kiss me just once for luck (these are desperate measures)

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by LiarsandThieves22

Summary

"I do not want to make you uncomfortable. With how I talk about us. To others. Like . . . reporters. Or how I treat you in front of others, like the guys on the team."

Something like understanding settled on Shane's face now, and it immediately made Ilya's heart stop racing. "You think I don't like PDA."

"First time I held your hand in public I thought you were going to have a panic attack," Ilya admitted.

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Or: Shane's first season on the Ottawa Centaurs, as told through five times Ilya initiated PDA (and one time Shane did).

Notes

most hollanov fics start with the author telling you they don't know anything about hockey but i'm here to say i actually know a ton about hockey and just ignored all that knowledge for fun anyway

this is very shameless fluff but there is a french slur used during the montreal game section. please be warned!

See the end of the work for more notes

It came up for the first time the week before the home opener. Or, really, Ilya brought it up for the first time then after much, *much* nudging from his therapist. The thing was she was right: he knew she was right, which made it worse, actually. They'd had a *lot* of conversations about him asking *around* things instead of just asking them outright. Or him wanting things but never *saying them out loud* and then lashing out when he didn't get them. It was a work in progress, shedding all his childhood trauma and Russian sense of *push everything down until you die* to try and have a healthy, communicative relationship with someone else. But he was working on it.

Hence: The Conversation.

He and Shane were alone in their house in Ottawa. Shane had just come back with a run from Anya, who had flopped on the floor dramatically the moment they returned like she was an exhausted old lady and not a very spry puppy. Shane was at the sink pouring himself a glass of water. Ilya was watching him do that because Shane doing even mundane tasks still managed to make him breathless. It was a real effort to not crowd him against the sink and kiss him senseless, but he made that effort because he knew Shane would want to shower first. Ilya was thoughtful like that.

Or, shit. He was *trying* to be.

"So," he said, abruptly, into the silence of the room.

Shane looked up and took a long sip of water. When Ilya still hadn't spoken before he was done he raised both his eyebrows. "So?"

Ilya cleared his throat. He felt awkward. Awkward like the first time he had asked a girl for sex – like he didn't know what he was doing and he was going to fuck it up. Shane made him feel like that a lot, actually. He figured it was because he'd never been in love before – sex was easy, but he was in uncharted territory here, trying to make a life with a person.

"It has. . . come to my mind that we should discuss boundaries."

Shane's face scrunched up in that horrendously adorable way it did. "What, with Anya? I think she likes the runs."

Anya loved the runs. Anya loved *Shane*, perhaps even a little more than she loved Ilya, which was frankly deeply unfair. And also: not the point.

"About us," he clarified.

Now Shane frowned. "What do you mean?" He seemed suddenly uncomfortable, shifting a bit. "Is. . . did I do something wrong?"

Ilya remembered that Shane, too, was new at this – was fumbling through the sudden openness of their relationship. He was doing a bad job at saying what he meant.

"No," he said, moving to cup Shane's face in his hands. "No, I mean. . . I mean. . ."

How to say it? At the start of their thing, Ilya had been the one with more to lose. A whole country to never return to. And it was *supposed* to be casual, really, it was, but then before he could stop it they were both so emotionally caught up in it that it practically hurt. And Ilya had been *afraid*. Had wanted more but didn't have the capacity to ask, too petrified that Shane would run. So instead he had danced around the subject in a way that hurt them both, and Shane had responded in ways that hurt them both, *had* run, and it had all felt so dramatic and brilliant and fucking awful all at once. Then Ilya's father had died and he realized he had no *reason* to go back to Russia and he decided to try and stop being afraid and give them an actual shot. And then the tables had turned, and suddenly it was *Shane* with everything on the line – the hockey golden boy with the weight of the world on his shoulders. Ilya had been the one desperate for more, had been the one ready to throw his career to the wind for love, and Shane had been the one who struggled with what that meant. And that was okay – it had taken them a while to figure it out, that was all. They hadn't meant to hurt each other – sometimes people just did that, navigating the terrifying new steps of their relationships, figuring out how to be someone's partner.

But now they were *open*, they were *out*, they were *living in the same city* and *playing on the same team* and *married to each other* and sometimes it was so overwhelming how happy this made Ilya that he thought about doing reckless things like pulling Shane to him and kissing him breathless in the locker room in front of their coach and their team and reporters and God and *whoever*.

And these were things that *Shane Hollander*, who was awkward and unpracticed with public affection, would probably hate.

"I love you," Ilya said. Shane raised his eyebrows, like this was not surprising news. "I want to . . . to show people I love you. All the time. Loudly."

Shane's face furrowed again. "Are you . . . not getting enough from me?"

"No, no, I am, I–" he bit off a sigh. This had been easier to discuss in therapy, in Russian. It had made more sense when Shane wasn't standing in front of him with his stupid kissable face, being all distracting. "I do not want to make you uncomfortable. With how I talk about us. To others. Like . . . reporters. Or how I treat you in front of others, like the guys on the team."

