

The House Always Wins

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The House Always Wins

by [noedovenest](#)

Summary

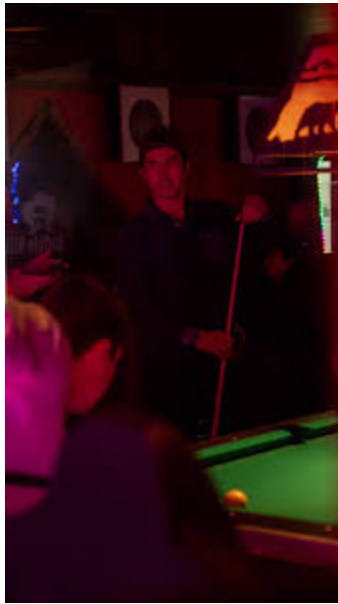
He snagged a cue stick from the wall and set up the break. Leaned over the table and rolled the polished wood between his fingers, getting a feel for its weight. Then, with one eye closed, he lined up the shot like a rifle and struck, watching the balls scatter like shrapnel. It was one of his best breaks yet, and Shane lifted his head instinctively, half-hoping one of his roommates had appeared at exactly the right moment. Instead, he found the bartender.

OR: Bartender Ilya Rozanov challenges university student Shane Hollander to a game of pool

(inspired by that one picture of Hudson playing pool — iykyk)

Notes

if you haven't seen it yet: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DThe-q9DcCY/> - enjoy!



Shane Hollander had rules. They weren't written down anywhere, or imposed by anyone but himself, but he respected them with something close to religious devotion. Among them were eight full hours of sleep before an exam, never skip leg day, every meal needed a protein, a carb, and a vegetable, and always call his parents on Thursday. The most important, and frankly the most relevant, was that he never exceeded a two-drink maximum. It didn't matter what the night entailed, he knew his limits.

But he'd aced his final, and he didn't need the grades posted to prove it. He'd flown through that exam like he'd written the questions himself. On top of that, he'd secured a co-op position with Sportlogiq, a Toronto firm he'd had his sights set on for years. And, as if the universe were conspiring against him, it was Hayden's birthday.

After all, what kind of friend said no to—*what number shot was this?*

"To Queens!" Hayden shouted, clumsily thumping his shot glass onto the sticky tabletop before tossing his head back and downing it.

Shane followed suit, unable to hide the brief twist of his features as the burn hit. He let the warmth spread through him, the relief of the shot weaving alongside the finality of the semester. To mark the occasion, he flipped his Queens baseball cap backward, putting Kingston University behind him. At least for a little while.

"To getting the fuck out of Queens!"

"I can't believe you're gone for eight months," Hayden groaned, loud and overdramatic enough to draw the attention of a nearby table of first-years. "How am I supposed to get any studying done?"

Shane narrowed his gaze. "Open a textbook?"

“But you always open my textbooks for me,” Hayden pouted, his bottom lip jutting forward. “I don’t know, man. The house isn’t going to be the same without you.”

They shared a two-story, brick-sided period home with three other roommates, all of whom were...somewhere around the bar. Though they didn’t all study Statistics like Hayden and Shane did, they attended the same campus, which made for the perfect blend of schedules. Not to mention, they weren’t terrible to live with. J.J. had a habit of letting food expire, and Gilbert played his music a bit too loud, but it could’ve been worse.

The idea of heading to Toronto on his own was unsettling, if Shane was being honest. He’d never had a solid group of friends in high school and hadn’t realized what he’d been missing until he enrolled at Queens and found these guys. But he was eager, too. To give it a shot, on his own. To learn what life could be like outside the bubble he’d floated in for the past two years. Maybe, to find someone else worth sharing company with. A nice girl, or...

“Boys.” Their server appeared at the end of the table with five paper receipts and a tired smile, and Shane tried not to react to the timing of it. “It’s been a pleasure, as always, but I’m closing you out. My last exam is in the morning, and it’ll be a miracle if I pass, so I need all the sleep I can get.”

Hayden’s eyes went wide, the tips of his ears turning red. “You can’t leave us here, Jackie. It’s not even eleven!”

Jackie rolled her eyes, jerking her thumb over her shoulder at the bar. “Stop whining, Pike. If you don’t want to pay up, I’ll just transfer you over to our new bartender. Actually, have you guys met Rozanov yet?”

