering to argue. Did he *want* her to talk him out of it?

“Not generational talents, usually, no. It’s expected for players like you two to stay with the teams that draft you. But expectations are not law, Ilya,” she said, her voice softening. “You’re allowed to want this.”

Am I?

Just hear us out, they’d said.

It didn’t hurt to have a backup plan in case Shane changed his mind, he supposed. There was no harm in seeing their offer. It didn’t mean anything.

He would only look.

As he led Farah out of the building, Ilya slid his phone out of his pocket and pulled up his text thread with Shane.

Meeting is over, he typed. *Went fine*.

Typing dots popped up immediately. Shane must have been waiting with his phone in hand. Seconds later, his reply came.

That was fast. Did they give you any problems?

Ilya’s thumbs hesitated over the keyboard.

It was no big deal. He wasn’t going to take Boston’s offer, so it was irrelevant. No need to worry Shane.

There was nothing to tell.

No, no problems, he typed, then sent it before he could overthink. It was time to check in for his return flight. Back to Shane. Back to the cottage.

He gave the TD Garden one last long look, then climbed into his car and left it behind.

Chapter End Notes

Re: Ilya's agent: I'm only familiar with literary agent contracts and they vary from "you can terminate this agreement at any time for any reason" to "you must give 30+ days' notice." I have no idea if this is typical for sports agents, too. It's fanfic! We're vibing!

Chapter 3: How to not fuck it up

Chapter Summary

Friends get told, Yuna Hollander gives a powerpoint presentation and apologies, and the friendship hard launch commences.

It was a good thing that Rose Landry was the first one to arrive at the cottage for their big “telling people” party, because she figured it out the second she got out of her rental car. She took one look at Ilya and *screamed*.

“Shane! Fucking! *Hollander!*” she shouted, punctuating each word with a swat at his arm. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me! *He’s* the peg?”

Ilya, who had been doing his whole definitely-not-jealous, stoic Russian thing, immediately doubled over laughing. Shane contemplated his many regrets.

“I cannot *believe* you kept this from me,” she said, wrapping Shane in a hug and smacking a huge kiss on his cheek. “We are going to have *words* about this.”

She popped the trunk of the car and Shane dutifully pulled out her luggage, handing one bag over to Ilya when he sauntered over to help. Rose snatched the bag out of Ilya’s hand and dropped it to the ground, then held out her own hand for a shake instead.

“Hi, I’m Rose. I’m really sorry I briefly stole your man, but I returned him gayer than I found him, so I hope that helped.”

Ilya shook her hand with a wide grin on his face. “Extremely helpful, yes, thank you. I do not forgive you yet, though. I hold grudges.”

“Mm, yes, you do strike me as that sort of catty bitch,” Rose said, taking a half step back to evaluate him. “That’s okay, I’ll win you over.” She looked to Shane. “When is everyone else getting here?”

“Maybe fifteen minutes?” Shane said, closing the trunk and hefting Rose’s suitcase. “I really hope Hayden and JJ are the last to show up. They’re the most likely to start shit with Ilya and I really just don’t have it in me to put up with it today.”

“You let me handle Montreal’s fourteenth and fifteenth best players,” Ilya said, following after grabbing Rose’s other bag off the ground. “I will distract them until we make our announcement.”

“Your methods of distraction are what worry me,” Shane griped. He shouldered the door open and his mom looked up from her place at the table, removing her

glasses and standing up from behind her laptop.

“Mom, this is Rose Landry. Obviously,” he said, muscling his way through the awkwardness. “Rose, this is my mom, Yuna.”

It wasn’t that long ago that he’d pictured this meeting going very differently. Introducing his mother to his perfect girlfriend, her so proud of Shane for bringing someone so wonderful into their family, performing his role exactly as expected. It felt like he’d stepped into an alternate universe where he was the person he used to want so badly to be. These days, he couldn’t ignore the twisting wrongness that the idea of being with Rose provoked, and he sought out Ilya’s hand to squeeze, just in case he was feeling weird about the whole thing, too.

“Mrs. Hollander, it’s amazing to meet you,” Rose said, taking his mother’s hand.

“Yuna, please,” his mother said. “I’m such a fan.”

“Oh, I’m such a fan of *yours*,” Rose insisted. “You’re a total badass and you raised my very favorite of my gay boyfriends, so it’s a true honor.”

“Rose,” Shane warned.

“Oh, you’ve had other gay boyfriends?” Yuna asked, amused.

“Mom,” Shane said, the warning tone increasing.

“Oh, *so* many,” Rose said with great sincerity. “I’m actually a little worried that attraction and gaydar have gotten cross-wired in my brain somehow. It’s a real problem.”

“Okay, can I show you to your room now?” Shane interjected with an air of desperation. “Please?”

Yuna and Rose exchanged a look that clearly said “we’ll talk more later,” which Shane willfully ignored. So long as he didn’t have to be present for it, he’d survive. He and Ilya tried to leave Rose to get settled into her room, but she cheerfully abandoned her unopened bags on the floor and followed them out.

“Are you kidding?” she said. “I don’t want to miss a goddamn minute of this dramatic reveal.”

Shane saw Ilya’s lips twitch as he suppressed a smile. Maybe introducing them had been a terrible mistake. They really were far too similar; no wonder Shane had thought he could make it work with her.

The three of them stopped off in the kitchen to pour Rose a glass of white wine, then stepped out front when the crunch of tires once again sounded. Shane was relieved to see yet another rental car making its way up the drive, rather than Hayden or JJ’s familiar vehicles. Through the windshield, he spied Cliff, Connors, St-Simon, and Svetlana, who had all shared a flight from Boston. Ilya had waffled on whether to tell so many Boston players when he was planning to leave anyway, but had ultimately invited all three of them anyway, thinking it

would be good to have people to cover for him about his departure until the truth came out. Ilya had promised Connors and St-Simon were good guys who were definitely not homophobic, and it seemed cruel to leave Cliff alone in the locker room with a huge secret he couldn't discuss. This way, they could all back each other up.

The guys all piled out of the car and started gathering bags while Svetlana swept straight over to Ilya, exchanging cheek kisses and pleasantries. Shane knew he should be a good host and go welcome her, but it had only been a week and a half since *I could marry Svetlana*, so he just couldn't bring himself to do it yet. Beside him, Rose leaned in close.

"Oh, she's gorgeous," she murmured. "You're being so cool and mature right now. I'd be over there marking my territory if I were you."

So cool and mature. Not at all freaking out internally. Shane grimaced when Svetlana turned and her eyes landed on Shane, widening slightly in surprise, then narrowing again as she visibly put the pieces together.

"I'll go greet the hockey boys while you handle this," Rose said, clapping a hand on his shoulder and leaving him high and dry to face his boyfriend's ex-fuckbuddy who he'd threatened to marry.

"The infamous *Jane*," Svetlana said quietly under the sounds of three hockey players meeting a famous actress, holding her hand out for Shane to shake as she turned back to Ilya. "Ilyusha, I am furious with you and there will be consequences. All these years you could have been introducing me to my favorite hockey player and you chose to keep him to yourself."

Well, it would have been awkward to meet while you two were still fucking and I was in love with him, Shane thought, but shook her hand politely all the same.

"Nice to meet you," he lied. "Thanks for coming."

She cocked her head with a raised eyebrow, then looked back at Ilya. "What did you do?"

"Nothing!" Ilya protested, holding his hands up in innocence. "I did nothing!"

"I'm gonna go get the guys settled," Shane said, walking away before he had to answer any awkward questions. He approached the Boston guys, hearing a horrified "Ilyusha, you *didn't*!" behind him as he went.

"Hollander! Very fucking confused to be here, but thanks for having us, man!" Cliff said, moving to give him a hard clap on the shoulder before freezing in place. "Uh, sorry, is your, uh..."

"My collarbone is fine now, no thanks to you," Shane said with a grin. "Let me show you guys in. I've got a guest room that can fit two of you, and Ilya said to let you guys fight it out over who has to sleep on the couch."

"Conny," Cliff and St-Simon said in unison.

Connors turned with a glare. “What the fuck, guys?”

“You fucking snore and everyone knows it,” St-Simon shot back.

Cliff nodded his agreement. “You have been exiled, brother.”

Shane grimaced. “It’s a really comfortable couch, I promise. Ilya and I pass out on it all the time.”

Three sets of eyes turned to look at him. Fortunately, he was saved by the approach of the final two expected cars of the day. Hayden and JJ in one, and his father with the catering order in the other.

“Hey Ilya, can you show the guys and Svetlana inside? I’m gonna get Hayden and JJ,” Shane called back, swallowing his dread.

Ilya called out from the doorway. “What, you fuckers need me to hold your hand or something? Get in here!”

As Ilya, Rose, and the Boston contingent disappeared inside, Shane blew out a breath in relief. The longer he could put off Hayden and JJ crossing paths with the others, the better. And now, with his dad arrived, he had a built-in distraction.

“Capitaine!” JJ shouted out the window as Hayden brought the car to a stop. “This place is incredible!”

He leaped out the second the car turned off. Hayden followed close behind, wrapping Shane in a back-slapping hug.

“Glad to see you with the sling off, man,” he said. “We leave the bags in the car, right? You still have us at your parents’ cottage tonight?”

“Yeah, sorry, full house tonight,” Shane said with a nervous laugh, moving on quickly before they could latch onto that detail. “Hey, can you help me get the food out of my dad’s car? We got tacos for dinner.”

“Hell yes, tacos!” JJ said, charging straight over to Shane’s dad to take a stack of warm aluminum trays from his arms.

“Good to see you, JJ,” Shane’s dad said, ducking back into the car for more trays.

“You as well, Mr. Hollander!” JJ said, passing his stack over to Hayden and accepting another. They all loaded up with massive amounts of chicken, beans, cheese, tortillas, and all the fixings and headed inside, where Shane’s mother was just finishing connecting her laptop to the TV in the living room. Every chair in the house had been crowded in to face toward the screen. Most of the guests were hovering around the seating; Svetlana and Rose were chatting with wine glasses in their hands, while the Boston players were popping the tops off their beer bottles with an opener they passed around.

“Just put everything down on the table for now,” Shane’s dad said. “I’ll handle getting all this set up while you boys and Yuna do your thing.”

“And what thing is that, exactly?” JJ asked as he set down his trays. “You’ve been very cagey about this whole thing, mon capitaine.”

Hayden froze as soon as the trays were no longer obscuring his vision, staring into the living room in horror.

“Shane, why is half of the Boston team here?” he asked, bristling. “Including Ilya fucking Rozanov and *Marleau*, the guy who ended your season?”

“Still sorry about that, by the way,” Cliff chimed in.

Ilya snickered. “Four is half of twenty-three now? What, you can’t do math either? Must be a Montreal thing.”

Shane pinched the bridge of his nose. This was going to go so poorly. “Ilya, fuck off. Hayden and JJ, sit down. Actually, everyone just... sit down somewhere so we can start.”

“Start what? What are we starting?” Hayden said, his nose wrinkling in disgust when the only available seating forced him to choose between sitting beside Marleau or St-Simon.

“Hayden,” Shane said in his captain's voice. Hayden threw his hands up and plopped into the seat beside St-Simon.

“Fine, fine, be all weird and mysterious. As usual,” Hayden snarked. “Does this have something to do with Lily? You’re being weird in a Lily sort of way.”

Ilya snorted, and Shane glared at him.

“Just get up here so we can do this,” he said, already exhausted. Ilya grinned and came to stand beside him at the front of the room, where Shane’s mother had placed two stools from the kitchen island off to the side of the TV. Ilya cheerfully hopped onto one of them, and Shane sort of collapsed onto the other, sagging a bit so his shoulder brushed against Ilya’s.

“You are okay? Ready for this?” Ilya murmured, catching Shane's gaze and holding it. Shane found himself lingering over the softness around Ilya’s beautiful eyes in a way that would usually have had him scolding himself for being too obvious. But it didn’t matter anymore. In a matter of moments, everyone in this room would know. He could look his fill.

“Yeah,” he whispered, knocking his knee against Ilya’s. “I’m ready. You?”

Ilya smiled. “Yes. Let’s do it.”

Shane looked over to his mom and dad, who hovered in the kitchen, then back out at their assembled group of friends. This whole thing was about to get a lot more real.

“Okay, everyone,” he called out, grabbing everyone’s attention. “Let’s get started. You’re all here because Ilya and I need your help.”

“But first, for fun, we are going to reintroduce ourselves!” Ilya said with a devilish grin. “Hello, I am Boston Lily.”

“*No*,” Hayden gasped, horrified.

“And I’m Montreal Jane,” Shane added with a little wave.

“*What?*” Cliff said in a laugh.

Ilya looked delighted by the reactions so far. “And if you know those names, you know that we have been, ah, *seeing* each other on and off since we were stupid nineteen-year olds.”

Shane took over. “It was casual for a long time, but we’re together for real now. And, like I said... we need your help.”

“Wait, wait, hold up,” Cliff said, waving his hands in the air. “So every time you were blushing and grinning down at your phone it was *Shane fucking Hollander* on the other end?”

Ilya’s grin fell away. “I told you, Russians do not blush. You are full of shit.”

Cliff snorted. “Oh, one of us is full of shit, brother, but it’s definitely not me. Casual, my *ass*. You’ve been in love with your Montreal Girl for *years*. Or, uh, Montreal *Guy* I guess. Sorry, Hollander.”

Hayden looked like he’d witnessed an alien abduction happen right in front of his face.

“So, when I said you played better after seeing Lily,” he began, voice haunted.

St-Simon cut in, his eyes wide. “Oh god, I’m just putting things together. Everything we thought was Jane was actually Shane Hollander. So after every visit to Montreal—”

Connors went pale. “The scratches and bites, oh my god—”

“*Okay, enough*,” Shane snapped, feeling his face grow hot. “I know you’ve got years’ worth of shit to process but do it when my parents aren’t in the room, please. Can we move on, or do you have questions that can’t wait?”

There were, of course, questions that couldn’t wait. Yes, Shane was gay, but no, Ilya wasn’t. No, they weren’t exclusive until recently. Yes, they were in love for real. No, neither of them had slept with Scott Hunter. On and on and on. Finally, the questions subsided, leaving a giggling Svetlana and Rose along with five shellshocked hockey players. Rose spoke up, making herself heard over the muttering.

“So, you said you need our help. What’s going on? What can we do?” she asked.

Shane smiled at her, grateful to be getting back on track. “Right. You’re all here because carrying on a secret relationship is really fucking hard, and it’s going to be even harder now that we’re actually serious. My mom has come up with a

whole plan to help us be able to come out and be together publicly in a year or two. And you are all part of that. Mom, you wanna...?”

“Sure, I’ll step in here,” his mom said. She walked over to where her laptop was connected to the TV and woke it up. The TV screen flickered to life, revealing the first slide of a blue, white, and red powerpoint presentation. In big letters it read: **How to Not Fuck It Up, by Yuna Hollander.**

“Booo Montreal colors,” Cliff called with his hands cupped around his mouth.

Yuna leveled him with her patented no-bullshit look, one that Shane had feared throughout his adolescence. “Marleau, whose house are you in?”

Marleau sat up straighter. “Shane Hollander’s, ma’am.”

“Then yes, it’s fucking metros colors,” his mother said. “Moving on.”

Shane barely suppressed a smile as his mother folded her hands in front of her and began her presentation.

“Thanks for being here, everyone. The fact that you’re in this room means the boys have decided to trust you with their most important, closely-guarded secret. I’m going to talk to you about how to honor that trust and not fuck it up.” She hit the spacebar on her laptop and advanced to the next slide, which showed a bullet-pointed list:

The Plan, summarized:

- **Step one:** [redacted], get Ilya safe from Russia (in progress)
- **Step two:** Tell friends, gain support (in progress)
- **Step three:** Hard launch the friendship (tonight)
- **Step four:** Re-train Shane
- **Step five:** Soft launch the relationship
- **Step six:** Come out publicly

“This is a brief summary of our plan,” his mom said, pointing to each bullet as she gave the group a quick overview. She kept step one brief and vague; the trade was Ilya’s business to discuss with his teammates once it all went through.

“So, now that you’re in the loop, there is one really critically important rule,” his mom said, switching to the next slide.

DON’T FUCK IT UP, it read in massive bold letters. A low chuckle rumbled through the group.

“You laugh, but I’m dead serious,” Shane’s mom said. The laughter fell away, followed by a heavy silence. “You are literally holding Ilya’s safety and freedom in your hands, and both Shane and Ilya’s careers.”

She changed the slide again.

Tips for Not Fucking it Up:

- **Don’t tell anyone**
- **Pay attention to your surroundings**
- **Double-check photos and videos**
- **Delete incriminating communications**

“Do not. Tell. Anyone. Outside this room,” Shane’s mom said very slowly and carefully, like they were all... well, like they were hockey players with double digit concussions between them. “I cannot stress this enough. I don’t care how much you trust your friend or your mom or your partner. People talk. All it takes is one slip-up.”

Hayden raised his hand. “Can I tell Jackie?”

Shane’s mother gave him a look. “Were you listening?”

“I was, I swear!” Hayden protested, glancing over at Shane. “But Jackie’s your friend too, man. She cares about you. You know she’d keep the secret, and she’s way smarter than me. I’m sure she could help.”

“I’m fine with that,” Shane said, thinking of how awful and awkward dinners at Hayden’s would be if Hayden knew but Jackie didn’t. “Also, I don’t think you’re actually capable of keeping a secret from her anyway.”

“Fine,” Shane’s mom said. “But I’ll need to share the slide deck with her. And that brings up a good point; what should Jackie do with the slides once she’s done reading them?”

There was a long moment of silence. Svetlana and Rose looked at each other and sighed. Loudly.

“Obviously she should delete them permanently,” Svetlana said, glancing at the hockey boys from the corner of her eyes. “Come on, guys.”

“Correct,” Shane’s mom said, pointing to the last of the bullet points. “Data security is important. You’re going to be deleting any text messages or other communications that could out this relationship immediately after they’re read. People get hacked all the time and you are public figures. You should be doing this anyway for anything you don’t want to see posted on TMZ.”

Several of the guys shifted uncomfortably. Shane had absolutely no desire to know what they had in their phones.

Shane's mom looped back to the other two bullet points. "These other two points boil down to 'pay attention.' Be mindful of who's around you when you talk. Keep your voice down. And please, *please*, remember to check the backgrounds of any photos or videos you post online, including the audio. Look and listen carefully. You'd feel really awful if you accidentally posted a video with Shane and Ilya kissing in the background, wouldn't you?"

Several of the guys grimaced or went pale. Hayden looked absolutely ill, and Shane understood why. It was exactly the sort of dumbass mistake Hayden would make, especially while sleep deprived with a newborn in the house. Ilya reached over and put a hand on Shane's thigh, giving it a quick reassuring squeeze. Shane laid his hand over Ilya's and threaded their fingers together, ignoring Hayden's uncomfortable look. Shane's mom advanced to the next slide.

How You Can Help:

- **The locker room**
- **Social media**
- **New images**
- **Support the Foundation**
- **Be there as a friend**

"Now that I've hopefully scared the shit out of you, here are some ways you can help instead of hurt," Shane's mom said with a smile. "For the hockey players, help shut down homophobic bullshit in the locker room without implicating our guys. If anyone starts asking too many questions or getting suspicious, you redirect the conversation or create a distraction."

She pointed to the second and third bullet points. "Interact with Shane and Ilya on social media—in *friendly* ways please. It'll provide opportunities for Shane and Ilya to reinforce their new images: Shane less polished and more authentic, Ilya without his asshole shield up all the time."

Ilya's hand tensed in Shane's. He wasn't used to showing his real self to anyone but Shane and occasionally Svetlana. Not even the three teammates he'd trusted enough to invite to this gathering. Shane squeezed back, running his thumb over the side of Ilya's hand.

"What, are you telling us our fearsome captain is secretly a teddy bear?" Connors cooed.

"Shut your face, Conny," Ilya snapped.

Shane's mother hummed. "What a perfect example of an unhelpful interaction. Thank you, Connors."

Connors wilted in his chair, withering under the force that was Yuna Hollander's disappointment. Shane winced in sympathy. His mother clicked her tongue and moved on.

"We can't say much about this next point yet," she said, indicating the line about the Foundation. "But just know that Shane and Ilya are going to be starting up a charitable initiative called the Irina Foundation this year, and they'd love to have you all on board to support and volunteer if you're able."

That brought on a wave of intrigued muttering, but his mom pushed on to the last point.

"Finally, the thing I hope you'll do anyway: just be a decent friend. This whole situation is really hard on Shane and Ilya, and frankly, it sucks," she said. "Sometimes they'll need to talk about it so they don't explode and do something stupid. Be there for them."

"We got your back, Roz," St-Simon said, slapping a hand over his heart.

JJ held up a fist. "Always here for you, mon capitaine!"

Shane's mother finally looked satisfied. She advanced to her final slide, which simply read: **Any questions?** And, because she was a little bit of an asshole (like mother, like son), there was an embedded video compilation of Shane scoring on Boston.

Everyone was too overwhelmed for further questions and desperately in need of fresh beer and tacos to help process the whole thing, so the meeting adjourned. Hayden avoided Shane's gaze and went straight for the fridge, but JJ at least stopped off to give him a back-slapping hug.

"I'm happy for you, mon ami," he said. "It's weird as fuck that it's Rozanov, but who cares what I think? As long as you're happy."

"I am," Shane said, watching Ilya accept hugs and fist bumps from his teammates with a smile. "Never been happier, actually."

"Well, that's all I need to hear," JJ said. "Now, tacos!"

Shane managed to pull his mom over before she could be absorbed into the flurry of dinner chaos, giving her a hug.

"I love you, Mom. Thank you for doing all this," he said into her hair, then stepped back to take Ilya's hand. "We really appreciate it. The plan, everything."

His mother pressed her lips together and shook her head. "Oh, Shane. This is just the best way I know how to apologize. Words can only do so much, you know?"

Shane furrowed his brow. "Apologize?"

Her face crumpled like she was going to cry. She blinked up at the ceiling for a moment, then looked back down at Shane. “I didn’t help you feel safe enough to come out to me. I’m supposed to be your ultimate safe person in the world and I failed in that. I made you feel like who you were as a role model and hockey player was more important than who you are as my son. That’s a pretty bad fuck up. And I’m sorry.”

“Mom, you already apolo—”

“No, let me finish, please. You could have been happier and freer if I’d made you feel safe before. I can’t change the past, but I can make it possible for you to be safe and happy and free *now*. So that’s what I want to do, if it’s okay with you. But you tell me if I’m ever overstepping, okay?”

“Mom, no,” Shane began, looking over at Ilya to make sure he agreed. Ilya met his gaze, then took a step closer to his mom, a hand half-raised as if unsure a hug would be welcome.

“Yuna, please, I am so grateful for all you are doing. It’s a lot, but we need it. This plan is... the old plan wasn’t...” Ilya paused and regrouped. “I think trying to hide for ten years would have killed me,” he finally said.

“Me, too,” Shane agreed. “Thank you, Mom. For the plan *and*... the apology.”

“Oh, my boys,” she said, gathering them both close. Shane wrapped one arm around his mom and the other around Ilya, holding them both for a long moment. When they all separated, there were red-rimmed eyes all around.

“Okay,” his mom said, running a perfunctory finger below her eye to wipe away the moisture gathered there. “Let’s go get some tacos before your teammates eat them all.”

The friendship hard launch began with a photo. Rose and Svetlana had glanced out the wall-to-wall windows of the cottage as everyone was finishing off dinner, looked at each other in a bizarre telepathic moment, and exclaimed in unison: “Golden hour!”

Ilya had no idea what the fuck “golden hour” was, but he let himself be herded out the door along with everyone else. Beside him, Shane shrugged, apparently just as confused as he was. It quickly became clear that “golden hour” was some kind of code word for taking a photo.

They both allowed themselves to be yanked around and rearranged, first next to each other, then on opposite sides of the group, then carefully apart but not *too* far apart. Boston and Montreal players were intermingled rather than separated by loyalties at Yuna’s behest, and Rose and Svetlana were carefully placed next to each other between Shane and Ilya. Once Yuna, Rose, and Svetlana were happy with the state of affairs, Yuna took about two dozen photos, with David

smiling and providing gentle heckling beside her. After much conferring with Rose and Svetlana, Yuna presented Ilya and Shane with the undisputed best photo to be shared on Instagram.

“Okay, attention really quick, everyone!” Yuna called out. “I’m about to post the photo on Shane’s instagram, and I’m tagging all of you. Everyone please share it sometime this weekend! Ilya, I’ll text the photos to you so you can make your own post. Anyone else who wants it, come give me your number.”

Ilya pulled out his phone and opened Instagram, navigating to Shane’s profile. There, right at the top left of the grid, the new photo appeared.

Good times with good friends, the caption read. In the photo, everyone looked *great*. Highlighted by golden sunset, arms wrapped around each other, grinning like they all were, in fact, the best of friends rather than a newly-introduced group united by one powerful secret. He double-tapped the photo to like it, then flipped over to his text messages, saved the photo Yuna had sent him, and created his own post. He kept the caption simple:

Summer ☀

He hit ‘post’ and closed the app with a small smile on his face. It was only a tiny thing, but it still felt *important*. The world knew he and Shane Hollander were more than just rivals. They existed together outside the ice, and Ilya’s heart gave a thrill of excitement that couldn’t be contained. He reached for Shane, drew him into his arms and, for the first time in front of all their friends, captured his mouth in a deep, hungry kiss. He half-expected Shane to pull away or temper the kiss into something more suitable for public viewing, but all he did was throw his arms around Ilya’s neck and give as good as he got, grabbing handfuls of Ilya’s curls and holding on for dear life. Cheers and whoops went up around them as they broke apart, grinning at each other and pressing their foreheads together.

“Those photos had better go in a locked and encrypted app, Rose,” Yuna called out. Ilya glanced over and caught Rose with a guilty grin.

“Trust me, I am a master of phone security,” Rose swore with a hand over her heart. “If anyone needs a tutorial on how *not* to have your nudes leaked, I’m here for you.”

Ilya looked to Shane with raised eyebrows, intrigued. Maybe there was a way for them to keep photos of each other after all. It would certainly make the distance easier. Even being only two hours apart, their schedules would still make it impossible to see each other as often as they’d like.

“Okay, everyone, we’re off!” Yuna called out, waving to the group. “Take photos tonight and post them to your Instagram stories, okay? And what are you going to do before you post them?”

“Check the background!” Marly and JJ called out in unison, exchanging a fist bump after.

“Yes, very good, boys,” Yuna said. “Hayden and JJ, just come on by whenever you’re done here. Your guest rooms are all made up on the bottom floor. Make yourselves at home.”

“Good night, all,” David called, raising a hand in farewell. Shane and Ilya walked them to their car and gave hugs, then split up, Ilya to entertain the group and Shane to build a fire in the firepit.

Shane sank into his task with relief, glad to have a brief break from the chaos of their seven remaining guests. He was mired in a soup of conflicting desires and emotions. He felt exposed and vulnerable and wanted to hide in their bedroom away from the world. He wanted to hang all over Ilya and bite his neck. He wanted to make out with Ilya in front of everyone until they all got sick of watching it. He wanted to hold Ilya in his lap in front of the firepit and let everyone see how soft he could be.

He piled up some torn up cardboard and twigs in the middle of the pit, then made a cone of different-sized logs around it, taking his time to carefully balance each one. Just as he was placing the final logs, hesitant footsteps approached, and he looked up to see Svetlana approaching, empty wine glass dangling from one hand.

“Hey, Svetlana. There’s another unopened bottle in the fridge, still, I think,” Shane said without looking away from his task, his jaw tense.

“Please, call me Sveta,” she said, taking a seat near him and crossing her legs. After a moment, she sighed. “I’m sorry Ilyusha is such a dumbass. I promise I am no threat to you and never have been. I would never marry him, not even for a green card, knowing that he has you.”

Shane shook his head, trying to swallow away the tightness in his throat. “Yeah, no, I know you guys have... history, and it’s none of my business. It’s fine.”

“It’s clearly not fine, Shane,” she said, her tone wry. “But I would like to be friends, and not just because you’re my favorite hockey player. Ilyusha would like that, too. We are the two most important people in his life. I think it would mean a lot to him.”

Shane nodded. He knew she was right, and he wanted to be able to give Ilya that. And he really, truly did not have a problem with Svetlana herself. If only he could get *I could marry Svetlana* out of his brain, the rest of it really *would* be fine.

“It might take a minute,” Shane said as he stuck the grill lighter inside his tent of logs and lit the kindling. “But I promise I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask,” Sveta said. “Now, let me tell you everything that was wrong with Montreal’s power play this season.”

By the time Ilya and the rest of their friends meandered over, drawn in by the light of Shane's successfully crackling fire, he and Sveta were deep in it, having moved on from the power play to an in-depth analysis of Montreal's defensive pairings. Ilya looked positively delighted by the development, and he happily sprawled across the outdoor couch to put his head in Shane's lap while others were forced to pull up chairs from inside. Shane buried his fingers in Ilya's hair and scratched slowly at his scalp, smiling faintly at Ilya's pleased hum. Hayden darted a look over at them, then quickly went back to his conversation with Connors and St-Simon. Rose, Cliff, and JJ were all laughing uproariously at something as they joined the group, Rose easily knocking her hip into Sveta's to nudge her aside so they could share a seat. It was nice, seeing their friend groups mingling so easily; even Hayden seemed to be comfortable enough. The alcohol flowed, and the conversations got more and more comfortable.

Too comfortable, actually.

"So, Hollander, what's it like being gay?" Marleau called across the fire, leaning forward as if eager for the answer. Shane nearly spat out his drink, utterly thrown.

"I... have no idea how to answer that," Shane said, glancing down at Ilya like *what the fuck?* "Pretty sure it's like being straight only I think about dick instead." He paused, then added: "Also, I'm terrified of people finding out all the time, so I guess that's... different."

Cliff nodded. "Sure, sure. But like, you've been with women, so uh... how was that?"

"Not great," Shane said flatly. "Rose, don't say a fucking word."

"I would never!" Rose protested, one hand held up in an oath. "Our bond as gay and bestie is sacred. Though I have always wondered..."

"Oh, god," Shane groaned. Ilya sat up from Shane's lap, scenting blood in the water.

Rose continued. "There was this one time when I was giving you head and..."

"Rose, *please*," Shane begged.

"And I'll just say it was *different* that time," she continued. "Were you thinking about Ilya?"

Shane launched to his feet. "I am going to walk into the lake."

"Nooo, please, Shane," Ilya said, grabbing him by the hand and holding him back. "I want to know, too."

"Of course you do, you jealous freak," Shane said, letting himself be drawn back in. He wanted desperately to climb into Ilya's lap. Then, he remembered he *could*. Everyone knew. Also, he'd had a few beers. Without another thought, he planted his knees on the outdoor couch on either side of Ilya and sat on his thighs, wrapping his arms around Ilya's neck as he turned back to Rose.

“Yes, obviously I was thinking of him. I hate you.” He planted a fierce, closed-mouth kiss on Ilya’s lips, then drew back. “And I hate you, too.”

Ilya snorted. “It’s just funny to hear how bad you are with women because you are so fucking good with me.”

“Yeah, get it, capitaine! We knew you had it in you!” JJ whooped.

“Well, it really helps to actually be attracted to the person you’re fucking,” Shane grumbled. “No offense, Rose.”

“None taken, my friend,” Rose chirped. “I know I’m not packing what I need to keep a gay man satisfied. Especially not from what I’ve heard about Ilya’s—”

“ROSE,” Shane snapped, mortified. The entire group burst into laughter, none more so than Ilya, who buried his face in Shane’s shoulder as he shook.

“I love you,” Ilya said into Shane’s neck, then pulled back to say it again. “I love you so fucking much.”

“God fucking help me, but I love you, too,” Shane replied, and kissed him again.

Later, around midnight, Ilya sat back and laughed as JJ hauled a nearly delirious Hayden off to Shane’s parent’s cottage, the newborn-induced sleep deprivation just too much to handle when combined with a few beers. Everyone else opened fresh bottles and continued their conversations, blending as if they’d all been friends the whole time. It made something in Ilya’s chest twist and ache to see Shane laughing with his Boston boys, comfortable and a little tipsy and more relaxed than he’d been all day. Shane was a clingy drunk, and he alternately sat on Ilya’s lap, plastered himself to Ilya’s side, and sat on the ground between Ilya’s legs throughout the night.

Ilya loved every second of it. And soon, if he was able to make the move to Ottawa, he could have more of it than he’d ever dreamed would be possible.

It wasn’t until things finally began to wind down that Ilya realized he hadn’t looked at his phone at all since posting the photo. People were probably losing their minds and writing thinkpieces calling them all traitors by now. He unlocked the phone, intending to check his instagram notifications, and instead saw a missed call from Farah and a little red (1) on his email app. He opened it and saw a new email from Farah sitting right at the top of his inbox.

Ilya,

Attached you’ll find the approved trade to Ottawa as well as Boston’s offer for you to re-sign. Sorry it took longer than anticipated. Cottage season, you know,

had to chase a few people down. Please call me at your earliest convenience so we can go over the details together. Congrats!

*All my best,
Farah*

The Ottawa trade. He got the Ottawa trade.

And the Boston offer.

His gaze slid over to where Shane stood chatting with Marleau, St-Simon, and Connors, all of them laughing over something he'd missed. Marleau threw his arm around Shane, who ducked his head shyly, shaking his head at whatever dumb thing had been said. They were such good guys, all of them. Good teammates. Good friends. He'd miss them.

Ilya clicked his phone off, slid it back into his pocket, and sat back to enjoy the company of his Boston brothers, probably for the last time in a long while.

There would be plenty of time to talk to Shane about the email tomorrow.

Chapter 4: Sunrise and sunset

Chapter Summary

Honest communication? In *my* gay hockey fic? It's more likely than you think.

Chapter Notes

There's a lengthy end note explaining Shane's contract situation for those who are curious!

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

Rose wished she could look at the objectively beautiful sunrise out her bedroom's sliding glass door and feel something like awe or wonder or gratitude at the colors staining the sky like spilled paints. Instead, all she could think was: *ugh, so fucking early.*

She could tell there would be no getting back to sleep, though. Her body was ready to get up and move, the fucking traitor, and so she rolled out of Shane's deliciously comfortable guest bed and dragged on a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie. If she was going to be up at—god, not even five in the morning yet—she was going to go outside and look at the *fucking sunrise* and pretend she was a person who could appreciate it without coffee in her system.

Rose stuck her feet in her sneakers without bothering to tie them, squashing down the backs of them so they were more like slippers, and slid open the door leading out to the lake. It wasn't until she was already outside and shuffling toward the dock that she realized she wasn't the only one awake. Smoke curled from one of the adirondack chairs facing the water, and she could just make out a head of curls sticking up over the back. Interesting, and not at all the person she would have expected to be awake at this hour. She headed down and flopped into the chair beside Ilya.

"If I ask to bum a cigarette, will you promise not to tell Shane?" Rose asked in place of a greeting.

Ilya huffed a laugh. "Oh, keeping secrets from your 'bestie' now, are you? For shame, Rose Landry."

"Oh stop," she said, gratefully accepting the pack and lighter when he held them out. "I have one like every few weeks."

“Same for me, but it does not prevent the lectures,” Ilya replied, though he looked fond rather than annoyed about it. Rose took out a cigarette and lit it, then handed everything back, curling up in the chair with her knees to her chest as she took her first drag. Ah, *perfect*.

“What are you doing up?” Ilya asked, keeping his eyes fixed on the rising sun.

Rose shot him an exhausted look. “My sleep schedule is completely fucked from filming in England. My body never has any idea what time zone it’s in anymore. What about you?”

Ilya took a long drag from his cigarette and blew out a stream of smoke before answering simply: “Thinking.”

“About your grand plan?”

“Yes,” he said after a long beat.

Rose huffed in annoyance; no wonder it had taken these boys seven years to figure out their shit. Getting either of them to say anything real was like pulling teeth.

“What part of it are you stuck on?” she prompted again, tapping her cigarette over Shane’s resentfully supplied ashtray.

Ilya was quiet for so long Rose thought he wasn’t going to answer at all, but finally, he spoke. “The plan is for me to trade to Ottawa before the new season. To be closer to Shane and get Canadian residency.”

“And you’re hesitating,” Rose guessed.

Ilya shook his head. “Not exactly.”

Rose wanted to *growl*. Pulling. Teeth.

“Is it that you’re wanting Shane to move instead so you can stay in Boston?” she suggested.

“No, no, is nothing like that, and his contract makes it impossible anyway,” Ilya said, the tip of his cigarette glowing as he waved his hand. “I really do want Canadian citizenship. U.S. is not so good for Russians right now.” He paused, then added: “Also, after how their election went, maybe not as good for queer people anymore, either.”

“Totally fair,” Rose said, lip curled. “So, what’s worrying you, then?”

For the first time, Ilya looked over at Rose, studying her for a long moment.

“I am worried Shane will change his mind about me,” he finally said, looking away again. “Or that this will hurt his career and he will hate me for it.”

Rose grimaced. “Ouch. For what it’s worth, I don’t think Shane could ever hate you. That man is more in love than I’ve ever seen anyone in my entire life. But...

he's hurt you before, I guess."

Ilya tilted his head to the side in acknowledgement. "Yes, but he knows he is gay now. Things are different. Besides, I've hurt him, too. There are, ah... no saints in this relationship."

"I can see how such a big move would be scary, though," Rose offered. "You're really taking on the majority of the risk by changing teams."

Ilya tipped his head back and forth. "Mm, yes and no. I have been wanting to move to Canada for new passport anyway. That part was my idea first. Even if Shane leaves me, I will still get that eventually, like I want. But..."

"But uprooting your entire life is huge, and you love your Boston friends," Rose said, nodding. "I feel you."

"It is not even about that. I think..." Ilya trailed off, taking a drag and ashing his cigarette before continuing. "I am not afraid to leave Boston. Making the decision to ask for the trade was easy. I can miss my boys and still think leaving is right. I think I am just afraid about Shane. I need to get over it."

Rose snorted. This man.

"Yeah, I actually don't think that's the move here at all," she said. "I don't think there's any way around you using words and talking to Shane about this. Your relationship is new to being an actual relationship and you're going to have to get used to talking about hard things like this, especially with something so big on the table. Let him reassure you. It'll do much more for you than giving yourself lung cancer at five A.M."

"I thought we were skipping smoking lecture," Ilya said, a smile curling at the corner of his mouth.

Rose grinned. "What can I say, the spirit of Shane possessed me for a moment. I'll get an exorcism and we can smoke another one."

Ilya stabbed his cigarette out in the tray and shook his head, pushing up to stand. "No, I think I'm done. You want coffee? Come on, I'll make it."

"Good, because I have no idea how to use that coffee contraption in there," Rose said, following suit. Ilya snorted.

"You want to know a secret? Neither does Shane," he said, leading the way back up to the house. "He bought it a week ago because was recommended on some list of best coffee makers and he still hasn't figured it out. He just suspiciously waits to have his coffee until after I have already made it."