Something like understanding settled on Shane's face now, and it immediately made Ilya's heart stop racing. "You think I don't like PDA."

"First time I held your hand in public I thought you were going to have a panic attack," Ilya admitted.

That, at least, made Shane laugh. "I mean, yeah, I almost did." He frowned. "I think I got so used to hiding that part of me still thinks we're *supposed* to be hiding, you know?" He looked at Ilya with a lot of earnestness. "I'm trying to get better about that."

"I know," Ilya said. "But you have a very kissable face. And now I *can* kiss it in public. It might. . . be hard for me. Not to. But I will not, if you don't want me to."

Shane thought about it for a moment. Weirdly that made Ilya grateful. If Shane had answered too quickly it would have maybe felt like a knee-jerk reaction to make Ilya feel better. Here, it seemed Shane was at least taking what *he* really wanted into account, which would be better than both of them trying to bend themselves into some weird shape for the other. At least, that was what Galina had said.

"I want you to show how you feel," Shane said finally, after a long pause. "I don't want you to feel like you have to hide anymore. I don't want to feel like *I* have to hide anymore. It might take me a minute to get used to it. . . to catch up . . . but. I want you to do what makes you happy." He let that hang for a second. "Including kissing me in public. Even at games."

"And dirty jokes?"

"I have no expectations that I could *stop* you from making dirty jokes even if I *didn't* like them," Shane said, grinning. He wrapped his arms around Ilya's middle, brushing their noses together.

"So you admit you like them."

"I admit nothing." Shane took a deep breath. "Look, I'm not saying you can tell reporters about the size of my dick or the details of our sex life or anything, okay? And we should probably try to avoid traumatizing our teammates or getting called into HR and shit like that. But we're together. And we're *playing* together. And it's going to come up. So as long as it doesn't get us suspended from the league, I'm okay with public displays of affection." His face scrunched again. "But it might take me a minute, you know? To be the one giving them to you."

"Is okay," Ilya said, kissing Shane on the tip of his adorable little nose. "I will do it enough for both of us."

Shane groaned, and went bright red, but Ilya could tell he was happy. And that made Ilya happy.

And so did the permission to kiss Shane Hollander in public.

—

Ottawa Centaurs Home Opener – October 12th, 2021

Ilya was giddy. There was really no other way of saying it. He'd spent the whole day grinning. The whole *amazing, best day ever* day. With his *husband*.

He wasn't sure if the novelty of that would ever wear off. He sort of hoped it wouldn't. He imagined himself as an old man sometimes, waking up next to old man Shane (exactly the same as current Shane, really, except with grey hair and some wrinkles and maybe he wore his sexy glasses more often – but emotionally Shane was already well into "old man" territory, so on a day to day level it was really the same). In his vision, he was exactly as excited to see Shane every morning as he was now – like waking up and realizing that it

wasn't all a dream, that it was really his life, and this wonderful, amazingly sexy man actually *did* love him, and always would.

It was always amazing to see Shane. To enter a room where Shane was. Or to watch him now, gliding seamlessly across the ice, face furrowed in concentration, completely and totally *focused*.

Ilya had spent a lot of his life watching Shane Hollander play hockey. He'd gotten good at schooling his expression in public – at making sure to scowl when Shane scored, to roll his eyes when Shane snatched the puck away from him or from someone else. It was nice, now, to not have to pretend – to let himself stare at Shane and Shane alone as he darted across the ice, to allow himself to wince at every hit Shane took, to allow the giddy grin to break through when Shane sunk the puck into the back of the net.

The fans were roaring "HOLL-AN-DER! HOLL-AN-DER!" For years in Boston he pretended that chant drove him insane. Here, he was half tempted to join in.

Boodram, next to him on the bench, knocked their shoulders together as Haas enveloped Shane in a hug on the ice. "Looks like you got competition, Roz. Haas has a new favorite. Maybe Hollander does, too."

On the other side, Troy snorted. "I'd say so. Holly hasn't even noticed the puppy eyes you've been shooting him the whole game."

"Shut up," Ilya said, with no real heat. This was chirping he'd signed up for, really, with the whole *transferring to the same team for love* thing. "I am still Haas' favorite. And Hollander knows where he belongs, trust me."

As if he could hear them, Shane met his eye across the ice. And then Shane *winked!* At Ilya! *Shane!* It was enough to make Ilya feel a little wobbly, getting flirted with *in public*, in front of cameras.

"Oh my god," Bood said. "You're *literally married to the guy* Roz, you don't have to spend the whole game looking like you're pining after him."

Ilya scoffed. "This is why Cassie will leave you Bood," he said. "No sense of romance in your cold, dead heart."

Bood scowled. "Just for that, I'm gonna fucking trip you."

The lines shifted again, and Ilya got back out on the ice (Bood, of course, did *not* trip him, because Bood was a bit spineless when it came to these things).

It really was something else, to be playing like this. It would be a lie to say his first few runs in Ottawa hadn't been a bit difficult. He hadn't really been sad to leave Boston – the city itself he felt neutral about, and the idea of even the *possibility* of a long-term future with Shane had tasted better than any Cup would ever taste – but it was hard, to go from winning all the time to being a big fish in a horrifically small pond.