Shane’s interest piqued. They’d spent countless weekends at this booth, gotten to know every member of the staff here. Even the guys in the kitchen, who regularly filtered out to the bar when their shifts ended.

What he hadn’t calculated, before leaning heavily to one side and peering past Jackie to catch a glimpse of the new bartender through the crowd of university students, was just how obvious he was being.

The man behind the bar was maybe around their age, with light brown curls, staring directly back at him.

“Oops,” Shane mumbled, silently blaming his broken rule before diverting his gaze back to Jackie. “He looks nice.”

“Doesn’t he?” Jackie giggled, and the lethality of Hayden’s glare could’ve passed as a weapon.

“I didn’t mean—” Shane’s words tied themselves in a knot, immediately realizing how the comment had landed. But what *did* he mean?

In a fitted black button-down, with cheekbones like chiseled marble and hazel eyes that lingered in his memory even after he looked away, Shane was pretty sure that was exactly

what he'd meant.

"Come have a drink with us?" Hayden asked, fishing a twenty from his pocket. He sheepishly placed it on the table. "You can transfer us to the new guy. Just wanted to make sure you got your tip."

Given that Hayden had been rationing his noodle packs for the past week, Shane knew just how important that twenty was. How long had he been crushing on this server, he wondered, thinking back to every time he'd tipped her more than expected, every time he'd asked her to stay.

This time, she actually looked like she was considering it.

"I would," she said, and Hayden sighed at the inevitable, "I really would. But my exam is tomorrow, my feet hurt, and God—actually, a drink sounds really good right now."

"Done," Hayden jumped up without hesitation.

"Just one," she added. "Give me a minute to close out."

Shane's friend was practically vibrating. The second her back was turned, he leaned in and whispered, "I fucking did it!"

He laughed, though it came out hollow. He wasn't jealous, or at least, he hadn't meant to sound that way. "Good job, buddy."

"You, uh... you want to get lost?"

"What?" Shane straightened, searching Hayden's face for a joke and finding only fierce determination. "Oh my god. You're serious."

"For the length of one drink. That's all," Hayden said, practically begging. "Go play some pool with J.J. And while you're over there, make sure they stay fifteen feet from this booth until—" he checked his watch, "—midnight."

That was an hour from now, but Shane bit his tongue. The pure excitement in Hayden's wide eyes softened something in his chest, leaving him without the will to argue. "Don't fuck it up, alright?"

Hayden shook his head. "Do you know how much I've prepped for this?"

"Well, definitely more than you prepped for our data final," Shane muttered, already sliding out of the booth.

"You're the best," Hayden called, already distracted.

Shane huffed a laugh and turned toward the crowd. His slightly impaired gaze swept the room, scanning for one of the familiar faces he'd arrived with. When his search came up empty, he drifted toward the pool table beneath the wobbly spotlight at the far end of the bar, finding it empty.

J.J. always ended up back here, Shane thought, tugging the rack from beneath the table and setting it on the green felt. He crouched, pushing his sleeves up a few inches as he dropped the balls into place, one or two at a time, each landing with a soft thud. When he stood, there was still no sign of his roommates.

“Nice,” he muttered, leaning briefly against the wall plastered with posters and vintage prints.

He could leave. They lived a short walk away, and he’d definitely hit his drink limit. It would probably be the smart decision. But his head felt light, his tongue loose, and the thought of sitting alone on their overly plush couch, SportsNet humming in the background, suddenly held no appeal.

He snagged a cue stick from the wall and set up the break. Leaned over the table and rolled the polished wood between his fingers, getting a feel for its weight. Then, with one eye closed, he lined up the shot like a rifle and struck, watching the balls scatter like shrapnel. It was one of his best breaks yet, and Shane lifted his head instinctively, half-hoping one of his roommates had appeared at exactly the right moment.

Instead, he found the bartender.

A glass in one hand, a cloth in the other, he stood motionless, doing nothing but watching Shane. Not the break, not the balls scattering into pockets, but Shane. What had Jackie said his name was? Rozanov. Shane remembered only because he’d wondered how it would taste on his lips.

Hoping to make a better impression than his earlier, too-obvious stare from the booth, Shane flashed him a smile, wide and genuine and just a little fueled by the vodka fire in his chest.