"That little shit," Rose said, giggling as she followed Ilya up the hill toward the house, thinking for the first time that she was glad she'd gotten up early.

It took Ilya until the next day to tell Shane about the trade offer coming through. He knew he should have done it as soon as all the guests were out of their house, but Shane was so socially drained and exhausted that Ilya didn't want to make it worse. Then, after a day had gone by, it felt awkward that he'd not said anything yet. The awkwardness made him avoid it even more. Finally, while flipping through the team choice screen during a morning game of Chel, Shane gave him the perfect opening.

"Have you heard anything from Farah yet?" he asked, guileless.

Ilya set down his controller and wiped his suddenly damp palms on his shorts, propping his forearms on his knees.

"Ah, yes, actually," he admitted. "I heard about the trade."

Shane whipped around, practically throwing his controller onto the coffee table. "What the fuck, Ilya? What did she say?"

He'd fucked up. No doubt. Best to just get it out there.

"I actually got an email with the trade approval during our party," he said with a wince. This was going to be bad. "I'm sorry I did not tell you."

Shane went still. Then, as if coming back to life, he slowly scooted away from Ilya and tucked himself up against the arm of the couch, folding his arms protectively over his chest.

"Okay. That... scares me, Ilya. Why didn't you say anything? Do you not want to go to Ottawa? Because you don't have to. Not this year, not at all. If you want to stay in Boston, I promise it's fine, you just have to *tell* me, I don't want you to —"

Shane's words sped, and his eyes went shiny, much like they did during the *I could marry Svetlana* conversation. Ilya's stomach gave a sharp twist. *Fuck*, he was fucking this up already. They'd barely been together for three weeks and he was fucking things up *already*.

"No. Listen. I *do* want to go to Ottawa. I promise," he cut in, insistent.

Shane's nose wrinkled as he sniffed. "It's okay if you don't. I know this whole plan is asking a lot from you. Too much, probably. You're giving up Russia and Boston, and I'm giving up basically nothing. I know it's not fair."

Ilya pinched the bridge of his nose. "Shane, no. This is the only time you will ever hear me say these words, so listen, yes? *This is not a competition.*"

Shane opened his mouth to argue, so Ilya rushed on before he could have the chance.

"These are all things I want for myself," Ilya said. "I *want* to cut ties with Russia. I *want* Canadian citizenship instead of American. I *want* a trade to make that

happen. It's a lot of change, and it will be hard, but the idea of ever having to go back to Russia... it makes me feel like I cannot *breathe*. I told you this before when I was in Russia, but you couldn't understand me. I fucking hate it there. I will still miss things about it, but I will not miss who I am there or what it does to me. Canada is the right choice for *me*. And on top of it all, *you* are the right choice for me. I am doing what is practical for the situation, and also what will make me happiest."

Shane stared off at some point over Ilya's shoulder, nodding along hesitantly. "Then... why?"

Ilya pressed his lips together, remembered Rose's words from the previous morning, and forced himself to say it plainly.

"I am... scared that you will realize being with me is too difficult, or not worth it," Ilya admitted, staring down at his knees because it was easier than looking Shane in the eye. "Or that we will go through with this plan, and it will go badly with the league, and you will wish you had never done it."

"Hey, no," Shane said, unfurling from his defensive position and sticking out a socked foot to rest against Ilya's thigh. "I won't lie, I'm terrified about the league part of it. It's the worst part of this whole thing. But so long as I have you at the end, I could *never* regret it."

Ilya leaned back, letting his hand dangle listlessly off the arm of the couch. "How do you know?"

It was Shane's turn to look uncomfortable. "So, uh... my mom sent me a list of therapists after we made our plan. And she really encouraged me to make an appointment right away because this is all going to move so fast. So, I had my first appointment the day before everyone got here. When I told you I had a brand meeting and locked myself in the guest bedroom with my laptop, it was actually a therapy appointment. I'm sorry I lied. I just felt weird about it."

Ilya nodded. He would have felt weird about it, too. Probably would have done the same thing.

"Wow. We really suck at this talking thing," he said, his lips twisting in a wry smile.

Shane laughed and nodded. "We really do."

Ilya reached down and gave Shane's ankle a quick squeeze.

"So, how was it?" he asked carefully. "The therapy?"

Shane shrugged. "It was okay. Good, I guess. The guy was a minor league baseball player for a while so he kinda gets it. We didn't get very far, it was only an hour, but I've been thinking a lot about what we talked about."

Shane paused, then unexpectedly grinned. "After our basic introduction stuff, he started us off by saying 'Shane, I wanted you to tell me everything that pisses you off about being gay while playing professional hockey.' And it was like this

massive *monster* rose up in my chest, and I thought, ‘oh, shit, here we go.’ And I just went *off*.”

“Fuck,” Ilya said.

“Fuck,” Shane agreed. “It was a lot. It made me realize just how fucking exhausting it is having to hide being gay. And nowhere is worse than the locker room. If I didn’t have to keep up that performance all the time... like, how good could I be at hockey if I wasn’t carrying that?”

Ilya had never thought about it like that before, but Shane was right, and it made Ilya immediately think of Russia. How much lighter would he feel once he had his permanent residency? How much lighter, still, when he could come out as bisexual? When he could openly be with Shane? The awareness of the weight stole his breath, and he was suddenly desperate for the plan to accelerate, to get to the Cens and get his PR application going *now*.

Shane continued. “But here’s one of the things that I’ve been thinking about: Matt, my therapist, really emphasized at the end of the appointment that I had to want to come out for myself, not just for the plan or for you. And I think I do.” Shane gave one single, sharp laugh. “I’m so tired of fighting it. I’m tired of fighting the room. So, I know I won’t regret it, because it’s for me, too, if that makes sense.”

“It does,” Ilya said, then took up a teasing tone to break a bit of the tension. “One therapy session and you are already Mr. Wise, Mr. Insightful, Mr.—”

“Shut *up*,” Shane said, chucking a throw pillow at him. “There’s still plenty of bullshit to work through, believe me, it’s a mess in there,” he said, tapping his temple. “Apparently I have a lot of ‘internalized homophobia’ or whatever. It’s just that I’ve never let myself think about any of this before. I spent so long shoving it all down that I’ve never actually considered any of it. And now that Matt broke the seal, I’m thinking about it all the fucking time.”

Shane’s mouth twisted with sudden fury. “Sometimes I really *hate* being gay.”

Ilya’s heart dropped, but Shane rushed on, clarifying.

“Not the sex obviously, the sex is great, and loving you is the best thing I’ve ever felt in my life,” he said, nudging Ilya’s thigh twice with his foot. “So, I guess maybe it’s not that I hate being gay, I just hate all the baggage that comes with it. The way the world treats us. The way it complicates everything. Having to come out. All of *that*. It’s bullshit.”

“Total bullshit,” Ilya agreed. He took a few breaths while he thought through everything Shane had said and realized he still had one big, lingering fear. Fighting down the voice in his head that called him *needy* and *pathetic*, he met Shane’s gaze. “That is all about coming out as gay, though. What about coming out as... with me? That will be its own whole shitshow.”

“And the worse of the two, for sure,” Shane admitted. He scooted closer and grabbed Ilya’s hand in both of his, running his thumbs over the back of it. “A life

with you is the reward at the end of all this, though. It's what I want. Is it still what you want?"

"Of course," Ilya said instantly. "Fuck the league. Yuna said they cannot keep us from playing. The rest is just noise."

"Yeah. Noise." Shane's thumbs continued their soothing pattern on Ilya's hand as he seemed to absorb the words. "Not gonna lie, I'm still fucking terrified. But by the time we get there, we'll have this whole plan supporting us. The narrative around us will be completely different. And I will have been to a *lot* more therapy by then, so. There's that."

Shane rested his forehead on Ilya's shoulder, then pressed a kiss there before speaking again. "So... are you going to call Farah and take the Ottawa trade?"

Ilya ducked down to kiss Shane, slipping his tongue in and taking his time. When they broke apart, his voice was sure.

"Yes. I am taking Ottawa trade," he said, then admitted: "I did not even open the offer Boston sent me."

Shane leaned away, brows furrowed. "I guess I should have expected that they'd send an offer. Obviously. Did they really fight to get you to stay?"

Ilya grimaced. "Yes. In meeting they promised to give me everything I could possibly ask for, highest paid player in the league, all that. I said I would hear them out, but... I do not want to. The best thing I can do for *myself* is to be closer to you and get the fuck away from Russia. That is what I want, and now I get you a whole year earlier than we planned. I wish I had known last season was my last with Boston, and it's sad, but it doesn't change my mind. And I am sorry I did not tell you about what they said."

Shane chuckled and shook his head. "We really gotta get better at this talking thing."

"That is what Rose said when I talked to her yesterday morning," Ilya said. "I guess she is pretty okay."

Shane smiled. "I knew you guys would get along."

"Impossible," Ilya grumbled, forever committed to the bit.

Shane rubbed a thumb over Ilya's cheekbone, considering. "Have you talked to Sveta about all of this?"

Ilya's eyebrows went up. "No. Why?"

Shane shrugged. "She's your best friend, right? I thought you might want to talk it out with her."

Ilya shook his head. "I have not mentioned anything. She will have hockey-related opinions that I do not really want to hear, because this is not a hockey decision for me. Do not be too horrified, but for me, hockey comes second to all

the rest of this. I like hockey, and I like to win, but you *love* hockey. We are not the same.”

Ilya hesitated, then added: “I thought you did not really like Sveta.”

“What?” Shane furrowed his brow. “No, she’s really cool, I absolutely see why you guys are best friends.”

Ilya stared at him for a long moment. “You really don’t hate her? Even though...”

“No, of course not.” Shane grabbed Ilya’s shoulder and gave him a shake. “I was a little uncomfortable at first, but I was never mad at *her*, I was mad at *you* for wanting to marry her instead of me. That’s not her fault.”

“You are right, I am an idiot. I will only ever marry you,” Ilya said, the last words a low growl. He grabbed Shane’s chin and licked into his mouth, drawing out a groan and luring Shane into his lap. Shane braced one hand against the back of the couch and the other back on Ilya’s upper thigh, his thumb dipping along his inseam. Ilya grabbed a handful of Shane’s ass and hauled him closer, Shane’s muffled groan lighting a spark low inside him.

“This is what always happens,” Shane breathed as he ground down against Ilya’s growing hardness. “We fuck instead of talking.”

“Fucking *and* talking from now on, promise,” Ilya said. “Why choose?”

Later, sated, showered, relaxed, and sprawled on the couch with the remnants of lunch on the coffee table in front of them, Ilya and Shane managed more of the talking-instead-of-fucking thing.

“I think I want to come out to the team before the regular season starts,” Shane began out of nowhere. “After the roster is set.”

Ilya had Shane cradled between his legs, Shane’s back against his chest. One of his arms was slung low across Shane’s stomach and the other hand splayed over Shane’s collar bones, his thumb doing a slow sweep. Ilya hummed to show he’d heard as he thought about it.

“That is soon,” he said eventually. “You think you will be ready?”

Shane shrugged, the motion felt against Ilya’s chest more than seen. “I will have had like two months of therapy by then to work up to it, so... I guess I hope so? Is that how therapy works? I have no idea.”

“Me either. Therapy is not really a thing in Russia. It exists, obviously, but there is... I don’t remember the word, people don’t like you for it?”

“A stigma?”

“Fuck, that one’s the same in Russian. Whatever. Yes, stigma.” Ilya’s mind briefly wandered to a dark corner where he wondered how his life might be different if his mother had been able to have therapy, but he wrenched himself away from it and turned the discussion back to Shane. “So, why then for coming out?”

Shane splayed his hands over Ilya’s and threaded their fingers together. “I don’t want to distract the team during the regular season by dropping a bomb on them. Doing it at the end of preseason gives the guys a couple days to get used to it and get over any issues before they can affect us during games that actually matter. I could wait longer to make myself more comfortable, but what if it affects us on the ice? I think I’d hate myself for it.”

“It would not be your fault,” Ilya countered.

“Everyone would think it was,” Shane replied. “It would *feel* like it was. Anyway, if I have a choice to *not* do that, it feels like I should take it.”

Of course Shane had thought it through in painful detail. Still, Ilya couldn’t help but ask: “What if they are bad?”

Shane sighed. “I don’t know. I deal with it, I guess. My mom seems confident that her new media training she wants to do is going to somehow help me keep the guys in line. I don’t have the heart to tell her that it’s probably not going to be that simple.”

Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of Shane’s head, privately agreeing with him. It was hard for anyone who didn’t spend their daily existence in that kind of environment to truly understand how it functioned.

“Maybe not,” Ilya conceded. “But it could help, at least a little. Locker room is all about confidence. If you have planned ahead of time how you will react in different situations, maybe you will feel more like you can be confident in the moment. You show them you will not accept their shit, maybe they don’t give you shit.”

“Maybe,” Shane said, letting go of Ilya just long enough to shove the tip of a hoodie string in his mouth. “I guess if it’s really bad I can try the same thing as you, waiving my no movement clause for Ottawa, but I won’t have the threat of free agency to lean on like you did. I’m under contract until summer 2021. I really wish now that I hadn’t signed for eight years, just so I wouldn’t feel trapped.”

“And Ottawa may not have resources for two really big trades in one year,” Ilya added. “But you don’t want to leave Montreal anyway.”

Shane sat up and turned around in Ilya’s arms, his expression pinched. “Is that... bad? I always dreamed of retiring there, jersey in the rafters and all that. But playing with you is a different sort of dream. Maybe I should be trying to make that happen no matter how coming out goes.”

Shane lifted a hand to the side of Ilya's neck, then let it drag down over his collarbone, his pec, his ribs. "I wish I could have both, but I know I can't. And in the end, it may not be up to me anyway. Montreal may decide they can't handle having a gay captain."

Ilya captured Shane's wandering hand and brought it to his mouth, pressing a kiss to his palm. "My mother always used to warn me not to borrow trouble from tomorrow."

Shane's mouth twisted into a sad little smile. "Yeah. She's right. Hard not to, though."

"Hard not to," Ilya agreed. As much as playing on the same team as Shane sounded like a dream, it wasn't realistic at the moment. He had two more years under contract before he'd be in a good position to negotiate a trade to Ottawa. They could revisit it then. Who knew what their lives would look like in two years?

Shane's phone lit up on the coffee table, chiming an insistent alarm. He leaned over to silence it, swearing at the time.

"We have that meeting about the foundation with my mom in like twenty minutes. We should get going," he said.

Ilya groaned as Shane pulled away and stood, but internally, he was pleased. Another chance to see the Hollanders. Another chance to build something new with Shane, something the whole world would see. Another chance to eat David's cooking.

What was not to like?

The Ones Who Know

Ilya

Attention plz i have very important announcement

Saint

Here cap

Sveta

Always so dramatic

Marly

Reporting for duty

14th Best

If this is a sex thing i fucking swear man

Conny

Should i be worried

Rose Landry

I am stuck in a makeup chair please entertain me

JJ

Ngl very fuckin curious

Jane

Ilya, just say it.

Ilya

Yes yes I am getting there

You all know that step 1 of the plan is to deal with my citizenship issue and
Russia

I want you all to hear from me before it hits the news

I requested a trade to Ottawa

And it was accepted

Marly

WHAT

Conny

THE FUCK

Saint

Cap noooooooooo

Ilya

I know boys

Is sad

But for me is also very happy

I will get canadian residency in less than a year

And then no matter what happens I can legally stay

And I will only be 2 hrs from shane and his dick

Was my idea to move to canada, my choice

So don't be mad at him

Marly

Fuck, man. This sucks.

Marly

I mean I guess I'm happy you got what you wanted tho

Saint

Yeah i guess we should say congrats?

Conny

Yeah. Gonna miss you like fuck tho cap

Rose Landry

So happy for you Ilya

What you're doing is really brave

Can't wait for you to be safe

JJ

And for capitaine's hometown to have a team worth cheering for again!

Jane

Ouch.

Ilya

You've been awfully quiet Sveta

Sveta

I am processing

Ottawa is... a choice

Ilya

I have turned one rebuilding team around and gotten them a cup

I will do it again

Sveta

If anyone can do it it's you, darling

You're right

I can't wait for you to be safe

You renewed your passport recently?

Ilya

Two years ago, have 8 more years

Will be canadian citizen by then

Marly

You gonna tell the rest of the boys too?

Ilya

Yes right now

I will tell them it will all make sense in a year or 2

Act surprised

Marly

You got it

Saint

Will do

Conny

Yes cap

14th Best

Fuck this means we're gonna have to have you over for dinner aren't we

Rose Landry

Hayden I say this with all the love in the world

You genuinely suck sometimes

Conny

Ouch man

JJ

Burned by THEE ROSE LANDRY

Marly

I'd be doing some real fuckin soul searching right now

Jane

Let me know if you need a list of local therapists.

JJ

I'll drop off some aloe on your doorstep

14th Best

Genuinely, fuck all of you

The rest of the summer was swiftly consumed by logistics, and Ilya tried not to mourn the loss of calm days at the cottage too badly. The sheer amount of

meetings was staggering: with Yuna to get the Irina Foundation legally established, with the Centaurs to sign paperwork and do his introductory press conference, with various brand partners for photoshoots (Shane), with an Ottawa-based realtor to find a new place (Ilya), and to do the English test and medical exam required for the Express Entry application (Ilya again). The fiercely organized immigration consultant Yuna had hired also had her own long list of tasks and paperwork to be completed, which Ilya tackled with a focused diligence. The motivation to get the residency thing moving was *strong*.

Somewhere among all that, Ilya flew back to Boston to pack a few things and say a fond goodbye to his Boston boys, though he planned to leave most things for the movers. Svetlana had agreed to oversee the sale of several of his cars, and he arranged shipping for the ones he was keeping. All this on top of the start of off-season conditioning, which Shane and Ilya at least managed to do together in Ottawa as the hockey world reeled over Ilya's trade and Boston fans thirsted for his blood.

It was chaotic, and it left Ilya's head spinning. And yet, he still found time to stoke the friendship hard launch flames. Sports media, with the dearth of other hockey news in the post-free agency off-season, had clung to the story of Shane and Ilya's friendship with a strange sort of fervor. Thinkpieces about the "death of the rivalry" abounded, with much handwringing about what it meant for the upcoming season and the league as a whole, especially in light of the trade to Shane's hometown. It was all very dramatic, and Ilya liked it maybe more than he should. So, of course, he fed the beast.

Ilya Rozanov is now live!

[Ilya grins at the camera, swinging around to catch Shane and Svetlana in the shot, too. They're leaning against a kitchen island, deep in conversation.]

Ilya: Hello, internet! Welcome to my new house in Ottawa! Did you know you barely need a real estate agent at all when you have Shane Hollander around? He is Mr. Real Estate, he knows *everything* about—

Shane: Ilya, don't start.

[Svetlana giggles in the background. Ilya widens his eyes in an innocent expression.]

Ilya: What? The internet should know you're good for more than just hockey.

Shane: No one cares about me if it's not about hockey.

Svetlana: Wow, that was bleak.

Shane: That's not what I—

[Ilya clutched his heart and put on a distraught expression.]

Ilya: Shane, no, you love more than just playing hockey!

Shane: I meant that—

Ilya: You also love books about hockey, and podcasts about hockey, and going to your fancy cottage... with a practice rink to play hockey, of course, but—

Shane: You're such an asshole.

Ilya: You wouldn't have me any other way.

Svetlana: Are you sure about that?

[Ilya waves a hand dismissively.]

Ilya: *Anyway*, Ottawa people, tell me all your favorite things here that Shane Hollander is too boring to know about!

[Shane thunks his head down on the kitchen island three times. When he speaks next, his voice is muffled.]

Shane: Why do I put up with you?

Ilya: Because you love me *so much*, of course. Don't forget to give me those recommendations, Ottawa people! I'm so happy to be here! Goodbye!

[The livestream ends. It is saved to Ilya's Instagram grid.]

Before long, Ilya and Shane found themselves preparing to separate once again, Shane to Montreal and Ilya to his new house in Ottawa, though at least Ilya felt like he could reach across the distance and touch Shane in a way he couldn't before. They were in the same country, and that comforted Ilya more than he'd expected it to. If he really, really needed Shane, they were only two hours apart with no international border to cross. It felt different. They were pondering buying a house in the middle, but decided in the short term to see how things worked first, relying on their horrifically crowded shared calendar to carve out scraps that still felt like a feast compared to their old ways. The level of joy that color-coded disaster provoked in Ilya's chest was almost concerning.

On the calendar, the beginning of preseason loomed. So did Shane's planned coming out.

"In a few weeks, everything will be different," Shane whispered on their last night together before they were due to report to training camp. "Hopefully better, though, right?"

Ilya pulled Shane closer against him, feeling Shane's nose press against the pulse point in his neck. He would miss that tiny point of contact when it was gone. But now, with The Plan underway, they'd see each other again in just a week instead of in several months. An immense gratitude flooded Ilya's chest as he pressed a kiss into Shane's hair.

"Yes. Better," Ilya said.

Chapter End Notes

Contract ramblings only for those who are as lost in the sauce as I am (seriously, it's a lot, please don't read unless you give a shit):

Shane and Ilya are almost certainly not unrestricted free agents at the same time, which means Shane can't pull the same move Ilya is pulling with Boston in this fic and leave MTL. Here's why.

Both Shane and Ilya would have been on Entry Level Contracts (ELCs) for 3 seasons (2010-11 through 2012-13). Ilya is easy to calculate after that because we know all we need to know from canon: After those three years, Ilya signed a 5-year contract and, as he's been in the league for >7 years by that point, he becomes an Unrestricted Free Agent when it expires at the end of the 2017-2018 season. (In this fic, he has a No-Trade Clause that kicks in after his seventh season, covering the final year of this contract. We have no idea if this is the case in canon, but it makes sense.)

Shane is tougher, because all we know for sure from canon is that he is a free agent as of July 1, 2021. From that we can infer that he either signed an 8-year contract in 2013, or he signed two shorter contracts; and, the only way he could be a UFA at the same time as Ilya is if in canon he signed a 5-year followed by a 3-year which just feels...weird. It would be unusual for a franchise player and generational talent, especially one like Shane who has been open about wanting to spend his whole career in MTL.

Take a look at Crosby and Ovechkin, our real-world Shane and Ilya analogues. Their post-ELC contracts were 13 years (Ovechkin) and 5 years followed by 12 years (Crosby). And 8 years is now the maximum contract length as of 2013, when Shane and Ilya would have been signing. Examples from the post-2013 era: Evgeni Malkin (8 years) and Connor McDavid (8 years). So it seems highly likely that Shane's on an 8-year contract, and that's what I'm rolling with in this fic.

So, since his free agency is years away, he doesn't have the same bargaining chip to pressure Montreal with that Ilya does. Sure, he could request a trade, but they're unlikely to trade away generational talent and franchise player Shane Hollander to a divisional rival with no incentive to do so.

Thanks for attending my "fic author now knows too much about NHL contracts" talk.

(Oh god, am I becoming a hockey guy (/gn) ???)

Chapter 5: Preseason arrives

Chapter Summary

Shane wants to win therapy, Ilya looks for green flags in Ottawa, and Montreal gets a taste of their new-and-improved, slightly bitchier captain.

Chapter Notes

NOTE: I've taken the liberty of having Harris start with the Centaurs a season earlier, but to square it with canon, he's just an intern here. So, technically it works? Welcome to the Centaurs, Ilya and Harris.

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

Shane wondered if therapists ever got annoyed with their clients. They had to, of course; they were only human. But Matt was always so perfectly calm, and Shane couldn't help but feel that his own neuroticism would be the thing that finally broke him. On his worst days, he *wanted* it. *Just yell at me, Matt. Just tell me I'm a mess. Tell me to get over myself.*

Matt, of course, never broke. He was endlessly patient, and logical, and empathetic, and unexpectedly funny when Shane needed it most. It made Shane irrationally hate the man in his lower moments; the shine had definitely worn off therapy after that first session, and all he was left with was the *work*. Therapy was fucking exhausting, and he had to schedule his sessions at the end of the day so he could collapse afterward without it ruining his entire routine, especially now that training camp was about to start.

Shane could not *wait* to collapse after this session.

"So, you have about two weeks to go until you plan to come out to your team. How are you feeling about it?" Matt said, leaning back in his chair, a cat wandering past in the background of the video. Shane followed the cat with his eyes. It was easier than making eye contact, even when the contact was through a camera.

"It's kind of making me feel crazy?" he said, picking through the sticky mass of ragged, crumpled stick tape that was his feelings. "One minute I want to blurt it out and just get it over with so I don't have to feel this anymore, and the next I want to go back on the whole thing and stay in the closet forever."

A wash of shame hit him after those words, and he felt almost proud for recognizing it.

“I’m so afraid I’m going to disappoint everyone and chicken out,” he murmured, hoping he’d said it too quiet for the mic to pick up. No such luck.

“You know what I’m going to say to that,” Matt prompted. Shane sighed.

“I know. It has to be for me. Fear of disappointing Ilya and my mom shouldn’t be the only thing making me come out,” he recited dryly. “And it’s not, not really. I won’t lie, I’m still not completely comfortable with everyone thinking of me as gay, but I want this weight off my chest. I want to feel like I can breathe in the locker room.”

Matt hummed and jotted a note down on his ever-present yellow legal pad—probably that they needed to circle back to that whole *thinking of me as gay* thing—then he sat forward. “Okay, Shane, I want you to try something for me. Close your eyes and picture the moment. You coming out to your team. What is it exactly about that picture that makes you feel discomfort?”

Shane did as he was told, picturing the locker room, his teammates all facing him, looking at him as he talked. He couldn’t even see their facial expressions; they were all a hazy blur. He mentally flinched away from the image, and the locker room fell away.

“The idea of standing up in front of everyone and making a stupid speech announcing it makes me feel sick,” Shane admitted in a rush. “I hate it so much. It makes me cringe.”

Matt nodded. “Okay. What would be the ideal way for them to find out?”

Shane snorted. “For the information to magically drop into their skulls with no involvement from me at all, and it’s just something they’ve always known, so there’s no reaction.”

“That *would* be nice,” Matt said with a wry grin. “So, what if we found a middle ground? A way to come out doesn’t involve you standing up and giving a speech?”

Shane had no idea what that could possibly be, but he was intrigued.

“I’m listening,” he said.

Training camp with the Centaurs was unavoidably weird. There was no chance it wouldn’t be, after seven seasons on the same team, but Ilya had been assigned an extra mission that was adding a layer of awkwardness he hadn’t been prepared for.

“All your support people you told about Shane are back in Boston,” Yuna had said over dinner a few nights ago, before Shane had gone back to Montreal. “So, I really want to encourage you to feel out your new teammates and see if there might be someone safe you can trust there. I’m not saying spill all your secrets on day one or anything, I just think it wouldn’t hurt to be scoping things out right from the start.”

“It’s a good point,” Shane had agreed. “From everything we’ve heard, the Centaurs are a really good group of guys. I’m sure you’ll find someone you click with. I want to see you as often as possible, but I also want you to settle in with the team, right?”

At the end of the night, Yuna had drawn Ilya into a hug, then pulled back and rubbed her hands over his upper arms. “I just don’t want you to feel alone out here, okay? You always have us, any time, day or night, for any reason. But I know we’re just Shane’s parents.”

Ilya scoffed. “*Just* Shane’s parents? Please, Yuna, you are a devious mastermind, and David—”

“Don’t try to distract me with flattery,” Yuna scolded, patting his cheek firmly. “We’re here for you, but I know we’re not enough on our own. You need your teammates. I know you and Shane have this whole elaborate schedule to see each other, but as the ‘devious mastermind’ of this whole plan, I am forbidding you from skipping team bonding activities at the start. Go to the bar. Go to the dinners. Find your safe people. Consider it an official step of the plan. Okay?”

“Okay,” Ilya agreed. It was a temporary problem; he’d figure out the new team, find someone to tell, and then go back to prioritizing seeing Shane over all else. It would still be more than they’d ever gotten before. Maybe, once they’d done more to develop their public friendship, he could even bring Shane along to a team event and introduce him. Assuming they truly *were* good guys. He’d know before long.

And so, he found himself on the first day of training camp arriving for his fitness testing into a room full of mostly strangers, his Bisexual Safety Radar on high alert. The first person he’d spoken to was, of course, Bood, who still wore the A like last season. Ilya had worried there’d be bad blood with him waltzing in and getting the C right away, after the previous captain retired at the end of last season, but it didn’t seem to be the case. Bood had walked right up to Ilya, introduced himself, shaken hands, and clapped him on the shoulder.

“It’s wild to have you here, man, we’re pretty hyped. What brings you to Ottawa?” Bood asked, expression open and welcoming. Ilya’s radar did not ping danger, and so he poked a toe tentatively over the line, watching Bood’s face carefully.

“Ah, I am keeping things quiet for right now, but I moved here for my partner,” he said, giving him a partial truth in a voice low enough to slide beneath the general din of the room.

Bood nodded, his bright smile settling into something softer and more real. "That's great, man, glad to hear you have someone. I can keep it quiet. I hope we get to meet them someday, though."

Ilya noted the neutral pronoun and felt his heart lift. A green flag on day one. Maybe it really would be okay here. He marked Bood as a potential ally to watch and gave the younger man a little half-smile.

"Later this year, I hope," Ilya said, then turned to greet the next person who approached him. He went on like that, shaking hands with most of the established guys, exchanging nods with the awestruck prospects, but swallowing down the temptation to make any further revelations. Instead, he settled in to change, listening closely to the conversation around him for clues about the men he'd be sharing a team with for the foreseeable future.

It didn't take long for the topic he'd been dreading to come up. One of the defensemen he'd just met, Nick Chouinard, gave a dramatic pained moan loud enough to be heard over the music and chatter.

"Can you believe our rotten fucking luck, though?" he was in the middle of saying to Dykstra. "First game of the regular season, our home opener, against the fucking *Admirals*. Am I right, Roz?"

Ilya tensed at being drawn into the conversation, especially *this* conversation.

"What do you mean?" he asked, bracing for something homophobic about Scott Hunter.

Chouinard snorted. "Starting off the year playing last season's cup winner? That's fuckin' rough, man. At least it's not in their barn."

A general groan went through the room.

"Too right, brother," Dykstra said. "We should invite Scott Hunter out for a drink after, though. Can't imagine it's going to be an easy season for him."

Several guys nodded or murmured in agreement, and Ilya saw his opportunity. He was new in the locker room, but he was also Ilya fucking Rozanov, cup winner and generational talent. He had sway. He could help set the tone here.

"You should invite Vaughn, too. He is good guy. Then Hunter won't feel singled out," Ilya added. "The elderly can be so skittish, you know."

That got some laughs. He decided to nudge a bit more.

"Though maybe we should introduce him to some men his own age," Ilya continued. "His boyfriend is way too young and hot to be locked down by dinosaur."

"Isn't he only like three years older than you?" Bood shot back with a laugh.

Ilya scoffed. "Absolutely not. Scott Hunter was alive for the moon landing. Scott Hunter lived through the last ice age. He should be dating someone of his own

generation, like World War II veteran.”

That got a real laugh out of most of the guys. There was a contingent of vets nearing retirement in one corner who seemed distinctly out of step with the broader team culture, but they stayed quiet and kept mostly to themselves. Ilya mentally marked them as not allies, but probably harmless, while Chouinard, Dykstra, and most of the younger guys got tentative green flags. By the time they were all changed and dispersed for their various fitness tests and physicals, Ilya was feeling much more secure about his choice to come to Ottawa.

Boston Boys

Marly

Hey roz

Marly

[An image of the Boston boys in distress. Cliff is on his knees, hands held to the sky, face twisted in anguish. Connors is clinging to a pillar, his cheek smashed against it, mock sobbing. St-Simon has his arms wrapped around himself, expression crumpled as he seems to rock back and forth.]

Marly

Anyway training camp is fine without you or whatever

How are the Cens?

Saint

[A gif from the Alanis Morissette video for ‘You Oughta Know.’ At the bottom are the lyrics:

*And I’m here to remind you
of the mess you left when you went away]*

Conny

Yeah hope you’re good man

Because we are

Totally fine

Ilya

Jesus boys get it together

We are not messy exes

You never had this dick to begin with

Marly

No only your boy can handle All That

Seriously tho how are you?

Ilya
I am okay

Team seems like good people so far

They don't call each other cocksuckers here at least

Conny
The bar is in hell

Saint
And yet, how many actually clear it?

Marly
Bleak

Ilya
Very

Are people talking about me?

Saint
Yeah man but we got it

Conny
Some people are pissed

Some are still sad

Varkov is weirdly happy

Ilya
That fucker always hated me for some reason

I think he could tell maybe

Marly
What like he's homophobic?

Ilya
I think so

Saint
Fuck him

Conny
We'll hide his shoes

Marly
We'll tape his gloves together

Ilya
I love you boys

Ride at dawn

The next day, the Centaurs' first practice was a shitshow, but Ilya had expected that. It would be a long rebuilding process, but Bood was a strong left wing who he had decent chemistry with, and Chouinard and Dykstra were an excellent defensive pair. There were some good building blocks to work with. Losing so often would be rough after taking Boston to the playoffs for so many seasons, but it would help to have The Plan as a side project, another thing to look forward to. His own personal rebuild. By the time Ilya came off the ice with the team at the end of practice, he was feeling far more optimistic than he'd expected. Before he could make it back to the locker room, though, a voice pulled him up short.

"Ilya! Do you have a minute?"

Ilya turned, finding a vaguely familiar young Black man with a neat beard and a sweet smile waiting for him. His jacket, Ilya was delighted to note, had several rainbow pins along the lapel.

"Sure," Ilya said. "Sorry, have we met yet? My head is spinning from so many new people."

"Not really, I was kind of in the background yesterday during all the media day craziness. I'm Harris. I just got hired this summer as a social media intern," the man said, offering his hand for a shake.

"Is good to meet you," Ilya said, and meant it. This was a man he needed to befriend. "I like your pins very much, especially the little rainbow hockey stick."

Harris seemed momentarily taken aback, but then softened into a grin. "Thanks. My ex-boyfriend got me that one at an event for You Can Play last year. He kinda sucked, but the pin is cute, at least."

"Ah, I wish I had been there to get one," Ilya said. There, that was vague enough, right? He *could* just be an ally, but it also planted the seeds for more down the road, if he chose. "You needed something, or were just saying hi?"

"Oh, right! I was wondering if we could film another short video for our socials before you head out today. Sorry we didn't get to it on media day," Harris said with a wince. "Nothing big or embarrassing, and nothing you aren't comfortable with. Just a quick welcome to the team Q&A. Would that be alright?"

"Oh, Harris, you will find that I *love* to be the center of attention. Yes, I will do this," Ilya said, grinning. "Let me shower and change, then... do you have an office?"

“Yeah, I share with the real social media guy, but I’ll just meet you in the media room. That work?”

Ilya nodded. “I will see you soon, then, Harris. Us new guys must stick together, yes?”

“Right,” Harris said faintly, studying Ilya as if he were a particularly intriguing puzzle. Ilya walked away before he could burst, revealing more than he should to this man who he had *just met*, who was still a relative stranger. Still, only his first week and he’d met an out and proud gay man who had no issues walking the halls of the Censplex with rainbow pins on, talking about an ex-boyfriend. A good sign on top of all the other good signs he’d observed.

Ilya felt sure he’d have someone to tell before too long.

[The video opens with Ilya sitting in front of an Ottawa Centaurs logo backdrop, as seen in the background of every press conference ever. He’s in street clothes, his hair still damp from the shower.]

Ilya: Hi, I’m Ilya Rozanov, and I am the captain of the Ottawa Centaurs for the 2017–2018 season!

Harris (off-screen): We’re so excited to have you here, Ilya, and even more excited that you’ve already signed an extension with the Cens. I know there’s one big question on everyone’s mind: What brings you to Ottawa?

Ilya: Ah, mysterious personal reasons to be revealed at a later date. [He winks.] I loved my time in Boston and will always be grateful to them, but I am looking forward to bringing Ottawa back to the playoffs.

Harris (off-screen): What’s the best thing about Ottawa so far?

Ilya: Mm, it’s only been two days, but I think I am really going to like the guys on this team. Is such positive room, you know? Good vibe. I think we will play some very good hockey together.

Harris (off-screen): I couldn’t agree more. And last, what team are you most looking forward to playing this season?

Ilya: Oh, is always Montreal. Wherever Shane Hollander is, that will always be my favorite. There is no one I like to beat more than him.

Harris (off-screen): And it makes for very entertaining hockey for the rest of us! Thanks, Ilya, we’re glad to have you in Ottawa.

Ilya: Very glad to be here. [He smiles, and it’s genuine, no fierce Russian asshole mask in sight.]

[The video ends.]

hollanova: “mysterious personal reasons” eh?

↪ **pucksinnetsplz:** I thought he said it was because he “wanted a new challenge”

↪ **thetrapezoid:** he also said it was bc he had “a thing for loons”

↪ **cozywithrozy:** my personal favorite was “I’m entering my canadian era”

↪ **putmeinthesinbin:** at least this promises we’ll eventually know the real reason. For his sake I hope it’s something that will satisfy the bloodthirsty boston fans

↪ **bostonbb81:** nothing will ever slake our thirst for his traitor blood

↪ **putmeinthesinbin:** whoa uh... ok

Shane’s training camp experience started out very differently from Ilya’s. He, Hayden, and JJ all walked into the locker room together on the first day back, laughing and jostling each other, ready to greet the new guys and submit themselves to being poked and prodded by trainers and doctors. Instead, they were almost immediately called out by Comeau.

“Yo, what the fuck is with you traitors hanging out with guys from Boston this summer?” he shouted across the locker room. “Fucking *Rozanov*, really?”

Yes, I am fucking Rozanov, really, Shane’s mind provided hysterically, but he quickly discarded the thought. Moments like this were exactly why his mother had insisted on new media training, aided by Rose.

“Start laying the groundwork,” his mother had said. *“Defusing the hostility toward Ilya now will make things much easier in a year when you come out. Slow steps.”*

Rose had given him a brilliant rule to live by. *“You’re a little bit of a bitch, Hollander, and it’s okay to let it out some. Think of what the old polished Shane would say. Then, think of what Ilya would say. Now, meet in the middle. There’s your new answer.”*

Shane pasted on an amused smirk and raised his eyebrows.

“Wow. Welcome back, Comeau, hope you had a nice summer. I did too, thanks for asking,” Shane said, laying on the sarcasm thick. “What, none of you have friends on other teams? That’s kind of fucking sad.”

Comeau blinked, clearly taken aback by the slightly sharper version of Shane.
“Yeah, but it’s *Boston*.”

“And when we’re on the ice, I’ll fucking destroy them,” Shane shot back, ripping his shirt over his head to start changing. “In between games, though? Who cares?”

Drapeau frowned. “I thought you hated Rozanov.”

“When did I ever say that?” Shane asked, yanking down his compression top. “I fucking hate *losing* to him, but we’ve known each other since we were seventeen. Yeah, we’re friends. Don’t tell me you actually fall for his ragebait bullshit.”