It was nice to be winning again. It was nice to be on a team where the fans loved him – where all games, even the losses, were filled with cheers and noise and excitement.

It was *so much better* to be sharing that with Shane. If someone had told Ilya years ago that his future would be like this, he probably wouldn't have believed them. Wouldn't have believed he could have this, that it was even possible. He'd given up a lot to be here. Shane had too – with the salary cap and the more than a few endorsements who'd quietly decided *not to renew* their deals, he had taken to sarcastically referring to Ilya as *the breadwinner*. But Ilya felt those sacrifices were worth it. He'd pick Shane over money. He'd pick Shane over hockey (again).

But it was nice that he hadn't had to, in the end. It was nice that he got his happy ending, hockey and teammates who cared about him and *Shane Hollander* loving him back and playing *with him* and a dog and a house and a family. It was so nice that he felt, abruptly, a bit like crying, right out there on the ice.

He didn't, though. No matter what Shane said he *was* at least a *bit* of a professional.

Still, he was maybe a bit distracted – distracted enough one of the Miami linesmen got a stick around his stake and he sprawled to the ground. The tripping call put Ottawa on the power play. Not that it really mattered – Miami was doing terrible, and they were already up two points on them halfway through the second. Still, power play was exciting because that meant Shane and Ilya would play *together*. One of Ilya's favorite things to do with Shane (not counting sex, or kissing, or cuddling, or making dinner, or – okay, it was kind of a long list). Sure enough, there was Shane, hopping over the boards and skating up to him.

"You all right?" he asked, gesturing vaguely towards Ilya's ankle. Ilya waved it off – it wasn't that bad of a trip, in the end.

"Better now," he cooed with as much suggestion as possible. It made Shane's cheeks go a delightful shade of pink, even though no one else was near enough to hear them. Ilya loved that shade. He *lived* for it. Shane scrunched up his nose, all adorable and flustered right in the middle of the game. Playing together was the best idea anyone had ever had.

"Any tips for the power play, *captain?*" Shane asked, trying to swerve the tone back to professionalism.

Ilya shrugged, feeling loose limbed and cocky and wonderfully happy. "Should try scoring a goal, maybe," he chirped. "Or maybe you should just pass the puck to me, since I am the better shot."

"Fuck off, Rozanov," Shane said, skating away, but he was grinning as he did it.

The other great thing about playing with Shane was that, after all these years of being admittedly a bit obsessed with each other, they could basically read each other's minds on the ice. When they were playing against each other it made for difficult, trenched-in play. When they were playing *together*, it made them something close to absolutely unstoppable. Ilya understood why they were on different lines – you needed to spread your talent out – but it made the power play feel like their secret weapon. Commentators had spent the summer

hemming and hawing about how he and Shane would play together – if they'd be distracted by their marriage (stupid) or unable to get used to working together instead of against each other (somehow even stupider). He was very, very excited to shut those people up.

And shut them up they did. The puck dropped and Haas pulled away with it. He managed to get it to Ilya just before getting slammed into the boards. Two Miami guys were on Ilya's ass, and he didn't have a great shot at the goal. He cut his eyes across the ice and saw Shane pulling ahead of the singular guy after him. Stupid, really, to leave Hollander so unguarded. He passed the puck, and Shane took the shot and drove it into the top right of the net.

The crowd exploded.

Ilya couldn't help himself – he tore across the ice to get to his husband and grabbed him into a hug immediately. Shane was laughing, joy bursting out of him. And it was a sound Ilya just loved *so much*, Shane's excitement so totally infectious, that he couldn't help himself. He felt like he had at the All-Star Game all those years ago, so overwhelmed with the joy of celebrating *with* Shane that he just had to kiss him. Back then it was on the cheek, and it was dangerous, and they had to play it off. But now everyone knew – every person cheering in that crowd was well aware that Hollander and Rozanov would go home together after the game.

And, well, Shane had given him permission. So: fuck it. He learned forward and kissed Shane on the mouth, a small, quick press of their lips together. Just enough to say *congratulations, that was amazing, I am so proud of you, I love you, I am so happy you're here.*

Ilya had gotten very good at saying a lot of things through kisses. Best way to communicate, really.

When he pulled back he half expected Shane to be glaring at him, embarrassed. But Hollander was still smiling, cheeks a little more flushed than they'd been. He shook his head like he found it all deeply amusing. "Couldn't help yourself, huh?"

Ilya shrugged at him, grinning back. "Was a good goal," he said, an echo of years earlier.

Shane's grin got wider. "Good assist," he said back. The crowd around them continued to go wild as the rest of their teammates skated up to thump both of them on the back.

There was just no doubting it. This was going to be the best year of Ilya's life.