Though his view was partially obscured by moving bodies, Shane didn’t miss the way Rozanov’s jaw ticked, like he’d almost been tempted to return it. Bright hazel eyes narrowed on him, and when he went back to work, it was with a languid lack of urgency, the cloth dragged slowly over the glass, holding Shane’s attention like he’d paid for it and wanted his money’s worth.

Why had his pulse tripled?

Shane cleared his throat and turned back to the table. He was only killing time until J.J. inevitably showed up, but he couldn’t deny the urge to show off, just a little. He knew he was good at this, and for some inexplicable reason, he wanted Rozanov to notice that, too.

The overhead lights dimmed as the bar settled into a livelier rhythm, and Shane melted into the energy of it. He let the smooth R&B mingle with the last shot he’d taken, leaned a little farther over the table than usual, balanced on the edge as he pocketed another ball. And another.

By the time only the eight ball remained, in what Shane considered record time, he chanced another glance toward the bar and found it empty. Disappointment settled like a stone in his stomach, absently noting that at least three people waited on the other side, cash in hand, shifting impatiently. Shane frowned, tilting his head.

“A beer.”

The voice came from behind him. Shane spun on his heel, pulse jumping as he found the source of the honeyed Russian accent. From a distance, the bartender had been worth a second look, but up close... Shane's lips parted, breath hitching. He'd noticed men before, sure, but Rozanov was something else entirely. A God among them, striking enough to erase every other face from memory.

Long fingers flexed around a short pint glass as he set it down on the ledge along the wall. “You play good.”

“Uh, thanks, but I didn't order—”

“On me,” Rozanov cut in. Before Shane could ask why, he was already reaching for a cue. “Want a game? It is more fun to win when there is someone to beat, I think.”

“What makes you think I'll win?”

“I didn't say that,” Rozanov replied, the corner of his mouth ticking upward.

Without warning, he took a long stride forward, closing the distance between them. Shane's heart thumped hard as Rozanov slid in beside him, stealing his final shot. He barely needed to aim. The cue ball struck clean, the eight ball skimming across the felt before dropping neatly into a corner pocket Shane hadn't even considered an option.

“Shit,” Shane breathed, his laugh leaving him in a rush of air.

“Still feeling confident?” Rozanov hummed, rounding the table to reset the rack, apparently taking Shane's non-answer as confirmation.

“Sure,” Shane replied too quickly. In truth, he might have met his match.

“Then we will place bets,” Rozanov said casually, like shaking pockets was a side hobby. Remembering that he had an actual job, Shane glanced toward the bar, where one of the guys from the kitchen fumbled nervously with a bottle of tequila.

“Bets?” Shane echoed, turning back to him. The top button of Rozanov's shirt had come undone, revealing a hint of chiseled muscle beneath the thin black fabric. Had he bribed someone to take over the bar just to put Shane in his place? Or was there another reason he'd come bearing beer and a challenge? Rozanov was already waiting, balls racked and ready. “Uh, I'm not much of a gambler.”

The question came with enough confidence that Shane suspected he already knew the answer. “You are student, yes?”

“At Queens,” Shane confirmed. To keep himself from staring, he chalked the end of his cue instead. “You?”

“Me as well,” Rozanov nodded slowly, gaze fixed on Shane's fingers as they worked over the tip. “Then we do not bet money. Need that for boring things like books.”

Shane flushed and set the chalk aside. “Then what?”

Rozanov gestured toward the table. “Win, and we will decide after.”

It sounded increasingly like a scam, but Shane couldn’t bring himself to care. Not when every word from the bartender landed like a promise. He nodded and leaned forward, sending the cue ball flying. A striped ball dropped cleanly into the side pocket, deciding the game.

“Jackie said your name is Rozanov,” Shane said, circling the table as he chose his next shot. “Is that, uh... Slavic?”

Rozanov’s eyes flared slightly, and Shane wondered if he’d misstepped.

“Yes. Is my last name.” Then, after a beat, “Or Ilya, if we are friends.”

The crooked smile that followed loosened the knot in Shane’s chest. He focused on lining up his shot instead of dissecting what *friends* meant. If he looked up now, he’d definitely miss. “I’m Shane.”

“Shane,” Ilya repeated, and he couldn’t help but appreciate the way his name sounded in Ilya’s native tongue. “I am from Russia. Originally. Have been in Canada three years now.”

“Where’d you learn English?” Shane asked, sending the ball exactly where he wanted it.