That little jab had been his mom’s idea. She’d felt a little stupid for falling for Ilya’s whole asshole persona after getting to know him, and there was no better way to get to his teammates than to suggest they’d let Ilya Rozanov get under their skin.

“It is true,” JJ chimed in as he chuckled his hat into his stall. “I couldn’t believe it myself, but Rozanov is actually a good guy. Weirder me out at first. Right, Pike?”

Hayden visibly steeled himself. “Weird is definitely the word for it. But yeah, he’s... fine. And the other Boston guys, too. I know Connors from juniors.”

Mitty nodded from his sprawled stretching position on the ground. “I played juniors with St-Simon. Really legit guy.”

Comeau made a face and waved all the comments away. “Okay, that’s enough of the Boston love fest. It’s still weird.”

“Aww, it’s okay,” Shane cooed. “I know you’ll make friends one day, Gil.”

Mitty raised an eyebrow, studying Shane with that weirdly perceptive goalie stare. “You came back from the summer a little bitchy. It suits you.”

Shane shrugged. “Decided to give fewer fucks this year. Censoring myself all the time is fucking annoying.”

“Hell yeah, brother,” Andropov said, offering a fistbump.

Comeau, pathologically incapable of not being an asshole, sneered at Shane. “Aren’t you going to get in trouble with your mommy?”

Shane snorted. “We’ve agreed to a ‘shift in my public branding’ this season.”

Hayden clapped Shane on the shoulder. “Can’t wait for the media to get to see a bit of the real you. It’s gonna be funny as fuck.”

“A kind and generous soul... who is also a bit of a snarky asshole,” JJ said with a hand over his heart.

Shane held his arms out wide. “I contain multitudes.”

Comeau, however, just couldn't let things go.

"*Rozanov*, though," he said, incredulous.

Shane grinned. "Don't worry, Gil, I'll call him and let him know you're obsessed with him."

"You *call* him?" Comeau said, horrified.

"No, I exclusively send him notes by carrier pigeon," Shane said like 'duh, obviously'. "'Dear Rozanov, will you hang out with me? Check yes or no.'"

That one was a bit riskier, but it drew the laughs he'd hoped for and, best of all, made Gilbert Comeau flush like an angry middle schooler. Perfect. Another bit of his mom's advice implemented: *Find the biggest asshole on the team and take him down a peg. A captain's job is to set the tone of the room.*

Rose had added on to that one, too: *Assert your dominance, but with humor instead of chest-thumping. Don't let him get his claws into those impressionable rookies. Day one: It's your room.*

This was *his* room. And so far, he thought he'd nailed it.

Shane's first opportunity to speak to the press came the following day, when their practice was open to the public. He was herded to the media room after the afternoon session, where half a dozen mics and phones were shoved in his face. Despite the new training, he found himself more nervous than he'd been for media availability in years. He and Ilya's friendship was out there now, and the fear that they would figure out the rest of it somehow was front and center.

His mother, of course, had a strategy for everything. "*If someone speculates about your relationship, just avoid and deflect. Turn the conversation back toward hockey, or answer a slightly different question from the one they actually asked. You don't want to deny, because then you'll look like a liar later. If something actually leaks, then the party line is: 'Yeah, so what? It's not a secret, we're just private people.' Deny them the ability to make it a scandal.*"

It was unlikely it would come up, but he was ready if it did. And in the meantime, he had instructions for starting to shift he and Ilya's narrative. An attractive dark-haired man to his left kicked off the questions.

"Shane, first day back on the ice! How is it feeling after being out for the end of last season due to injury?"

Shane put on his new media smile—a little less polished, a little more natural—and dove in. "Feels great, I definitely missed it. I'm back at a hundred percent for the new season and ready to work hard."

Normal so far. Easy question. He answered a few more softballs about some of the team's struggles from last year and hopes for the coming season (a cup, obviously), and then his first opportunity arose.

"What team are you looking forward to facing the most this season?"

Shane grinned. "Oh, it's gotta be Boston, right? I mean, I look forward to the challenge of the Admirals, always good to test yourself against the recent cup winner, but Boston versus Montreal is always going to have that extra bit of edge."

The reporter pounced on the golden thread he'd dangled for him. "I thought you were friends with Boston players now, though?"

Shane smiled, shark-like. "Yeah, but that's off the ice. On the ice, they're *Boston*. It's totally different." He let his grin turn wry. "Look, in this league guys get moved around all the time. We've all got friends on other teams. Like, now that Rozanov is in Ottawa, I think Ottawa games are about to become a new favorite."

"So you and Rozanov's friendship doesn't dampen the rivalry?"

Shane mentally thanked the reporter for the easy opportunity. "Ha, definitely not. We've always been friends, and I've always loved annihilating him on the ice. That won't change just because he's on a new team. He's my favorite person to play against and my favorite person to beat into the ground."

"He said something similar about you in a video the Centaurs just posted," the reporter said.

Shane snorted. "I'm not surprised. I think the world might stop turning if Rozanov quit mouthing off."

That drew a chuckle from the assembled journalists, and he could tell they were pleased. In the past, he'd rarely played into the rivalry at all during media, and certainly not to the degree that Ilya did. This was like a treat for them: he'd given them the pill of he and Ilya's "friendship" and wrapped it in a layer of what they really wanted, that competitive fire between rivals. His mother had emphasized that he needed to walk a careful line—he couldn't get away with the same shit a white man like Ilya could without repercussions—but Shane felt good about where he'd ended up. A little less polish, a little more personality, just like they'd planned. He felt like a *real human* in a way he hadn't in a long time.

And then, finally, the topic he'd been most dreading came up.

"Shane, what's it going to be like facing off against Scott Hunter this year?"

It sounded innocuous, but Shane knew what they were really getting after. He denied them. "Like I said earlier, it's always a good test for the team to play against last year's cup winner. We'll see if winning has made them complacent or if they still have the fire this year."

“Right, but is it going to be different facing off with Scott Hunter specifically this year?”

Time to roll out one of his favorite pieces of advice from his training with Rose and his mother: *Let the homophobes bury themselves.*

“I don’t understand. Why would anything be different?”

And he blinked innocently, staring the man down, letting the silence fill the room with no desire to break it.

Eventually, another reporter broke through the awkwardness with a different question. Shane answered it cheerfully as if nothing had happened. Secretly, something in Shane’s chest purred in satisfaction. This was actually... kind of *fun*.

The new Shane Hollander was going to have a very good season. Assuming his team didn’t hate him in two weeks.

Two weeks, and he'd be out to twenty-three more people.

His smile slipped, just for a moment, but he caught it, and pushed through.

Shane Hollander would always push through.

Chapter End Notes

If you liked Ilya’s instagram live last chapter, I have a whole fic of the guys chaotically coming out via instagram lives: [Ilya Rozanov is Now Live](#). Enjoy!

Chapter 6: Deadlines

Chapter Summary

Ilya decides to trust. Shane comes out to his team.

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya received his official invitation to apply for permanent residence just before the end of the preseason, about a month after submitting all his initial information through the Express Entry program. Thanks to the fancy immigration consultant Yuna had hired, Ilya was already prepped and ready, and he had his PR application submitted on the day of their last preseason matchup at home versus Montreal. Now, the real waiting would begin, interspersed with annoying menial tasks to keep the process moving. Ilya vowed to stay on top of it all, though; the sooner he did his parts, the sooner he'd have his PR, and the sooner he'd be safe if he and Shane were outed.

And the sooner they could choose to come out on their own terms.

Ilya celebrated the process being officially underway by fucking Shane fast and hard against the door of his new house in Ottawa, shortly after a preseason game neither of them had played in. Their bodies were fresh and unbruised, their energy undepleted, and they made the most of it, eventually moving round two to the bedroom, and then round three to the shower. Laying in bed afterward, Ilya pillowed his head on Shane's chest and nuzzled in until Shane relented and put a hand in his curls. He rubbed one hand up and down Shane's thigh—god, his fucking thighs, he wanted to be absolutely *crushed* by them—and let his mind drift.

"I think I want to come out to Harris," he murmured after a bit, as surprised to hear the words as Shane seemed to be. Shane's hand paused in his hair.

"It's only been two weeks. You trust him already?"

"I know is fast," Ilya said, the feeling of surety solidifying in his mind even as he spoke. "But he is gay, and very kind, and has talked to me about a guy he is seeing. I have already sort of tested the waters. I think..."

Ilya paused and considered. "I *know* is partly just that I am missing my Boston boys, how well they know me. I just want to be known here, at least a little. And if he spreads rumor, well, is only rumor, and will be confirmed eventually

anyway.” He shrugged. “I do not think he will, though, with this sort of secret. You know I am good at reading people. He is walking green flag.”

The corner of Shane’s mouth turned up, and he leaned in to press a sweet kiss to Ilya’s lips. “You’re right, it’s scary how good you are at reading people. Me included. If you think he’s safe, then I trust you.”

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Ilya said, back to rubbing his cheek against Shane’s bare pec. “To be clear, I am just telling him about me, not about you. That will take more time, to trust him with that.”

“I know,” Shane said. His hand went back to work in Ilya’s hair. “I’m sure we’ll be able to bring him into The Plan eventually, though. I really do want you to have someone there who’s in on it who doesn’t live so far away.”

“I think Harris will be the guy,” Ilya said with certainty. “I think Bood will be, too, but he’s not literally walking around with rainbow pins talking about the guys he fucks, so I will take my time there.”

Shane gave a thoughtful hum. “You said your guys were talking about inviting Scott Hunter out. Should we... tell him? I don’t know if he can actually help, but...”

Ilya sat up, suddenly alert. “Oh, please, *please* let me tell him. I want to do it. Let me, *please*, Shane.”

“Okay, okay,” Shane said with a laugh. “You menace. Try not to traumatize him, or be too much of a dick. He might think you’re just fucking with him otherwise.”

Ilya slapped a hand over his heart. “I promise. I will do so good. Though maybe we should have nurse on standby. Might be too much for his aging heart.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Have fun, tell me how it goes. With Scott *and* with Harris.”

Ilya flopped back on the bed and grinned up at the ceiling. “Wow. Soon you will be out to your team, and I will be out to Harris, and we will both be out to the gay messiah of hockey. And my PR stuff is processing.”

He paused, trying to wrangle his feelings into some kind of order, but all he could manage was: “Things are *happening*.”

Shane smiled softly, drawing Ilya down for another gentle kiss. “Yeah. Things are happening.”

It was the Monday before the start of the regular season, and that meant the roster was officially set. Shane’s deadline had arrived.

It was time to make good on his promise to come out to his team.

He'd had a therapy appointment a few days earlier to prepare. He had one scheduled for that evening to process whatever happened. He had prepped JJ and Hayden for their roles in it. He was as ready as he could be.

He felt a little like throwing up.

Shane arrived to practice only a little later than his usual time, making sure he'd still be in the locker room once everyone was there getting changed instead of getting out on the ice early as was his habit. JJ arrived soon after him, slapping him on the shoulder as he walked over to his stall. He shot a quick raised eyebrow at Shane as if to say "Ready?" Shane gave a tiny half nod, and JJ turned out toward the rest of the room, arms spread wide.

"Hello, hello, everyone, let's look a little less like the walking dead today, yes?" JJ called out, loud and clear above the general locker room chatter. He received a chorus of groans in return, as his forceful brand of cheer often prompted in the mornings. "Ah, fuck all of you. Andy, you manage to seal the deal with that girl last night? Things were looking good when I left!"

Andropov grinned and ducked his head. "You know I did. Had a good night."

"Eyyy, there he is! I hope she is your future wife," JJ said, shoving Andropov playfully before turning to Shane. "What about you, capitaine? You got out of here in a hurry yesterday. You meet up with your ridiculously hot boyfriend?"

"Don't call him that," Hayden said with a groan.

Shane laughed, at least sixty percent out of nerves, his throat feeling weirdly sticky and thick. "I did. He says hi."

"Good to know he is alive, after the way you guys dropped off the face of the earth at the end of the summer," JJ said, getting changed as if this conversation were absolutely nothing out of the ordinary.

Shane shrugged. "Things got chaotic. He's—"

"Wait, hold on," Comeau said, loud and clear.

Here we go, Shane thought. Of *course* there had been a part of him that had hoped no one would react to JJ's boyfriend comment, that he would just be out and everything would be fine, even ignored. It was never the most likely outcome, though. He summoned up every bit of his new "confident gay man who doesn't give a fuck" attitude and braced himself.

Comeau played his part exactly as expected, staring down Shane with a sort of shocked, disgusted look. "Are you fucking gay?"

"Yeah?" Shane said, furrowing his brow. "So?"

Comeau sputtered. "So? You kept it quiet all this time, why the fuck do we have to know about it now?"

Not the route Shane had expected him to take, but fuck it, Shane was ready, the anger he'd unlocked in that first therapy session swelling and cresting high in his chest. He turned to face Comeau and rolled his eyes.

"So glad you asked. Not that I need to justify it to you, but I have a whole fucking list," he said in a fake pleasant voice. He held up one finger. "One, so you assholes will stop pressuring me to pick up girls when we go out. It's fucking annoying."

He raised a second finger. "Two, so you'll all stop trying to set me up with every girl you know. It's *fucking annoying*." A third finger. "Three, so I don't have to sneak around and hide the fact that I have a boyfriend. Can you guess how I feel about it?"

"It's fucking annoying?" one of the rookies suggested.

"I knew you were the smart one," Shane said, shooting the kid a tight smile, then he raised a fourth finger, his heart racing. "And four, it's fucking exhausting trying to hide it all the time. Am I laughing at the right jokes? Was that comment I made too gay? Am I standing right? Am I acting right? Can they tell? *Fuck*. Can you imagine how good my hockey could be if I wasn't so *fucking exhausted* all the time?"

Shane let his hands fall to his sides, looking around the room, forcing himself to meet gazes where he could. "I am always looking for ways to improve as a player, and this is the best thing I can think of to push myself to the next level, to put this giant fucking burden down and just focus on the game. It's not a big fucking deal unless you make it one."

That seemed to land with all the weight he'd intended. Some of the really religious guys had turned away, shaking their heads, but most of the room was still listening. He took a breath in through his nose and brought it home. "I would appreciate it if you all could keep this to yourselves, just for now. I'm going to come out publicly this season, but I need to take care of a few things first, so just give me time before you tell all your friends on other teams. Can you do that for me?"

A general murmur of agreement went through the room. Drapeau and Comeau exchanged a look.

"Okay, *maybe* I get why you have to stop hiding it with us here, if it's about hockey," Drapeau said. "But why do you have to tell the whole fucking world? It's going to be a giant shit show and everyone will be looking at this team because of it, just like they are with the Admirals this year."

Shane's unearthed anger surged again. It was a relief, in some ways, to embrace the anger instead of being so fucking scared all the time, but he needed to not lose it on his teammates when things were actually going pretty well.

"Come on, man, I know you're smarter than that," Shane said, shaking his head. "It's the same fucking reason. Hiding is exhausting out there, too. Constantly worrying about getting photographed somewhere with my boyfriend. Constantly

worrying someone will notice where I'm always going and put it together. Not to mention the fact that I don't want to fucking marry him while keeping him a secret. It's not fair to either of us. We want to be able to have a wedding where people don't have to sign NDAs at the door."

Hayden, who was supposed to be helping by interjecting supportive comments, instead made a strangled sort of noise. JJ's eyes went wide.

"Tabarnak, capitaine. I knew you guys were all in love and shit, but I didn't realize you were *there*."

Shane felt himself flushing, but pushed on. "*Anyway*, that's it. If you have a problem, I suggest you get over it. I love Montreal and I love this team, but I can always waive my NMC if it gets shitty here. So you all have to decide: Would you like to play with me or against me? Your choice."

"Oh, fuck no," Mitty said, face falling in horror. Shane smirked. He loved being every goalie's worst nightmare, even when they were on his own team.

"It's up to you guys," he said with a shrug. "Figure it out amongst yourselves. I'm not the one with a problem here. Let me know if you need to talk something out. Does anyone have anything else they need to air with the group?"

Berkes cleared his throat and looked visibly uncomfortable when every eye turned to him. "I'm not trying to be an ass or anything, we're cool and all, I just think some guys might be wondering. How do we know you aren't like... *looking* at us?"

Shane recoiled in such obvious disgust that several of the guys laughed. Shane found *plenty* of men attractive, but *these* guys?

"Besides the fact that I'm a fucking professional with like... integrity?" Shane said. "And the fact that I don't want to get hate crimed? And the fact that I have *standards*?"

Hayden scoffed, shaking his head. "I hate to say it, but you haven't seen his fucking boyfriend, man, or you wouldn't even be asking."

Hayden, finally coming in with something useful. JJ barked a laugh.

"Seriously, guy looks like a fucking Greek statue," he said. "And if the rumors about what he's packing are true..."

"Oh, they're true. Trust me, you all have nothing to worry about," Shane said. "Anything else? Can we play some fucking hockey now? We do actually have practice in five minutes."

No one else said a word.

"Great, good talk," Shane said, and plopped down on the bench to put on his skates, pretending his heart wasn't racing like he'd just finished a record-length shift on the ice. There was a long silence, then one of the younger guys tentatively spoke up.

“Do we get to know his name?”

Shane looked up with a little half-smile, grateful for such a sweet question. “It’s not safe for him to be out yet, but I’ll tell you guys once it is.”

“How long have you been together?” asked Andropov.

“Yeah, *Shane*, tell them how long,” Hayden said, goading.

“Fuck *off*,” Shane said, yanking his laces too tight. He’d have to redo it now. “We were messy as fuck for like six and a half years until we finally started getting our shit together in January. It’s been a *long* fucking time.”

“Holy shit,” one of the rookies said, then shrank in on himself when everyone looked at him. “Sorry, that’s just... a really long time to have to hide someone.”

“Like I said. Exhausting,” Shane said, then shoved on his gloves, grabbed his stick, and headed for the tunnel. “See you on the ice.”

Practice was... fine, actually. With Theriault barking orders at them, it was easy to slip into their usual rhythm as a team, running drills and ending with a scrimmage that had Shane feeling almost normal by the end. Things were *so* normal that he’d nearly forgotten about the whole thing until Theriault poked his head into the locker room and barked his name.

“Conference room one in five minutes,” he snapped, then left before Shane could reply. Hayden shot him a worried look, but he just waved it away. He’d expected this, too, and he was trained for it: *Record the conversation. Don’t lie, but tell them only what they specifically ask you and nothing more. Bring it back to hockey.*

Shane washed as fast as he could in showers that seemed only somewhat less full than normal, then threw on his clothes and grabbed his phone. He started recording before he even got into the room, carefully laying the phone face down on the table as he sat. Across from him were Coach Theriault and the GM.

Okay, this was fine. This was expected. He could do this.

“Hi,” Shane said, pleased with how even his voice came out.

“Hollander,” the GM began. “Do you know why you’re here?”

“Not really,” Shane said. *Don’t give them an inch. Don’t act guilty, because you aren’t. You’ve done nothing wrong.*

The GM glanced over at Theriault, then back to Shane. “We heard that you, uh... came out to the team today.”

Shane shrugged. "One of my good friends mentioned my boyfriend in passing, and it led to a discussion, yeah."

Theriault's nostrils flared as he visibly kept himself under control. "You didn't think you should tell management first?"

Shane furrowed his brows in pretend confusion. "I didn't think management had any interest in who players date. It has nothing to do with hockey."

There was a long, tense silence. Shane was beginning to like these silences. They sounded like homophobes drowning.

Finally, Theriault snapped. "Is it another player?"

Shane controlled his reaction, but only barely. Well, *fuck*. He couldn't lie, and refusing to say was as good as confirmation anyway.

"Yes," he answered.

"And you don't think that's a conflict of interest?" the GM asked, with much less overt hostility.

Shane played up his confusion again. "Guys play against their brothers, cousins, and friends all the time. It's no different."

"Who is it? Is it one of those Boston guys?" Theriault demanded.

This was a line Shane would not cross. He shook his head. "I'm not going to name him right now. Once it's safe for him to be out, I'll tell you."

"That's not good enough," Theriault snarled.

"It'll have to be," Shane said simply.

Theriault looked like he was about to go nuclear. "How do we know you aren't throwing matches for him?"

Shane scoffed, insulted. "By looking at my stats? By looking at our two cups?"

The GM shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "You were seeing this guy through those two cup runs?"

"Yes," Shane said, biting his tongue to prevent himself from elaborating further. This was starting to spiral out of control. He needed to end it. "If you want to talk about this any further, or again in the future, please go through my agent. Unless you have an immediate concern that needs to be addressed, or something that's related to actual hockey, I'm going to go ahead and go."

Theriault puffed up, his face going red, but the GM lifted a hand to forestall him.

"Go ahead, Hollander," he said, sounding tired.

Shane gave them a nod and slid his phone carefully off the table, slipping it into his pocket. Once he was out in the hallway and around the corner, he stopped the recording and immediately emailed it to his mother, Farah, and Ilya, following it up with a text to each of them to look for it. Ilya replied back right away.

Lily

You are okay??

I will listen right now

Shane

Yeah, I'm okay. Coming out to the guys wasn't bad.

I'll tell you about it later.

Lily

Okay sweetheart

You are very brave

How does it feel to be out?

Shane walked back into the locker room, where a few guys were still lingering. No one gave him weird looks. No one said a damn thing other than "later, Hollzy," and "See you tomorrow," and the like. No awkwardness. Comeau and Drapeau were already gone, and that was probably where the biggest problems would lie, but if the rest of the room fell in line, they would probably keep their mouths shut.

Time would tell. Probably each new day in the locker room would slide things a little bit back toward normal. Every time Shane mentioned his boyfriend there would be a momentary hiccup, but the room would move on. Eventually it would become ordinary. They'd probably have to start all over again with the Ilya reveal, but for now... he was out.

How does it feel to be out?

Shane

Too much for text I think

Better over the phone

After an hour of therapy to figure out what the fuck I'm feeling

But I think it's good

Lily
Okay

Gonna be at the BoodBQ this evening but I'll call after

Shane
You coming out to Harris tonight, then?

Lily
Yes I think so

Will let you know how it goes

I love you

Shane
I love you too.

So much.

Two hours later, he received an email from Farah.

Hey Shane,

You did great. I got together with one of the agency's lawyers and we sent a little note to the MTL management about that conversation. Pretty sure we've got them spooked. They should leave you alone. I've got something in the works that should help when your partner's identity comes to light. More soon.

*Best,
Farah*

He shot back a quick thank you email and pulled up Skype to get ready for his therapy appointment. He hoped Matt was ready for a deluge.

Today was going to be a *lot*.

It was a good thing Yuna had been so persistent about making team meetups part of The Plan, because Ilya found himself sorely tempted to skip the end-of-preseason BoodBQ. All he wanted was to drive straight to Montreal and spend the night holding Shane in his arms, praising him for his bravery. And yet, Yuna's

voice was insistent in his ear; he needed to make connections, feel out the team, find who he could trust... and today, he needed to come out to Harris.

Harris provided a double opportunity, actually. As Ilya loaded up his plate and happily scarfed—after a lesson learned the hard way—the most mildly spiced of Bood’s incredible barbecued chicken, he casually observed Harris as he moved through the party wearing his jacket with the pins. Once he knew what to look for, it was easy to spot the patterns. Harris gave friendly but distant nods to some of the older, soon-to-be retired guys on the team, but eagerly dove into conversations with most of the younger guys, seeming completely comfortable with Bood, Dykstra, Chouinard, and Dillon. He fell in with a few of the WAGs, too, chatting happily and talking up his family’s apples and cider. Ilya perked up when he heard Harris’s conversation turn to dogs.

“You have dogs?” Ilya said, immediately abandoning his quest for more chicken in favor of Harris. “Show me, show me.”

“Oh, here we go,” Cassie Boodram said, slowly backing away. “I’ll just leave you to it.”

She disappeared, chuckling fondly, leaving them alone in a back corner of the yard by the food table and pressed together at the shoulder while Harris flipped through an album of dog photos.

“So, my parents have three dogs, but also kind of a rotating door of fosters,” he said, lingering over each photo so Ilya could coo.

“They are all so good. I want to pet them all,” Ilya said, his night instantly improved. A sudden look of disgust crossed Harris’s face, and he lowered his phone with a flat look. Ilya scented gossip on the breeze.

“You know that guy I’ve been on like two dates with?” Ilya nodded, and Harris continued. “Well, when I told him how many dogs my family has he said, and I quote: ‘Ew, gross.’”

Ilya gasped dramatically. “You must dump his ass immediately.”

“Already done. I could *never*,” Harris said, solemn. “No dick is worth putting up with a psychopath.”

“Exactly,” Ilya agreed, feeling his opening in the conversation arrive. Now. He should say it *now*.

“You would like my boyfriend very much, I think,” Ilya said, darting a quick look at Harris to catch his startled reaction. “He is such a perfect good boy on the outside, but secretly very bitchy and funny. I think you would bring it out in him.”

Harris barked a laugh, clapping Ilya on the shoulder. “Well I hope to meet him sometime. He sounds like fun.”

“Yes, you will meet him. One day,” Ilya said, keeping his voice low, heart tumbling wildly against his ribs. “For now it is a secret, okay? Not for long. Just

for now.”

“Of course. Thank you for trusting me,” Harris said, then looked out over the rest of the assembled team, still feasting on Bood and Cassie’s offerings and wrapped up in lively conversation. “Sometimes they have smaller ones of these where it’s just the core of the team, plus me for some reason, without any of the... more questionable guys who are on the way out. There have only been a few since I was hired in June, but I think it would be safe, if you wanted to bring him sometime.”

That was good to know. Impossible for the time being, but still, it checked out with Ilya’s read of the situation. “It is probably a ways off, but I will definitely bring him one day. It is just... complicated. Because of who he is.”

“Oh, is he famous?”

Ilya snorted. “Yes, especially among this crowd.”

Harris’s eyes went wide. “Is he another hockey player?”

“I will answer no more questions,” Ilya said, miming zipping his lips. “You are too smart, you will figure it out and I will be in trouble.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll stop,” Harris promised, hand raised in oath. “I swear, though, if you ever want someone safe to tell about him, I’m here for you. I won’t tell a soul.”

Ilya smiled. “I believe that. Maybe soon. I will have to check with him. But we have built a sort of... team. Of people who know and are helping us. We have this big plan to come out, but I have to get my permanent residency first. Russian, you know.”

Harris winced. “Ah, yeah, that sucks. Well, for what it’s worth, I would love to join your team. I can help with social media strategy or something, or just be a safe person for you to talk to here. Whatever you need.”

“Thank you, Harris. I really appreciate it,” Ilya said, and truly meant it. “Maybe you can help me figure out who else here might be safe to talk to?”

Harris bloomed with a genuine smile. “Honestly, this team is great overall. I haven’t been here much longer than you have, but I’m obviously, you know, *out* in a way that’s hard to miss. No one has been anything less than polite and respectful, and most of the guys are actively welcoming and kind. I really think we’ve landed in a safe place, you know?”

Ilya really wanted to believe it. “It is different when you share showers and a locker room with them, I think. But maybe you are right.”

Harris bumped their shoulders together. “And hey, if you ever need someone to gush about your boyfriend to—anonously, of course!—then I’m here, okay? Let’s be friends. Give me your phone, you need my number.”

“Yes. Friends,” Ilya agreed, handing his phone over without hesitation.

Ilya forced himself to stay at the party until all of the outliers had gone, leaving only Bood, Dykstra, Chouinard, Dillon, and a few of the younger guys, along with their WAGs. As Harris had alluded to, the vibe did change somewhat, becoming more relaxed and open, the sort of atmosphere that only emerged among like-minded company. Ilya began to relax, too, and felt his secrets burning on the tip of his tongue, desperate to escape. Dykstra bragged about Caitlin's work with the women's shelter, and Ilya wanted to talk about Shane. Bood diverted all credit for the success of the party to Cassie, and Ilya wanted to talk about Shane. Harris told the group the story of the guy who hated dogs, and Ilya wanted to talk about Shane, Shane, Shane. Finally, he scratched the itch just a little bit, in the only way he could think of.

"I, ah, have phone call scheduled with my partner tonight, so I need to head home. But this was a good time," he said, gesturing broadly to the grill, the loaded food table, the coolers and string lights and good company. "Even though you tried to kill me with your death chicken, Bood."

"Tell them we said hi!" Caitlin said from her place on Dykstra's lap. "It was great getting to hang out with you."

"Yeah, really nice meeting you! We're glad to have you here," Cassie said, which was quickly echoed by all the others.

"I'm not sorry about the chicken, though," Bood said, clapping him on the shoulder. "It's a Centaurs right of passage. Also, it's fucking delicious."

"Because you've burned all your tastebuds off," Ilya called as he left the backyard, already pulling his phone out of his pocket. He'd call Shane on the way home.

It had been a big day for them both.

That night, Ilya laid in bed staring up at the ceiling, trying not to let the darkness swallow him whole. He'd told Harris, and it had given him a brief burst of light.

But now he wanted *more*.

You are so greedy, Ilyusha. So selfish. Nothing is ever enough. Always you want more and more and more.

He closed his eyes and recited the steps of The Plan to himself in his mind. He thought of the confirmation email sitting in his inbox: *Your application for permanent residency has been received*. He thought of Shane lying in their Montreal bed, feeling new in his own skin after coming out to his whole team. He thought of Harris's number newly saved in his phone.

Things were moving. The Plan was working.

He just needed to be patient.

He buried his face in his pillow and willed away the burning behind his eyes.

Our time will come.

Soon.

Chapter End Notes

If you like Shane being confident in the locker room and telling his teammates to fuck off, you might enjoy my fic [Shane Hollander, Pro Level Cowboy](#).

Re: Coming out to the team: In the books we get very little information about how Shane's coming out went, and we have no way of knowing if he's telling the truth or downplaying. This short conversation with Rose from TLG is the most illuminating:

"Your teammates know you're gay, though, right?"

Shane nodded.

"Anyone being an asshole about it?"

"No. I mean, I can tell some of them don't love it, but they keep quiet about it. I don't know if even the openly supportive guys would be okay with me and, um...y'know."

This probably doesn't reflect real world hockey culture (which is awful), but it's canon to the books, so I sort of tried to strike a balance: justifying it by letting Shane's new confidence succeed in this moment while also giving him a little direct pushback. I don't totally know how I feel about where I ended up, but it's done!

Chapter 7: Dinosaurs and rainbows

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya gain new supporters. The Irina Foundation is announced. Hayden maybe sucks less?

Scott Hunter had known he was in for a weird season, but it was only now that he was realizing exactly how many shades of weird there could be. It was their first game of the regular season and the Centaurs (who they'd trounced thoroughly even with Ilya Rozanov at the helm) had invited him, Bennett, and Vaughn out for a drink after. The bar, Monk's, was a cozy hometown sort of place with pool tables in the back and pitchers of beer aplenty, and all but the jaded veterans of the Cens had made it out.

They were a good group of guys, friendly, upbeat despite their loss, good sports all around. The weirdness came from the distinct odor of "look, we are allies, we won't be weird about your whole gay thing," but it did at least seem to be completely sincere. No one was awkward around him. No one treated him any differently. Which, unfortunately, meant that Ilya Rozanov continued to be Ilya Rozanov.

"Ah, Hunter, so glad to see your knees are still holding up after the game. Careful, Dilly, this one is a fall risk, do not bump into the elderly!"

Scott breathed a sigh heavier than the entire Admirals team combined. "Rozanov, you have *got* to get some new material. It's getting sad, even for you."

"Well, you know, I figured your memory might be starting to go, good to repeat things," Rozanov quipped without missing a beat, and Scott grimaced. Hadn't Rozanov's father had dementia? Then again, if anyone were to use chirping as a coping mechanism...

"Hunter, come, let me buy you a drink," Rozanov said, clapping him on the shoulder, which Scott didn't love. "I have something to talk to you about."

Oh, god, what could *Ilya Rozanov* have to talk about?

"You buying for me, too?" Vaughn said, sliding up to the bar next to Scott, a clear intervention. Ilya only grinned.

"Sure, sure, of course, but then I need to kidnap your captain for a brief word alone. Do not worry, I promise to have him back in time for his nightly warm milk and prunes," he said.

“Jesus Christ,” Scott muttered, then ordered a beer when prompted. Once they both had drinks in hand, Rozanov cocked his head toward a quiet back corner of the bar, suddenly more serious. Scott followed, reluctantly curious about what could spur such a notable character change. Once they slid into the booth, Rozanov immediately chugged half his beer, then pasted on a smile Scott could not read to save his life.

“Okay, fuck. This is weirder than I thought.” Rozanov wiped his palms on his thighs, studying Scott closely. “Fuck it. I’m bisexual. Shane Hollander and I are together. It’s serious. We have a plan to come out once I have my Canadian residency. We thought we should tell you. Maybe see if you wanted to, uh, help us.”

Rozanov took another long swallow of his beer, then sat back, waiting for Scott’s reaction.

And what the *fuck* was Scott supposed to say to that? The bisexual part, sure, *maybe* he could buy that. He remembered Rozanov’s weirdly intense thank you from the Scott Hunter Night in Vegas a few months ago, and the way he danced with the men in the club. But with *Hollander*, his greatest rival? No. This was clearly some next level trolling.

“You’re fucking with me,” he said flatly. “When I said get some new material, I didn’t mean invent some gay hockey drama to chirp me with.”

Rozanov opened his mouth to spit a comeback, but Scott beat him to it. “You know, I really thought when you showed up at the club after the MLH awards that maybe you were at least not homophobic. Was I wrong about that?”

Rozanov’s expression fell, and his lips pressed into a thin line.

“Fuck, he told me you wouldn’t take me seriously,” he said, pulling out his phone. “Hold on, let me Facetime him, okay?”

Scott shook his head and took a sip of his beer. “What, so Hollander’s in on this with you? Never would have expected it from him.”

The Facetime call connected, and sure enough, Shane Hollander’s voice came from the phone.

“Let me guess: He didn’t believe you,” Hollander said. Rozanov scowled.

“Saying ‘I told you so’ is not a good look, Mr. Lady Byng.”

A sigh crackled over the speakers. “Maybe if you didn’t run your mouth at every single opportunity—”

Rozanov cut him off. “Sweetheart, I have a feeling you could literally bounce on my dick in front of him and he wouldn’t believe us.”

Scott choked on his beer.

“Ilya!” Shane shouted, horrified.

“We could always have a redo of All-Stars 2011 and fuck in the hotel room next to him to prove it,” Rozanov suggested, grinning as he watched for Scott’s reaction. Scott paused, thinking back to that first All-Star game with the two young upstart rookie rivals, back to grabbing his room key with a grumble and going down to the hotel bar to escape the sounds coming from the next room. His eyes widened.

“Oh my god, that was *you*?” he said, horrified.

“Fuck, you could hear us?” Shane said over the phone.

Ilya grinned. “See, he heard us anyway, we totally could have—”

“Do *not* finish that sentence,” Shane snapped. “Hey, Scott? I assume you can hear me.”

Rozanov turned the phone around so Scott could see Hollander on the screen, looking red-faced and contrite. Scott grimaced.

“Hey, Rook. So it’s true?”

Shane looked like he wanted to melt into his pillows. “God, I’m sorry, I really didn’t think you could hear us—”

“No, not that,” Scott interrupted, waving it all away before he could hear more than he wanted. “I mean, you’re really with this idiot?”

And surprisingly, Shane’s whole expression softened, his eyes relaxing, a small smile curling at the corner of his mouth.

“Yeah, that idiot’s mine,” he said. Rozanov looked utterly delighted by this, phrasing and all, looking over at the phone with a soppy expression. Shane continued. “I don’t know if he told you, but we have a plan for getting him safe from Russia and coming out, hopefully later this season. We were wondering if we could run it by you since you’ve, you know, been through it.”

Ugh. Scott was no match for Hollander’s particular brand of earnestness. This whole thing was real. Hollander and *Rozanov*. And Scott was disgusted to discover that he felt some kind of... protective fraternal obligation for them. Shouldn’t queer hockey players stick together and support each other? It’s definitely what Kip would say.

Scott sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. Maybe he really *was* getting too fucking old for this shit.

“Well, let’s hear your plan, then,” he said wearily.

Scott Hunter 🦋 has been added to the chat

Ilya

Everyone please welcome oldest man in hockey to the team

Do not everyone introduce yourselves, I have shared contacts

Marly

Eyyyyy welcome to the party Hunter!

Rose Landry

Ooh we are in the presence of gay hockey royalty

Sveta

Did you know these two idiots wouldn't even be together if not for your big stunt?

Ilyusha was going to go back to Moscow to live out his own personal tragic Russian novel plotline instead of going to Shane's cottage over the summer. Like an idiot.

They will never tell you themselves so I am ripping the bandaid off myself and giving credit where it is due

Jane

Gee thanks Sveta

Scott Hunter 🦋

Glad I could help? I guess??

Better Pike

It's so nice to meet you, Scott!

Saint

Nice win tonight, Hunter

Sorry cap

Conny

Tough way to start out the season

Ilya

I will have to get used to it

Losing so much will be hard but we lost a lot in early Boston days too

And there are some very good players here who just need more team around them

14th Best

Literally any other goalie would be a great start

Ilya
No shit

Also our fucking ancient coach needs to retire

Marly
Get him fired

Ilya
Bad idea as new guy probably

Sveta
I know some people. I will see what I can do.

I doubt I can get him gone this season, but next season, that fossil is out

Conny
You are truly frightening sometimes

JJ
But in a very appealing way

Better Pike
Oh I LIKE you

Rose Landry
Hot behavior tbh

Scott Hunter 
I feel like I shouldn't be seeing this

Marly
That's what I said when I walked in on Hollzy and Roz dry humping in the laundry room this summer

Scott Hunter 
Is it too late to pretend I was never here?

Scott Hunter  has left the chat

Scott Hunter  has been added to the chat

Scott Hunter 
Yeah, I thought so.

Shane felt a special sort of attachment to the Irina Foundation that was at least a teeny bit based in pride. It was the one part of their original terrible plan that had survived, his one good idea; and so, on top of all the real stuff that mattered

(helping people, teaching kids, honoring Ilya's mother), Shane felt a little flicker of self-satisfaction. *See, I managed to come up with one good thing to help us! I'm helping!*

Shane, his mother, and Ilya had collectively decided to announce the Foundation at an afternoon press conference before the first Montreal @ Ottawa game of the season. It was early November, and the friendship narrative was going strong thanks to some light encouragement through social media interactions both with each other and with their circle of friends. The Foundation would help further cement things, which was undeniably a good thing. Shane spent the ten minutes prior to the press conference freaking out in the bathroom anyway.

The press conference itself went off without a hitch. They managed to not make out in front of the cameras or make intense heart eyes, and the reaction from the assembled journalists was positive. According to his mom's update over lunch immediately afterward, the website was already receiving lots of traffic and donations were pouring in, as were the email sign ups from people awaiting the launch of camp registration in the spring. People online were largely reacting with support for the Foundation, praise for their collaboration, and empathy for Ilya's story—minus the obligatory internet assholes, of course.