—

Ottawa Centaurs at Montreal Metros – October 30th, 2021

It wasn't a secret that Ilya hated Montreal. He'd hated Montreal even before the absolute clusterfuck of the summer (Hayes' term, which he'd found accurate enough to steal). Obviously at the start it had been a sort of manufactured hate. The Raiders hated the Metros. Ilya was a Raider so he, too, had to hate the Metros. It helped that Hollander had been on the

team, obviously – made their rivalry and the team rivalry all that much sweeter, and it made them easier to hate.

But then *Hollander* had turned into *Shane*, and sometime between an ill-advised glance in the shower and starting an actual charity together, playing Montreal had become a thing Ilya, horribly, started looking forward to.

And then, well, it'd all blown up.

He'd known that it would not be well-received when they came out, not by the Metros locker room. He knew that a few of the guys were almost certainly *deeply* uncomfortable with Shane being gay, and held that in only because he was *literally Shane Hollander*, and he was still winning them Cups. Ilya had always figured there were some secret group chats or bar hangs where those assholes gathered around and talked all their shit to their hearts content.

He wondered, sometimes, how things might have gone if their original plan worked out. If they had come out on their own terms, over the summer. There was no doubt that it would have been better to have that happen, in nearly every way. But he thought that maybe the Metros never would have accepted Shane – or, at least, not Shane-and-Ilya. Not Hollander-Rozanov. And if they didn't learn that until too late then, what? Another year on the Metros for Shane, surrounded by a team who hated him, suffering in silence, separated most of the time?

He wasn't *grateful* for Hayden Pike, alright, not for *a lot* of reasons, but he did sometimes think that at least Hayden throwing them into the fire showed them who was actually on their side, in the end.

The point being: Montreal. He'd hated them before. He *really* hated them now.

He wasn't exactly *subtle* about it. Most of the boys knew that this was the game Ilya was looking most forward to – the one he most wanted to win. The first match up against the Metros, in Montreal, with Hollander on *their* side. Prove those fucking assholes wrong about Shane.

Shane, meanwhile.

Well.

Public Shane was, of course, always deferential and kind when asked. *The Metros are a great organization and I'm thankful for my years there. There's a lot of strength on the team, and I don't think it will be an easy match. I loved Montreal, but I'm incredibly happy to be in Ottawa now*. Ilya knew that some of this was bullshit (*strength*? On *Montreal*? Be realistic.) But he also knew Shane was Shane, and that the professional demeanor he carried around was not going to be shed overnight because of one asshole team full of assholes. (Or because he was now living full time with Ilya, who'd barely ever had a professional persona to start.)

Private Shane was a bit of a different thing. Ilya knew they were on the same page about this game mattering. About proving something. A revenge match, if you will. But while Ilya expressed that in motivational speeches to the team at practice about making Montreal cry

and constant chirping about their terrible lines, Shane sunk further into himself as the game approached. More than once in the days leading up, Ilya had awoken in the middle of the night to find Shane still awake, peering at his iPad. At first, he'd assumed it was classic Shane, watching old Centaurs footage to learn from mistakes. But he leaned over, once, and realized Shane was watching the Metros play the Admirals.

He'd been tempted to tell Shane to stop and get some rest – if not as his husband, then as his captain – but he knew the look of determination and focus on Hollander's face meant he wouldn't be easily swayed. He also knew it meant that Shane was *thinking of something.*

As a captain, Ilya had always been about the energy – about getting the team together, about camaraderie, about reminding everyone that this was *fun* and they could have fun while doing it, about riling up the troops to play well. Shane, he knew, was more analytical – more of a playmaker, a strategist. More of the guy who told people what to do, and who people listened to because he was usually right. Bood had joked a few times about losing his alternate captain status to Shane in the next season, and while Ilya was sure Shane no longer particularly cared about the role even he could admit that Shane's perfect recall of hockey knowledge might be more useful when talking to referees than Bood's. . . whole thing.

All to say that in the days leading to their first game against the Metros, Ilya knew Shane was planning something. So while he rallied the team into making it personal, he sat back and let Shane plot.

Shane brought his plan to everyone just before the game, while they were getting ready in the locker room.

"I know how we beat them," was all he said. Straight forward and unflinching.

"We beat them because we are better, and sexier, and have best hockey player in the world – me," Ilya said back. Mostly because this was just the type of thing he always said back.

Shane rolled his eyes, but it was fond. "Look, I've been watching them play and they're not as disciplined this season. Not as organized. They don't look *bad* but they rise to the occasion more. They fight more." He looked at Ilya, now. "You've gotta piss them off."

Ilya touched a hand to heart and fluttered his eyelashes. "Me? Hollander, I would never be so mean to my good friends on the Montreal Metros."

Shane tried and failed to conceal a laugh. Dykstra clapped Ilya on the shoulder. "This guy," he said, "is the *picture* of grace and decorum." Ilya pointed to Dykstra agreeably and shot his best smile at Shane.

"Well, even so," Shane said, "tonight I give you permission to be something better than the picture of grace and decorum."

"What's that?" Ilya asked.

Shane's grin, now, turned a little predatory. It was horrifically hot. "I give you permission to be Ilya Fucking Rozanov."