“In school, the basic words.” Ilya’s gaze followed Shane as he moved around the table. The cue ball came to rest near the edge, right where Ilya leaned against the cherry-oak frame. They noticed it at the same moment. “Other things, radio, television.” He shrugged, adding, “Boring books.”

Shane stepped closer, breath held and heat pooling low in his stomach when Ilya made no effort to clear a path, remaining exactly where he was, silently inviting the closeness it would require to make his shot. He hadn’t meant to showcase just how much that intrigued him, but his gaze betrayed his intention, slipping to the sharp curve of Ilya’s mouth, the way it tilted when he spoke, until there was barely space between them and just enough room for Shane to lean over the table.

As his cue slid back, Ilya added softly, “From lovers, too.”

Shane fumbled the shot, watching the ball skid uselessly sideways.

Ilya laughed, rough and low, and the sound of it alone was almost enough to earn Shane’s immediate forgiveness. But beneath the flicker of hunger was a lifetime streak of competition, impossible to shake. He glared over his shoulder. “You did that on purpose.”

“Is true, though.” Ilya leaned in, forearms resting on the table beside Shane. His voice dropped to a whisper, meant only for him. “They taught me many useful English phrases. Like *harder*, and *please*, and—”

“Hollander!” someone shouted nearby, and Shane’s startled reaction was impossible to hide from J.J., whose drunken glee drained from his face like a ghost had slipped through a wall.

“Uh, hey dude. We were looking for you.”

Shane resisted the urge to do exactly what Hayden had earlier, and tell J.J. to find somewhere else to be. Instead, he stepped back from the table, from Ilya, swallowing his annoyance. “You found me.”

“Yeah.” J.J.’s gaze flicked between Ilya and Shane, surprise dancing with a dawning realization. “Just wanted to let you know that Hayden’s *le con*,” he slipped briefly into French, his Québécois accent thickening, “so we’re heading out. See you at home?”

“Mhm,” Shane forced out, keeping his tone friendly. It wasn’t that J.J. had fully clocked the nature of this game, but more that it forced Shane to acknowledge it, too. To decide just how far he wanted to take it. Less than a second later, he settled it. “Don’t wait up.”

Ilya smirked, murmuring low enough that J.J. wouldn’t catch it, “So confident you will win.”

Curse the blush that bloomed across Shane’s freckled cheeks. He was fairly confident that he hadn’t meant it in reference to winning the game.

J.J. mumbled something Shane didn’t catch over the music, or maybe he’d simply stopped listening, every ounce of his awareness reserved for his opponent.

“Your turn,” Shane murmured as J.J. disappeared into the crowd, reaching for the beer Ilya had brought in a silent attempt to calm the nerves that had crept in without warning. It went down smooth; light, a bit sweet. He’d chosen his favorite draft.

Ilya watched him take a drink, and the moment hung between them like a shared oath. Shane’s throat bobbed as he swallowed, holding Ilya’s reverent gaze. A moment passed before he shook his head, smacking his lips together before he turned to assess his options.

As he moved around the table, clearing one solid ball after another, Shane found himself appreciating the game in a new way. The lift of Ilya’s shirt over his lower back when he leaned forward, and the breadth of his shoulders as he pulled back to watch a ball sink. The way his tongue darted over his lip when aiming, the faint hum of satisfaction when he pocketed another.

When Ilya turned to him, eyebrows raised, Shane blurted, “What?”

“I sunk the white ball,” he said flatly. “You didn’t notice?”

“Huh?” Shane’s mind had wandered far from the competition. He had been picturing the smoothness of Ilya’s skin beneath his eager, explorative touch, and all the things they could do with the table if the crowd vanished, leaving them alone. The felted surface pressed against his cheek, Ilya’s palm on the other, folding over him. If Ilya would make those same whispered noises when Shane relaxed into him, lifting his backside just enough to meet the solid length beneath dark jeans.

Ilya’s lips pressed together as he abandoned the table, finding Shane crowded against the wall. His fingers brushed over Shane’s as he plucked the glass from his hold, reaching past

him to return it to the ledge. Barely a foot of space remained between them, warm breath grazing Shane's cheek. "Are you giving up, *Hollander*?"

What he'd meant to say had wit, but his nervous system was firing flares, making a mess of his rational thought. The best he could manage was a simple, slightly defensive: "No."

"Good," Ilya purred, sliding a hand behind Shane's back. For a brief moment, Shane thought he might kiss him here, in a crowded bar, when he was supposed to be working. In the same moment, he decided he'd let him.