But, once Shane's mom left them so they could take their pre-game nap at Ilya's house, Ilya seemed to collapse in on himself, growing quiet, his mouth small and tight. When they crawled into bed, alarms set so they could get to the rink on time, Ilya stared up at the ceiling with one arm slung over his head. When Shane's kiss to his shoulder went without acknowledgement or reaction, Shane propped himself up on one arm and looked down at Ilya, laying a hand over his heart.

"Hey, are you okay? Today was kind of a lot, right?" he asked gently.

Ilya glanced over briefly, then looked back to the ceiling, sliding his hand up to thread his fingers through Shane's. "It was a lot. I am thinking about my mother, so of course that... is what it is. But also, is something else."

"Like what?"

Ilya shrugged. "I am trying to figure it out. I think maybe I am sad we had to hide at the press conference? I know we needed to. Things are not ready yet, but we are making progress. Many good things are happening, so I don't know why I feel so sad sometimes."

Shane leaned down and pressed a kiss to Ilya's forehead, wishing it was enough to cure the sadness. If only it worked that way.

"Well, we *did* just launch a mental health charity, so I think it'd be stupid if I didn't say this, but..." Shane trailed off and bit the inside of his lip, then forged ahead. "Have you considered trying therapy? It's been really helpful for me, figuring out all kinds of shit I didn't even know were problems. Ways I tend to think. Things I feel that I didn't even *know* I was feeling. You know? A therapist might be able to help you untangle it."

Shane could see the war play out in Ilya's expression, his mind echoing back to their conversation weeks ago about therapy in Russia, about the stigma. Shane clamped down on the urge to keep elaborating, to convince, to provide more evidence, and just let Ilya process. He'd had a front row seat to how much it had helped Shane, so there wasn't much he could say Ilya didn't already know.

Ilya was silent for a long time, and when he finally spoke, his voice was quiet.

"I will think about it," he said.

Shane gave a small, soft smile. "That's all I ask. If you ever have any questions about it, you can ask me anytime. Also, I think you should tell Harris about us."

That caught Ilya's attention. He rolled his head on the pillow to face Shane, eyebrows drawn. "You do? Are you sure?"

Shane leaned in for a quick peck on the lips, then drew back. "Yeah. It's been over a month since you came out to him and things have been fine. You guys hang out. You're friends. You trust him, right?"

"Yes."

"Then tell him," Shane said with a firm nod. "If I were in your position, I think I'd be constantly in danger of exploding and coming out to someone randomly. If you feel that way at all, if that's part of what's making you sad, then you absolutely should talk to Harris. Even if you *don't* feel that way, you deserve to have someone in the Cens organization you can talk to."

Ilya pursed his lips, then nodded.

"Okay. I will tell him," he said. He bumped their foreheads and asked, in a quieter voice: "Is okay that I am so sad sometimes?"

Shane leaned in for a long, slow kiss, then pulled back just far enough that their foreheads still pressed together. "I love you when you're sad. Or happy, or messy, or chaotic, or loud, or angry, or quiet. I love all the versions of you. Okay?"

Ilya's mouth pulled to one side in a tentative smile. "Okay."

"And you'll tell Harris tomorrow?" Shane prodded.

Ilya's smile bloomed larger. "Yes, yes, I will find him tomorrow and do it. I promise."

It turned out, Ilya didn't need to bother. Harris found *him*.

Ilya was unceremoniously yanked into the empty social media office after practice the day after the Foundation announcement, slamming the door shut

behind him and whirling around with manic eyes.

“So if I were to have a guess about who your boyfriend is, would you want to know? Or should I keep my big mouth shut?” Harris babbled, lips pressed together to contain his excitement.

Ilya broke into a broad grin. “Yes, you’re right.”

“I *am*?” Harris squeaked.

“Pretty sure, yes,” Ilya confirmed, folding his arms and leaning against the wall. Harris did a little flailing freak-out dance, then quickly collected himself and blew out a slow breath.

“Okay. So. Just to confirm.”

“Yes.”

“Your boyfriend.”

“Yes.”

“Is #1 Hottest Man in the MLH, two-time Stanley Cup winning champion *Shane fucking Hollander*.”

Ilya's grin impossibly broadened, his cheeks growing warm with pride. “Yes.”

Harris's whisper-scream of “*Oh my GOD!*” was nearly silent and accompanied by a very funny series of little flapping hops.

“Ilya fucking Rozanov this is the best thing I’ve ever heard in my entire *life* and I am two seconds away from ugly crying right now so don’t judge me,” he said, wiping away a bit of moisture that had gathered in the corner of his eye. “If you two had existed when I was a kid I would have... god, I don’t even know, it’s unfathomable. This is going to change everything. Wow. Wow wow wow. Okay. I’m cool. This is cool. I’m fine.”

“Are you?” Ilya asked, amused.

“*Very*,” Harris insisted. “Now look, you do not have to say yes to this, *but* you mentioned that you have a team helping you through coming out and all that. Can I be on it? Like, your social media advisor or something?”

Ilya pulled out his phone. “I will add you to the group chat. Shane’s mama will want to share a powerpoint presentation with you, but don’t let it scare you. I’m sure you already know most of it anyway.”

As if summoned by the mention, a text message from Yuna appeared on his screen.

Mama Yuna

Boys, just wanted to let you know that the stats article Farah's PR team encouraged into existence is going live in a few minutes with links back to the Foundation. Make sure you both share it.

Jane

Got it mom, thanks

Ilya

Thank you ♥♥♥

Ilya smiled fondly, then looked back up at Harris. "I think we have our next social media mission. Check this out."

The Ones Who Know

Harris🌀 has been added to the chat

Ilya

Everyone, this is my friend Harris, a social media intern for the Cens

I decided there were too many straight people in here

Needed to improve the ratio

Harris🌀

So glad to be here, all! Happy to help gay things up a bit

Jane

Hey Harris, good to meet you.

Harris🌀

Shane fucking Hollander oh my god hi

I promise to be cool about this, I will NOT be weird

Ilya

I'm sure Shane is happy to have a fellow super gay here

Jane

Do we have to do the super gay/regular gay thing every time?

Ilya

Yes

Rose Landry
Absolutely

Jane
Traitor

Rose Landry
🙄

Ilya
This is important though everyone

Harris is not just here to be my gay gossip friend

He is going to help us with social media stuff for The Plan

Harris 🌀
And I have a mission for you!

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

This article about Shane and Ilya's stats vs. each other just went live and we all need to share it widely with our support

This is a big piece of combating the eventual backlash they'll face

By the time they come out, we want the general attitude to be "well obviously it's never affected their performance, we all know this"

If you have a personal anecdote to share that will strengthen the narrative, even better

Sveta
Very smart. We're lucky to have you, Harris.

Better Pike
I can already tell you're amazing at your job ♥

Marly
Mission accepted!

Conny
Hahaha everyone in boston has a million stories about cap wanting to massacre montreal

14th Best
Seriously this article is the least surprising thing I've ever read

Saint
I might have the perfect video to go with this lemme see...

Scott Hunter 🌀
Smart strategy, thanks for the link

JJ

Should we all share now or space it out a little?

Harris 

Good question! It'd be great if everyone could share sometime in the next hour, or as soon as you're able to. It'll help the algorithm take it and run.

Jane

We really appreciate this Harris!

Harris 

Oh I'm so happy to help, believe me

Ilya

This is going to be great

I love it when the internet is about me

Jane

That makes one of us I guess.

New Analysis Finds Friendly Rivals Hollander and Rozanov Push Each Other to New Heights

Liam S. Hines and Marie Clarkson

Nov 10, 2017, 01:00 PM ET

Many sports news outlets have been baffled and concerned by the newly revealed friendship between Shane Hollander (C, Montreal Metros) and Ilya Rozanov (C, Ottawa Centaurs, recently departed from the Boston Raiders). Both men, captains of their respective teams, have been pitted against each other even before the 2009 draft, in which they were selected first (Rozanov) and second (Hollander). Their careers, now in their eighth seasons, have been marked with the league's top honors, with the Rocket Richards Trophy in particular passed back and forth in an almost predictable rhythm. They have long been viewed as fierce competitors driven to best one another specifically year after year.

In light of the renewed interest in the Hollander-Rozanov rivalry and the public fascination with their apparently longtime friendship, our team of analysts have revisited their statistical performances over the length of their careers and come up with one undeniable fact: Hollander and Rozanov play their very best hockey against each other.

A similar analysis was run with other top players in the league, but no other strong...

[\[Read More\]](#)

@espn

Curious how the Hollander/Rozanov friendship affects their performance on the ice? Our analysts have the data:

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

↪ **@MetroGoGoGo**

Ah, yes, I too live to beat my bestie into the ground

↪ **@TooLateItsNate**

Good maybe everyone will stop crying about some dudes being friends now, it's been RIDICULOUS

↪ **@BlockedShot**

This quote from Roz fuckin kills me: "What, you all do not feel most alive when you destroy your friends at video games or board games or professional hockey? We are not the same."

@CliffMarly

Lol anyone who has played with either of them knew this already

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

@JJDagenais

Some of you haven't seen the murder in @ShaneHollanderHockey's eyes before a game against Rozanov and it shows

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

@SaintVic

Look what I found!

[A shaky video of Roz in the locker room, fully geared up, saying "Montreal goes home crying, please, please." Guys in the background start shouting "Let's go, boys!" as the video tilts wildly to the floor, briefly showing skates before it cuts off.]

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

@RealRoseLandry

Raise your hand if you've witnessed these two literally try to drown each other rather than let the other one win 🙄♀

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

@ScottHunterOfficial

I've never been less surprised by anything ever

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

@OttawaCens

Check out this incredible breakdown of our new captain @IlyaRozanov81's performance against longtime friend and rival, @MTLMetros captain

@ShaneHollanderHockey!

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

@HeyItsHayden

@ShaneHollanderHockey becomes the hockey terminator every time we play Roz. Just facts.

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

@JackiePike35

Can confirm playing board games with them is a nightmare!

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

@MTLMetros

Competition breeds excellence.

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

@HockeyByConnors

I have literally watched @IlyaRozanov81 text “see you after the game!” to Hollzy, then turn around and promise free drinks for anyone who blocks a Hollander shot. I don’t know what’s confusing about this to people.

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

@SvetlanaVetrova

Yes, they are like this about everything.

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

Ilya

@MTLMetros

Competition breeds excellence.

www.espn.com/nhl/story/...

Hey the metros got one thing right

I am your competition, and you are excellence

Jane

Jesus fucking christ

Four months into his weekly sessions, Shane had discovered the biggest lesson about therapy the hard way: A therapist could not solve his problems for him. He still had to do it himself.

And that *sucked*.

“I guess I just realized that... I don’t even know who I am without the hiding, maybe?” he was saying, hunched over his laptop at the hotel room desk in

fucking Texas. “Like, do I even have a personality?”

That was bleak. He shook his head and pushed on. “I’ve been holding myself in so tightly for so long that I almost don’t know how to act anymore now that I don’t have to.”

Matt smiled, the warmth of it translating even over video call. “You definitely have a personality, Shane, and I *do* think it’s been shining through more since you came out to your team and started our work together. But it’s true that you may have missed chances to... establish yourself, I suppose? Things you might have liked but wouldn’t let yourself. Things you wanted to discuss. Things you wanted to experience. You have some lost time to make up for, and that’s okay. It means you have a lot of great opportunities ahead of you, but you’ll have to be the one to take them. How does that make you feel, to hear that?”

“Kind of... sad, I guess. Pathetic. Frustrated. Angry, as usual.” Shane paused, pressing his lips together as if trying to withhold his next words. They burst out anyway. “I just have to wonder... Do any of my friends even really like me? Do they know me? If *I* don’t even know me, how can they? What if they liked who I was before, and now I’m disappointing them? Or what if they were just humoring me before and now they definitely *don’t* like me now? Sometimes I feel like Ilya and Rose are the only people I’ve ever been real with.”

Matt settled back in his chair and let Shane’s outburst fill the space between them. After a moment, he nodded.

“It’s really hard to form genuine connections with people when you’re so focused on not letting them see you,” he acknowledged. “But was *everything* about you fake before? Or did they see some true things about you, too?”

Shane thought for a moment. “I guess it wasn’t *all* fake, but it was all... incomplete, maybe? Like, there wasn’t a single thing about me that was one hundred percent real because I was always holding back.” He paused, his eyes widening. “Fuck, I think hiding this one big thing just sort of got me into the habit of hiding *everything*. I probably held back stuff that there was no point in hiding, just because it was automatic. Is that really fucked up?”

“That’s a really good insight, Shane,” Matt said, scribbling on his pad. “And I think it makes a lot of sense. Maybe between now and our next session, you can try to be extra aware of the moments where you feel like you’re holding yourself back. You don’t have to do anything about it right away, but if you feel like pushing yourself a little bit, maybe you can pause in those moments and ask: Is this a thing I *want* to hide?”

Shane dropped his head to one side and covered his eyes with a hand, sighing. Those were the gentle “this session is almost over so we really gotta wrap it up” words, and he hated them every time. It felt like it took most of the session just to get him opened up and talking, and by the time they were really cooking and figuring things out, it was time to go.

“Yeah, I’ll try to do that,” he said, eyes already drooping with exhaustion. He was going to crash so hard after this, and they didn’t even get a chance to talk

about the thing he'd actually wanted to ask about.

"You did great today, Shane," Matt said, setting his notepad aside. "Any last notes before we go?"

Yes, Shane said silently.

"No," Shane said aloud. "Thanks, Matt. I'll see you next week."

"See you then. Be well, Shane."

The call ended. Shane stared at the screen unseeing for a long minute, then slid down in his chair and covered his face with both hands, groaning.

So, of course, a knock came at the door.

Shane briefly contemplated simply shouting an annoyed "WHAT?" but resisted the urge, on the off chance it was a coach or one of the rookies needing help. Instead, he dragged himself out of the chair and stumbled over to the door.

It was Hayden.

"Hey, your appointment is over now, right?" He held up a bag of takeout and a six-pack of ginger ale. "Wanna watch something terrible and zone the fuck out?"

"Fuck yes," Shane said.

Shane found himself thoroughly unable to zone the fuck out.

He was full of delicious tandoori chicken. He was passively absorbing some wilderness survival show Hayden was obsessed with. He was mentally, spiritually, emotionally exhausted.

And yet.

"You okay over there, buddy?" Hayden finally asked, muting the TV. "You've been huffing and shifting around like Jackie when she's 9 months pregnant and can't sleep."

Shane raised his eyebrows. "That's the comparison you're going with?"

"It's accurate!" Hayden protested, shoving away the now-cold garlic naan he'd been mindlessly munching. "Is something going on? Things with Rozanov okay?"

"Just therapy," Shane said, waving a hand vaguely. "Got some stuff on my mind."

“Well, try me,” Hayden said, sitting up cross-legged on the other half of the bed. “I’m no therapist, but a best friend has to be worth something, right?”

Shane indulged himself in one dramatic thunk of his skull against the headboard. He’d barely had the words to talk about this stuff in therapy; could he really dredge it all up for Hayden who, on his best days, had the emotional awareness of a zamboni?

Then again, it had to do *with* Hayden in part, so he should probably try, right?

For once, he noticed it: Internally, he recoiled away from the idea of being honest with Hayden. That old instinct to hide was still so strong, even with someone who knew all his secrets now. Something in him was already scrambling for cover, searching for a topic change or a joke or an excuse. *I’m just tired, just thinking about the Dallas game tomorrow, this has just been a really long roadie, I just never get to see Ilya even though we live two hours apart, just more gay bullshit, nothing to talk about.*

Instead, he blurted: “Hayd, you still like me, right?”

Shane flushed as soon as the words were out. He sounded like a fucking child. What was *wrong* with him?

Hayden reared back, alarmed. “What the fuck, man? Of course I do. You’re my best friend. My brother.”

In for a penny...

“But I’m different now, right?” Shane insisted. “I act different. I’m telling the truth more often. Do you still like this version of me?”

Hayden ran both hands through his hair and blew out a breath. “Buddy, I liked you plenty before, but I could always tell you were holding something back, and to be honest, it frustrated me. I wished you would just let me know you. And now I feel like I finally do. That’s a *good* thing.” He paused, then: “Did I... do something to make you think I don’t like you anymore?”

“Not exactly, just...” Shane chewed the inside of his lip and turned to stare at a spot of peeling paint on the wall. “You still seem really uncomfortable with me and Ilya. And I don’t know if it’s because I’m gay, or because of who my boyfriend is, or because I didn’t tell you earlier, or what, but it kinda sucks, man. He’s gonna be there for the rest of my life, so if he makes you not like me anymore...”

Hayden grimaced and thumped a fist against his leg. “Fuck. *Fuck*. That’s on me, man, it’s nothing to do with you, and Jackie has given me plenty of shit about it. Rose too, privately, if you can believe it. I never thought I’d have my phone blown up by an angry movie star, but this is my life now, apparently.”

He heaved a gusty sigh. “I promise, it’s not because you’re gay or because of anything you did. It’s just me not being able to get my head around the—” He paused and looked around, even though they were in a hotel room alone, then ducked in closer and lowered his voice. “—the *Rozanov* of it all. I’ve been trying,

but... *fuck*, man, I'm sorry. I never wanted you to think—ugh. Rose was right. And Jackie."

Hayden stood in a rush and spun around, propping his hands on his hips while he collected himself. When he turned back, his expression was contrite and his eyes were a little red.

"I'm sorry, man. I'm gonna try to be better, okay? I know you love him, you wouldn't be doing all this if you didn't, and if you acted like this about Jackie I'd... I'd feel really shit."

"Yeah," Shane mumbled. "I just... I know his sense of humor isn't for everyone, but he's so much more than who he is on the ice. He gets me, and he treats me well, and being with him makes me so happy. I just don't get why he's such a supervillain to you."

Hayden pinched the bridge of his nose, then dropped his hand away, shaking his head. "I dunno, man. I think maybe I took the rivalry way more seriously than most people? It was you versus him, and you're my *boy*, so of course I'm first in line to fight your enemies, you know? You said you guys never hated each other, but I *didn't know that*. So I spent years ready to go to war for you against him, only to have everything turned on its head and... *fuck*. I'm not trying to make excuses. I found out about all this four months ago and that should be more than enough time to get over it."

"Try harder?" Shane suggested like an asshole. Hayden barked a laugh and nodded.

"Yeah, buddy. I'm gonna try harder." He flopped back down on the bed and looked up at Shane. "What next in The Plan? Any upcoming steps I can help with?"

Well, that was an improvement, at least. Shane nodded. "I was hoping I'd get a chance to talk about this in therapy today, but we ran out of time. I'm trying to think of how to come out publicly. Now that I'm out to the team and the Foundation is launched, that's kind of the next big milestone. But I'll tell you what I'm *not* going to do is post some fucking *statement* online. That's way too..."

He shuddered. Coming out publicly felt different because Shane was, at the end of the day, a very private person. Or, at least, that was how he used to think of himself, how he *still* reflexively thought of himself. It would probably take a lot more therapy sessions to fully untangle the concepts of *privacy* and *fear* in his mind. Was he actually a private person at all, or just a chronically terrified one?

He didn't feel like he owed the world his personal life or anything, but he also hated the feeling of everyone hovering over his shoulder, waiting to yell "gotcha!" the second he slipped up. He'd much rather do it on his own terms. He just needed to stick to The Plan. Their eventual soft launch would casually ease them into exactly what he wanted: living their lives without caring who saw until they eventually just stopped denying it. But the next step of The Plan involved

him being publicly out. Somehow. Without posting a statement or making a speech, because ugh.

In the end, Hayden surprised him with an idea. “Why don’t we just do what we did in the locker room? We talk about it in public and wait for someone to record you, let it hit the media?”

Shane frowned. “Won’t that feel like a scandal?”

Hayden shrugged. “Maybe at first, but it’ll give you a chance to be like ‘So what? It wasn’t a secret.’ That’s what you’ve been wanting, right? To just have it out there like it’s no big deal?”

Shane nodded slowly. “I... actually think that might work. You would help me with it?”

“Yeah, of course!” Hayden said a little too forcefully, clearly trying to get a head start on making up for the past. Shane shook his head with a small smile.

“Okay, well, I’ll talk to Ilya, Mom, and Farah about it tomorrow. They may not love that it’s so out of our control, just waiting for someone to record, though.”

Hayden snorted. “Nah, I got you covered there. I know *exactly* where we can go to get that shit on the internet in two minutes flat. Leave that part to me. Okay?”

Shane smiled, feeling something in his chest finally settle.

“Okay. Yeah. Let’s do it.”

Chapter 8: Two steps forward

Chapter Summary

Shane takes a big step. Ilya struggles with it, but there's good news, too.

Chapter Notes

CW: Depression

► Click for more info (minor spoilers)

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

[The video begins with a shot of a busy bar plastered in Metros merch, a group of young women in the foreground as seen through a phone's front selfie camera. They chat and laugh and are hanging all over each other as they drink.]

Woman 1: Here they come!

Woman 2: Hell yes, I hope I get absolutely railed tonight.

The view flips to the back camera to show a long line of men streaming through the door. It's the Montreal Metros, led by Captain Shane Hollander and Hayden Pike. Pike has a hand on Hollander's shoulder and is gesturing while he talks. He's not quite shouting, but he can be clearly heard above the din of the bar.

Hayden: —know all you wanna do right now is go home and call your boyfriend, but just stay for an hour. Have one drink with us. I won't even make fun of you for texting him the whole time.

Shane: Yes, you will. But fine. One drink.

Hayden: I know long distance sucks, man. When do you see him next?

Shane: Two more days. I'm dying.

Hayden throws his head back and laughs as Shane ducks his head shyly, a sappy grin on his face. The pair move past the camera and out of earshot. The camera remains pointed at their retreating backs.

Woman 1: So, uh... you heard that, right?

Woman 2: Holy shit.

The video ends abruptly.]

Shane and Hayden did their little performance at their regular hometown hockey bar a week and a half before the MLH's three-day Christmas break, and as predicted, the video hit the internet pretty much immediately. It was quickly corroborated by a second video the next morning, taken from a different angle that captured most of the same conversation. The articles swiftly followed from every sports gossip site on the internet, plus a few of the less discerning press outlets. It was a strange sort of mirror image of the thing Shane had always feared, except this time he'd chosen it himself, and had planned his reaction. That made all the difference.

Most of the legitimate news sources at least waited to get confirmation directly from Shane. He'd known it was coming, but it was still a little frustrating when the very first question off an incredible win—after a very strong showing from the Admirals—was about his sexuality. Beside him, Scott Hunter was exuding uncomfortable tension, sitting ramrod straight with a serial killer expression on his face. The reporters were not intimidated.

“Shane, a video was posted online last night of you discussing a boyfriend with teammate Hayden Pike. Can you confirm for us that you have a boyfriend? Are you gay?”

Shane shrugged like it was no big deal, even as his heart threatened to choke him out. *Confident gay man who doesn't give a fuck. Confident gay man who doesn't give a—*

“Yeah, I'm gay,” he said. “Any questions about hockey?”

There was a brief beat of silence, then the room exploded. Any hopes he had of turning the conversation back to the game were quickly dashed. Scott heaved the quietest exhausted sigh.

“You don't think it's important to address it?” the next reporter asked.

Shane shrugged again, keeping his body language loose and unbothered. “It's not like it was a secret.”

“So your team knew?” another man added.

Shane nodded. “Yep.”

A man in the back row stood. “You seem reluctant to talk about this. Are you uncomfortable with being gay? Were you trying to hide it?”

Shane scoffed and shook his head. “Not at all. I'm perfectly happy with who I am, but I never felt like I needed to justify myself with a big formal statement. I'd rather just openly be myself, and that's what you saw on the video. If I were trying to hide, I wouldn't be discussing my boyfriend in a public place.”

He paused to gather his thoughts for a moment, holding up a finger so the next reporter wouldn't jump in, then glanced over at Scott and pressed on. "I don't want to speak for Scott here, but we've discussed this before and I know we're of a similar mind in that he's glad he did what he did, and he also wishes it didn't have to be a big deal that came with a giant—no offense—but, a giant media circus. Right?"

"Right," Scott affirmed. Shane continued.

"We both love this sport and just want to play and be treated like any other hockey player. So yes, representation is critically important, and I'm happy to be that representation for our Asian and gay fans. It would have meant so much to me when I was coming up through the ranks. But we provide that representation by existing here and playing the best hockey we can. I'm here to play, and we just played an incredible game I'd love to talk about."

A woman in the front row raised her hand. "Just *one* last question on that topic. Do we get to know who your boyfriend is?"

Shane smiled, thoughts turning to Ilya. "Not yet. It's not safe for him to be out right now, so I ask everyone to please give us privacy and not go digging. We'll announce when we're ready. And if we play a strong season and bring the Cup back to Montreal this year, you'll see my boyfriend out on the ice with all the other partners."

The next reporter, thankfully, took the hockey bait. "Montreal's penalty kill unit is doing some really solid work this season. Walk us through..."

He sat through another few minutes of questions, which were all thankfully hockey related, then shook Scott Hunter's hand and managed to make it all the way back to the locker room before he started shaking. Hayden was waiting there for him, jingling his car keys and rocking from foot to foot. As soon as he caught sight of Shane, his eyes went wide.

"Shane, buddy, you did great! How do you feel?" he babbled. "*Fuck*, man, you're out out now. Wow."

Shane snorted, then burst into uncontrollable giggles, graduating to full-on laughter that refused to be contained.

"Oh my god, sorry," he gasped, still tapering off into occasional chuckles. "I think I'm having an adrenaline crash or something? Wow. *Fuck*. Yeah. I think I'm... relieved, maybe?"

Shane flopped down on the bench, elbows propped on his knees, giving a half-hearted wave to the last few stragglers as they headed out. When he picked his head back up, he was wearing a grin he couldn't seem to contain.

"God, it's like another huge weight off my shoulders. I got to come out, and I didn't have to post a fucking social media statement or anything. Thank god Farah and my mom didn't force me into it. Theriault and the GM are probably going to be annoyed with me, but I don't really care."

“Fuck ‘em,” Hayden said, clapping Shane on the shoulder. “I’d invite you out, but I’m guessing all you want is to talk to your boy right now, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Shane agreed. “That and I’m probably going to crash really hard in like half an hour, so I should probably be home when that happens.

Therapy and media training had allowed him to give fewer fucks, but that didn’t mean *no* fucks. Reality suddenly broke through the overwhelming relief, and he put his head between his knees and breathed through the sudden sharp turn his thoughts had taken.

“Oh god, now everyone knows I’m gay,” he said.

Hayden cleared his throat awkwardly. “I mean, yeah, that was the whole point, right?”

Shane sat back up and buried both hands in his hair. “Yeah, but now every time they look at me they’ll be like—” He pointed to himself. “Gay.”

Hayden nodded, rocking back on his heels. “When’s your next therapy appointment, bud?”

“God, I know, fuck *off*.” Shane stood. “I’m going home.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Hayden said.

The Ones Who Know

Harris 📱

Congrats on being officially out, Shane!! You absolutely crushed it up there 📱📱📱📱

Ilya

So proud of you sweetheart

Rose Landry

SHAAAAAAAAANE!!!!!!!!!!

Harris 📱

Okay okay before this devolves into hours of excited screaming we’ve got some social media work to do

Everyone please share this article about Shane’s coming out and react positively!

@Scott Hunter 🦄 Your boost would be especially helpful!

www.espn.com/mlh/story/...

You can post it yourself or reshare from the ESPN account, whatever you want

Marly

How the fuck did they get the article posted that fast, it's been like ten minutes

Scott Hunter 🦄

I'd invite you out for a drink tonight but I imagine you're probably feeling kinda done

Jane

VERY done. Yes. Thanks anyway though.

Thank you everyone, actually. I really appreciate your support.

Better Pike

We love you, babe!

Ilya
Babe? 🦄🦄🦄

Sveta

Oh calm yourself, no one is taking him from you

@espn

Hockey Superstar Shane Hollander Confirms: "Yeah, I'm gay. Any questions about hockey?" See the video and read more:

www.espn.com/mlh/story/...

↪ **@hollanova:** *[A gif from the video for Livin' on a Prayer by Bon Jovi. The lyrics at the bottom read "Whoooooa we're halfway there!"]*

↪ **@rhymeswithorange:** YES HOLLZY YES WE LOVE YOU 🦄🦄🦄🦄

↪ **@stixnbiscuits:** god more of this shit can we just not

↪ **@hollzyleftskate:** o captain my captain! We are with you forever 🦄🦄

↪ **@yellingbird:** at least he's focused on the hockey like he should be

↪ **@ryebri:** it's cool i'm just SOBBING IN FRONT OF MY COMPUTER. He's right. Representation matters. I wish baby Hollzy could have had someone like him.

@JJDagenais

Mon capitaine, I am always with you 100%!

www.espn.com/mlh/story/...

@SvetlanaVetrova

I know you don't want to make a big deal, but this really does matter, and I'm proud of you. ♥

www.espn.com/mlh/story/...

@RealRoseLandry

YES BESTIE I LOVE YOU @ShaneHollanderHockey!!!! ☐☐📱📶

www.espn.com/mlh/story/...

@ScottHunterOfficial

I fully second everything he said here. I've got your back always,

@ShaneHollanderHockey.

www.espn.com/mlh/story/...

@HockeyByConnors

Huge respect for @ShaneHollanderHockey! The league is better because you're in it.

www.espn.com/mlh/story/...

@IlyaRozanov81

Happy for you and all, but can't believe you let dinosaur Scott Hunter beat you to it. Second place again? That must sting.

www.espn.com/mlh/story/...

@OttawaCens

The Centaurs organization is proud to support our Ottawa born hockey hero,

@ShaneHollanderHockey!

www.espn.com/mlh/story/...

@CliffMarly

All the love and respect in the world for you, brother! Hell yeah, Hollzy.

www.espn.com/mlh/story/...

@HeyItsHayden

@ShaneHollanderHockey has always been and will always be my best friend in the world. Feeling so proud today.

www.espn.com/mlh/story/...

@SaintVic

You're a legend, Hollzy!

www.espn.com/mlh/story/...

@JackiePike35

Uncle Shane will always be a treasured member of our family! We're so proud of you. ♥♥♥

www.espn.com/mlh/story/...

Shane Hollander was out to the world, and Ilya Rozanov was alone in his bed. He was, in fact, supposed to be at morning skate, but he'd texted his coach and Bood that he was sick and needed to rest up so he could play in the game that night. He *was* resting, in that he was horizontal in a bed, but he was alternating between staring at the wall and reading article after article about Shane's coming out. Most were neutral-to-positive, with the occasional hand-wringing about locker rooms and masculinity, but the exact reaction of each article wasn't the point. It was their existence.

Shane was out. And Ilya was not.

He had gone to bed after his call with Shane the previous night with a heavy, foggy pressure behind his eyes that sometimes came and went. When he'd woken up in the morning, the pressure had been even heavier. He'd gotten up, pissed, and made it as far as putting toothpaste on his toothbrush before he ran out of energy and had to climb back into bed. *Fuck*, he was pathetic. Couldn't he just be happy for Shane? Was he really going to lay in bed and pout all day because he had to wait a few more months for his own coming out moment?

Apparently, yes, he was.

His phone was in his hand, face-down on the blanket after his most recent bout of scrolling, when it buzzed just after noon. He'd fielded a few texts from Shane throughout the day, replying with one-word answers and emojis, and expected it was another one from him.

It was Harris.

Harris 📶

Hey, heard you weren't at practice today! You ok?

Ilya
Fine

Harris 📶

Sick?

Ilya
Kinda

Harris 📶

You doing okay after Shane's coming out yesterday?

Ilya stared at the text for a very long time. Too long, apparently, because Harris eventually messaged again.

Harris 

Okay, my friend senses are tingling. Is this a “leave me alone I need time” situation, a “come sit with me” situation, or a “tough love I’m gonna come drag you out of bed” situation

Ilya almost didn’t reply, the naked vulnerability of being seen making the pressure behind his eyes surge even harder. Eventually, he forced himself to tap out a message, painstakingly slow, one letter at a time.

Ilya

Maybe one of the last two but I don’t know

Harris 

What is your favorite flavor of ice cream?

God, he liked lots of flavors, but nothing sounded particularly good and deciding felt like an insurmountable task. He stared at the text for too long again.

Harris 

If deciding is too hard, just send me A for something vanilla based or B for something chocolate based

Ilya
B

Harris 

You got it. Be there in 30.

After thirty minutes that seemed to pass in a blink, Ilya received another text.

Harris 

Door code?

Ilya
1410

The door downstairs beeped, and Harris called out. “Hey Ilya! Coming upstairs as soon as I find spoons.”

The drawers in the kitchen opened and slammed a few times, then the tinkle of clattering silverware and a short “ha!” signaled victory. Footsteps thudded up the stairs, along with the crinkle of a bag. Ilya felt the air change as Harris appeared in his doorway, but he couldn’t bring himself to roll over.

“Hi,” he managed, his voice raspy from dryness and disuse.

“Hey, Ilya,” Harris said, his voice lacking its usual cheerful chirp. “One sec, I’m gonna leave this stuff here and go get us something to drink.”

The footsteps left again. The refrigerator door opened and shut, then the footsteps returned.

“Can I sit on the bed?” Harris asked.

Ilya grunted. “Fine.”

Harris appeared in his field of vision on the other side of the bed and sat heavily on the edge, thrusting a blue Gatorade at Ilya. “No ice cream until you drink this. Sit up?”

He waggled the bottle. Ilya stared at it, trying to muster the energy to sit up. He couldn’t leave Harris sitting there holding it. He flopped a hand over and took the bottle, then lay there for a long moment. Finally, with a monumental effort, he braced himself on the bottle and pushed up to sitting. Or, well, *slumping* at least. Up enough to drink without dribbling all over himself, probably. He opened the Gatorade—Harris had kindly already broken the seal and loosened the cap—and the second he took his first swallow, his body realized how thirsty it was. He chugged until the whole thing was gone, then capped the empty bottle and chucked it over the side of the bed. With a small thunk, he rested his head back against the headboard and let it roll to the side so he could finally look Harris in the eye. Or, close to it, at least.

“You have ice cream?”

Harris leaned over the edge of the bed and rummaged through the bag, emerging with two pints and two spoons. “Chocolate chip cherry and chocolate cookie dough. I’ll eat whichever one you don’t want.”

“Cherry, please,” Ilya said, making a gimme hand. Harris pulled the lid off and stabbed the spoon inside, then handed it over, opening the other one for himself. Ilya dug out a spoonful with a nice big chunk of cherry in it and was horrified and humiliated to feel tears springing into the corners of his eyes as the first sweetness burst on his tongue. *Fuck*, he was a mess.

“Thank you,” he finally managed once he was halfway through his pint, already feeling at least twenty-five percent more human. “Shane would want me to be eating something healthier, but I think I needed the shock of sugar.”

“That was my thought, too. I had a friend in college who went through something similar, and a sugary treat sometimes helped. We can get some borderline healthy takeout later to fuel you up for the game. If you’re planning on playing, that is,” Harris said with a wave of his spoon. “So, can I ask about this?”

Ilya shrugged, digging in the bottom of his container for another good cherry. “It happens sometimes.”

Harris hummed around a spoonful. “Does something trigger it, or does it just happen?”

“Mm, can be either,” Ilya said. “Sometimes there will be trigger, but it is not even really *about* that. I don’t know if that makes any sense. It’s like, the thing will kick it off, but then it is... snowball?”

“It snowballs, yeah,” Harris said. “So you’re not even sad about the first thing anymore, necessarily, you’re just...”

“Sad. Yes.”

Harris studied the chunk of cookie dough balanced on the end of his spoon, then shoved it in his mouth. “Have you ever tried therapy before?”

Ilya snorted. “No. That is what Shane said I should do. I guess he was right. He will be so smug.”

Harris laughed. “I feel like everyone who has a good experience in therapy wants so badly for everyone else in their life to do it, too. It’s a universal thing.” He pointed his spoon at Ilya. “Not a bad thing, though, and in this case, he’s probably right. Sorry. When do you see him next?”

“I get to visit him in Montreal tomorrow, and then a few days after we will get Christmas break together here in Ottawa. It’s good.” It gave Ilya a pained sort of thrum in his chest to think of it. Tomorrow, and then three whole days not long after. Riches. “If I am not too exhausted after the game I might drive down tonight.”

“Well, text me when you get there if you decide to do that, so I know you made it okay,” Harris said, scraping the bottom of his container. “Was it Shane’s coming out that triggered it this time?”

Ilya nodded, too ashamed to come right out and say yes.

“It’s okay to feel however you feel about it, you know,” Harris said, looking over with a raised eyebrow. “I know you’re happy and proud, but you can also be pissy and jealous too. I would be.”

Ilya blinked, surprised. “You would?”

Harris scoffed. “Uh, yeah, of *course* I would. I mean, maybe you don’t feel this way at all, but I’ve always wanted to be out and proud, so to see someone else get to do that while I had stay in the closet?”

“It fucking sucks,” Ilya admitted.

“It fucking *sucks*!” Harris said, slamming his empty ice cream container down on the side table. “Your feelings make total sense, Ilya. I’m thrilled for Shane, but I’m also super sad for you. And I can’t wait until your time comes so we can celebrate you so hard.”

Ilya gave up on holding the tears in. A few broke loose and trailed down his cheeks.

“It is coming soon. My residency application is going well. There has been progress. Biometrics, medical, background check, all passed. We will get there.” He took a deep breath and let it gust out in a sigh. “I just have to get through a few more months.”

“And in the meantime...”

Ilya sighed again. “Yes, yes, in the meantime I will go to fucking therapy.”

“Excellent!” Harris said, clapping his hands and rubbing them together. “Now, let’s get you clean, get some takeout, and start getting pumped up for the game tonight. I’m here to dump your ass into the shower if needed. You’re like twice my size but I can totally do this. Let’s go.”

Harris flexed, and Ilya was surprised to hear a small laugh burst from his own chest. The pressure was still heavy and pushing behind his eyes, but his limbs felt less leaden, his mind somewhat less foggy. A shower didn’t feel completely impossible. Maybe if he could get moving, the momentum would carry him straight through to the game that evening. And then, to Shane’s.

If he could just get to Shane’s, everything would be okay.

“Alright, let’s see your muscles, Drover. Push me,” Ilya said, kicking the blankets off his legs.

“Oh, get ready,” Harris said, planting his knees on the bed and steadying himself. “One... two...”

Ilya leaped out of the bed just as Harris lunged forward, barely catching himself as he nearly tumbled straight off the edge.

Ilya cackled all the way to the shower.

Because he was a fucking coward, Ilya texted Shane while he scarfed his takeout on the couch next to Harris.

Ilya

So the therapy thing

How exactly do I find a therapist

Jane

I may have made a list of Russian-speaking, LGBTQ+ friendly therapists in Ottawa and Montreal

It's a short list but they exist

I'll email it to you

Ilya

Of course you did

Thank you

Jane

Anytime ♥

You still feeling sad about the hiding?

Ilya

Yes, sometimes.