Shane's plan, when it boiled down, was actually incredibly simple. The Metros were playing pissed off. Every game they had a chip on their shoulder that Shane had noticed. They were quicker to throw punches, sure, but mostly they were quicker to make stupid penalties – bad checks, slashing, tripping. They were *good* at the penalty kill, but hockey was a numbers game, so playing down too often was never a good idea.

And Shane, being Shane, knew *why* they were so pissed. Him. While Shane and Ilya had been badgered with their own flood of annoying press questions over the summer and at the start of the season, Ilya had largely ignored what *other* teams were being asked. He spent the preseason trying not to roll his eyes at every slightly rude question about playing on a team with his husband and the gritty details of their personal and private lives. The Metros, meanwhile, had been asked, over and over again, one question:

What about Shane Hollander?

Was it a mistake to trade Shane away? Did they think they could be as strong without Shane? After all, they hadn't gone to the playoffs in ages before Shane showed up, and hadn't won a Cup without him for longer. Were they worried?

Shane, being Shane, had studied the fucking *interviews*. And he'd noticed that as the season continued on, and their losses piled up, the Metros got less *enthusiastic* in their insistence that they were the same team without Shane Hollander, if not a better team. They got more clipped. They got more annoyed. He was a ghost haunting their locker room. And so they, too, had something to prove tonight. And it would surely be easy for Shane and Ilya, in particular, to get under their skin. Shane by merely existing; Ilya by merely being, well, the hockey player he'd been for his entire career.

"An asshole," Shane said, easily.

"An asshole you *married*," Ilya pointed out, with a grin.

"Yeah, like that," Shane said. "That'll piss them off really good."

So, while Shane and Ilya tried to goad the players into penalties and distractions, the rest of the team would be open for scoring. Haas, in particular, Shane called out. They'd underestimate him for sure – if he could get the puck past them a couple times, it'd be smooth sailing.

The thing about Shane was that, when it came to hockey, he was pretty much never wrong. (He could be wrong all the time outside of hockey, though, like when he said two dogs was too many or told Ilya the Fast & Furious movies weren't that good, but hockey he was pretty much perfect at. It would be annoying if it wasn't so attractive, really.) So it wasn't surprising to see how quickly his strategy worked. Montreal rode Shane nearly the whole time. Ilya had to stop himself from wincing in sympathy every time Shane went into the boards – he knew those hits would bloom into bruises later, but he also knew that he'd be there to ice them and kiss them better tonight at the hotel, which was a fair enough trade. But the strategy worked within the first ten minutes of the game – Shane had gotten the puck to Luca ahead of a brutal check, and Luca, left undefended, had sunk it into the goal with ease.

By the second period, though, Ilya was having trouble tamping down his fury at the whole thing. These *assholes*. Slamming into Shane again and again with barely disguised fury. For what? For winning them three cups? For making some of them household names when they absolutely shouldn't be? Like anyone would give a shit about Cardot or Comeau or Drapeau if it wasn't for Shane Hollander dragging their sorry asses through playoff after playoff. He knew that Ottawa was different – friendlier, looser. Harris had said that they got a lot of comments on social media about being a *vibes team*, whatever that meant. But he thought that even Boston would not have reacted *like this,* if Ilya had been on their team and traded away after the whole ordeal. Cliff Marleau had retired over the summer, but he'd sent Ilya a nice text after the whole mess of the FanMail leak, had posted in his defense online and spoken up a few times in interviews on ESPN, where he was now a semi-regular commentator. They weren't exactly *close*, but still.

And here were men that *had* been close to Shane, some of them, and they hated him. For what? For being gay? For finding love? Or for finding love specifically with *Ilya Rozanov?* For a mistake in a playoff game that any player could have made – that *these* players *had* made, time and time again? J.J and Hayden seemed to be growing frustrated with their own team's antics – Hayden had sent a sorry little look to Ilya a few times. It didn't quell his rage at all. If anything, it made it worse.

So, yeah, maybe he was getting brasher too. But Shane had *told him* to be an asshole. He was just following orders.

He knew what people thought about the dynamic of his relationship with Shane. He'd gone on a bad little spiral after the outing, scrolling through tweets speculating on who topped, calling Shane a little bitch, suggesting Shane let Ilya shove him around. And there was some of that, sure, Ilya making demands and Shane obeying, but the truth was that Ilya knew in his heart that he was the one that was – how did they say it? – *whipped*. That Shane could say jump and Ilya would always ask "how high?" He'd been in some form of love with Shane Hollander since they were eighteen years old. It didn't matter who was on top when they fucked, not really, because truly Shane was always in charge. He could say "come" and Ilya would trot after him like Anya, on his heels, desperate for his affection and attention. Always, always, always.

So: he liked to follow orders. And this was an easy one, by the second period, because assholes deserved to be met with assholery, if that was even a word. That was what Ilya was thinking as he slammed Cardot into the boards like a goddamn freight train.