But Ilya tightened his grip and flipped their positions with ease, nodding to the cue forgotten in Shane's hand, his half-lidded eyes never leaving Shane's lips, jaw, nose, tracing him like a brush across a canvas. "Only a few left. Can you finish?"

"Yes," Shane breathed.

"I want to watch you," Ilya murmured low, sliding into the position Shane had just vacated. "Maybe I will learn something."

Knowing he was on display should have put Shane on edge, but each step around the table, under Ilya's unwavering gaze, only tightened the coil in his stomach. After pocketing the second ball, Shane found the courage to glance up, and maybe that had been a mistake, because Ilya was drinking from his beer, lips over the same ring of foam Shane had just finished.

The cue felt clumsy in his hands as he tried to push aside the untethered desire that threatened to throw his game. By a stroke of luck, the ball fell into the pocket.

"*So close*," Ilya mouthed, just a few feet away, and Shane's composure melted entirely.

His need had grown half-solid beneath his sweats, an impossible thing to hide, so he didn't try. At this point, he just wanted to finish the game and figure out when Ilya's shift ended. The semester was over, and for the first time in weeks, he didn't have to cage his desire. While he might not have been with a man before, if he had a type, it was definitely Ilya. That, he decided, was all the credential he needed.

Sucking in a deep breath, Shane aimed his cue. "Top right."

Ilya laughed, "Yes, Shane."

He eyed the ball. "This is an easy shot. You aren't worried?"

Each consonant landed hard and sharp beneath his thick accent when Ilya replied, "So cocky. I will not worry until it is over."

"When I win," Shane said, riding an ego high when he glanced up through dark lashes, confidence flooding in from the mirrored hunger in Ilya's gaze, "what happens then? Should we set terms now?"

Ilya set the beer aside. "Probably that is fair."

“Okay,” Shane leaned forward, lining up his shot. It was a version of himself that he'd never met before that said without hesitation, “If I win, I want your number.”

Ilya tilted his head. “That is all?”

“Sure,” Shane shrugged, unable to hide his smug grin. “I’d ask for your terms, but…”

Ilya’s sharp features stayed neutral, refusing the bait. “Take your shot, Shane.”

He rolled his shoulders back, focused only on the cue, and slid it forward.

The ball bounced once, twice, then stopped, teetering on the very edge of the pocket. A light breeze could have sent it in.

“You’re fucking kidding,” Shane muttered, circling the table to get a closer look. “That's bullshit! There’s got to be something wrong with this table.”

So absorbed by the ball, he didn’t notice Ilya moving behind him until the faint brush of his chest against Shane’s back sent a shiver up his spine. A single finger nudged the ball in, and Ilya whispered into his ear, “I win.”

Shane didn’t dare turn. “Fine. Fair's fair. What are your terms?”

“Hm,” Ilya pressed closer, drawing an involuntary sigh from Shane’s parted lips. “I think I want more than your number, yes?”

He wanted more, too. His confident suave had been replaced with breathless impatience, urging the question out. “When do you get off?”

He’d meant the shift behind the bar, but the rumble of Ilya’s chest told Shane that he'd chosen to interpret it much differently. “As soon as I get you back to my place, I hope.”

Shane couldn't resist any longer, flipping over to meet Ilya’s eyes, finding their faces a hair’s breadth apart. “*Now?*”

His gaze gleamed with devilish promise. “Yes, now. I paid the kid a hundred to cover the whole night.”

Shane laughed, sharp and breathless. Maybe Ilya *had* played him from the start. “Now who’s cocky?”

The rest of the bar faded from his mind entirely when Ilya’s fingers slid beneath his jaw, tilting his chin up. He leaned in slowly, like Shane was breakable, pressing a delicate kiss to the corner of his lips. A test, he realized with faint amusement, as if he needed the assurance when Shane was looking at him like that. Another came, teasing and lingering, and he pulled away like it was a challenge to do so, drawing it out until Shane nearly cried out for more. The absence of it urged him forward, pressing flush against his chest to sample one of his own. He drew on Ilya's bottom lip, flicking his tongue along the soft edge.

Ilya pulled back just far enough to murmur, "I don't make bets unless I know I'm going to win."

"You know," Shane reached down and grabbed his hand, ready to tug him out the exit, "I'm pretty sure I won, too."

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