But also I think I am just sad.

Like my mother was sad.

Jane

I love you so much. Thank you for telling me.

You don't think about doing what she did, do you?

Ilya

No, no, I do not want to

But sometimes I think I could maybe think about it?

This probably should have been an in-person conversation. No, it *definitely* should have been, or at minimum a facetime. But Ilya didn't think he could handle Shane's eyes while he said what he had to say, and so he kept texting, darting a look over at Harris as the burning behind his eyes returned.

Ilya

I understand if you want to call off the plan

Or not be with me anymore

I know you did not sign up for this

Maybe I am too messed up

Jane

Hey NO

WHAT

Fuck I wish I could call you right now

Fucking meeting

Of course I still want to be with you. I will ALWAYS want to be with you.

Please don't ever think I don't. Remember, I love all the versions of you, right?

I love you. Exactly as you are.

“Bathroom,” Ilya rasped, darting out of the room with his phone before Harris had a chance to look. He locked himself in the downstairs bathroom and took a shuddering breath, trying to get himself under control. He needed to rally somehow. He still had to be at the rink in an hour or so. But definitely not with red-rimmed eyes and a hoarse voice. Ilya turned his phone over in his hands a few times, then tried to steer the conversation—and himself—toward a lighter tone.

Ilya

I love you too

I can't wait to see you tomorrow

Jane

Me too.

And then Christmas break soon. 3 whole days.

Ilya

3 whole days

Gonna fuck you on every surface in this house

Jane

Yes please.

I gotta go, but call after the game tonight? I want to talk about all this more.

Ilya

Yes

I want to hear your voice

And Ilya promised himself that after the Christmas break, he would use Shane's list of therapists and find someone who could make him better for Shane.

The original plan had been for Ilya and Shane to head to the Hollanders' house around lunch time on Christmas Eve. Plans changed, however, when Shane saw Ilya's ass in his newly-tailored slacks, hoisted him up onto the kitchen counter, and proceeded to swallow Ilya's cock until he came down Shane's throat with a shout that echoed off the walls. That had led to them stumbling back upstairs, where Ilya opened Shane up torturously slowly, keeping him hanging on the edge until Ilya was hard again. By the time they'd fucked, showered *again*, and gotten re-dressed in their Christmas Eve outfits, they'd completely missed lunch. When they appeared an hour and a half late, blushing, apologetic, and sheepish, Shane was grateful his parents were tactful enough to do nothing more than exchange an amused look.

They ate leftovers. It was fine.

Later, the four of them gathered in the living room with drinks and hors d'oeuvres, discussing the season, the future of the Centaurs, and updates on all of the friends who were in the know. Shane could sense the way his mother was gently guiding them toward business and was unsurprised when she set down her wine glass and picked up her laptop.

"So, boys, I know it's a holiday, but I was hoping we could do a quick check in on how our plan is progressing," she said, waking the computer. "We'll keep it quick, then we can watch a movie, okay?"

Shane glanced over to Ilya to check in; things had been a little strained since Shane's public coming out, and he didn't want to make Ilya wrestle with his complicated feelings in front of his parents. To his surprise, Ilya had broken out into a grin.

"I actually have an early Christmas present for us all," he said, pulling out his phone and tapping for a second before turning it around. Shane recognized his permanent residency application tracker, which they'd all been receiving regular screenshots of. His eyes widened, and he looked up to Ilya, whose grin impossibly broadened. "A few days ago, I got my P1 email and filled everything out. The consultant tells me that means my PR has been approved and we are entering final stages."

"Oh my god!" Shane and his mom exclaimed in unison.

"Son, that's great!" his dad said. Shane dove forward, snatching the phone from Ilya's hand to get a closer look.

“So, what does this mean?” he asked, breathless. “How much longer until it’s done?”

Ilya huffed a laugh. “You know there is no telling with this stuff. It could be three weeks, it could be three months. But the next thing is my eCoPR—” he recited the letters carefully, “—which says I am officially a permanent resident. Most people get that about five, five and half months after applying, so maybe March? But the actual card might not come in the mail for another month or three after that. Traveling is a little messy before the card arrives, but the team said they will help coordinate all that.”

Shane passed the phone back, his eyes stinging. “But once you get the E-whatever, that’s it? You’re safe?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, eyes shining. “Just one more step.”

“Wow,” Shane’s dad said, leaning back in his seat and swirling his drink. “Wow. Ilya, this is amazing news.”

Shane’s mom fanned her eyes, clearly fighting back her own tears. “Oh, I’m so happy. Cheers, everyone.”

She held up her wine glass, and it was met by two tumblers of vodka and a ginger ale. Shane was abruptly not close enough to Ilya and curled up against his side, wiggling until Ilya threw an arm over his shoulders. Ilya chuckled and pressed a kiss at Shane’s crown, nuzzling there for a moment.

“Soon,” he said, and Shane felt his smile.

“Soon,” he replied.

Shane’s mom dabbed at her eyes and then tapped on her laptop for a moment with a small smile. “Okay, well, that’s the best possible update. Item one on my agenda was to see how that was going, so: check! And there’s been so much good buzz online from your friends supporting you on social media, and from the stats article, which has rippled out to the rest of the league. Things are progressing perfectly on that front. You’ve even gotten some great secondary coverage just about the support you’ve received from other players. We’re seeing a distinct shift in the tone of the coverage you’re both receiving, and people really do seem to be viewing you as more of a unit.”

She turned to Shane, her smile edging more toward a smirk. “Shane, people are really enjoying your more open and authentic persona. Lots of comments about your real smile versus your old media polished smile.”

Shane felt himself flush, and he tucked his face against Ilya’s chest. “Oh. Great. I guess.”

“It *is* great,” his mom said. “And they like your sense of humor, too. Your new image is really solidifying. I’ve been on the lookout for any sort of criticism and haven’t found much of anything that isn’t just overtly homophobic. Obviously some people are horrible, but there’s no getting around that. There were people who hated the old you, too, for whatever reason.”

“Haters gonna hate,” Ilya quipped.

“Exactly,” his mom said. “Ilya, things are both easier and harder on your end of things. Boston fans are still pissed at you even this far into the season, and I expect that to stay true for a while, with a resurgence whenever Boston inevitably misses the Cup finals this year. There’s also some talk about you ‘going soft’ as you become more and more associated with Shane and the Centaurs, leaving behind your old image. On the other hand, a whole new base of fans is really embracing you, and there’s a not insignificant group of people obsessed with your ‘bromance’.”

“If only they knew,” Shane grumbled.

“They will soon enough,” his mom said gently. “So, I think we have a couple of priorities going into the new year. First, I think we continue to have you seen together both with and without other people. Next, we should go ahead and start booking some joint ad shoots, just small ones based in Montreal or Ottawa with quick turn-around that we can squeeze in during the regular season. I know it sucks to take up some of your limited time together, but it’s for the cause, right?”

Shane and Ilya looked at each other and shrugged, sighing. At least on a joint ad shoot they could still have a hotel room together, probably. Better than being apart.

His mom made a few notes, then continued. “Finally, I think we need to continue to work on Ilya’s new image so it’s as solid and well-accepted as Shane’s, and I have a few ideas for that. Ilya, people have noticed that you obviously stopped going out so much over the last year, and that you seem to have stopped almost entirely in Ottawa. I think people need to see that you haven’t just dropped off the face of the Earth. I’d love to see you using your Instagram stories more. Post when you go out with Harris, when you’re at Bood’s for a barbecue, when you’re out at Monk’s, when you’re out with friends during roadies. I’m also going to work on getting you some solo brand partnerships to squeeze in as soon as possible. I think we want to strike a balance between people seeing you living a fun, more chill and casual life you love while pairing that with ad work showing you as cool, masculine, and maybe a touch more elegant than in the past. What do you think?”

Ilya nodded, considering. “Yes, I think that works. I can do the Instagram stories thing. And I will do whatever brand things you tell me make sense.”

“Great, that’s great, Ilya, thank you.” She made a few last notes, then closed her laptop and picked up her wine. “I really think we’ve made some great progress since the summer. Things are coming right along. If you wanted to fully come out after the playoffs are over, I think you’ll probably be ready by then.”

Shane and Ilya locked gazes once again, this time with twin smiles pulling at the corners of their mouths. After playoffs. That wasn’t so far away.

“Six months,” Shane murmured, grabbing Ilya’s hand and squeezing.

“That’s not long at all,” his dad said brightly.

“Sooner, for the soft launch,” his mom reminded them. “As soon as Ilya’s eCoPR is here, you can start.”

Ilya’s smile took on an edge of mischief. “That will be fun.”

“God help us all,” Shane said, but he leaned his head back against Ilya’s shoulder as he said it, leaning over to kiss his cheek. “I’m sure you look forward to embracing the chaos.”

“Of course,” Ilya said.

Shane’s dad laughed and shook his head, then stood, holding out a hand to Shane’s mom. “Well, boys, you pick a movie and relax. I think we’ll get started on dinner.”

“Let us know if you need any help, please,” Ilya said, then slung an arm around Shane’s neck and brought his phone up, camera app open. They snapped a few pictures: heads leaning together, kissing cheeks, kissing on the mouth, flopping on top of each other. Shane watched as Ilya carefully saved them to the encrypted photo app Rose had told them about, eyes lingering on the last photo. Their eyes were both shut, crinkled at the corners, their noses nuzzling together as they lay on the couch side by side, smiling perfect contented smiles.

“Can you believe that next Christmas, we’ll get to post these photos like any other couple?” Shane said, staring at the photo with something like awe in his voice. Ilya clicked off the screen and tossed his phone to the other end of the couch, wrapping his arms around Shane and pulling him in close.

“I cannot wait to show us to the whole world,” he said into Shane’s hair.

Shane nuzzled into Ilya’s chest and breathed his scent in deep, letting out a hum of agreement as he reached up to thread their fingers together. His thumb swiped once, twice over Ilya’s bare ring finger.

“You know what? Me, too,” he murmured.

Chapter End Notes

Note: The depiction of Ilya’s depression in this chapter is based on my own experiences and is by no means universal. If you ever feel like Ilya, I hope you’ll reach out to someone. Therapy and meds and stuff really do help! I love you and you deserve to feel better.

Chapter 9: Community

Chapter Summary

Ilya goes to therapy, and The Ones Who Know have a mini-reunion at All-Stars.

Chapter Notes

CW: Discussion of depression in a therapeutic setting, and a passing mention of Irina's death.

In this fic, Galina sucks less as a therapist, I hope! I have beef with TLG Galina.

Previously On: The boys, in collaboration with Yuna, have a new post-cottage plan to get them happy, safe, and out in just a year or two. They've come out to their friends, Ilya has traded to the Centaurs, Shane has started therapy, and the regular season has begun. Shane is out to his team and the public, and they're both out to Scott Hunter and Harris Drover, who have joined The Ones Who Know. The Irina Foundation has been announced, Hayden has vowed to suck less, and Ilya's permanent residency application has been approved. They're just waiting for that final confirmation to hit.

It was the second season in a row the league had decided not to make the bye week overlap with All-Stars, which meant Ilya would get a good chunk of time with Shane not once but *twice* in January. Their bye weeks didn't perfectly overlap, of course, because their luck couldn't be *that* good, but still, they made plans to spend their time off at each other's houses, an unprecedented *ten days* in each others' presence, broken only by a handful of home games, practices, and a single away game in Toronto. It was a good thing, too, because the first day of Shane's bye week was also the day of Ilya's first therapy appointment.

It was going... fine. They'd hit the basics:

Why was he there? Probably depressed, but no, not thinking of self-harming at the moment.

What did it feel like? Tired, heavy, like moving was impossible. Like he was about five seconds away from crying at all times. Like maybe he hated himself.

Quick family history? Wonderful mother dead by suicide, asshole father dead by dementia, terrible brother still living it up but no longer on Ilya's dime.

Important relationships? Shane had encouraged total honesty. *Therapy doesn't work without it, Ilya.* And so, Dr. Galina Molchalina knew all about Shane Hollander and had gotten a brief rundown of The Plan.

The history taking took up the bulk of the appointment, but with about fifteen minutes left, they finally got down to business.

"So, Ilya, I want to come back to your down periods where you have a hard time getting out of bed," Galina said, in Russian, thankfully. "Are they recent, or have they been going on for a long time?"

Ilya thought for a moment. "I think maybe they have been happening since I was a teenager, but have been getting worse as I get older. Usually I can feel it coming on and I used to be able to cut it off before it got bad."

"Say more about that," Galina encouraged, jotting down a note. "How did you cut it off before?"

Ilya shrugged. "Go dancing, get drunk, get laid, win a hockey game, buy another sports car I don't need, something like that."

Ilya cringed as the words came out, hearing how they sounded, but Galina just nodded as if that made total sense.

"And are you still doing those things?" she asked.

Ilya shook his head. "No, not really. Over the past...maybe year and a half or so, I realized it was all feeling less good than it used to. The cars, the girls, none of it was making me happy, I don't think, and it wasn't drowning things out the way it used to anyway. Shane and I are monogamous, so I am not going out to clubs and hooking up anymore. I sold most of the sports cars to fund the charity we started."

Galina smiled. "I was really happy to hear about the Irina Foundation, by the way. I think it's a wonderful initiative."

"Ah, yes, thank you," Ilya said with a chuckle. "Is part of why Shane encouraged me to try therapy. We do run a mental health charity, after all. Would be stupid for me to dig in my heels and be old fashioned Russian about it."

Galina tipped her head in acknowledgement. "Even when we logically know better, it can be hard to overcome our base programming. And the drinking, are you still doing that?"

"Only socially, and most of the Centaurs are not really hard drinkers," Ilya said. "They are more stand-around-and-sip-a-beer guys."

Galina made another note. "So most of the old ways you had of coping are gone. And, I hate to say it, but you aren't getting the regular lifts from winning hockey games anymore, either."

Ilya clutched his chest. “Ouch, twist the knife, why don’t you? We will get better!”

“I believe it!” Galina said with a laugh. “So, Ilya, let me tell you what I’m thinking, where we go from here. First of all, I think you’re a really strong candidate for antidepressant medication, and I’d like you to talk to your doctor about trying it.”

Ilya started to protest, but Galina held up a hand and pushed on.

“I know not everyone is thrilled with the idea, and pills might be a sensitive thing for you. That’s completely valid. I do think you should at least consider it, though. With your family history and your description of your mood, I really think it could help you lift your baseline and stabilize some of those very low lows. There’s no shame in using a medication to achieve that. It’s all just brain chemistry.”

Ilya pressed his lips together in a line and gave a tight nod. Not an agreement, but at least a confirmation that the message had been received.

“Next,” Galina continued. “I’d like to work with you on replacing some of those old maladaptive coping mechanisms with healthier ones. I often recommend physical activity, but you’re obviously getting plenty of that already. We can work on creating a list together, but for now I’d like for item number one to be reaching out to someone, whether that’s a friend or your boyfriend or whoever. Can you think of anything off the top of your head that gives you an instant mood boost?”

Ilya thought for a moment, then grinned. “Sometimes I go running in the park specifically so I can see all the dogs and pet them.”

“Perfect,” Galina said with a smile. “And in the long term, we can work together to unpack some of the traumas you’ve experienced and explore the ways they’ve wired your brain to think in certain patterns. I’d like to see you weekly for now, if that works with your schedule. We can do virtual meetings while you’re on the road if needed.”

Ilya nodded. “I can do that.”

Galina set her pen down on top of her notepad and stood, holding out her hand. “Ilya, it was great to meet you and get to know you a little. I really think you made the right choice coming here, and we’re going to get you feeling a lot better.”

Ilya took her hand and shook, feeling hollowed out but weirdly buoyed by her words. “I hope so. Thank you. See you next week.”

He stopped at the front desk on the way out to schedule his next two months of appointments, then swung through the Kawartha Dairy drive through on his way home to grab an Emergency Mental Health Milkshake, as Harris had taken to calling them. He also grabbed a small container of raspberry sorbet on the off chance he could convince Bye-Week-Shane to have a little treat. As soon as he

walked through the door to his house, he chucked the empty milkshake cup in the trash, threw the sorbet in the freezer, and faceplanted on the couch with a groan. A moment later, Shane's voice came from somewhere behind him.

"Ilya? You okay?"

Ilya groaned.

"You were right," he said, his voice muffled by a throw pillow. A hand settled between his shoulder blades.

"About what?"

Ilya turned his head just enough so he could see Shane from the corner of his eye.

"Therapy. Is fucking *exhausting*."

The Ones Who Know

Rose Landry

So look not to just INVITE myself places

But

I just found out I'm not needed on set the weekend of the all star game

And I MAY have confirmed on the side that @Sveta is also available

So I'm just SAYING

Reunion at the ASG?

Sveta

Cute how you are asking

I have Ilya's credit card saved on my laptop and I am booking us a suite at the hotel next door right now

Two rooms, one for us and one for the lovebirds

And I'm booking us a private room at a restaurant for dinner on Saturday night

Just to make sure I have it right, in attendance will be:

Me, Rose, the lovebirds, Cliff, JJ, and Scott Hunter, yes?

Scott Hunter

I don't suppose this is optional?

Sveta

No ♥

Scott Hunter 🦅

Can I at least bring Kip?

Sveta

Lovebirds?

Jane

Fine with me

Ilya

Yes, but if you have not already told him about us, don't tell him before

Also book two extra for dinner Sveta

Jane

?

Ilya

I'll tell you on the side

Marly? JJ?

Marly

Sounds sick, I'm in

JJ

I would not miss it!

Sveta

Excellent

Ilya

Rose and Sveta bring noise cancelling headphones

Or earplugs

Unless you want to hear what Shane sounds like when I fuck him through the
mattress

Actually he'll be into that, never mind

Jane

Jesus christ

JJ

GET IT CAPITAINE

Better Pike

Please, say more 00

14th Best

I'm muting this chat

Saint

I'm not picturing it

Harris 

I'm not NOT picturing it

Conny

What did I miss?

Scott Hunter 

Scroll up at your own risk

Ilya

So Bood is going to be at all stars

With Cassie

Jane

You're thinking of telling them so they can join us?

Ilya

In a manner of speaking

If it's okay with you

I have plan

Jane

What is that supposed to mean?

Ilya?

ILYA

For fucks sake

@QueersofMTL

Get to know Montreal's newest gay icon, hockey star Shane Hollander! Here's everything we know about the Metros captain and his mysterious boyfriend:

www.queersofmtl.com/story...

↪ **@lavender_parade** WE LOVE YOU CAPTAIN

↪ **@butwhatifryan** I know you have a boyfriend Shane but give me ONE CHANCE I swearrrrr I will be so good for you

↪ **@miss_josie** *[The familiar meme of Rosa and her puppy from Brooklyn 99, with slightly altered wording in the caption: I've only had gay Shane Hollander for a day and a half, but if anything happened to him I would kill everyone in this room and then myself.]*

↪ **@themetroz** I just want the entire metros org to know I have my binoculars out and I am watching them. If you fuck with our king, we will fuck with you.

↪ **@allezmontreal** truly, mtl is the queerest fucking city and it would be monumentally stupid to fuck with this community. We gotta make sure they know it.

@IlyaRozanov81

Love getting to see these fools at all stars

[A series of photos are attached:

Ilya with an arm thrown around Cliff, pulling him close to lick his cheek;

Ilya being held upside down by JJ and Bood, his curls touching the hotel bar floor;

Ilya with his arms wrapped around Svetlana's waist, her feet kicking up off the ground;

Ilya and Rose sticking their tongues out at each other from opposite sides of the photo;

Ilya with his head resting on Shane's shoulder as Shane pretends to take a bite out of his head.]

↪ **@HockeyByConnors** So fucking jealous, have a drink for me

↪ **@CliffMarly** git gud connie baby then you can be here too

↪ **@HockeyByConnors** walk into traffic plz then your spot will be free

@CliffMarly

All stars baybeeeee

[A group photo of hockey players trying to balance pints of beer on their heads. Shane is perfectly balanced and poised, no hands needed. Ilya has his hand ready to grab his at any second. JJ is fully still holding onto his, not even trying. Cliff's is actively falling off his head, the beer half sloshed out in midair. Scott Hunter is leaping back from Cliff with a horrified look while Kip laughs doubled-over in the background.]

↔ **@SaintVic** Party foul, chug chug chug

↔ **@JackiePike35** I love you idiots

↔ **@HeyItsHayden** Let me guess, Shane got all smug about yoga or whatever

↔ **@RealRoseLandry** Shane? Smug? NEVER. (Yes. Always.)

@JJDagenais

Mon capitaine, mon ami, mon frère

[A photo of JJ with his fist in the air and head thrown back in a whoop as he gets a piggy back ride from Shane.]

@DorothysMTL

Attn: all sports gays, Shane Hollander night is TONIGHT! Everyone who wears Metros merch will get 25% off their drink tab. Don't forget to put on those freckles for our lookalike contest, too!

Ilya always looked forward to the All-Star game. Not because of anything to do with All-Stars itself, of course; no one gave a fuck about that. He only cared for one very obvious reason: three days with Shane, a treat even when much of it involved mandatory events. And the best thing about the 2018 All-Stars weekend in particular? Thanks to their public friendship, Shane was feeling less paranoid about being seen together. It was a very good thing, because as each day brought Ilya's Confirmation of Permanent Residence closer, the itch under his skin intensified. The itch to touch, to claim, to declare, to parade and flaunt at the bar and the pool and at dinner and in front of cameras. Ilya *wanted*, and the wanting had to be fed somehow.

And so, he touched. A hand at Shane's elbow when he interjected himself into a conversation. An arm slung over his shoulders as they chatted with teammates. A brush against the small of his back as he slid past at the bar. Every tiny touch poured into the yawning void inside him, and only the knowledge that soon he would have *everything* kept him in check.

And, miraculously, Shane touched back. They were joined at the hip all weekend, moving through rooms together, open and playful, teasing each other in media and posing for every camera that pointed their way. The friendship narrative needed new fuel, and Ilya especially was only too happy to provide.

Ilya was glad, however, that Shane was *not* with him when a group of the biggest assholes in the league decided he needed to be part of them. They'd absorbed

him into their conversation somehow without his consent: Dallas Kent and Troy Barrett, that guy from Colorado that Shane couldn't stand, the winger from Nashville whose teeth Ilya had once knocked out after he ran his mouth one too many times. It was the most unpleasant company the MLH had to offer, and Ilya was deeply relieved when Shane provided him an out, appearing at his side dressed in the softest looking cashmere sweater and pants that hugged his ass in a truly unfair display.

"Hey, I got us a car to meet Sveta and Rose for our reservation. Meet me out front in five?" Shane said, a hand boldly splayed across Ilya's shoulder.

"I'll be right out," Ilya said, reaching out to pat Shane's lower back. He knew his smile was probably too soppy for a group that included the likes of Dallas Kent, but he could only rein himself in so much. Shane returned the smile faintly, then nodded to the group and headed out, Ilya's eyes following him the whole way. A snort startled him out of it.

"Dude, you know he's gay, right?" Kent said, lip curled in a sneer. "Do you really wanna be seen touching him all the time?"

The last remnants of Ilya's smile fell off his face.

"If *you* have a problem, then *we* have a problem, and I will rearrange your teeth," he snarled, and then stalked off. Kent and his goons didn't bother lowering their voices as he walked away.

"Oh, shit, Hollzy's got a guard dog," the Colorado guy said.

A barked laugh. "They're so weird about each other."

"They're probably sucking each other's dicks," Kent replied.

In just a few months, they'd all know just how right they were.

Ilya and Shane were the first to arrive at the restaurant and, as promised, they were led back to a completely closed off private room with a large circular table set for ten. Ilya pulled out Shane's chair for him, then snuck in a quick kiss on the cheek right before a waiter bustled in to take their drink orders. Shane slipped the man his card to pre-pay for the whole table, smugly pleased to have beaten Ilya to it. As soon as they were alone, Shane slipped a hand onto Ilya's knee under the table and squeezed.

"It's been a year since we started figuring all this out. Last year at All-Stars. And now look where we are," he murmured, looking for all the world like he was five seconds from crawling into Ilya's lap. Ilya smirked, laying his hand over Shane's in his lap.

"Yes, a year since you told me the Earth-shattering revelation that you are gay."

“Oh fuck off. It *was* Earth-shattering at the time. This is me after a year of being honest and six months of gay therapy, okay? I’ve come a long way.” He darted a quick look at the door, then pressed a kiss to Ilya’s shoulder. “How is your therapy going? You’ve had two more sessions, right?”

Ilya huffed a laugh through his nose and looked away.

“You lied to me. Therapy is awful. I cry all the fucking time,” he admitted. Therapy made him feel like one giant gaping wound that he barely managed to stitch closed between sessions. “But I, ah... I made the appointment with Terry to talk about medication. So. There’s that.”

“That’s a good thing, right?”

Ilya shrugged. “Yes, I suppose.”

Shane wisely chose not to push, because Ilya had nothing more he wanted to say on that. Instead, Shane said: “Matt told me we can back off to every-other-week appointments now if I want.”

“Oh, so you are trying to tell me you are better than me at therapy now?” Ilya said with a grin. “You are trying to win therapy?”

“No, god, definitely not,” Shane said, laughing. “Just, he thinks we’ve made a lot of progress and I could benefit from more time in between sessions to work on the things we talk about and think about stuff.”

“Mm, my Shane,” Ilya said, abandoning Shane’s hand and reaching for his thigh instead. “So good at being gay now. I think maybe I want a personal demonstra—”

The door slid open, and Ilya and Shane leaned away from each other, cheeks flushed, as Sveta and Rose were led into the room. They both sat down directly across the table from Ilya and Shane, snickering at each other as they got settled and ordered their drinks. As soon as the waiter was gone, Rose leaned her elbows on the table and propped her chin in her hands.

“So, have you guys given up on hiding already? Because your heart eyes are visible from space,” she said, smirking.

“Oh, so sorry, I will try to love my boyfriend less,” Ilya snarked as the door opened again and the rest of their party arrived. Scott, Kip, Bood, Cassie, JJ, and Cliff all strode in with loud greetings and introductions, finding seats around the table so all the couples could sit together. Ilya launched himself out of his chair to give Cliff a big back-slapping hug even though he’d just seen him a few hours earlier.

“Bood, Cassie, so glad you could come!” Ilya said, moving to them next and feeling the smile on his face grow truly out of control. “And Kip! I’m so delighted to meet you that I won’t even make any jokes about your ancient boyfriend.”

“Thanks? I guess?” Kip said, visibly trying not to laugh at Scott’s exasperation. Drink orders were taken and appetizers were ordered, and once the group was finally alone, Svetlana smiled like a shark.

“Everyone, I just thought you should know, I had the waitstaff sign NDAs,” she said. Ilya felt his heart swell to bursting.

“Oh, Sveta, you do the most wonderful things for me,” he said, and then grabbed Shane by the chin and kissed him. Shane’s hand fisted in Ilya’s shirt and yanked him closer, deepening the kiss as their friends whooped and at least one person whispered “holy shit.”

When they finally broke apart, flushed and breathless, Shane leveled a flat look at Ilya.

“So that was your grand reveal plan? To just make out in front of them and see their reaction?” Shane turned and shrugged at Cassie and Bood, exasperated. “I don’t know why I even bother being surprised anymore.”

Ilya leaned back and laughed heartily. “Well, I thought about gaslighting them throughout most of the meal, but then you were too pretty and I could not help myself.”

Shane rolled his eyes but pressed in for another quick kiss anyway. When he sat back, Ilya looked straight to Bood for his reaction. He’d been ninety-nine percent sure he and Cassie would be cool about it, but there was always that lingering one percent, and...

“*This* is your mystery partner you moved to Ottawa for?” Bood said with the biggest grin on his face. “Holy shit, what a fucking power couple.”

Next to him, Cassie had her hands folded over her heart like she was trying to keep it inside her chest.

“I think this is the greatest thing that’s happened all year,” she said, sticking her hand out past JJ to shake Shane’s hand. “Shane, it is so good to meet you. I’m Cassie.”

On the other side of the table, Kip laughed and leaned against Scott’s shoulder. “Sorry, babe, I think you’ve been upstaged. If they ever come out, you definitely won’t be the gay king of hockey anymore.”

“God, I hope not. They can have the crown, I’m sick of it already,” Scott said.

“Speaking of coming out,” Ilya said, lifting his drink in a grand gesture. “Bood, Cassie, Kip, welcome to The Ones Who Know, our group of friends who are helping us with our big, complicated plan to eventually be out to the world. There are a few others who aren’t at All-Stars this year. You already know Harris, of course.”

“No wonder you guys are always whispering in corners,” Bood said with a chuckle.

Ilya shrugged, grinning. “Yes, is hard having very big secret you want to tell everyone but cannot. We are waiting for my Canadian permanent residency to come through, and until then we’re trying to get the world used to us being friends without it affecting our hockey.”

“Hell yeah, I retweeted that article ESPN did about your stats,” Bood said. “Felt like the whole internet saw that one.”

“Yeah, even I’ve heard about your rivalry bromance, and I don’t even follow much hockey outside the Admirals,” Kip added. “You guys are doing a good job so far.”

Shane looked a little heartened by that. He glanced over at Ilya. “I’d be curious to know how everyone’s locker rooms are reacting. To our ‘friendship’ *and* to me being, you know, *out*.”

“Oh, that’s easy for us,” Bood said. “I’m sure Rozy’s already told you, but our room is completely supportive of you both. We’ve got some guys on the way out who are more old school hockey, but they know they’re in the minority and keep their mouths shut. We’ve made it clear what’s acceptable in our room.”

Ilya’s heart warmed at Bood’s description of the team, soothing down the spiky edges of doubt that he could never fully rid himself of.

“Yes, but I am the new guy, you know. I have always wondered if there are things people do not say around me,” Ilya admitted.

Bood shook his head. “Nah, man, what you see is what you get. They like you a lot. They support Hollander. They’ll lose their fucking *minds* then they find out about this,” he said, gesturing between them. “But in a good way, you know? Absolutely fucking legendary.”

“I wish I could say things were as good in Montreal,” JJ said, finger chasing a drip of condensation down the side of his glass. “On the surface, it’s okay. Our capitaine here has managed to keep complete control of the room and make the homophobes fall in line, which honestly? Fucking impressive, mon ami.”

“All credit to Rose and my mom,” Shane demurred. “Their strategies have been working so far.”

Rose clicked her tongue and smiled. “Aw, but *you* had to nail the execution, and it sounds like you have!”

“I feel like there’s a *but* coming,” Bood said, leaning around Cassie to look at JJ.

JJ grimaced and nodded. “Yes. The team is functioning, the room isn’t overtly hostile, and probably at least half the guys and all the rookies are on board. But there’s definitely shit that gets said behind Shane’s back that I overhear.”

Shane waved a hand with frustrated dismissal. “As long as they play the fucking game and don’t spoil the room, I don’t care what they say behind my back.”

Ilya scowled. “You deserve better than that. You deserve full support.”

Shane shrugged. "But I'm not going to get it, and honestly, I don't even expect it. In any group of people you're never going to have one hundred percent agreement on anything. Like you said, even in the Cens room, you've got guys on the fringe."

"Yes, but they aren't actively stirring shit behind the scenes, either," Bood said. "They just don't say anything because they know it isn't welcome."

"And you *should* have one hundred percent agreement on not being a fucking bigot," Ilya added.

"Yes," Rose and Sveta said in union, then looked at each other and laughed. Sveta continued. "Scott, I assume the Admirals are good?"

"Yeah, we kind of already had our trial by fire," Scott said. "If anything, they celebrated that I'm not the only one out now. We have our few outliers, too, but I think we're more on the Cens' end of things."

"Good, good," Sveta said. "And Marly? Boston?"

"Kind of in between Ottawa and Montreal," Marly admitted. "We've been trying to clean up the room this year, and it's working. Varkov is still a complete dickwaffle, and he has a small group around him, but they know not to voice it in the room. We're working on picking them off and converting them one at a time."

Shane sighed and sat back in his chair, looking over at Ilya with those wide brown eyes, something sad and conflicted in his expression.

"You are worried," Ilya said, lifting a hand to the back of Shane's neck. Shane blew out a breath and nodded.

"Some days it just feels impossible that it'll be well received in Montreal when we, you know, announce this. Us," he said, dropping his gaze to the table. Ilya's lips quivered as he pressed them together, and he tipped Shane's chin up with the crook of his finger, pressing a brief kiss to his mouth.

"We cannot control everyone. All we can do is set things up as best we can. That's why we're doing The Plan," he said, keeping Shane's chin tilted so he couldn't look away. "Not to make everything perfect. Not to eliminate anything bad anyone could possibly say. But to get as much support as possible, to make it not so big a deal when we come out. Right?"

Shane shook his head, his mouth curling into something sarcastic.

"Don't you know if I force myself to be perfect then everything will turn out just fine?" he said dryly.

Ilya's lips twisted into a small smile. "That sounds like a fun thing to chat with your therapist about. Maybe not winning at therapy so much after all."

Shane rolled his eyes. "Oh, fuck off. I know words like 'compulsory heterosexuality' and 'internalized homophobia' now, I'm obviously winning."

Across the table, Scott scrubbed a hand over his face. "I feel like I need a textbook to be gay."

"Nah, only if you're really fucked up about it," Shane shot back with a wry smile.

A chuckle went around the table, and Kip clutched his chest. "Oh, all you queer hockey boys really should form a support group or something. You can all take Queer 101 together."

"Hey, do not include me in this," Ilya said, holding his hands up. "I have known I was bi since I was young. Russia is the one with the problem, not me. I know my community, and I knew Shane was gay long before he did."

"Once again, fuck *off*," Shane said, exasperated and fond.

"*Anyway*, back to the issue at hand," Rose said, then fixed Shane with a look across the table. "Babe, all the people who matter are in this room or in the group chat, and we all love and accept you both. And as far as your teams go, I really think the soft launch is going to help a lot. By the time you guys announce, everyone will already be used to the idea, and it'll be totally unsurprising."

Ilya caught a look pass between Shane and JJ.

"You do not think it will go that way in Montreal?" he asked, bumping his shoulder against Shane's.

It was JJ who answered. "I am honestly not sure. It's been like four months since Shane laid down the law about your friendship in the room, and shutting down Comeau helped a lot, I think. That ESPN stats article about you two also went around the entire room, and everyone bought in on that no problem. I do think it would go a lot better now than it would have at the start of the season. And better still now that Rozanov is with the Cens since, no offense, mes frères, but you will not be in playoff contention this year."

"We'll get there," Ilya and Bood chorused.

Shane shrugged. "I want to believe you're right, JJ. I hope I've done enough."

JJ clapped Shane on the shoulder. "Capitaine, if they're assholes, it won't be because you didn't do enough. It'll be because they suck. You are not responsible for their reactions."

"Send me the bill for this session," Shane said with a snort. "Can we talk about something else now, please? Anything?"

And so the conversation moved on, drifting through Rose's recent shoot, Scott and Kip's post-coming out adventures, and many opinions on the food. At the end, Sveta got their waiter to take several big group photos both at the table and gathered together, all the better to stoke the friendship fires online. The photos were posted before the dessert even arrived, and by the time people started to head out, the internet had already taken them and ran.

“Thank you so much for trusting us enough to bring us into your circle,” Cassie said, clutching both of Ilya’s hands in hers. “We’re so, so happy for you.” She glanced around for Shane, saw he was distracted, and lowered her voice. “Also, if you think there’s a chance in hell I could get Shane into the WAGs chat one day, you let me know.”

Ilya threw back his head and laughed. “Oh, god, he would be horrified. I love it. One day, yes, we will do this.”

Bood held out his hand for a shake and drew Ilya into a back-slapping hug. “Seriously, man, I’ve got your back. I’ll keep this quiet for you, but when the time comes, I know the team will be cool, and you’ll have my full support.”

“I appreciate it very much, Bood,” Ilya said. “I’m glad you know now.”

Others started to make noises about leaving, JJ and Marly planning a meetup with another group at a club, Sveta and Rose considering tagging along, Scott and Kip murmuring quietly to each other in their seats, and so Ilya was able to slide up next to Shane and slip a hand in his back pocket, leaning in to murmur.

“So, should we head back to our hotel now, or should I fuck you right here in this room? I think I could go for some more dessert,” Ilya said, his tongue flicking out to tease at Shane’s earlobe. Shane inhaled sharply through his nose and his hands came up to clutch at the sides of Ilya’s shirt.

“I was thinking of going out with the others for a while, but...”

“Mm, no,” Ilya said, giving the edge of Shane’s jaw a nip. Shane’s lips parted in a little open-mouthed pant. “I think you will get on your knees and suck my dick under this tablecloth here, and *then* maybe—”

“*Okay*, boys, time to go get a room,” Sveta said, throwing a balled up napkin at them. “And not *this* room, to be clear, it’s my name on the reservation.”

Shane hid his flushed face against Ilya’s shoulder and held up a middle finger. Ilya pressed a big smacking kiss to the side of his head, shooting a wink at Kip, who also looked slightly flushed.

“Fine, fine, we will go back to the hotel and I will give Shane what he needs, and then maybe we will come out and join you,” Ilya said, pinching Shane just below the ribs.

“You *asshole*,” Shane hissed, squirming away. “You aren’t getting shit from me tonight.”

“I do not think this is true, sweetheart. You are, ah, *sure thing*.”

Shane shot a pleading glance at Rose, who held up her hands and shook her head.

“Don’t look at *me*, Shane Hollander,” she said. “You’ve been folding like a lawn chair for that man for seven years.”

Shane tipped his head back to the sky as if to plead with god himself.

"I hate everyone in this room," he said.

The Ones Who Know

Kip has been added to the chat

Boooood has been added to the chat

Cassie (Bood) has been added to the chat

Ilya

Welcome to the new people and thank you everyone for coming tonight

Especially you, Scott, I know it was hard to be up so late at your age

Scott Hunter 

Shane, are you sure THIS is the guy?

There have to be some nice men in Montreal

Ilya

HA

You do not know Shane at all if you think he has any interest in nice men

He wants someone who will be a little mean and boss him around

Jane

Oh my god

14th Best

Come on man you're embarrassing him

Ilya

Yes, he likes that too a little bit

Kip

Yeah please I've met Shane once and I can tell his type is assholes with big top energy

Sorry Scott, I think you need to just sit down for this one

Jane

I feel very seen and I'm not sure I like it

Scott Hunter 

Is this the queer community you've always dreamed of?

Ilya

Sorry, he is busy now, we will meet you all at the club later

Scott Hunter

Hey google how do I get myself kicked from a group chat

Shane came back from All-Stars to a strangely tense locker room buzzing with quiet conversation. He shot Hayden a questioning look as he set down his phone and car keys, but got only a puzzled shrug in return. Same from JJ.

“Everyone enjoy their days off?” he tried, a hopefully neutral topic of conversation.

Everyone looked at each other in a weird, heavy silence until Berkes elbowed the rookie next to him. The poor rookie looked down at something on his phone, then stepped forward, pale and shaken looking.