The man cursed in French – or, at least, Ilya was pretty sure it was a curse. It certainly had the cadence of one. He looked half a second from dropping his gloves and honestly, Ilya wanted him to. He was itching to let some of his pent up rage out on these motherfuckers. He wouldn't instigate, though – that was against Shane's plan, for one, but also Shane hated it when Ilya came back from a game more bruised than he needed to be; hemmed and hawed like a concerned mother over every injury that was, as he often said, *pointless*.

But J.J. rolled up before the fight could get going, tugging Cardot away while muttering *he's not worth it*. Cardot kept his angry glare on Ilya, and Ilya knew that he'd been getting a pointless check the next time they were on ice together.

Perfect. All according to plan.

He could see Shane's adorable pissed off expression as he went back to the bench for the line shift. Shane leaned over Dykstra to talk.

"I'm fine, you know," he said. "You don't have to check *every* Metro who looks at me funny. The point is making *them* pull penalties, not getting your own."

Ilya scoffed. "I am defending your honor, Hollander. Is my job as your handsome and perfect husband."

Dykstra groaned. "Can you guys not flirt *over* me, please?" Shane rolled his eyes but leaned back, giving Ilya a look that said *we will talk about this later.*

Good. It was so much more difficult to have sex with pissed off Shane when they were on the same team. Back when he could just beat Shane at hockey, it was like clockwork. Ilya liked finding new ways to make it happen. (So far the easiest way he'd found was not picking up various pieces of clothing he left draped around the house. That drove Shane *insane.*)

The second period rolled on – Troy managed another goal, taking them to 2-0. Ilya knocked into Comeau enough times that the man started muttering under his breath in French and spending his time on the bench glaring daggers at Ilya and Shane equally.

By the start of the third, Ilya could see the Metros were truly, unspeakably annoyed. They were making increasingly dumb mistakes, getting too edgy and angry with it. Ilya had no doubt it would be only a few minutes before Ottawa got onto the power play and had a chance to really put the game away.

The thing was that Shane had been right about pissing them off, but it was possible that the team had gotten a little *too* into pissing them off, and had pushed them into *actually being a bit dangerous* territory. At least, that's what he thought as he sat on the bench and watched Shane wrestle the puck away from Comeau, only for Comeau to swear loudly in French and then hoist his stick up and crack it directly across Shane's face, just under the rim of his visor.

There was a horrifying spurt of bright red blood on the ice.

Ilya was off the bench before he even realized he'd made the decision to be off the bench, dropping his gloves nearly instantly. He didn't go for Comeau though, beelining instead directly for Shane. Comeau could wait – if Shane was hurt, Ilya needed to know *now.*

Shane was bleeding from his nose and a cut on his lip, and there was already a nasty bruise developing on his jawline. Ilya got to him and immediately brought his hands to the unbruised side of Shane's jaw, turning his face to look at the damage.

Shane huffed a small laugh. "Ilya, I'm fine."

"Asshole hit you in the fucking face," Ilya seethed. "Could have–" He cut himself off. "Is your nose broken?"

“No,” Shane said, softly. His eyes were filled with so much affection it made Ilya’s knees a little weak. “I don’t think he got enough power on it, and anyway I saw it coming enough to mostly turn away from it.”

“I’m going to kill him,” Ilya said flatly.

Shane’s laugh was bright. “I think Troy beat you to it.” He jutted his chin to gesture over Ilya’s shoulder, and Ilya turned to look.

The entire bench had cleared, on both teams. Comeau was bleeding from his nose now, too, face gone blotchy and red, and Barrett had his gloves off and was screaming at him as the refs tried to pull them apart.

“You guys are *goddamn fucking assholes!*” Troy was shouting.

Ilya grinned, and then turned back to Shane. “They know it is captain’s orders – protect Shane Hollander’s beautiful, perfect face at all costs.”

“You’re such a sap,” Shane said. As he said it he crinkled his nose in that adorable way he did, but then winced as it aggravated the cut. A bit of blood poured sluggishly from his face, dripping onto the ice.

Ilya felt himself get serious again. It was part of it, getting hurt, but it didn’t mean he had to *like it*. Especially not when it was unnecessary, and especially not when it was Shane’s *face*. “You’ll go to medical moya lyubov, yes? See if you need stitches?” Shane nodded. For the second time on ice that season, Ilya thought *fuck it, I have permission* and bent down to kiss Shane. This was chaste, too, in part because of Shane’s slightly damaged lip – he mostly aimed for the corner of Shane’s mouth. He angled his body so they were as away from the cameras as possible, trying not to be seen by the rest of the world or the stadium. Just a small, private moment, to say *I’m glad you’re alright.*

And then, like the most annoying mosquito in the world, Cardot appeared. He apparently had not gotten a dance partner yet, not with Shane and Ilya tied up together. The refs were too busy trying to pull the rest of the brawl apart to notice.

“Aww,” he sneered, face full of malice. “The little pédé cannot take a hit anymore? Must be kissed better?”

Ilya had never bothered to learn French, but he could tell by the way Shane stiffened and his eyes narrowed that whatever Cardot had said was *not good*. He turned to Cardot, but muttered under his breath so only Shane could hear him. “I am going to kill him now, yes?”