“H-hey Hollander,” he began, his voice trembling. “We were just all wondering... well, your boyfriend. Is it... is it Rozanov? Some of the guys around the league who went to All-Stars were talking, and there were all these pictures...”

The kid thrust the phone out at Shane. It was open to an Instagram post by a user named Hollanov5eva, a carousel of photos from the ASG weekend. The posed photos from the restaurant were included, but most of the photos were candid screenshotted from players' Instagram stories and twitter accounts. And in nearly every single one they were touching. Hands on elbows, shoulders, lower backs. Arms pressed together as they stood too close. Intense eye contact. Bright, unguarded smiles. Individually, none of them were damning; they'd been posing for cameras as good buddies all weekend, and they both had similar photos with other players, too. To this room, though, after all the small details he'd shared about his mystery boyfriend over the last few months, it must have been obvious. He glanced down at the likes and comments; It wasn't a popular post, and the comments were mostly calling the poster delusional. It could have been a lot worse. He wasn't even sure how his teammates had managed to find it.

Shane took a very subtle, slow breath in to calm his racing heart. Okay. This was not the end of the world. If he lied and then told the truth later, he would lose the room completely, no matter how good the reason he offered them. But he couldn't tell them the truth *now*, either. How could he play this?

“Guys, I told you, I'm not ready to say who my boyfriend is,” he began slowly, cautiously. “What I *will* say is that Ilya Rozanov is a Russian citizen, so if he *were* in any kind of same-sex relationship, it wouldn't be safe to talk about it until he had Canadian permanent residency, right?”

Andropov frowned, crossing his arms. "As long as he does not go back to Russia, he will be fine."

"And what if he gets a career ending injury tomorrow and loses his contract and work visa?" Shane asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Oh." Andropov pressed his lips together and nodded. He should know better than the rest of them, being Russian himself.

Shane continued. "Starting a *rumor* like this could have really dire fucking consequences. So unless anyone in this room wants to be responsible for one of the greatest hockey talents in the world getting beaten to death in his home country, everyone is going to mind their own fucking business. Yes?"

"Yes, Captain," the team replied in murmured unison.

Shane nodded. "Glad we understand each other."

The earlier tense muttering gave way to a more somber mood. Even Comeau and Drapeau seemed subdued, shooting Shane strange, unreadable looks every so often. JJ offered him a fist bump, and Hayden leaned in to offer a whispered "good job" when Shane turned back to his stall. But still, Shane's rabbiting heart would not calm. He'd have to let Ilya and his mom know.

Apparently, the soft launch was starting early.

Chapter 10: Tape job

Chapter Summary

The Ottawa Centaurs Pride Night game.

Chapter Notes

Previously On: The boys, in collaboration with Yuna, have a new post-cottage plan to get them happy, safe, and out in just a year or two. They've come out to their friends, Ilya has traded to the Centaurs, and they've both started therapy. Shane is out to his team and the public, and The Ones Who Know have grown to include Kip, Bood, and Cassie. Ilya's waiting for the final word on his permanent residency application. At the end of the last chapter, the Metros guessed Ilya was Shane's boyfriend, but he managed to not completely confirm it, instead threatening them with what could happen to Ilya if they start rumors.

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

February passed in a blur of conflicting roadies that didn't allow Ilya and Shane to see each other for nearly three weeks straight, as if they were being forced to pay for the decadence of January. Most of the month was spent on pins and needles, waiting to see if the rest of the world would pick up on their closeness at the All-Star Game, if rumors would break containment, or if someone on the Metros would be an asshole and say something.

Speculation was definitely running rampant throughout the league. Out on the ice, Shane in particular had begun receiving some very pointed chirps. Fortunately, he was well practiced in his new training these days.

If they try to get to you by making it about sex, don't back down. Throw it back in their faces. Make them uncomfortable instead.

"You must be one hell of a cocksucker to tame a whore like Rozanov," Philly's star center spat at him one game.

Shane gave him a feral grin. "I'm better than you at more than just hockey."

The man's face crumpled in confusion, unsure if he was supposed to be offended.

Shane won the face off.

“So which one of you does the fucking?” the second line center for Florida asked him at another game.

“You sure are thinking about my dick a lot for a straight man,” Shane said with raised eyebrows.

The man sputtered in protest.

Shane won the face off.

“I bet you’ve been bending over for the entire team, haven’t you?” a loudmouthed second year player from Nashville said.

“Dude, I don’t want to hear your fantasies about my ass,” Shane said with a wrinkle of disgust.

The guy flung off his gloves the second the puck was dropped. Shane dodged his first swing, dropped his own gloves, and delivered a single devastating punch to the guy’s jaw that put him on his ass. He put his hands up and backed away, point made, and calmly accepted his five minutes. The whole thing was over before it started.

The phone sex that night was absolutely scorching.

Ilya got some of the bullshit, too, though Shane definitely bore the brunt, since he was publicly out. He’d been getting comments since December anyway, they just tended to involve Ilya more often now. Still, he made sure to never reply in a way that outright confirmed anything. Rumors swirled, but they were still just that: rumors. And they seemed to be staying within the league for the time being.

The PR Squad

Mama Yuna

Weekly check in, folks. What are we seeing out there?

Farah

The agency’s PR team has no red flags to report. Reaction to the All-Star Game photos has been overall positive and successful in advancing the friendship narrative.

No one seems to be pushing a romantic angle outside certain fringe areas of the internet. Word does not seem to have gotten out to the general public.

Harris

That lines up with what I’m seeing. I’ve been tracking #hollanov (and the related lesser known tags #shilya and #rozander) and the increase in traffic and usage has been very small.

There was a burst of activity immediately post-ASG in line with any new influx of photos, but it doesn’t seem to have caught on in any significant way. There have been no new surges since the small one when Shane came out publicly.

Rose

So people aren't seeing them romantically, but the friendship thing IS taking off?

Farah

Even better, actually: the friendship is starting to be old news. The 'bromance' is now a given. We could probably still use some further reinforcement on the competitive angle, though.

The ESPN article did very good numbers, but since that's the primary friction we're expecting post-coming out, it doesn't hurt to push a little more.

Jane

Maybe we can livetweet or do Instagram stories during the next Hollander family game night

Ilya

Oh, won't that be embarrassing for you, though? To let the whole world see you lose so badly?

Jane

Fuck OFF, I can't wait for the internet to watch me destroy you

Farah

...yes, I think that will be effective.

[In a video posted to Yuna Hollander's Instagram account, Shane, Ilya, and David all sit around a table with a Scrabble board in the middle. The camera is some distance away, a kitchen island just visible in the foreground. Shane's scowling face is flushed with irritation, while Ilya is grinning widely from the other side of the table. The words "Too competitive?" are superimposed over the video in one corner.]

Yuna: *[audibly suppresses snickering giggles]*

Ilya: You are just mad because English is my second language and I am still kicking your ass.

Shane: It's because I had shitty tiles! What the fuck was I supposed to do with *that*?

David shoots a look over at the camera and shakes his head with a silent sigh and a small shrug.

Ilya: Oh, so your last game against Toronto, was it the ice's fault? Your stick? Your skates? Your—

Shane: Dad, look away. I have to do something bad.

Shane starts to reach across the table. Yuna and David finally break out laughing and the video cuts out. Shane and Ilya are both tagged.]

Ilya reshared the video to his story with the addition:
Proof of life after my attempted murder.

Shane reshared the video, too:
He deserved it.

Ilya's quick turn-around campaign with the Montreal-based shoe company Aldo that he'd shot during his bye week launched in late February, and the internet ate it up. Ilya was, of course, naturally good-looking, but the stylist on the shoot had really gone above and beyond. Best of all, he'd gotten to pose with a very good dog for part of the shoot, and those photos in particular had blown up. The campaign had gotten picked up by some men's fashion blogs and, combined with his "friendship" with Shane and the strategic use of his Instagram stories, the enormous ship that was his old reputation had finally begun to turn. Ilya should have felt great about it all.

But then March rolled around, bringing with it the Pride Night game for the Centaurs, and instead, Ilya felt like absolute shit.

The 2017-2018 season marked the first time every team in the entire league hosted some kind of Pride or general "Hockey is for Everyone" theme night, and the news had originally brought Ilya a burst of hope. Sure, they were performative bullshit, but Ilya was begging for scraps at this point. He'd accept a little lip service for now. Things were slowly changing right when they needed them to, right as they were preparing to come out, and that felt like... well, slightly more than *nothing*, at least.

Montreal's Pride Night had been at the very end of February, and the Montreal crowd had greeted Shane with personalized signs, waving flags, and extra loud cheering, even though he didn't really want the extra attention or recognition. But they all knew. Shane was out. Pride Night was for him, whether he owned it or not.

Pride Night was not for Ilya Rozanov.

Ilya Rozanov's pride tape looked just like everyone else's. Ilya Rozanov was just another random hockey player falling in line and doing as he was told. There was nothing to show that he was part of the community, nothing at all to show the world that hockey was even more queer than they thought. No way for him to claim his identity on a night that should include him.

You are whining over nothing. What is this? You want to be special snowflake? You are pathetic, Ilyusha.

Thanks to two months of weekly therapy, he could at least recognize when his brain was being an asshole now, and hear the echo of his father's voice in the words. *Thanks, Papa. What a wonderful parting gift.*

Ilya frowned down at his rainbow tape, then called out in the locker room: "Anyone have a Sharpie?"

Three markers were promptly flung at his head. One he caught, and the other two he managed to dodge.

"Fuckers," he said by way of thanks, then pulled his stick up close to his face and wrote in tiny letters on his grip tape: *bi pride*.

His phone buzzed in his stall. Probably a text from Shane, something supportive and loving about how next season's Pride Night would be theirs and so on. Ilya thought about ignoring it, but the guilt caught up with him, and he capped the marker and picked up his phone.

It was an email notification.

PR Portal (PR confirmation) - eCoPR
Available for Download | Portail RP (conf...
(la version française suit la version anglaise...)
This is an automated message. Do not reply to
this email. ILYA ROZANOV, Congra...

Ilya nearly dropped his phone. He *did* drop the Sharpie. With shaking fingers, he tapped on the notification, and the email opened. There was a Canadian flag at the top in a white banner that read Government of Canada | Gouvernement du Canada.

(la version française suit la version anglaise...)

This is an automated message. Do not reply to this email.

ILYA ROZANOV,

Congratulations! Your status as a permanent resident is confirmed. An IRCC case worker will send you a message with further information; the message will come from an email address ending in @cic.gc.ca. To avoid missing our emails, check your junk or spam folder.

Your electronic Confirmation of Permanent Resident (eCoPR) is available to download in your IRCC Permanent Residence Portal account.

To access your eCoPR, log into your...

Ilya sat down hard on the bench, tears blurring his vision. His fingers stumbled over each other several times as he scrambled to log into his IRCC portal and make sure the document really existed.

And there.

Right there.

He downloaded the PDF and opened it, just to be sure.

CONFIRMATION OF PERMANENT RESIDENCE

Family Name: Rozanov

Given Name: Ilya

Date of Birth: 15/06/1991

...

Almost five and a half months on the dot, just as they'd hoped. It was done.

It was *done*.

He screenshotted the document and dropped it into the Hollander family group chat, then immediately called Shane. When he didn't answer the first time, he called again. Finally, Shane picked up.

"Ilya?" he said, sounding confused. "We're both due out on the ice soon, is everything—"

"I got my permanent residence," Ilya interrupted, his voice tremulous. He could feel the eyes of his stall neighbors on him, but couldn't bring himself to care. "I sent a screenshot to the family chat. I want to come out tonight. Can I?"

"Can you—hold on, sorry, let my brain catch up," Shane said, then was silent for a moment. "Oh my god, you got it. You're really... wow. Okay. Wow."

Ilya snorted. "You sound like your dad."

"Fuck off," Shane said automatically. "Oh my god, Ilya, this is—*fuck*." The background noise faded a bit, and Shane's voice dropped. "Of course you can come out if you want to. It's your choice. You're safe now. It would make you happy to be out, right?"

"Yes. Very."

“Then you should do it,” Shane said firmly.

Ilya wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. “You know that as soon as I am out, people will start putting two and two together. Me and you.”

“Fuck it,” Shane said. “The soft launch begins for *real* now. Are you ready to dodge a bunch of media questions?”

“Yes. Mama Yuna has prepared us well,” Ilya said. “I’ll warn our PR team so they can help me with media after the game.”

“Probably a good idea,” Shane said. “Maybe warn our friends, too, so they don’t have a collective heart attack?”

“Ah, yes, I will do this. Thank you. I love you,” Ilya said, for once not caring if he was overheard. He’d be telling everyone soon anyway.

“I love you, too,” Shane whispered. “I’m so fucking happy for you. Good luck. Talk to you after.”

Ilya hung up, then whirled around, his eyes locking onto the equipment manager.

“Brian,” he snapped. “Do we still have any of that colored stick tape left over from the kids’ skate we did?”

Brian looked thrown, but shrugged. “Yeah, pretty sure. What do you need?”

“Blue, purple, and pink, please,” Ilya said, then sat down and began unceremoniously ripping the rainbow pride tape off his stick as Brian dashed out the door.

“Rozy, what the fuck?” Dykstra said from across the room, his expression stormy. “Are you seriously not using the tape? Do we have a problem?”

Ilya grinned, his eyes still wet. “No, boys, for once there is no fucking problem. Hold on. There is something I must do really quick.”

The Ones Who Know

Ilya

Just so you do not worry, you all should know

I got my pr today

I am officially a permanent resident of canada

Harris 

Why would we worry?

Marly

Bro?

Conny

Well I wasn't worried before but...

Ilya clicked off his phone screen before any other messages could roll in, looking up with a smile as Brian came running in with a stack of three tape rolls: blue, purple, and pink, just as he'd asked for. The shades weren't *perfect*, but they'd get the point across, he thought. He took up the blue tape and started wrapping just as Harris came barreling into the room, breathing hard.

"Oh my god, you're doing it," he said, eyes wide.

"I'm fucking doing it," Ilya said, grinning.

"Oh my *god!*" Harris shouted with a little hop.

"Doing *what?*" Dykstra asked, exasperated.

Ilya took up the purple tape and began wrapping a wide band next to the blue.

"Boys," he said. "I am now a Canadian permanent resident, so I can finally say: I am bisexual, and these are the colors of the bi pride flag. So no, I promise, I am not being an asshole on Pride Night. Is *my fucking night*."

"Hell yeah!" Bood shouted, and he was quickly echoed by most of the room, with lots of clapping and stick tapping.

Harris gave a full on sob, tears running over his cheeks and into his beard. He clapped a hand over his mouth, then dropped it. "Sorry, sorry. Fuck, I wanna hug you, but you have to be out for warmups *so* soon. Wrap faster."

Ilya moved on to the pink tape. "Can you do me a favor and let the PR people know this is coming? I am sure there will be questions, and I am happy to talk about myself, but I still have to dodge the boyfriend questions for now."

"Yes, got it, will do," Harris said. "Good luck out there."

"I owe you so much ice cream," Ilya shouted after him, ripping off the end of the pink tape and admiring his work. It wasn't perfect, but it was certainly enough to get the point across to those who knew. Enough to start a conversation. He decided to leave the rainbow grip in place as a little nod to Shane, then leaped to his feet and shoved his gloves on, grinning down at his tape job.

"You look about a thousand pounds lighter, Rozy," Chouinard said, clapping him on the shoulder.

"I feel it," he admitted, spinning his stick in his hand once. "Now listen up, everybody. We play Buffalo tonight. We can fucking beat *Buffalo*! Please do not injure my poor pride tonight of all nights, okay boys? I want to be celebrating at Monk's tonight with each and every one of you fuckers! Can we do that?"

"Yes, Cap!" they shouted back.

“Let’s fucking go!” he called out, leading the way down the tunnel and toward the ice. Toward the first Pride Night game he’d ever looked forward to. They all shuffled themselves into their usual order and listened to the announcer do his thing, waiting for the cue.

“And now, welcome to the ice your Ottawaaa Centaaaaurs!”

Their starting goalie burst out onto the ice and Ilya, following just behind, swept out his arm to send the waiting tower of warm-up pucks tumbling to the ice. He quickly scooped one up and cut his way toward the net, burying his first shot of the night and arcing around the glass to look out at the crowd.

There were pride flags *everywhere*. Mostly rainbow, but also bi pride, and trans pride, and other flags Ilya didn’t even recognize. So many of them. And there, down at the glass, was a young girl of maybe eighteen with a bi pride flag wrapped around her, arms up and cheering with the fabric clutched in each hand. Ilya pointed at her and whooped, then held up his stick to show off the tape job and pumped it a few times as he coasted around the edge of the rink. The girl and her friends went wide-eyed and pointed at him, then started jumping up and down, screeching their joy for the whole arena to hear. Ilya threw back his head and laughed as he looped back around for another shot on the goal.

Warm-ups seemed to fly by because Ilya kept getting distracted. He’d take his shot during a drill, then immediately get lost looking into the crowd, admiring all the flags, dyed hair, and bright clothing. He’d drop into a stretch, then catch another sign. As warmups came to a close, he scooped up an armful of pucks and carried them to the glass: one for a boy with a “Centaur PRIDE” sign with rainbow letters, one for a girl in a rainbow dress on her dad’s shoulders, one for two guys holding hands with pride flags painted on their cheeks, and on down the line, a puck for as many people as he could who were visibly celebrating Pride Night. Finally, he swung by the bench to ask for a Sharpie, signed his stick, and skated straight for the girl with the giant bi pride flag. He tapped on the glass, pointing to her, then popped his stick over the glass.

“Bi pride!” he shouted, holding up a fist and grinning.

The entire group shrieked in reply, their fists held in the air. The girl with the flag clutched the stick and burst into tears as he turned and skated back to the tunnel, hands empty and heart on fire. The whole thing had been recorded by several phone cameras, had been on the fucking jumbotron, and he did not give a *fuck*.

This was what Pride Night was supposed to be.

They won the fucking game.

It wasn’t a beautiful win, two teams at the bottom of the standings duking it out, but Ilya had personally been on fire with purpose and his teammates had risen to

meet him. He'd put up two goals and an assist, and most importantly, he'd done it with another bi pride tape job. Most people had swapped back to their usual brand of tape, too picky or superstitious to deal with the rainbow tape that frayed so easily, but Ilya had *needed* those colors with him. He'd hoisted his stick aloft to display the tape job as he skated a lap after being awarded first star of the game, and then laughed in delight as Bood had presented him with the team's player of the game award, a black and red painted horseshoe they conferred in the locker room after every game.

Now that the game was over, Ilya wished he had a massive flag he could wear like a cape, like the one that girl he'd given his stick to had, so he could keep the colors with him during media. Because of *course* he was tapped for media that night. There had never been any doubt.

"If you don't feel comfortable taking questions tonight, we can put Bood on instead," their head of PR said when she came to retrieve him. "It's fine either way."

Ilya badly wanted to make a joke about "going either way" being the whole point, but he let it go. "I'm happy to do it. I'm ready."

He made his way to the media room and shot a wink at Harris when he got there, grinning ear to ear in a way that probably made him look like a lunatic, but he just couldn't contain it. *This* was pride, and he was bursting with it. When Buffalo's coach finished up his turn at the table, Ilya took his seat behind one of the mics, Buffalo's captain beside him. Poor guy probably wasn't going to get a single question tonight.

Sure enough, the first question was all his.

"Ilya, we noticed you didn't use rainbow pride tape with the rest of your team," a woman in the front row asked. "Are you protesting Pride Night?"

Ilya snorted. "God, no, opposite. Blue, purple, and pink are the colors of the bi pride flag. I decided to represent myself tonight."

The woman blinked. "Just to clarify, you are coming out as bisexual?"

Ilya laughed, his heart so full he was genuinely a little worried he was having a heart attack. "Yes, yes, that is me."

A flurry of reactions ran through the room, but a man in the back quickly jumped up to get the next question. "Ilya, what made you decide to come out today?"

"Ah, you can insert some kind of comment here about others paving the way before me, gratitude to Hunter and Hollander, blah blah. But the real reason is that as of about three hours ago, I am officially a permanent resident of Canada," Ilya said, smiling as everyone rushed to write that down. The man waved for a follow up question.

"What does that have to do with it?" he asked.

Ilya leaned in close to the mic. "Next question, please."

Best to play it safe with Russia until he had full citizenship. Finally, the question he'd prepared for arrived.

"You are close friends with Shane Hollander, who also recently came out as gay," another reporter called out. "Are you two romantically involved?"

Ilya scoffed. "I *just* came out and already you are making this about Hollander? Do I not get my moment to shine? Besides, we are here to talk about hockey, yes?"

The man raised an eyebrow. "Shane Hollander said something very similar during his own coming out."

No shit.

"Yes, is one thing Shane Hollander and I have in common," Ilya said as if talking to a child. "We both care about hockey very much. We are hockey players, did you know?"

That got a chuckle out of the room. Ilya pressed on. "Now someone please put poor Eriksson here out of his misery, he has been very patient. Hockey questions, yes?"

Buffalo's captain, Eriksson, shot him a "what can you do?" sort of shrug.

"It's all good," he said with a wry grin. "I'm not exactly eager to talk about our power play situation tonight."

And so the conversation moved on.

And Ilya Rozanov was out to the world.

And he felt higher than he'd ever been in his life.

The Ones Who Know

Harris 

CONGRATULATIONS ILYA!!!!

I'm so fucking happy for you

Rose Landry

My makeup artist is so mad because I fucking CRIED MY MAKEUP OFF seeing you with your bi pride tape

And giving away the stick oh my god

Sveta

I'm so proud of you, Ilyusha

Better Pike

You were absolutely beautiful out there Ilya ♥

Kip

Can confirm the entire crowd at the Kingfisher went fucking BANANAS for you

Cassie

So did the WAG section at the game! Everyone loves you so much babe

Harris 🏒

I know all you hockey boys are still getting unstinky and doing post game stuff but I'm gonna be dropping some links in here for everyone to share throughout the night. You can also RT some of the stuff I'll be posting to the Cens account shortly

Ilya

Thank you for support, everyone. I cannot even say how I feel

Is too big

I love you all

🏒 🏒 ♥ 🏒 🏒

@purplenews

The MLH has its first out bisexual! Congrats to Ilya Rozanov of the Ottawa Centaurs on a spectacular Pride Night coming out! Read more:
www.purplenews.com/story/...

[An image of Ilya celebrating after a goal, kissing the bi pride taped blade of his stick.]

@SvetlanaVetrova

Seeing my best friend in the world looking so free and happy is everything to me.
♥

[An animated gif of Ilya on a breakaway, the puck tucked up against his bi pride tape job. His mouth is open in a laughing grin.]

@espn

Ilya Rozanov (C, Ottawa Centaurs) comes out as bisexual with impressive Pride Night game performance. See the video and read more:
www.espn.com/mlh/story...

@JackiePike35

This is the bi representation we need and deserve. Sending so much love,
@IlyaRozanov81! Happy coming out!

[A video of Ilya grinning at a rainbow-clad kid as he tossed a warm-up puck over the glass.]

@JJDagenais

The bisexual menace is revealed to the world! Congrats on coming out, mon ami. It is a privilege to know you. www.espn.com/mlh/story...

@ryebri

Everyone knows that this matters because of Russia's anti-LGBTQ+ laws, right? This is HUGE. I'm so happy he's safe. Canada's got you, Rozy.

[A video clip from post-game media availability in which Ilya says, "...as of about three hours ago, I am officially a permanent resident of Canada."]

@RealRoseLandry

HELL YEAH, that's my bi baddie out there! @IlyaRozanov81, so happy to celebrate you today, my friend. ♥

[An image of Ilya bending for a face off, grinning brightly down at his bi pride tape job.]

@itsraebitheway

Guys I have never cried so hard in my entire life. Thank you so much @IlyaRozanov81. I will never forget this night for as long as I live.

[Four photos: A close-up of the rainbow grip of the stick he gave away with the words "bi pride" written in Sharpie; a close-up of Ilya's signature across the bi pride colored tape on the blade; Ilya with his fist raised on the other side of the glass; the girl with the bi pride flag draped over her shoulders, clutching Ilya's gifted stick and crying.]

@ScottHunterOfficial

I mean, not exactly the person I would have chosen to join our queer hockey players club, but I guess it takes all sorts. Congrats on coming out and giving the league its first out bisexual, @IlyaRozanov81. www.espn.com/mlh/story...

↔ **@IlyaRozanov81** I will be here to carry the torch when you break a hip and retire this year

↔ **@ScottHunterOfficial** Again, I am THREE YEARS OLDER THAN YOU

@OttawaCens

The Ottawa Centaurs are proud to celebrate our Captain @IlyaRozanov81, who came out as bi at our Pride Night game vs. Buffalo! We stand with you always. www.espn.com/mlh/story...

[An image of Ilya celebrating after a goal, both fists up in the air, his taped stick clutched in one.]

@hollanova

THERE IT IS WE GOT THEM BOTH! Now it's only a matter of time...

[An image of Shane and Ilya standing side-by-side, pressed together at the shoulder. Shane's side of the image is bordered in rainbow, and Ilya's side of the image is bordered in bi pride colors.]

@CliffMarly

THAT'S MY BROTHER OUT THERE! So proud of you @IlyaRozanov81. Now maybe I can finally tell some of those old Boston club stories...

[An old image of Ilya circa 2012 as seen from behind. He appears to be leaving the club with his arms wrapped around two people, a man and a woman.]

↔ **@IlyaRozanov81** Cliff, please, I am a happily taken man these days, do not get the people's hopes up!

↔ **@hollanova** Happily taken you say... 00

@CassieBoodram

The OttaWAGs love our captain so much! Happy Pride Night, Ilya! ♥♥♥

www.espn.com/mlh/story...

[A short video of the Ottawa WAGs in the stands at the game crammed into the frame. Together they shout: "We love you Rozy!"]

@censofpride

I can't believe I got to witness this beautiful moment firsthand. I will remember this forever. Happy coming out, @IlyaRozanov81. We love you so so much and you absolutely made our night.

[A video taken from directly over the shoulder of the girl with the bi pride flag. Ilya pops his stick over the glass, raises his fist and shouts "bi pride!" and then skates away with a massive grin. It's barely audible over the crying and repeated "oh my god, oh my god," but it's there. A massive cheer goes up from the crowd before the video cuts out.]

@HeyItsHayden

I guess you're a pretty okay guy. Congrats on coming out, @IlyaRozanov81. Off the ice, I'll always have your back. On the ice, I can't wait to punch you again.

www.espn.com/mlh/story...

@SaintVic

We miss you, we love you, we're proud of you, you're the GOAT

@IlyaRozanov81! www.espn.com/mlh/story...

[A photo of Ilya and St-Simon in the gym at the rink in Boston, each doing a bicep curl and making a silly growling face at each other.]

@hollanov5eva

Anyone else casually Noticing how he didn't actually say no?

[A video clip plays of Ilya's post-game interview. In response to the question about if he's dating Shane, he says, "I just came out and already you are making this about Hollander? Do I not get my moment to shine?"]

@cozywithrozy

His joy is absolutely infectious, I have not stopped smiling for HOURS. Look how free this man is. LOOK AT HIM.

[A gif of Ilya skating past the glass during warmups, grinning wildly at all the flags and signs.]

@Kipstopher

The Kingfisher went WILD for our bisexual king Ilya Rozanov tonight! 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿🏒🏒🏒

[An image of a packed bar table, everyone on their feet cheering and clinking their glasses together. Someone has located a small bi pride flag and stuck it in their glass.]

@thecensfuturecup

So I'm gonna use this gif for EVERYTHING now

[An animated gif version of Ilya raising his fist and shouting "bi pride!" with the words captioned at the bottom.]

@BoodBQ

So proud of our captain tonight! You are a legend, my friend. We're lucky to have you. www.espn.com/mlh/story...

[An image from the Pride Night game of Ilya and Bood knocking helmets, grinning at each other.]

@rhymeswithorange

Oh, right, so they were made for each other. Got it.

[Two gifs side by side. On the left is Ilya during media availability. Caption reads: (after coming out as bi) "Besides, we are here to talk about hockey, yes?" On the right is Shane, also during media availability. Caption reads: "Yeah, I'm gay. Any questions about hockey?"]

@HockeyByConnors

🏒 Rozy! Rozy! Rozy! 🏒 So proud of you dude! www.espn.com/mlh/story...

[A photo of a younger Rozanov and Connors screaming at the camera in a dark bar.]

@puckingqueer

He is MAJESTIC

[A video clip of Ilya sailing across the ice at the end of the game with his arms spread wide, grinning with pure unadulterated joy, as he coasts into the arms of his teammates. His stick is held blade-side up to show off the tape job.]

@ShaneHollanderHockey

Happy coming out day, Ilya. Always proud of you.

[A photo of Shane and Ilya side by side, Ilya's arm around Shane's shoulder and Shane's around Ilya's waist. They each have a beer in their free hands and big smiles on their faces. Ilya and Shane are both wearing the same clothes they were during their respective post-game media appearances that night.]

↪ **@hollanova** Okay, this photo is from TONIGHT. Shane got in the car immediately after his own game and drove up from montreal to be with Ilya after he came out?? Am I the only one seeing this??? Hello????

Ilya

Thank you again for making the drive out last night, sweetheart

It meant a lot to be with you after all that

And to introduce you to the team for real

Jane

Of course Ilya. I needed to see you and celebrate with you.

You deserved all of it. I only wish I didn't have to leave so early.

Part of me still can't believe it.

Your PR, I mean.

We're almost there.

Ilya

Yes. Now the fun part begins 😊

Jane

God help us all.

It's going to be a weird couple of months, isn't it?

Ilya

Buckle up, Hollander

Is going to be a fucking delight

Chapter End Notes

The 2017-2018 season really was the first time all 31 (at the time) NHL teams had some kind of inclusion-themed night!

Thank you to the random strangers out there who posted their eCoPR approval emails, phone notifications, and redacted documents so I could directly steal the authentic wording.

Chapter 11: If you have eyes...

Chapter Summary

The soft launch begins.

Chapter Notes

Previously On: The boys, in collaboration with Yuna, have a new post-cottage plan to get them happy, safe, and out in just a year or two. They've come out to their friends, Ilya has traded to the Centaurs, and they've both started therapy. Shane and Ilya are both out to their teams and the public. Ilya has received his Confirmation of Permanent Residency and is now just waiting on the physical card. That means he's safe, and it's soft launch time.

The longest chapter yet! I hope to have the final chapter up next week.

Thanks for coming on this ride, courageous WIP readers. Your wonderful comments provide the best motivation and I appreciate every single one. ♥

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

Shane walked into the locker room the day after Ottawa's pride night game running on too much coffee and too little sleep, only to find every eye turned his way. He sighed; he'd gotten up *so* early to make it back to Montreal in time for morning skate and would need a hell of a pre-game nap, but no amount of sluggishness was going to get him out of this. He'd promised he'd tell once it was safe, and it was time to pay the piper. It had been weeks since the All-Star game and their guess at Shane's boyfriend's identity, and hopefully they'd used those few weeks to get used to the idea.

"Yes, you were right," Shane said. "It's Rozanov."

The room exploded with a variety of reactions, which Shane steadfastly ignored as he went about his pre-practice routine until one voice finally rose above the rest.

"Shit, Hollzy," Berkes said. "It wasn't enough to be the best at hockey, you had to fuck it, too?"

"To be fair, hockey fucks *really* good," Shane said. All around him, a wave of noise crested, everything from groans of disgust to genuine laughter. "Hey, if I have to hear about every girl you fuck at a bar, you have to hear that Ilya's reputation is well-deserved."

JJ slapped Shane on the shoulder. "I guess something had to keep you coming back all those years. That was a brutal situationship, capitaine."

Shane snorted. "I know it's hard to believe, but I do actually like him for more than just his dick."

"But he's a fucking asshole!" Comeau finally exploded, apparently having reached his limit of shutting the hell up. "He's the enemy! Everyone fucking hates him!"

"I don't," Shane said simply.

"I don't either," JJ chimed in.

"Me either," Hayden shockingly added. "Once you get to know him and see how they are together, you kinda get it, you know? Besides, if you let a chronic ragebaiter get to you on the ice, that's kind of a *you* problem."

Comeau sputtered. "Pike, you too? Really? You've drunk the Rozanov Kool-aid?"

Hayden gave an easy laugh. "Nah, I've just figured him out. He's actually kind of funny. And when you see a man that catastrophically down bad for your best friend, it's hard to hate him."

Shane could hardly believe what he was hearing. He shot a grateful look at Hayden, who nodded with a small smile. Shane clapped twice to shut down the chatter and gather everyone's attention back to him.

"Just so you know, we're not planning to confirm anything publicly until after the playoffs are over. We don't want to be a distraction," Shane said. "We'd appreciate it if you could not say anything to the media about it until the season's done. Management is being informed—" Shane checked his email and saw a new one from Farah as expected. "Now, actually. So everything's above board. Any questions? Issues?"

Shane braced himself for the inevitable backlash. The accusations. The hatred.

It didn't come. Instead, Wilson snorted.

"Well, at least we know you aren't throwing games or anything," he said, turning away from his stall. "I don't know how you guys can fully try to kill each other on the ice and then go home and suck each other's dicks, but the stats don't lie."

"For real, Cap," one of the rookies added. "You guys slam each other into the boards like you're at war, then, what, go fuck about it afterward?"

“Pretty much,” Shane admitted. “Now, everyone please stop thinking about my dick and get ready for practice.”

Miraculously, Comeau and Drapeau didn’t say a word. They almost certainly wanted to, judging by the vaguely constipated looks on their faces, but the tide of the room had shifted. Most people really *had* already gotten used to the idea, it seemed, and had already moved on with their lives. There was some low muttering in the corner, and a few people who couldn’t quite meet Shane’s eyes, but overall, the reveal had been a giant nothing. Which was what he’d wanted, right?

He picked up his phone again and checked the email Farah had sent. It was short and straightforward, addressed to the GM, the president of hockey operations, the assistant GM, the head coach, and the head of HR:

My client, Shane Hollander, would like to voluntarily inform you of his long-term, committed relationship with another player in the league, Ilya Rozanov of the Ottawa Centaurs. As there are no applicable rules or HR policies regarding this situation, you may consider this a simple courtesy. Any concerns or other communications regarding this topic should be funneled through me. Otherwise, Shane expects his relationship to be treated the same as any other player’s.

*Regards,
Farah Jalali*

He owed Farah a big end-of-season bonus.

Out on the ice at practice, all the coaches looked wide-eyed and startled, except for Theriault, who was red in the face. None of them said a damn word to Shane about Ilya, though, and that suited him just fine. He focused, he performed, he kept his head up, and he flew across the ice, finally freed of every one of his secrets.

His team knew about Ilya. It would be an open secret across the league before long.

Now, it was time to start showing the world.

Harris 

So you guys are ready to do this?

Jane

Yes. Definitely.

Ilya

Show us your ways, social media master Harris

Harris 

Okay, soft launching 101, here we go...

[A post to Ilya's Instagram: the photo shows Ilya from the collarbones up laying on a white pillow, his curls tousled and a soft smile on his face. At the very edge of the photo there's a slight fan of black hair on the pillow next to him, and just the very edge of a face.]

ilyarozanov81 Good morning ☀

@ottavibes Good morning rozy!

@rozysfuturewife god what I would give to see this first thing every morning

@cozywithrozy so we all see the hair right?

↔ **@hollaforhollzy** I can't actually see anything else tbh

↔ **@hollanova** just casually thinking of who has hair like that...

↔ **@jellyfisheses** That's a man. Right? That's totally a man. I mean, women have short hair too sometimes. But like. That jawline feels like a man?

↔ **@hollanov5eva** one man in particular...

↔ **@morethantwo** I mean, we know he's bi now, so it's very possible

↔ **@hollyhockey** You're all making SO MUCH out of absolutely nothing

↔ **@cozywithrozy** OR the framing of this photo was incredibly intentional...

@81shotsongol he's deliberately fucking with us and tbh I'm here for it

@SportsNewsNow

“They were grown in a lab for each other”: Teammates spill on the Hollander-Rozanov rivalry: www.sportsnn.com/story/hollander-rozanov...

↪ **@rhymeswithorange** I’m SCREAMING Cliff Marleau said they are like feral kittens that shouldn’t be separated. PURE GOLD.

↪ **@hollanova** “I don’t think there’s a thing in the world that could come between them, not even their own freakish competitiveness.” Oh my heart. Thank you **@HeyItsHayden** for this absolute gem.

↪ **@yellingbird** WE GET IT, they’re friends now or whatever, why the fuck are we still talking about this so much

↪ **@hollzyleftskate** “I’ve never seen two people play harder against each other.” So can all the people who have been whining about them being friends PLEASE sit down already?

↪ **@ryebri** “There isn’t a more perfect match in the universe than those two” like yeah WE KNOW **@BoodBQ** and also 000000

↪ **@stixnbiscuits** why does this all sound so weirdly romantic. like. it’s hockey.

@AirCanada

Run away with **@ShaneHollanderHockey** and **@IlyaRozanov81** this summer.

[The video opens with Ilya Rozanov staring down at his phone as he walks through the airport with a duffel slung over one shoulder. It cuts to Shane Hollander drinking a smoothie as he walks through the same airport, backpack on his back. The two look up and lock eyes. Shane drops the smoothie cup in a nearby trash can as Ilya slides his phone into his back pocket.

Then, they break out into a run. Ilya vaults over a set of chairs. Shane jumps onto a rolling luggage cart, then leaps off. Ilya dekes a security guard. Shane sprints past a family with an adorable child in a Hollander jersey. Cut to a gate, where an AirCanada gate agent stands with a friendly smile. Ilya puts on a burst of speed. Shane pulls up right next to him. They’re neck and neck... right up until they skid to a stop in front of the gate agent, each of them holding out a paper boarding pass in perfect unison. The agent’s smile takes on an edge of amusement as she reaches out both hands and carefully takes both boarding passes at the exact same time, her eyebrows raised. Shane and Ilya look at each other with sheepish grins and walk onto the jet bridge... or try to. They get stuck when both of them try to walk through the door at the same time, trying to be first. There’s a little scuffle.

Cut to the two of them sitting side-by-side in first class, leaning close together. Ilya is holding a tablet between them and offering an earbud to Shane.

Ilya: Watch the game?

Shane: Yeah, put it on.

Shane takes the earbud and puts it in, watching the tablet screen as Ilya brings up a hockey game. They both settle in to watch, shoulders pressed together.

The tagline fades into the center of the screen: "Run away with us." The AirCanada logo fades in below it.

The ad fades to black.]

↪ **@uncreative** They're so fucking funny for this tbh

↪ **@censandcensability** Even the brands are cashing in on these absolute competitive freaks you love to see it

↪ **@hollanova** A joint ad campaign? The first one since their rookie season? Oh my god i have been FED. They are so cute I can't handle this.

↪ **@pucksinnetsplz** Why does it feel like these guys are EVERYWHERE right now? Can't open hockey twitter without an article about them and now this?

↪ **@jamie_mcdavin** Sorry aircanada not even my favorite bromance will make me hate you less

@HeyItsHayden

Yeah this is them in a nutshell: "I'm gonna destroy you! You're going down! Get wrecked! Hey, wanna grab something to eat? Need help with that? Love you, bye."

[Quote tweet: **@AirCanada** Run away with...]

↪ **@RealRoseLandry** I laughed so hard because YES EXACTLY

↪ **@CliffMarly** Yep you nailed it

↪ **@BoodBQ** They match each others' freak perfectly

[Ilya's instagram story features a photo of the Seattle skyline in late evening as taken from a hotel window. A black bar with white text cuts across the middle of the photo. It reads: "Missing him tonight." In the bottom left corner is a song card for Say You Won't Let Go by James Arthur. The snippet of song that plays is:

*I'm so in love with you, and I hope you know
Darlin', your love is more than worth its weight in gold
We've come so far, my dear, look how we've grown
And I wanna stay with you until we're grey and old
Just say you won't let go
Just say you won't let go]*

[Shane's instagram story is a photo of city lights as seen from an airplane window. There's a single red heart emoji in the top left corner. In the bottom right corner is a song card for Rewrite the Stars by James Arthur and Anne-Marie. The snippet of song that plays is:

*How do we rewrite the stars?
Say you were made to be mine
And nothin' could keep us apart
'Cause you are the one I was meant to find
It's up to you and it's up to me
No one could say what we get to be
And why don't we rewrite the stars?
Changin' the world to be ours]*

@hollanova

Just... noticing. I invite everyone to look at their instagram stories right now and Notice with me. That is all.

↔ **@hollzyleftskate** Choosing deeply romantic songs by the same artist on the same night... god what if they ARE rewriting the hockey world to be theirs, I will SOB

↔ **@hollanova** stop I can't handle speaking of it directly, my heart will explode

@ilyarozanovupdates

Ilya Rozanov appears to hint at a male partner via Instagram stories: "Missing him tonight"

[A screenshot of the Instagram story is attached.]

↔ **@ryebri** "hint" like this is practically a declaration, we are so close I can taste it

↔ **@ilyarozanovupdates** look I try really hard to stick to objective facts on this acct but ☹☹

Jane

Hey can we call after your therapy appointment later?

Or will you be too blah from it?

Ilya
We can call whenever

Jane
What time is your appointment over? 5?

Ilya
No appointment today

Jane
Did you move it to another day or something?

Ilya
No, just cancelled

I do not have anything to talk about right now

Things are good

Jane
I'm really glad you're feeling better right now.

I'm so glad you're happy and things are going well.

But please don't stop going to therapy or taking your meds.

The fact that you feel better means it's all working, right?

And your therapist said that good things happening doesn't cure clinical depression

Ilya you've been typing for a really long time

Are you okay? Can I call?

Ilya
Okay

[Incoming call: 1:18:07]

Jane
Thank you for hearing me out. I love you.

Ilya
I love you too.

I will call Galina's office in the morning.

[The Instagram reel opens with Ilya and Shane sitting side-by-side at a hockey rink. Down on the ice, the players of the Ottawa Charge and Montreal Victoire are warming up. Shane is wearing a dark blue hoodie with the Victoire logo on the front. Ilya is wearing a shirt that says "Ottawa Pride" with the Charge logo accented in rainbow in the center and a PWHL ballcap. They are both grinning.]

Ilya: Hello everyone! We are at the Ottawa Charge @ Montreal Victoire game this afternoon!

[Shane pinches the front of his hoodie and shakes the logo for the camera.]

Shane: Allez Montréal!

[Ilya shoves him out of the frame with his shoulder and shows off his own shirt instead.]

Ilya: No, no, go Ottawa!

[Ilya turns to grin at Shane and throws an arm around him, pulling him back into the frame.]

Ilya: Shane, what are you hoping to see tonight, besides some damn good hockey?

Shane: I hope we see a jailbreak goal, just because I think it's a really fun rule change. The PWHL actually has some great innovations that I really think the MLH should consider, like the 3-2-1-0 point—

[Ilya's hand lifts off Shane's shoulder and wraps around to cover Shane's mouth.]

Ilya: Oops, sorry everyone, I did not mean to get him started. Shane, you can lick my hand all you want, I am not letting go.

[Shane glowers.]

Ilya: Anyway, keep an eye on my stories today, I'll post some highlights from the game! Goodbyeeee!

[Ilya removes his hand from Shane's mouth and wipes Shane's own spit straight down the side of Shane's face.]

Shane: Augh, god, you're the *worst* sometimes!

Ilya: You love me anywaaaaay!

[The video ends. It is saved to Ilya's profile as a reel and shared to his story. Shane reshares it, as do the official accounts for the Charge and the Victoire.]

[A carousel of photos on Ilya's Instagram:

Photo 1: Six people sit at a round table in a bright, modern-looking restaurant, the table tucked into a quiet windowed corner. Shane and Ilya sit next to each other in the foreground. There are four women at the table with them, clearly leaning together into two distinct pairs. Everyone smiles brightly for the camera.

Photo 2: Everyone holds up a drink, clinking their glasses together in the middle of the table.

Photo 3: Shane on his feet at the rink, arms in the air as he cheers with a big grin on his face.

Photo 4: Shane on his feet at the rink again, this time looking furious, mouth open and arms gesturing down at the ice.

Photo 5: The four women photographed from behind, walking down a sidewalk. Each couple has their arms wrapped around each other.

Photo 6: A blurry photo of Shane. His eyes are crinkled shut and he's grinning widely as he bends forward.

Photo 7: Ilya's PWHL ballcap sits on a bartop. There are four signatures scribbled in Sharpie on it.

Photo 8: All six people stand in a dim bar, backs up against the bartop with the wall of liquor bottles behind them. They're arranged all in a line, pressed together with arms wrapped around each other.]

ilyarozanov81 Highly recommend going to an Ottawa Charge vs. Montreal Victoire game with @ShaneHollanderHockey and watching him shout at the refs from the stands. Thank you to Laura Stacey, Marie-Philip Poulin, and Anna Kjellbin of the Victoire and Ronja Savolainen of the Charge for hanging out with us afterward and giving great advice. See you this summer!

@sheknowspuck Love to see these guys supporting the PWHL!

@pucksinnetsplz wtf kind of advice could these girls possibly have for the two best hockey players in the world?

↪ **@improbable.her** lol attention women everywhere, giant red flag alert

↪ **@toomanyplants** boooooo shame him 🍌🍌🍌

@81hattricks One of these things is not like the others... or is it?

↪ **@neutralzone92** wdym?

↪ **@81hattricks** Marie-Philip Poulin and Laura Stacey are married. Ronja Savolainen and Anna Kjellbin are engaged. Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov are...??????

↔ @hollanova I mean, they're both out queer men at a table with two other queer pro hockey couples... the math doesn't seem hard here.

↔ @neutralzone92 You can't just make an assumption like that

↔ @hollanova I'm not saying I'm right, I'm just saying the math checks out
👤👤♀

That evening, laying in bed, Ilya could feel the *thinking* coming off Shane in waves, despite the very good orgasms they'd both enjoyed before settling in. Shane's head was nestled on his chest, and Ilya wove his fingers through his hair, rubbing in a soothing rhythm.

"You are thinking very hard about something," he said. "You are worried about today? Was it too much? Too obvious?"

Shane turned his face further into Ilya's chest and rubbed back and forth a few times, either a shake of his head or a nuzzle or both.

"I just keep thinking of something Marie-Philip Poulin said when we were at dinner," he said, words muffled against Ilya's skin.

"You know you don't have to say her full name like that every time, Shane Hollander," Ilya murmured, *so fond*.

"Fuck off," Shane said, equally fond. "Just, she said 'this is the most myself I've ever been.' Once she and Laura were out and married and playing professional hockey together."

Ilya hummed in acknowledgement. "And you are... feeling something about that?"

"I think I'm..." Shane trailed off and collected his thoughts. "Eager, maybe? Like, for a good bit of time I actually sort of dreaded each step of our plan, and none of it more than the big coming out at the end. I *want* to, you know I'm in this, but I've still been sort of terrified the whole time. But what she said really stuck with me."

"Clearly, if you cannot sleep after coming your brains out with my tongue in your ass," Ilya couldn't help but snark.

Shane patted blindly for one of the decorative pillows they'd knocked on the floor earlier and hit Ilya with it. "I'm trying to be sincere here, you asshole. I'm saying I'm actually fucking looking forward to coming out with you. I want what they have."

Including the part where they're married? Ilya couldn't quite bring himself to say aloud. Instead, he wrapped his arms fully around Shane and pulled him

closer, pressing a kiss to the crown of his head.

“I want to feel like myself *all the time*, not just when I’m alone with you,” Shane murmured against the hollow of Ilya’s throat, following the words with a brush of his lips.

“You will,” Ilya said into his hair. “And so will I. Soon. It took us so long to get here, and now somehow these last two months of waiting are the hardest.”

“But we can’t fuck it up now.”

“No. We have to be good.” Ilya smiled as he felt sleep begin to take him. “But not for much longer.”

[Ilya’s Instagram story features a screenshot from his text messages. The texts read:

Marly

Look man I love you both

You know I do

But sometimes talking to you is like

*“My name is Ilya Rozanov and I’m rich
and hot and talented and my boyfriend
is equally rich and hot and talented and
we’re disgustingly in love and his
parents love me and we’re gonna get
married and have a million babies”
girl fuck you*

Ilya

Don’t be jealous marly baby

Some of us just stay winning

In the bottom corner of the image is a song card for “All I Do is Win” by DJ Khaled.]

The final Ottawa @ Montreal game of the season was a predictably unbalanced matchup, and yet they managed to put on a good show anyway. The Cens made a respectable showing, keeping the score to a tolerable 3-1, and the game was lively and entertaining with plenty of on-ice interaction between Shane and Ilya that the crowd ate up. They chatted over the line at warm ups, riled each other up at face offs, and slammed into each other as often as possible, locked in a constant battle for the puck.

It was an electric game for all involved; the Cens were fired up and matching the energy, and even the Metros were having fun by the end. There'd been a few comments in the locker room ahead of time that Shane had shut down or let go, but once the game was over, no one had any question about whether Shane and Ilya had played their hardest against each other. The Cens seemed to have no such reservations from the start, casually greeting him throughout the game with "hello Captain-in-law!" and "are you my stepdad now?" and other such things that had him blushing and laughing.

Sitting beside Ilya for media was a special sort of torture, with every cell in Shane's body simultaneously screaming "don't look, don't give it away" and also "fuck it, I love him, let everyone see!"

Soft launch, he repeated to himself silently. *Soft, not a bomb.*

Hopefully the cameras couldn't see the way Shane's face heated when Ilya winked as he took the chair next to him.

"Menace," he grumbled, poking Ilya in the thigh. Ilya hooked their index fingers together for just a second, his eyes steady on the crowd, giving nothing away. Shane felt like screaming, or blurting the truth, or maybe just climbing in his lap and kissing him in front of everyone.

Fortunately, the questions began before he could do any of those things.

"There's been a lot of speculation about your uniquely close relationship, given that you've both come out as gay and bisexual respectively," a man in the middle row began. "What is your response to it all?"

Ilya scoffed. "Always people are asking these things instead of wanting to talk about our very excellent hockey. We are the two best players in the league! Does no one want to talk about that goal I scored immediately after winning that face off against Shane?"

Shane scowled. "No, no one wants to hear about that. Maybe they want to hear about my *two* goals, though."

Ilya did his little twitchy sniff thing. "On second thought, please continue asking us more invasive personal questions."

Marcel from Metros PR took that as his cue to intervene. "Okay, okay, let's stick to hockey questions only, people."

They did. And the whole time, Shane's foot pressed against Ilya's under the table.

Soon, they would be able to answer all their questions honestly. Tell the truth. Be seen.

Soon. Soon. Soon.

@arcteryx

Be Out with @ShaneHollanderHockey and @IlyaRozanov81, our newest athlete partners.

[The video opens with Shane and Ilya, dressed in high end outdoor apparel and beanies, facing off on a frozen pond. There are several fast cuts as they battle for the puck alone on the ice, laughing and shouting.]

Cut: They're walking away from the pond, Ilya with a crossbody bag and Shane with a backpack, jostling each other as they walk to a sleek black SUV.

Cut: Shane scrambles up a rocky bit of hiking trail, then turns to offer a hand to Ilya as he climbs up after.

Cut: Shane and Ilya running down the trail, backpacks on, the brand's logo clearly visible on the bags.

Cut: Ilya lowers himself down beside Shane at an overlook at golden hour, the sunlight glinting off his curls. The two sit shoulder-to-shoulder, looking out over the incredible view below, their bags resting on the ground beside them. The Arc'teryx logo fades in with the tagline: "Be Out."]

↪ **@hollanova** That tagline, I am going to PASS AWAY

↪ **@jenna_who_makes** Hey so I actually worked on this ad and fun fact, we originally had a completely different tagline, then Ilya Rozanov came out publicly too and we rushed to change it. 😊

↪ **@impossible_kim** there is no universe in which I can afford anything from this brand and yet I feel myself being ✨Influenced✨

↪ **@rainbow_popsicle** I don't think they've ever partnered with hockey players before??? It's always like climbers and trail runners and stuff. No one can resist the media power of these two right now.

↪ **@chili_crisp** okay but this is so fucking romantic and I'm obsessed. Sign me up for these two hockey boys. Beam it into my eyeballs. I'm sat for whatever the fuck is going on here.

@OttawaCens

And that's a wrap on Centaurs hockey for the 2017-2018 season! We regret narrowly missing out on the playoffs this year, but we're grateful as always to our amazing fans. We'll be back in September better than ever!

[Included is a video of the Centaurs' season highlights.]

@IlyaRozanov81

Proud of my Ottawa brothers and the whole organization for their work this year. We made a lot of progress as a team and I know next season we'll bring the Cens back to the playoffs. 🇺🇸

↔ **@BoodBQ** Couldn't have said it better! Looking forward to seeing you and your guy at the bbq

↔ **@Choubacca** Was awesome having you with us this season, captain! We're gonna crush it next year

↔ **@EvanDyksy** This is remarkably polite and tame coming from you but HELL YEAH BROTHER, next year is OURS

@MTLMetros

The Metros are kicking off the first round of the playoffs with home ice advantage vs. Toronto this Thursday, April 12! Check your local broadcast info so you don't miss it: www.mlh.com/metros

[Included is a video of highlights from the Metros' earlier games against Toronto.]

@allezmontreal

Guys I swear I just saw Ilya Rozanov at a cafe in my gayborhood in Montreal. Here visiting Shane maybe now that the season's over?? He left with two coffees. #hollanov

@minor_human

Another Ilya Rozanov in Montreal sighting. He was on a run in the park and fully did a cartoon stop when he saw my dog. He was very kind and my dog loved him.

@ride_a_centaur

Okay I wasn't going to say anything but in light of the Rozanov sightings in mtl... One of the rookies on the Cens posted this photo from their end of season bbq and then took it down. Why is it all the Centaurs and their social media guy... plus randomly Hollander?

[A photo of the entire Ottawa team, their WAGs, Harris Drover, and Shane Hollander, grinning at the camera with various beverages dangling from their hands. Ilya is pressed between Shane and Harris in the middle of the photo.]

↔ **@hollanova** I have a theory

↪ **@censofhumor** Sooooo maybe they deleted it because of this tweet from Bood the other day? It basically proves Ilya brought his boyfriend to the bbq. So either he's standing off to the side somewhere, or...

[Screenshot of a tweet: "@BoodBQ Couldn't have said it better! Looking forward to seeing you and your guy at the bbq"]

↪ **@fizzy_brain** I mean, it's the Cens and their WAGs. Ergo, Shane Hollander has either magically traded to the Cens after the trade deadline, or he's...

↪ **@yaypucktime** Not a wife nor a girlfriend but a secret third thing?

↪ **@fizzy_brain** I mean, I think it's barely a secret at this point...

[A photo posted to Ilya's Instagram: A sheet pan with heavily seasoned chicken breasts and cubes of roasted sweet potatoes sits on top of a stove. A pot is on one of the back burners, and there's a bag of greens sitting off to one side.]

ilyarozanov81 Cooking for two is always better

[A photo posted to Shane's Instagram: Two grain bowls with farro, wilted arugula, roasted sweet potato, and sliced chicken breast.]

shanehollanderhockey Eating can feel like a chore during playoffs, but it's much better with company

@hollanova

Look twitter I have done a remarkable job of keeping calm and sane lately I think. But those are clearly the same meal. That is Shane's kitchen. I am being so chill and I deserve recognition for it.

[Three images are attached: A screenshot of Ilya's instagram post, a screenshot of Shane's post, and an older post of Shane's advertising a protein powder brand he partnered with. The kitchen is clearly the same in Ilya's post and Shane's old post, right down to the angle of the shot.]

↪ **@brian_writes** Okay but that doesn't mean they're dating, it just means Rozanov is visiting.

↪ **@hollanova** why are you even in my mentions? This is a hollanov account. You know what I'm about. It says it right there on the tin.

- ↪ **@rhymeswithorange** it FEELS like things are... accelerating? Maybe?
 - ↪ **@ryebri** soft launch?
 - ↪ **@hollzyleftskate** totally a soft launch imo
 - ↪ **@hollanova** I love this for us all. 🙏
-

@JackiePike35

Game 4 watch party, here we go! **@IlyaRozanov81**

[A photo of Jackie and Ilya with their faces pressed together and wine glasses held up.]

- ↪ **@hollanova** Ilya in his WAG era?
- ↪ **@hollanova** HE LIKED MY REPLY???????

@hollanova

I am hyperventilating. Holy shit. I think this might actually be happening.

[Screenshot proving that Ilya liked the “WAG era” reply. “OMFG?????” is scribbled in the corner.]

- ↪ **@ryebri** *[The “it’s happening, everyone remain calm” gif from The Office.]*
 - ↪ **@hollzyleftskate** *[The “this is fine” dog surrounded by flames gif]*
 - ↪ **@rhymeswithorange** I’m afraid I live here now.
 - ↪ **@newestgnome** I feel like I can’t blink or I’ll miss something
 - ↪ **@cake_with_sprinkles** so do we think confirmation is coming soon?
 - ↪ **@hollanova** I think they’d probably wait until after the playoffs are over. But maybe???
-

@themetroz Okay I’m at the Metros game 5 and Ilya Rozanov is here? Sitting with the WAGs and Hollander’s parents? Wearing a Hollander jersey?

[A sneaky over-the-shoulder-with-the-selfie-camera photo of Ilya in the stands at a Metros game, turned sideways so you can see he’s wearing a Hollander jersey.]

He's mid-conversation with Yuna Hollander, who looks like she's trying not to laugh.]

↪ **@alliellama** now that's how you support a bestie!

↪ **@hollzyleftskate** oh they aren't even hiding anymore are they

↪ **@hollanova** that's his future mother-in-law there 🙄🙄🙄

@sunflowermoon I'm just saying, if I were Shane Hollander's boyfriend and I were NOT Ilya Rozanov, I'd be giving some serious side eye.

[Side-by-side pictures from the Montreal vs. Toronto game. On the left, Shane stares up into the stands with a bright smile on his face, his eyes crinkled at the corners. On the right, Ilya is in the stands staring back down at Shane, grinning with absolute heart eyes. Shane's parents are seated next to him.]

↪ **@anything_is_possible** queer men can be friends without threatening their relationships

↪ **@sunflowermoon** no, totally!! But the way they look at each other is...

↪ **@anything_is_possible** oh I see it too, it just had to be said

@MTLMetros

After a 4-1 series, the Montreal Metros advance to round two of the playoffs! They'll face either Tampa Bay or New Jersey starting Thursday, April 25th. Round 2 tickets will go on presale for season ticket holders Monday, April 22 at 9am.

↪ **@metrogogo** it will be a miracle if we make it through with so many injuries, but here I am buying my tickets as always 🙄

@hollanova

I put together a compilation of every time Shane or Ilya failed to deny a relationship between them during interviews this season. It's almost five minutes long. Enjoy. www.youtube.com/watch?v=...

[A video of cut-together clips from Shane and Ilya's media appearances during the 2017-2018 season. In every one, they either talk around the idea of them being together or directly change the subject.]

↪ **@rhymeswithorange** holy shit this is great work. It's also... really obvious, wow.

↪ **@ryebri** Truly what other explanation is there for not simply saying "no"? I can't think of anything.

↪ **@oversteeped_tea** They're probably just playing it up to get attention, trying to bring in more fans or something

↔ **@hollzyleftskate** hugely risky move in the notoriously homophobic MLH if so??? Doesn't make any sense

@PuckTalkNews

Is hockey ready for two players dating? Read our analysis:

www.pucktalknews.com/mlh/...

↔ **@dddaviddd** No.

↔ **@talkpucktome** men's hockey***

↔ **@marisa_roots** Hockey already HAS players dating. The PWHL is full of couples. So are the women's Olympic teams. On same teams and on competing teams. This is old news. Catch tf up, men's hockey.

↔ **@crushingtbr** this is embarrassing and you should really delete it

@MLHGossip

Dating rumors in the MLH? Lots of eyes on Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov these days, and some are questioning: Is it really a bromance, or is it something hotter? www.mlhgossip.com/story/...

↔ **@herefor24** I'm not sure anyone's actually questioning it anymore??

↔ **@yarnandtarot** Just waiting for official confirmation at this point

↔ **@coldteaagain** yeah y'all are behind the times, this is old news

↔ **@hollanova** and yet some people will have their heads in the sand to the very end...

The writing was on the wall for the Metros, and Shane was deeply fucking tired. His body felt like one enormous bruise, and his shoulder was being held together by tape and pain killers. They had just won game five of their series against Tampa Bay, but it was a last gasp of effort and everyone knew it. One more loss and the Metros were done for the season, and it was looking likely. They'd been ravaged by injuries to the point where a second round win would be near miraculous, and even if they managed to limp through, there was no way they had enough gas in the tank to secure the Eastern Conference championship.

The fact that Ilya was waiting for him out in the car was all that got him through media availability. He was able to paste on a smile and ramble his way through stock answers about their play, performing the role of a captain who totally believed they were going all the way this year. Finally, as questions began to wind down, things turned to the topic the media had been tactfully avoiding, perhaps sensing that this was one of their last opportunities of the season.

“Ilya Rozanov was in the stands supporting you again tonight,” a man in the front row said. “What does it mean to have him there cheering for you?”

Shane couldn’t help the way his media smile bloomed into something softer and more genuine. “Ah, I know we’d both much rather he be down on the ice fighting me for the win, but this is the next best thing. I’m glad he could be here.”

Marcel from Metros PR raised a hand to cut off questions, sensing the shift in the room, but a woman in the back snuck in one last one under the wire. “Does the speculation about you and Rozanov online make you uncomfortable?”

Shane shrugged, easy and unbothered. “No, why would it? Rozanov’s a great guy. I do wish people weren’t so invested in my personal life, but I know it comes with the territory.”

At that, Marcel really did end things, and Shane made his way back to the locker room to grab his things. Once he flopped into the passenger seat beside Ilya, he found his give-a-fuck was just broken enough to lean over and give him a quick peck on the lips.

“You did good at media,” Ilya said as he pulled out of the parking space. “I especially liked the part where you called me a ‘great guy.’”

“Don’t let it go to your head,” Shane grumbled, already half-asleep. He scrolled through his notifications on his phone to keep himself awake and found an email from Farah, sent sometime while he was on the ice.

Shane and Ilya,

The commissioner has been quite persistent about trying to set up a meeting with both of you. I’ve managed to put him off by insisting he tell me the purpose of the meeting before I schedule it, and he seems to have dropped it. If we do end up having to take a meeting with him, I think I can push it off until after the playoffs. Just wanted to give you both a heads up in case he tried to go around me and contact you directly. I do not recommend taking any phone calls from him without me on the line.

*Best,
Farah*

Shane read the email aloud to Ilya, who sighed.

“We can dodge his calls for another month, yes?” he said. “We only have to hold out a little while longer. Then we will already be out and he cannot do anything about it.”

“Yeah, I hope so,” Shane said, clicking his phone screen off. “We’re so close. I don’t want anything to fuck this up when we’re almost there.”

Ilya reached over and squeezed Shane’s knee. “We’ll be okay no matter what. This whole thing has momentum now. Is moving without us, yes? The fans and bloggers online have taken it and run. Cannot stop an avalanche once it has begun.”

Shane stared down at his lap for a moment, then grabbed his phone and opened Instagram. He quickly snapped a photo, dark but legible, of Ilya’s hand resting on his knee and posted it to his story with the words: “Celebrating a great win with great company. ♥”

“There’s no stopping us now,” he said, and wove his fingers through Ilya’s with a smile.

@espn

The Montreal Metros fall to the Tampa Bay Lightning 3-2 in a brutal game six, sending Tampa Bay to the Eastern Conference Finals next week. Read our recap and analysis of the game and make your predictions for the next round:

www.espn.com/mlh/story...

The Metros were drowning their sorrows at a club, mentally exhausted and physically wrecked, and for once, Hayden had managed to get Shane out with the team. Jackie and Ilya were there, too, along with most of the other WAGs, and the drinks were free flowing. Ilya’s presence had thrown off several of the guys, but they got over it pretty quickly when they saw how much Shane loosened up around him.

“Has he secretly been fun all this time?” Wilson asked Hayden, gesturing over at Shane with his beer. Shane was bent double as he laughed at something Ilya had said, his cheeks red and his hand firmly glued to Ilya’s thigh. They were *barely* hiding at this point. The plausible deniability was tissue paper thin. And Shane clearly did not give a *fuck*.

“I tried to tell you all he was, man,” Hayden replied. “He was just always wound tight from having to hide.”

“I guess so,” Wilson said, knocking back the rest of his beer and disappearing for another just as JJ’s voice rose about the music and noise.

“Shots for all the Metros!” he called out, pumping his fist in the air as the server dropped off a whole tray of shot glasses. JJ lined them up on the tables and

picked one up. "To next season! The cup will be ours!"

Hayden took the shot, grimacing at the burn, and then fell into a seat between Jackie and Ilya, reaching for a glass of water as his head swam. Most of the guys knocked their shots back the traditional way, but after some very brief goading from the rookies, Shane locked his arms behind his back, picked up his shot glass in his mouth, and tossed it back with barely a wince. The rookies tried the same thing with much more coughing and sputtering.

"Gotta learn to breathe through your gag reflex, guys," Shane said with a smirk, dropping his glass back on the table. He had apparently reached the "no filter" level of tipsy.

"Yes, tell them all about how you've practiced that, Hollander," Ilya said, yanking him closer by a belt loop.

Shane barked a laugh and dropped down next to Ilya, slapping a hand over Ilya's mouth as he pressed in along his side. "Shhhhhh, Ilya, we're still soft launching until the season is over, you can't say that here!"

"Sweetheart, I'm pretty sure this whole club is onto us," Ilya said wryly, throwing an arm around Shane's waist. "Maybe we should head home, yes? You want?"

"What I want is for you to suck my dick in the bathroom right now," Shane said, not nearly quietly enough. Hayden grimaced.

"Your wish is my command," Ilya said, pushing Shane up to stand and urging him forward. They stumbled toward the bathrooms, giggling with their hands all over each other, completely unsubtle. Hayden slapped his hands over his face while Jackie snickered next to him.

"Oh God, I wish I hadn't heard that," he groaned.

Olsson watched the whole scene with raised eyebrows. "Are they sneaking off to fuck?"

That got everyone's attention.

"Let's talk about literally anything else!" Hayden pleaded, and changed the subject.

Time passed in a head-swimming haze of alcohol and end-of-season commiseration until Shane fell back into the seat next to Hayden, loose-limbed and flushed. He took a long drink of water and then slumped back in his seat.

"Feel better cap?" Olsson said with a snicker.

Shane flicked him off. "Fuck off."

His voice was unusually gravelly. Hayden did *not* think about why.

"Where's Rozanov?" Berkes asked, scanning the crowd for him.

Shane smirked. "He needed a minute."

"Goddamn, cap," Wilson said. "Couldn't wait until you got home?"

"I'll get it then too," Shane said with an easy shrug, then downed the last of the water.

Drapeau shook his head, looking shell-shocked. "What the fuck happened to our goody two-shoes captain?"

"He never existed," Ilya said as he returned to the table, dropping heavily into the seat beside Shane, looking wrecked. "He has always been a secret freak buried under layers of gay repression." He tipped his head back with a heaved breath and then looked to Shane. "You have killed me."

Shane gave a smug smile but said nothing, just threw an arm around Ilya's shoulders.

Wilson drained the last of his beer and shook his head. "Not gonna lie, we've all been wondering how someone like him managed to tame the MLH's biggest manwhore."

"Not all of us," Comeau grumbled, disgusted. Everyone ignored him.

"I mean, I love him, and I've been obsessed with him since I was seventeen," Ilya said with a big smacking kiss to Shane's cheek, just exaggerated enough to play it off as friendly to anyone watching. "But also he is the best I have ever had, so..."

"Okay, that's enough," Shane said, cutting him off even as he grinned. "Do you wanna dance before we leave?"

"Oh my god, *yes*," Jackie said, grabbing the front of Hayden's shirt and hauling him up after her. "Let's all go!"

Several of the WAGs leaped to their feet and dragged their partners along, too, and the whole group waded out onto the floor, dancing so close that it didn't look strange at all for Shane and Ilya to be practically on top of each other, grinding to the music. Shane's smile was infectious, and he laughed and shouted along to songs he barely knew and let Ilya's hands guide his hips.

And sure, maybe Hayden didn't really want to imagine his buddy getting a blow job in a club bathroom or hear about he and Ilya's bedroom escapades. But there was something really intensely *important* about seeing Shane dancing his heart out, badly, but looking so free and happy and open. His arms were thrown over Jackie's shoulders in front of him and his back was pressed so close to Ilya's front that there couldn't be a molecule between them. Hayden watched Shane from behind Jackie, his arms running up and down her sides, and thought to himself: *I think this is it. I think I finally know him. I think we're finally brothers for real.*

And when Ilya and Shane slipped away, disappearing into the night, Hayden could only smile.

“Ready to go?” he asked Jackie.

“Take me home,” she whispered hotly in his ear.

While Shane went to locker cleanout and wrapped up his exit meetings, Ilya packed up the car for their drive out to the cottage. Now that the season was over, they didn’t want to waste a second they could be spending in their favorite place on Earth. When Shane texted he was done around dinner time, Ilya drove over to the Bell Sports Complex in the loaded-up car and hopped out, waiting by the passenger door until Shane came out with Hayden and JJ at his sides. Both guys clapped Shane on the shoulders, and JJ leaned in to say something, giving Shane a shake when he looked oddly bashful. Hayden and JJ both waved to Ilya before heading to their own cars, and Shane made his way over, looking around before giving Ilya a quick peck on the lips.

“Ready to go?” he asked. Ilya smiled.

“Very. Want to grab something to eat on the way out of town?”

“God, yes, I’m starving,” Shane said, plucking the keys from Ilya’s hand and circling around to the other side of the car. They bickered about what to eat for nearly long enough to leave all the options behind, then finally settled on something and made their way out of town, their hands twined together the entire time. Shane seemed to cling tighter and tighter the closer they got, even as the rest of him seemed perfectly relaxed, making the familiar drive with ease.

“You okay?” Ilya asked, sweeping his thumb over Shane’s knuckles. Shane turned and shot him a smile before looking back at the road.

“Fine,” he said, loosening his clutch on Ilya’s hand. “Just eager to be home with you. It’s been a long year of hiding, and I’m looking forward to being somewhere that’s just for us. You know?”

“I do know,” Ilya said. He lifted Shane’s hand to his lips and placed a kiss on the back. “I’ve been waiting for this all year.”

They arrived at the cottage at sunset, crunching down the driveway with an immense sense of relief. When Shane turned the car off, he sat back, letting out a slow exhale.

“We’re here,” he murmured, then turned to smile at Ilya. “Leave the bags for now. Let’s go watch the sunset. First one of the summer.”

Ilya reached out to run the backs of his fingers over Shane’s cheek, then leaned over for a lingering kiss.

“Yes. Let’s do that,” he said.

The two of them got out of the car and made their way down to the dock, pausing at the edge to take in the beauty of the sky, the spill of colors, the view that made Ilya's heart ache with all the memories of the summer that changed everything.

"I love this place so much," Ilya said, reaching over to take Shane's hand. "I'm so happy we're here."

"Me, too," Shane murmured, then blew out a breath. Frowning, Ilya turned.

"Everything okay?"

Shane gave Ilya's hand a comforting squeeze. "Yeah, yeah. I just... I wanted to talk to you about something."

Ilya's stomach went tight with nerves. "Okay. Nothing is... wrong?"

Shane shook his head, smiling, and turned fully to face him.

"We're going to be announcing our relationship to the world soon, and I think it would be really amazing to introduce you to everyone..." Shane paused and took a breath. "...as my fiancé."

Shane pulled a small velvet box out of his pocket, and Ilya's heart seized in his chest, his eyes going hot and full in a sudden rush.

"Ilya Rozanov—"

Ilya started nodding his head, tears running down his face, and Shane huffed a small laugh, continuing on.

"This past year of loving you without doubt, of finally being with you for real, has been the best year of my life. We've come so far, and all I can think about is that I want more. I want to keep doing it forever."

Shane dropped to one knee and opened the ring box.

"Ilya, will you wear my ring? Will you be my husband?" He swallowed, his voice hoarse as he finished: "Will you marry me?"

Ilya fell to his knees, nearly knocking Shane over as he threw himself forward, somehow managing to kiss him through a sob.

"Oh my god, Shane, *fuck*," he said, pressing their foreheads together. "*Obviously* yes. Of course. Please. Thank you. Yes."

Shane fully laughed then, pulling him in for another kiss, and another, until Ilya pulled back just far enough to speak against his lips.

"Are you ever going to put this ring on my finger?"

"Oh, fuck, right." Shane scrambled to pull the ring out of the little box without dropping it in the lake, then carefully slid it onto Ilya's offered right hand. He

stared down at it for a long moment, his lips parting, and when he looked back up at Ilya there was a familiar heat burning there.

“Seeing my ring on your finger is really doing it for me,” he said frankly. “Let’s go inside. Right now.”

Ilya stood and pulled Shane up after him, tugging him toward the house.

"Come on, Hollander. Race you."

They took off running, heading straight for the bedroom.

For once, neither cared who won.

After they woke up horny at two in the morning and fucked again, Shane propped himself up on one elbow, and Ilya nearly groaned. Shane had an *idea*. One of his middle-of-the-night ideas.

“Fuck it,” Shane said, grabbing Ilya’s hand and twisting the ring around his finger. “We’re not gonna make some big formal statement like we have something to apologize for or defend ourselves against. As soon as the playoffs are over, we’re just going to celebrate getting engaged like any other couple.”

Ilya grinned. He loved give-no-fucks Shane so much. Also, *engaged*. Still wow.

“Can we fuck with our friends a bit when we announce?” he asked.

“Of course,” Shane said. “I assumed you would want to.”

Ilya leaned in and kissed him, deeply and thoroughly.

“You know me so well, sweetheart. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Ilya kissed him one last time, and then planted a hand in the center of Shane’s chest and forced him down to the bed.

“Now, go the fuck to sleep, please.”

Shane laughed, but did as he was told.

Chapter End Notes

Just one chapter left! A little more soft launch, an announcement, some reactions, and the end.

Thank you to poading for helping me find these peak 2016-2018 era constant radio play Hollanov songs for the instagram stories.

I mentioned this in chapter 1 but it bears repeating: The PWHL did not exist until 2023, but I wanted to use their excellent examples of real-life queer couples and also promote them to you because the PWHL is a great league that is growing every year. Support them! This is loosely based on the 2024-2025 season specifically because Anna Kjellbin and Ronja Savolainen were doing the Ottawa/Montreal split like Shane and Ilya. Sadly Kjellbin was traded to New York in March of that season, but we're handwaiving the timing of that slightly for the story here.

I didn't wanna RPF here and actually write any of the PWHL players "on screen" really, but when Shane quotes Pou as saying she's "the most myself I've ever been," that is taken from this great feature on MPP+LS: [A Hockey Love Story: Laura Stacey and Marie-Philip Poulin navigate marriage and career](#). It's very sweet. ♥

Chapter 12: The beginning.

Chapter Summary

A last little taste of soft launching, an announcement, and the end.

Chapter Notes

Previously On: The boys, in collaboration with Yuna, have a new post-cottage plan to get them happy, safe, and out in just a year. Ilya has traded to the Centaurs, and they're both in therapy. Shane and Ilya are both now out to the public. Ilya has received his PR and is safe, so they've spent the last few months of the season soft launching their relationship and carefully dodging direct questions from the media. And now...

I can't believe we've reached the end. ☐ Thank you so much to everyone who's been following along with this as a WIP. I value you so much. I hope you enjoy this wrap-up.

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

[On Ilya's Instagram is a photo taken from the dock at the cottage, showing the lake and the beautiful scenery all around.]

ilyarozanov81 My summer home. ☀

@cozywithrozy so this is 100% Shane Hollander's cottage right?

↔ **@hollanderbackgirl** I don't think there's any way to know for complete certain.

↔ **@hollanov5eva** Head over to Shane's instagram and scroll back to last summer. Same view. So close it almost looks like the same photo.

↔ **@hollanova** Definitely Shane's cottage. No doubt. And before someone jumps in to be like "this doesn't mean they're dating he's just visiting hurr hurr" WE KNOW. Just wait.

@CliffMarly See you in a few weeks brother!

@RealRoseLandry god your party cannot get here soon enough

@BoodBQ Hope you guys get to enjoy the calm before the storm! See you next month.

[On Shane's instagram, a photo of two feet sticking out of the water. The shot is angled so the surroundings aren't visible.]

shanehollanderhockey He's such a goof.

@SvetlanaVetrova Always and forever.

@HeyItsHayden Can't believe I'm gonna say this, but hope he doesn't drown out there!

↔ **@RealRoseLandry** Now that's what we call character growth

↔ **@hollanderrrrr** this exchange is possibly the clearest evidence it's Rozanov that we've ever gotten

@JJDagenais I might take you up on your offer to come out there a little early, that water looks TOO GOOD

@SaintVic I think I've seen him do this in every body of water he's ever touched

@hollanova Just casually noticing Ilya's friends commenting on this. nbd.

@MetrosMTL

Happy 27th birthday to our captain, Shane Hollander!

[A video compilation of Shane's best goals of the 2017-2018 season]

@MLHGossip

Are Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov vacationing together for the summer? Here's what we know: www.mlhgossip.com/story/...

↔ **@bigolecurls** so, nothing, basically. You know nothing. You have a guess based on a single photo.

↔ **@rhymeswithorange** I know they're right, and yet I still feel gross about this article. Leave them alone. They'll announce when they're ready.

@hockey_werewolf

Now every time someone asks about Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov's relationship I feel a reflexive urge to redirect the conversation to their hockey. Have they programmed us? Am I a sleeper agent now?

↔ @rainbow_fireflies SAME oh my god I thought it was just me

↔ @browniesundae at this point I want everyone to just SHHHH until after playoffs. Let them cook. It's coming.