Like he said: he liked obeying orders.

“I’m not stopping you,” Shane said back, tone deceptively light.

Ilya grinned as he moved towards Cardot. This was going to be *fun*.

—

Christmas Eve – December 24th, 2021

They cancelled the All-Star Game on Christmas Eve.

Christmas Eve. Of all fucking days.

Not that Ilya was surprised they'd cancelled it. He and Shane had theorized a lot in the days leading up to the actual announcement that there'd be no All-Star Game. That it would be partially *their fault* there was no All-Star Game.

It had gone down in a shockingly simple way. The rules for the game had been decided well before last season had ended – four captains, picked by public voting, would choose teams from a pool of MLH selected All-Stars. Simple enough. In the days before The Incident, it would have been fairly obvious that both Ilya and Shane would be captains. In the days before The Incident, MLH leadership would have *wanted* them to be captains – the old rivalry back in action, even though it'd been largely played down over the years.

Even when Ottawa was losing, Ilya managed to make the All-Star Game. He was too good – and, frankly, too famous – to not be there, even on a perpetually underperforming team. It had been fun, the last few years, to allow himself to be more openly and obviously friendly with Shane. Sure, some of the other guys thought it was all a facade – more than one had suggested directly to Ilya that they assumed this was PR cover for a secret kid or other scandal, which was frankly fucking rude – but, whatever. He didn't need other people to *understand* him and Shane necessarily. It just felt freeing to be *seen*. To be able to go to a bar together and sit across from each other and drink without it being some sort of international incident. Granted, they couldn't do the things he *wanted* to do – but they could get closer than they'd ever gotten, and it had felt like a small victory, at the time.

The truth was that he'd been sort of looking forward to the All-Star Game, as horrible and boring as it was. Most guys viewed the event as a light waste of time. You were either on a team gunning for the playoffs, in which case the break could be an unwelcome momentum stopper, or you were on a team with no shot, in which case the weekend featured a lot of ribbing from everyone else. Last year, Ilya had been in a weird middle ground – Ottawa was picking up speed, but no way guaranteed, and no one had really known how to treat him.

So he'd mostly avoided everyone else. Spent a bit of time shitting on Scott Hunter, chatted lightly with Marleau, and that was mostly it. Beyond that he'd stayed sort of embarrassingly glued to Shane's side, standing a polite distance away and trying very hard to not stare too openly at the hollow of his boyfriend's throat.

What he'd been looking forward to this year, really, was a chance to not have to pretend to be someone else. He knew there would be guys who were uncomfortable with it, but fuck them. He didn't *care* about them. He'd gladly spend a whole weekend hanging out with *only Scott Hunter* if it meant he could press himself as close to Shane as he wanted to in bars. If it meant he could put his arm around Shane's waist at the boring fucking dinners.

But Roger Crowell, unsurprisingly, didn't want that.

They actually hadn't heard much from him over the season. They'd been *good*, mostly – Ilya had curbed his worst impulses, and most of their public acknowledgement of their relationship had been off-ice – stuff Crowell couldn't, officially, be mad about. Ilya posted on Instagram; Shane commented now, more active on the app after the near-miss with the plane, and posted sometimes himself. They'd kissed on the ice a few times, but never too flagrantly. As far as Ilya was aware, the only people who noticed those were the ones who'd been *really watching* to see if they kissed, for either positive or negative reasons.

Still, he knew that Crowell was pissed. About them – about the space they took up. About how much of the press around the season was about their marriage and their off-market team of misfits and their whole *thing*. It was the talk of the hockey world rumor mill that Crowell had it out for them, for Shane in particular, was trying to find ways to shut them up and stop them from being so *political*. Nevermind that neither of them were *doing* anything political, or more political than they *had* been doing. It wasn't like they were campaigning for anything. They were just in love, and they weren't hiding it anymore.

So, yes, Ilya had been waiting for *the other shoe to drop*, as Canadians were so fond of saying. Which it had, a few weeks earlier. They'd opened public voting for the All-Star Game and – shock of shocks – Ilya and Shane had quickly risen to the top of the polls.

And then MLH had *promptly changed the rules*.

Suddenly, no two captains could be from the same team. More than that, no two All-Star *players* could be from the same team. The whole event would be made of teams consisting of singular members from as many different professional teams as possible.

Which – look, if that had been a *pre-announced* thing, Ilya maybe almost could have understood it. The All-Star Game was, for better or for worse, largely made up of the same guys every year. New rookies edged in, old guards retired, sure – but the stars of Major League Hockey remained consistent. And, consistently, those guys played for a handful of top teams. You had the Raiders, the Metros, the Admirals. You had Toronto and Los Angeles and Chicago. You had, now, Ilya Rozanov playing on scrappy Ottawa. And that was it.

This would have been the first year where 1) Ottawa was expected to send more than one player and 2) Ottawa had even *more than that to send*. He and Shane were stars, of course, but so was Hayes. So was Barrett. The four of them made *sense*, at the very least.