Mama Yuna

Picked up your mail today, look what came!

[Photo of an envelope from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada]

Ilya



Will you please do me a favor and send me picture of the card

Mama Yuna

Sure, and I'll keep it safe in my purse until we see you boys next

Ilya

Perfect, thank you mama yuna!!

[Posted to Ilya's Instagram is a photo of his Permanent Resident card with the number blurred out. A song plays over it: "U Can't Touch This" by MC Hammer.]

ilyarozanov81 Official.

@HockeyByConnors HELL YEAH

@toomuchplaid Wow I don't know if I want to laugh hysterically or be crushingly sad about this song choice

@CassieBoodram The real thing!! We're so so happy for you Ilya ♥

@SvetlanaVetrova See, and you didn't even need a terrible backup plan, you absolute dumbass

↔ **@emmabergy** my curiosity is SO STRONG right now

@RealRoseLandry Absolutely love this for you babe

@PopCraving

Is Rose Landry finding love on the ice once more? New items link the sizzling starlet to hockey powerhouse Ilya Rozanov, her ex-boyfriend Shane Hollander's close friend. Is drama afoot? www.popcraving.com/story/...

↔ **@RealRoseLandry** no.

↔ **@hollanova** lmao you have this so wrong it's actually funny

↔ **@apalmtree** I would actually LOVE this for her so long as Shane isn't a jerk about it, Ilya Rozanov is smokin hot

↔ **@impossiblegarden** is this seriously because she called him babe one single time in a tweet? Must be a slow news day

↔ **@outandback** Rozanov has publicly said he has a boyfriend right now so...?

↔ **@alix_gamesalot** Ilya Rozanov, her ex-boyfriend Shane Hollander's "close friend" honestly hilarious

@MLHGossip

Is Metros captain Shane Hollander stealing linemate and alternate captain Hayden Pike's wife? New evidence reveals a cheating scandal that could rock the Metros to their core: www.mlhgossip.com/story/...

[Attached is a photo from the club the night the Metros were knocked out of the playoffs. Shane and Jackie are dancing. Shane's arms thrown over her shoulders, and Jackie has one hand in the air and the other on Shane's waist. It's very tightly cropped and the background is blurred.]

↔ **@purplepucks** okay y'all were absolutely convinced Hollander and Rozanov were together like yesterday

[Oprah gif with the caption "So what is the truth?"]

↔ **@brickwalling** lol nice try, here's the full version of the photo without the terrible cropping and blurring. Note how Shane and Jackie are leaving tons of room for Jesus, meanwhile Hayden and Ilya are fully grinding up on them. #metrosclubbing2018

[The same photo from the original post, but not cropped. Shane and Jackie are in the same position, but Ilya is pressed up against Shane's back, and Hayden is pressed against Jackie. They both have their hands on their partner's hips. Other Metros and WAGs, previously blurred out, are crowded around them, also dancing close up on Shane's and Jackie's sides.]

↪ **@sunflowermoon** Once again, if Shane Hollander's boyfriend is NOT Ilya Rozanov, then... ☹☹

↪ **@hollanova** Now you're just trying to stir shit up @MLHGossip, delete this nonsense

@ShaneHollanderHockey
Still gay.

[QT: @MLHGossip Is Metros captain Shane Hollander stealing...]

↪ **@RealRoseLandry** You're so fucking funny and I love you

↪ **@HeyItsHayden** 🙄🙄🙄

↪ **@JackiePike35** Please, if THEE Rose Landry couldn't make it happen??

↪ **@RealRoseLandry** Babe you're a fucking CATCH and if Hayden ever kicks it you call me right away

↪ **@birosetruther** UM ROSE LANDRY???

@mad_in_mtl So if we're all posting our photos from that night the Metros were all out after the playoffs... #metrosclubbing2018

[A photo of Ilya, Shane, Jackie, and Hayden all talking at a table in the VIP section of a club. Shane and Ilya are sitting very close.]

@hi_from_heather Ooh I have one too #metrosclubbing2018

[A photo: Shane and Ilya are slightly blurred but perfectly recognizable as they walk through the club. Shane has a fistful of Ilya's shirt and is dragging him along behind him. They're both laughing.]

@maiziemymy I wasn't gonna share this but uhh #metrosclubbing2018

[In the photo, Shane still has Ilya by the shirt, but now his back is against a bathroom door, and he's half inside as it opens. Ilya is grinning broadly with both hands on Shane's hips. The photo is so dark only those very familiar with Shane and Ilya could recognize them.]

↪ **@hollanova** oh my god I've hit my expiration date

↪ **@brian_plays_ball** you know two men can go in a bathroom together without fucking right. I do it all the time.

↪ **@itslateandyet** okay I also wasn't gonna share this but I was in the other stall that night and they 100% exchanged blowies in that bathroom. Sorry guys but you were real loud #metrosclubbing2018

@MLHGossip
Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov reportedly get frisky in a club bathroom! See the whole story: www.mlhgossip.com/story/...

The PR Squad

Mama Yuna

So, do we need to do anything about this, or just let it go?

Harris 🌀

A single tweet from some random dude with no corroboration other than a very dark photo feels like something to ignore. Fans of Shane and Ilya have been flooding the #metrosclubbing2018 tag with other content to drown it out.

Farah

The agency's PR team recommends not acknowledging it at all. In fact, turn your phones off and stay off social media entirely.

Rose Landry

And maybe don't go to any clubs.

Mama Yuna

And maybe don't get up to anything in the bathrooms if you do.

Ilya

Sorry mama yuna. Won't happen again.

Jane

ILYA.

Ilya

What?? They already know!

Ilya

It's not like I told them it was your idea. ☹️

Ilya

Whoops, meant to send that second part in the other chat, oh well

Jane

Everyone please erase this entire conversation from your brains.

Especially MY MOTHER

Ilya

Sorry again mama yuna ☐

The Ones Who Know

Saint

You know I'm kinda sad we don't really need this chat anymore

Conny

Because the ones who know are like... everyone on the internet who pays attention?

JJ

They even did a spot on it on sportscenter the other day, crazy shit

Kip

I feel like I just got here though!

Cassie (Bood)

Yeah same!

Ilya

Aw dont worry, you'll always be special

Jane

Seriously, we wouldn't have survived this year without the support of everyone in this chat

Ilya

This is true

Ilya has changed the name of the chat to The Ones Who Knew First

Ilya

No reason we can't keep the chat for fun

Scott Hunter 

Does this mean I'm finally free?

Ilya

No

Bood

No

Sveta

No

Rose Landry

No

Marly

No

Better Pike

No

14th Best

If I have to be here, you have to be here

Rose Landry

HAYDEN PIKE.

14th Best

Sorry, sorry, it was a reflex!

Better Pike

And?

14th Best

I'm happy to be here?

Rose Landry

And?

14th Best

I'm... sorry? I love you all?

Better Pike

That'll do.

@espn

With an electric game 7 victory against the Tampa Bay Lightning, the Washington Capitals will face the Las Vegas Golden Knights in the Stanley Cup Finals. www.espn.com/mlh/story...

↔ **@ducksnpuks** Well, that's... happening. I guess. Great. Whoo.

↔ **@princessmonster** Great, I just love watching two teams I hate slog it out. Maybe I'll skip the finals this year.

↔ **@goldnights** GO GO GOLD!

↔ **@crisperiffic** ...ew.

@bostonbb617

Okay, I'm just gonna say it, flay me alive if you want, but if Rozanov really did leave Boston to be closer to Hollander... I GET IT.

↔ **@harrowingcrow** fr this is maybe the only reason I will forgive. I, too, would move for All That.

↔ **@deanna_everlast** this time last year I never would have believed it, but now we've got out bi rozy being peak loverboy all over god's internet so...

↪ @axe_in_hand I mean:

[A collage of photos of Shane in various states of undress: sweaty and shirtless after a game, posing for an underwear ad, a close-up of his thighs in tiny shorts, and a tightly-cropped shot of him panting and sweaty, mouth parted, eyes dark, freckles stark against his flush.]

The Ones Who Knew First

Ilya

Okay everyone, official party date: June 13, two days after game seven

Jane

Thanks everyone for putting up with all my scheduling questions

Rose Landry

So hey not to wreck all your carefully laid plans or whatever

But are you really gonna just sit around for a week and a half if the series ends early?

Kip

For real, that would kinda suck right?

Jane

I don't really know what else to do. We can't know how many games it'll go to, and we can't make you all wait around on standby

Rose Landry

Can't you though?

I mean, I can't speak for everyone here so correct me if I'm wrong

But we're all wealthy enough to afford short notice plane tickets (which is maybe gross but true)

I'm in between shoots, so I'm not busy

Most of you are hockey players or adjacent and so not busy right now, unless you have brand meetings or something

Shane, your parents are going to be around anyway

So basically just Kip and Sveta, right? How are your schedules looking?

Sveta

I can get away whenever I need to

Kip

My semester is over so I just gotta get someone to cover my Kingfisher shifts, should be good

Rose Landry

Anyone else have issues?

Scott Hunter

Just the general philosophical issue of arranging my life around Ilya Rozanov

But no, my shoots are all later in the summer

Saint

On behalf of the Boston contingent: we good

Bood

Cassie and I are local obviously so we can handle short notice

Harris

Same, I will be vibrating with anticipation

Better Pike

I checked with my parents and they're fine to watch the kids anytime in early June

JJ

I'm not going anywhere until July so fuck it, let's goooooo

Jane

Are you all sure? We don't want to make everyone's lives revolve around us.

Rose Landry

SHANE.

Jane

Okay, okay! Just checking!

Marly

Most of us are revolving around the cup finals anyway

Conny

At least this way we have something to look forward to while we hate on Washington and Vegas

Cassie (Bood)

Also not to make this about us or anything, I know no one wants to come out and have this over more than you guys but

I WILL DIE IF I HAVE TO WAIT LONGER THAN NECESSARY

Rose Landry

SEE Cassie gets it!!

Marly

Is it weird that this is like all I can think about right now?

Ilya

Marly, we do not want to hear about your fantasies

Shane is mine.

Best Pike

Maybe I'm terrible but I really want one of them to sweep this in 4 games so you guys can just come out ASAP

Bood

I mean, this is more one of those "I hope a meteor hits the rink and destroys both teams" kind of series, but yes, I get what you mean

14th Best

Truly, fuck Washington, fuck Las Vegas, no one likes either of you, just get it over with

Rose Landry

Yesssss let our boys come out already!

Marly

It's getting ridiculous at this point

Conny

How were those club photos not the last nail in the coffin or whatever?

Harris 

This is how soft launching works. You eventually make it so obvious that people are just waiting for the official confirmation.

Until they actually SAY it, it's not real-news-outlet official

Sveta

It's been incredibly effective. Everyone considers it a given at this point.

It's a good thing you guys are out of town and away from the media right now because I'm not sure how much longer you could dance around it.

Ilya

I could fuck with them for years and they would love every minute of it

Jane

Two more weeks, everyone. That's all.

Cassie (Bood)

So close!!

JJ

Two weeks until we fuckin PARTY

Kip

Scott won't say it but he's really excited for you guys and we're looking forward to being there!

Scott Hunter 

Betrayal

Kip

You'll get over it 😞

[On Shane's Instagram, a photo of two sets of socked feet propped up and touching on a coffee table, a hockey game on the TV in the background. There's a ginger ale and a tumbler of clear liquid on the table, along with a plate of sliced veggies and a bag of Cheetos.]

shanehollanderhockey The best way to watch the cup finals (other than from the ice, of course)

@hollanov5eva Cheetos and what I assume is vodka? Oh, we all know who that is.

↔ **@cozywithrozy** Sometimes I wonder how much of their relationship must consist of arguing about food and drink

@CliffMarly I don't care which one of them wins so long as they do it SOON, we're all dying here

↔ **@hollanova** Dying for what?

↔ **@CliffyMarly** I think you know.

↔ **@hollanova** oh my god.

@espn

After clinching a decisive game five victory, the Washington Capitals are your 2018 Stanley Cup champions. See our series recap and post-game interviews: www.espn.com/mlh/story...

↔ **@colorwhirly** Well, that... happened. Sad hockey is over for the season, but glad I don't have to watch these two teams anymore.

↔ **@vegasbaybee** that call in the third was bullshit, that ref should be investigated, vegas was absolutely robbed!!

↔ **@capcapcaps** cry more, your goalie played like shit

↔ **@hollanova** Hey, now that the series no one cared about is over, let's all turn our attention to what really matters: Shane and Ilya are due to come out any day now.

↔ **@rhymeswithorange** I'm so excited I can hardly BREATHE

↔ **@cozywithrozy** I am going to LIVE on the internet for the next few days refreshing their social media over and over. That's healthy, right?

↔ **@hollzyleftskate** Anyone got a group chat going for Hollanov Watch 2018?

↔ **@hollanova** I'll DM you

↔ **@ryebri** Love that we're doing this on espn's stanley cup post. Invite me too plz!

↔ **@hollanova** Hey they'll be talking about it too before much longer

Ilya was deeply fucking glad the cup finals hadn't gone to seven games, and equally glad their friends had all been willing to stay flexible on travel. He hadn't wanted to be the one to suggest it (thanks, Rose Landry), but the thought of waiting around for over a week once the cup had been awarded made his skin crawl.

Now, Ilya stood back and watched as the entire Ones Who Knew First, plus Shane's parents, milled around at the cottage. Well, everyone but Scott and Kip, whose flight had been delayed and were still making the drive from the airport. Yuna, as impatient as the rest of them, had proposed getting on with things and celebrating with Scott and Kip once they arrived, but Ilya had swiftly shot down the idea. Shane hadn't questioned the decision at all, simply shot Ilya a knowing look and squeezed his hand. Scott may have been a reluctant member of the group, but they might not be together at all if not for him.

Ilya sidled up next to Harris where he was pulling a cider from a cooler, tucked up next to a line of tables that sat in the shade up against the house. A cake box sat next to several platters of burgers and hot dogs, along with all the fixings. David and Shane were working the grill in tandem, gently correcting each other's technique and keeping the plates topped up. Harris, cider successfully retrieved, starting poking at the cake box, sliding the stack of cake plates off the top so he could crack the box open and—

“Harris,” Ilya said, throwing an arm around him and pulling him away, nudging the cake plates back into place. “I see how you have been looking at Marly. You do know he is straight, yes?”

“I know,” Harris said with a dramatic sigh. “I’m just enjoying the view. Though I do get a slight heteroflexible vibe there. How sure are you?”

Ilya tipped his head back and forth, considering. “I mean, I have had threesomes with him and they were not exactly zero contact, so... maybe? I will wingman for you if you want to shoot your shot.”

Harris laughed. “I appreciate it, but I think I’ll need about three more of these to even think about having that kind of courage.”

“You just let me know,” Ilya said, then pressed his lips together, considering his words. “Harris, I wanted to say... you know I am grateful for you, yes? You got me through this year. You helped me settle in. You kept me company. You got me in therapy. I am very lucky that we met at the beginning of the season. Thank you.”

Harris blinked rapidly, fanning his eyes. “Damn you, I thought I could at least make it to your big announcement before I started crying. Fucking hug me.”

Ilya fucking hugged him, lifting him briefly off the ground, making Harris squawk in protest. When the crunch of gravel crested over the sound of Harris’s laughter, Ilya nearly dropped him. Somewhere in the distance, two car doors slammed. Ilya and Shane locked eyes across the yard, then Kip and Scott came walking around the side of the house. Ilya detached himself from Harris with a clap on his shoulder and walked over, meeting Shane halfway.

“I’m so sorry we’re late!” Kip called over, looking stricken. “There were no other flights to change to, we just had to wait it out.”

“It’s okay, we understand,” Shane said, reaching out to accept a handshake from Scott. “Travel is unpredictable.”

“Yes, yes,” Ilya said, wrapping Kip in a big hug, mostly to annoy Scott. “You are here now. I would like to have our dramatic coming out moment now. Yes?”

He turned to Shane, eyebrows raised, who smiled back with a twist of amusement. “Yes. Let’s get people together.”

“Okay, everybody, shut the fuck up and get over here!” Ilya called out, waving a hand to get everyone’s attention. “We are going to post announcement now!”

“That’s one way to do it,” Scott grumbled as everyone meandered over, gathering into a big arc in front of Shane and Ilya. Shane’s parents clutched hands in the front, with Cassie and Bood cuddled together on their left and Hayden and Jackie on their right. The Boston boys—Marly, St-Simon, and Connors—stuck optimistically close to Sveta and Rose Landry, and Harris, JJ, Scott, and Kip completed the semi-circle, everyone suddenly solemn.

Shane blew out a long breath next to Ilya, pulling out his phone and turning it over and over in his hand. For a moment, he looked positively ill. Then, like the sun bursting over the horizon, he smiled. “We’re finally doing this.”

“Yes. We are,” Ilya said, pressing a kiss to Shane’s temple before pulling out his own phone.

Together, they brought up the posts they’d drafted and hovered their thumbs over the button that would change everything. Ilya’s stomach fluttered as he met Shane’s eyes, watching him with something approaching awe. They had come so far together over the past year, but the sheer joy and relief in Shane’s expression as they stood on the precipice had tears pricking in the corners of his eyes. Shane had put in so much effort since last summer to work through his issues, tirelessly bulldozing his way through therapy and a lifetime of internalized bullshit. Now he stood before Ilya, shining and light with their impending freedom, not only ready but actually excited to take this step, to finally release the burden of their secrecy and walk into the world unencumbered.

Ilya, for his part, had *been* ready. After much arguing with Galina, he knew now that coming out was not going to fix his depression, but it *would* benefit from not having the massive stressor that was hiding his relationship. It certainly didn’t help. All he wanted was to celebrate his relationship for all to see, and his chest felt like it was pulsing with warm light as he reread the short post they’d prepared. He leaned his shoulder against Shane’s and looked over at him, reveling in his warm gaze.

“Ready?” he asked.

Shane smiled. “Ready.”

“Okay, everybody, count us down from three,” Ilya called out, and ticked them off on his fingers. “Three... two... one...”

Ilya and Shane hit post together, then immediately looked to each other, wide-eyed and grinning as their friends cheered. Shane coughed out something halfway between a laugh and a sob.

“We did it,” he said, eyes shining, then turned to their friends. “Will you guys check our posts and make sure everything looks good?”

“Hell yeah, brother,” Marly said as everyone pulled out their phones. “I gotta like it and comment and share and... wait, what the *fuck*?”

“*Shane Hollander!*” Yuna gasped, clutching David’s arm in a death grip.

Then, a chorus:

“OH MY GOD!”

“HOLY SHIT!”

“YOU MOTHERFUCKERS!”

[On Shane's Instagram, a carousel of photos: First, a photo of Ilya flipping off the camera with his ring finger, showing off his engagement ring with a huge smile. Shane is behind him, grinning, one arm wrapped over Ilya's shoulder and the other extended out, presumably holding the phone. A bit of the lake and surrounding scenery can be seen in the background. Second, a photo of them in the same location, but this time they're kissing. Ilya's flipping off the camera with a different finger this time. In the third photo, Shane and Ilya lay on the couch; Ilya is passed out, sprawled on Shane's chest, and Shane's mouth is twisted in an amused-yet-smug smirk.]

shanehollanderhockey He said yes! 💍❤ 5.8.2018

#engaged #hockeyhusbands

[On Ilya's Instagram, a carousel of photos: The first two photos are the same as Shane's post, but the last one shows Shane and Ilya lying side-by-side on the couch. Shane is wearing an oversized hoodie and curled into Ilya's chest, asleep. Ilya has his nose pressed into Shane's hair, the edge of his smile barely visible as he looks at the camera.]

ilyarozanov81 Of course I said yes, I'm not an idiot. 💍❤ 5.8.2018

#engaged #hockeyhusbands

"You're engaged!" Cassie screeched, tears running down her face.

"Wait, you've been engaged for a month?" Marly accused, jabbing a finger at Ilya. "Fuck you!"

Sveta snorted. "Oh, I guarantee it was Ilya's idea to hide this for a *fucking month*."

"Well, let's see this ring!" Rose demanded, making a flappy hand at Ilya. Ilya gave a feral grin.

"Oh, with pleasure," he said, and then dropped to one knee in front of Shane, pulling a ring out of his pocket. A *different* ring.

"What the fuck?" Shane said, his mouth falling open in delighted shock. "You asshole!"

"Still yes?" Ilya asked with a shit-eating grin.

Shane rolled his eyes, but they were shiny with unshed tears. "Obviously still yes, you menace."

Ilya launched to his feet and grabbed Shane's jaw with his free hand, claiming his mouth in a fierce, sure kiss as their friends clapped and cheered them on. Once they separated, Ilya glanced down just long enough to slip the ring on Shane's finger, then pulled his own from his other pocket and slid it back on, his throat growing thick at seeing the two rings together. He turned back to their friends to see several phones lowering.

"Text me those pictures. Or post them on Instagram. Or do whatever the fuck you want because we are *finally out*," he shouted, and then let himself be enveloped by his future in-laws, who cooed over the ring and dragged Shane into the pile.

"Well done, son," David said, shaking Shane's shoulder. Shane looked flushed and very pleased with himself.

"Yes, yes, I wish you'd *told* us, but this is very exciting. Welcome to the family, Ilya," Yuna said, pressing kisses to both Ilya's cheeks.

"This is the best possible way to come out," Harris said, wiping his eyes and holding hands with Rose Landry. "I love it *so much*. The internet is going to lose its collective mind."

"Oh, it already is," Kip said, scrolling on his phone. "ESPN must have had their article pre-written, because it's already up. People are *reacting*."

"In a good way, it seems," Scott clarified, also scrolling. "You guys really did a good job with the soft launch. No one seems surprised."

Marly whooped. "Boston apparently forgives you now, Roz. The official Raiders account tweeted out, 'To our former captain, Ilya Rozanov: the whole Ottawa thing makes a lot more sense now. We get it. Happy engagement!' People are retweeting it like crazy. Some of them hate Hollzy even more now, though, sorry guys."

Shane rolled his eyes. "The city that hates me the most now hates me even more? Oh no, what a tragedy."

Harris held up his phone and wagged it. "I got Ottawa's post congratulating you two up and, absolutely shocking... Montreal beat me to it. They must have had post notifications on for you or something."

Ilya's eyebrows shot up as he glanced over at Shane, who was blinking in astonishment.

"Well, that's... not what I expected," he said slowly. "Wow."

JJ clapped as he barked a laugh. "Management finally pulling their heads out of their asses? It's a fucking miracle!"

Everyone took their turns oohing and ahing over the rings and wrapping Ilya and Shane in tight congratulatory hugs as others read aloud more reaction tweets and Instagram comments. Eventually, though, Sveta pulled Ilya aside for a more thorough, quiet hug, adjusting his curls and tugging at the hem of his shirt to yank out the imaginary wrinkles.

"I'm so proud of you, Ilyusha," she said, her lips pressed into that tight little smile she got when she was feeling more than she wanted to let show. "And your mother would be, too. Look at what you've built."

She gestured to the assembled people, to Shane chatting with Bood, Cassie and Harris, to the Boston boys roughhousing with the Montreal boys, to Shane's parents laughing with Rose, Scott, Kip, and Jackie. Then she cupped Ilya's cheek.

"You're safe. You're happy. You're *so very loved* by so many people, Ilyusha. I don't think there's a single thing more she could have wanted for you," Sveta said, dabbing the corner of one eye with the tip of a finger, quick and perfunctory.

Ilya swallowed hard, feeling his own eyes grow hot. He nodded, leaning into her hand on his cheek. "I think you're right. I wish she could be here to see."

Sveta pulled him back in for one more long hug.

"You deserve it all," she whispered.

Ilya could recognize the way his brain instinctively recoiled from the words now, the reactive denial.

You deserve it.

He still couldn't quite bring himself to believe it, but he didn't *not* believe it, so that was progress. He squeezed Sveta back, letting his gratitude fill the moment.

"Thank you for being here," he said into her hair.

She huffed. "As if I would miss this."

He pulled away, catching Shane's eye across the yard as he let go of Hayden after what looked like an intensely emotional conversation. Shane raised his eyebrows as if to say, *now*? Ilya nodded.

"Hey, everyone?" Shane called out. As everyone gathered around once again, Ilya strode over to Shane's side, unable to resist the temptation to pull him in for a quick kiss. Shane laughed and kissed him again, then turned to their audience with a grin.

"Sorry, just one last thing and then we'll let you eat cake and swim and do whatever the fuck you want," he said. "We just... we wanted to have this party to say thank you to all of you for your support. This year would have looked so different without all of you. I kind of can't believe we actually pulled this off, you know? We had this whole big elaborate plan with so many steps, and it actually... worked?"

Everyone chuckled, and Shane shook his head, disbelieving.

"I feel like such a different person compared to last summer, and I don't think I could have pulled off half of the stuff I did this year without the training from my

mom and Rose, without Hayden and JJ backing me up in the locker room, without my dad's support, and without all of you in the group chat holding us together when it started to feel like too much.”

At that, Ilya sought out Harris, their gazes locking as Ilya remembered ice cream and therapy debriefs and reality TV takeout nights and gossip sessions about Harris's dating life, a hundred tiny moments that had held Ilya together when the long days without Shane or the viciousness of his own brain threatened to rend him. Ilya nodded, trying to convey without words all that Harris meant to him, how valued their friendship was. He had no idea if he was successful, but he got a nod back in return, at least.

Shane continued. “So, anyway, we just wanted to say thanks. We couldn’t have done this without you. So... let’s have cake now, I guess?”

Everyone laughed, crowding in to see as Shane finally set aside the cake plates and opened up the cake box, revealing a massive sheet cake that was probably far too big for the number of people in attendance. It has needed to be big, though, to fit all the names. The edges were lined with thick whorls of silver icing, dusted with something that gave them a metallic sheen. In the center of the cake, the words ‘thank you’ were scripted in thin black icing. Hanging onto the loop of the ‘y’ were two interlocking engagement rings done in a swirl of that same lustrous silver. And all around the rest of the cake were the names of The Ones Who Knew First, spelled out in black:

Yuna
David
JJ
Hayden
Jackie
Marly
St-Simon
Connors
Rose
Sveta
Harris
Scott
Kip
Bood
Cassie

And finally, down at the bottom, the black outlined in silver:

Shane & Ilya ♥

The afternoon faded into evening, the big reveal gathering turned into an engagement party, and as the word spread online, Shane and Ilya shifted from the most poorly kept secret in the MLH to something simpler and more profound: just two men in love, like any others. They sat on the edge of the dock with their feet swinging above the water, their extended family all around them and their hands intertwined. Their rings gleamed in the light of the setting sun, Shane’s on his left hand and Ilya’s on his right, tapping together whenever they shifted.

It felt right. It felt real.

For the first time in a very long time, Ilya felt whole.

The PR Squad

Farah

Congratulations, guys! Things are going very well online, and no word from the commissioner so far. I'm getting tons of media requests, but we can go through those in a few days after things settle.

Yuna

Can you forward those to me as they come in? I want to start organizing them into some kind of cohesive strategy to run by you.

Farah

Of course, already on it.

Harris 

I'm keeping an eye on social media as best I can with just my phone and so far the homophobes are dramatically outnumbered by the outpouring of support.

Rose Landry

You love to see it.

Jane

Thanks, everyone. Is it safe to unmute notifications yet, or will my phone overheat again?

Harris 

...I'd give it a bit tbh

Ilya

You are busy anyway. Come back to bed.

Harris 

Do we need to discuss group chat etiquette again?

Ilya??

Farah

The silence speaks volumes, I'm afraid.

@espn

MLH stars Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander confirm their relationship with engagement announcement: www.espn.com/mlh/story...

@CliffMarly

FINALLY YOU ALL KNOW, I have been so worried I would accidentally spill the beans! Love you guys so much!

[QT: @IlyaRozanov81 *Of course I said yes, I'm not an idiot. 💍...*]

@cozywithrozy

It's been an honor serving with all of you. Our work here is done. (No, I have not stopped crying yet.) #hollanov #hockeyhusbands

[QT: @ShaneHollanderHockey *He said yes! 💍♥ 5.8.2018...*]

@HeyItsHayden

So proud of my best friend for proposing to his man! Welcome to the family, @IlyaRozanov81.

[QT: @ShaneHollanderHockey *He said yes! 💍♥ 5.8.2018...*]

↪ **@RealRoseLandry** Okay this was actually very sweet, points for you.

↪ **@JackiePike35** The kids are so excited to be gaining an uncle! We love you @ShaneHollanderHockey and @IlyaRozanov81 ♥♥♥

@HockeyByConnors

Okay okay WE GET WHY YOU LEFT US I GUESS. Love you guys! Congrats!

[QT: @IlyaRozanov81 *Of course I said yes, I'm not an idiot. 💍...*]

@mlh

Congratulations to #hockeyhusbands Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov on their engagement!

[A photo of Shane and Ilya sitting shoulder-to-shoulder on the dock at the cottage, each with their arms wrapped around their knees, engagement rings on full display.]

↪ **@crispyyy** of course they made them give a more professional photo. No kissing or personality allowed!

↪ **@foxtailfern** tbh I'm impressed they posted anything at all, I'll take it

↪ **@thedarkhorse** I'm more impressed by the fact that they seem to be deleting the homophobic replies, at least from this one post. Actual moderation? In my MLH?

@BoodBQ

The ultimate power couple! Ottawa loves you both so much. Congratulations, guys.

[QT: @IlyaRozanov81 *Of course I said yes, I'm not an idiot.* 🧡...]

@RaRaRaiders

You know what? I'd move to Canada for (checks notes) the best fucking hockey player of our generation??? All is forgiven, @IlyaRozanov81. #hockeyhusbands

@ScottHunterOfficial

Huge congratulations to @ShaneHollanderHockey and @IlyaRozanov81 on their engagement! I can verify they're so nauseatingly good together that it even makes me like Rozanov just a tiny bit.

[QT: @ShaneHollanderHockey *He said yes!* 🧡♥ 5.8.2018...]

↔ @IlyaRozanov81 You liiiiike me

↔ @ScottHunterOfficial I knew I would regret this immediately

@SvetlanaVetrova

Can confirm that in this one thing, at least, he is not an idiot. Congratulations, boys. You deserve this.

[QT: @IlyaRozanov81 *Of course I said yes, I'm not an idiot.* 🧡...]

@SaintVic

So glad I don't have to live in fear of accidentally outing the first ever hockey husbands anymore! Honored by your trust but damn, guys, it's been stressful. Congratulations! Can't wait for the wedding!

[QT: @IlyaRozanov81 *Of course I said yes, I'm not an idiot.* 🧡...]

@beyond_done

HAPPY FÜCKING PRIDE MONTH BITCHES HOCKEY JUST GOT GAYER
#hockeyhusbands

[QT: @ShaneHollanderHockey *He said yes!* 🧡♥ 5.8.2018...]

@RealRoseLandry

Full on ugly crying with joy for my best friend in the world, theeeee Shane Hollander, and his FIANCE Ilya Rozanov!! They are soulmates. It's incredible. I LOVE YOU BOTH SO MUCH AHHH

[QT: @ShaneHollanderHockey *He said yes!* 🧡♥ 5.8.2018...]

@PurpleNews

Hockey Husbands-to-be! MLH stars Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander officially confirm their relationship with an engagement announcement. Read our profile on the couple: www.purplenews.com/story/...

@CassieBoodram

So this means I can now PUBLICLY pressure @ShaneHollanderHockey into joining the OttaWAGs chat, yes? WE LOVE YOU GUYS!! CONGRATS!

[QT: @IlyaRozanov81 *Of course I said yes, I'm not an idiot. 🧡...*]

@Kipstopher

SHANE HOLLANDER AND ILYA ROZANOV ARE ENGAGED and I've been sent this incredible reaction shot from the Kingfisher:

[The included photo is almost too blurry to make out, but there's a group of people jumping and hugging and waving tiny pride flags.]

@hollanova

Because I am still without words (*incoherent screeching*) here are some screenshots from Shane and Ilya's instagram stories. #hockeyhusbands

[A series of four images: the cake with all the names visible, a corner piece cut out of it revealing chocolate cake inside; Marly with Harris thrown over one shoulder, about to chuck him in the lake while Connors and Bood laugh; a huge group selfie with everyone crammed in, Shane and Ilya in front; another selfie, slightly askew, this one of just Shane and Ilya, kissing.]

↔ **@ryebri** How am I this fucking emotional over a CAKE

↔ **@rhymeswithorange** seeing them actually kiss makes me feel like I'm skydiving or something

↔ **@hollzyleftskate** I've been rooting so hard for them for so long and now it's real and I truly do not know how to process but it's GOOD and I really really hope they're having a great day.

@JJDagenais

My brother proposed to his soulmate and they're getting married and I love you guys and I love this party and I LOVE LOVE!!!

[QT: @ShaneHollanderHockey *He said yes! 🧡 5.8.2018...*]

@notasportsgay

I have never been so fucking happy for two men I have never met in my life. I don't even go here. What is hockey. I don't care. #hockeyhusbands #iguess

[QT: @ShaneHollanderHockey *He said yes! 🧡 5.8.2018...*]

It was David's pasta again, and the good vodka, and two boys in love sitting across from Yuna, just as they had nearly a year ago. For all that the set dressing of the moment felt familiar, though, there were plenty of differences in the

details. The smiles on the boys' faces. The rings on their fingers. The easy affection she felt for Ilya, that she knew David felt for him, too. The conversation that was filled with lighthearted chirps and curiosity instead of landmines. Yuna had rarely enjoyed a dinner so much as this one.

"Have you heard anything about the Ottawa head coach position yet?" she asked Ilya, waiting patiently for him to swallow his too-large bite of pasta before he could reply.

"Not yet," he said, covering his mouth as he swiped away a bit of sauce. "Last I heard they weren't going to interview until the new GM had time to settle in."

"Pretty big shake-up over there," David said. "How are you feeling about it?"

Ilya grabbed the cheese and added more to his pasta as he spoke. "Honestly? I love it. Coach Labelle needed to go maybe five years ago. And the other part of the reason Ottawa has been so bad is the GM making terrible fucking trade and draft decisions."

"Present company excluded, of course," Shane added.

"Of course," Ilya said. "That one wasn't their idea anyway. All they had to do was say yes."

Yuna twirled pasta on her fork, staring down at it in thought. "All good things. Hopefully Ottawa will be in better shape in two years. Maybe in a position to make another major trade."

Ilya looked up, wide-eyed, then turned to Shane, taking in his lack of surprise.

"Do you mean... you want to come to Ottawa?" he said, so much delicate hope threaded through the words that Yuna's heart ached for him.

Shane shrugged, nonchalant, as if he hadn't had a long conversation with her about it two days ago that had both broken her Metros-loving heart and made her an incredibly proud mother. "I mean, it's not a done deal, but it's definitely an option if you still have cap space by then. I figure we see how the next two years go, but I doubt having the house in the middle will improve things enough that we won't want to eventually be on the same team, you know?"

Ilya nodded faintly, looking almost afraid to believe it. And Yuna understood why. Shane's constant line had always been that he wanted to retire in Montreal, stay loyal to the team that drafted him. But as they'd discussed the other day, things changed. Priorities shifted. And in the end, waiting until retirement to have more than scraps of time together just didn't feel sustainable.

They were getting the house halfway between Ottawa and Montreal not because it would really give them that much more time together—it wouldn't, not *really*—but because if they couldn't share their time then they at least wanted to share their space. Yuna and David personally knew plenty of people who commuted over an hour every single day; it wouldn't be so crazy to drive out to the house on the 417 on days they had only practice and video or meetings. Those days

may not overlap often, but at least when they did, they'd have an extra two hours together each time. They'd decided it was worth it.

"Well, now I *really* hope our new coach works out, whoever it ends up being," Ilya said, turning back to his food as if he'd forgotten it was there. "And that Swiss kid we drafted this year looks really promising. I'm glad they traded *next* year's first round pick for me so we didn't miss out on him."

"Yeah, he's got real talent," Shane said. "I think after some development, he'll be amazing on your wing."

"Or maybe *your* wing, one day," Ilya said, like a little poke to make sure it was real.

"Or maybe my wing," Shane agreed with a small smile.

Oh, they were just *so* sweet, it made Yuna's teeth ache. She loved it.

Ilya Rozanov was incapable of maintaining too much sustained sincerity, though, and so his lips quirked as he turned to Yuna.

"And what about you, Mama Yuna?" he asked. She loved when he called her that. "What is next for you, now that we don't have a giant scheme to pull off?"

David laughed and shot her an indulgent look, and she gave him a wink.

"Oh, I've got that covered." Yuna set down her fork and folded her hands on the table, looking between her two boys. "There's going to be a wedding next summer, after all, yes? I've already put together a few ideas to show you."

Shane and Ilya looked at each other, grinning, their hands twining together on the table as she ran to the living room to get her laptop. She *may* have started another Powerpoint presentation. Just a few slides to get things started.

It was time for another new plan. But this time, there would be no paranoia, no contingencies, no media spin or secrecy.

This plan would be all joy.

Chapter End Notes

Minor chapter notes:

I couldn't stomach the thought of baby Haasy not getting to be a Centaur, so they included their 2019 first round pick as part of Ilya's trade package, not 2018. And Wiebe gets hired a year early, so he's still there, too. I declare it to be so. (Wyatt doesn't get traded until late 2018, so we're not there yet, but he's coming, too!)

Regrettably, I used the actual 2018 playoff bracket. Boo Washington and Vegas. (EDIT: Sorry to all the angry Caps fans in my comments, but it just didn't feel right to give Putin-supporting, Russia-loyal Ovi any love in a fic about a queer Russian trying to find his happiness.)

Instagram didn't start doing music on posts until 2022, but it was necessary, okay?

Yes, I wrote another re-proposal like in [Ilya Rozanov is Now Live](#). I don't know why I like this concept so much but I really do. Sorry to repeat myself.

Ending thank yous!:

Thank you so much for reading this, my longest fic ever, which I shamelessly used to ignore real-life writing deadlines. Guess I have to write that trilogy ending I've been avoiding now. 🙏

I've had the best time vomiting this largely unedited but hopefully still enjoyable story onto the internet for you. I hope now that I'm freed from the iron grip of this fic idea I'll be able to get back to my actual work again, but let's be real... I'm not optimistic. I have like 15 partial fics sitting in my drafts. There'll probably be more fic coming soon.

This story was a real challenge because it is essentially a series of things that could go wrong but never do thanks to the power of planning and gay audacity, so I worried throughout that the lack of tension would make it boring. I'm hoping that pumping it full of the anticipation of good things made it have some momentum at least. It was a fun project to see if I could make a concept like this work!

Now that this fic is finished, it would mean so much if you'd help others find it. It brings me so much joy to see people having fun with my work.

I'm gonna go back through to clean up my author's notes and delete the Previously On sections, unless you can think of a reason I should leave them?

Anyway, thanks once again. It means the world that you spent some of your valuable, limited time on my words. I'm grateful. ♥

Comments and kudos are so very appreciated! Thank you for feeding your author.

I'd love it so much if you'd check out my other HR fics. ♥

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