And three of them were openly queer, the fourth was a staunch ally, and they played for arguably the most outspoken team in the league.

The Hollander-Rozanov All-Star Special had been one thing when he and Shane were meant to hate each other – when no one knew they snuck into each other's hotel rooms after the event was over. It was an entirely different beast when the whole world knew they were married, and when the league was trying *very, very hard* to not highlight that fact.

"You should go," Shane had said when they announced the rule change. Like it was no big deal – like it was obvious. "You're the Captain. You're *you*. It'll be fun. You deserve it."

“I don’t want to go if you’re not there,” Ilya had admitted. He didn’t want to leave town for a few days without Shane. He didn’t want to go to awful parties with awful men if he didn’t have Shane’s hand to hold. He didn’t want to spend time apart, in different beds, if it wasn’t necessary. They’d lost so much time – he was a bit unwilling to lose any more, unless it was needed.

Shane had been able to read all that on his face – or else, he’d never really expected Ilya to want to go at all – because he backed down right away. “So neither of us go,” he’d said. “We pull out. Let Hayes or Barrett represent Ottawa. We can stay home with our daughter.”

Anya, who’d been laying with her head in Ilya’s lap, *harumphed* happily, like she somehow knew Shane had been talking about her.

It had sounded so simple on its face, but of course Shane and Ilya announcing they’d bow out of the All-Star Game had had *consequences*. Scott Hunter had quickly followed with his own announcement that he wouldn’t go. Other players pulled out too – a number of stars from the Chicago Hawks; Carter Vaughn, Hayden Pike and J.J. Boiziau (not that Pike would ever have gone anyway, *hah*). The captain of Miami, Zack Bennett, who Ilya had characterized exclusively as a massive homophobe, had pulled out and fully said he was doing it in *solidarity*, which was fucking confusing. So many players simply backed down – said, *no thanks, not this year*.

It shouldn’t have been a surprise when the *rest* of the Centaurs announced they weren’t going. But it still sort of was.

Ilya knew that the team respected him. He *knew* that. He knew they loved Shane. Both of these things were obvious. There was no doubt in his mind that every single person on the roster would defend both of them in a dark alley, if it ever came to that. They were *friends*, most of them, in a way Ilya had never really been friends with anyone on Boston. Cliff, sure, to a certain extent, and Connors a bit – they’d been drinking buddies. But Ilya had hidden so much of himself back then, had held himself back. He’d gone out and he’d smiled and he’d been game, but he hadn’t *opened up*. He hadn’t been able to. His life had been carefully regulated, the dark parts of him tucked deeply away. No one could know about his mother, or his father, or his brother. No one could know about Shane.

Now the whole world knew about his mother. Now the whole world knew about Shane. Things were different. He was able to get close to people – to be open and honest and *free*.

So it shouldn’t have surprised him that his teammates swung so readily to his defense, because they were his *friends* more than his teammates. But still. It was the *All-Star Game*. He wouldn’t have blamed Hayes or Bood or Barrett or Dykstra if they wanted to go.

“You’re fucking kidding me, right?” Bood had scoffed, when Ilya had raised the point at a Team & Family Dinner a few days after the Centaurs officially pulled out. “Why would any of us want to go to a party that you and Holly aren’t invited to, man? What kind of party even *is* that?”

Ilya had excused himself abruptly because he hadn’t wanted Bood to see him cry. He got the feeling Bood had sort of known anyway.

So: participants in the game dropped like flies. Players who were anti-homophobia dropped out, sure, but so did big stars who didn't want to come across as hogging the spotlight. So did players who simply thought a last minute rules change was bullshit. So did players who, Ilya thought privately, probably just wanted a few more days with their wives and kids at home during the season, and didn't really feel like traveling.

By the time Christmas Eve had rolled around, the number of actual stars available for the All-Star Game seemed sort of horrendously low. Which was why the cancellation wasn't a *shock*. There was talk of advertisers pulling out, of Crowell fielding calls from pissed off owners.

Good. Ilya hoped he'd ruined the fucker's Christmas.

He read the announcement on his phone, alone upstairs – he'd gone to lay down for a bit while Shane prepared for the dinner they were having that night with Yuna and David. Duck that needed to marinate for a bit.

He strolled downstairs to find Shane frowning at his own phone at the kitchen island.

"You saw," Shane said, when he noticed Ilya.

"Yes," Ilya said back. He wanted to say more. He wanted to say *I'm sorry this is the first one you'll miss and that you're missing it because of me*. He wanted to say *I'm sorry I'm all this trouble. I hope you think I'm worth it. I know you are worth it. I know you are worth more*. He wanted to say *I'm so happy to be here with you and your parents and not there trying to make advertisers and executives like me*. He wanted to say *I would choose you every time. Over hockey. Over everything. Forever.* It all got jammed up in his throat. He swallowed a few times, uselessly, instead.

Shane smiled. More of a smirk, really – just a twitch upwards of his lips. "Fuck those assholes," he said.

Relief crashed over Ilya. It took everything he had to not let his knees buckle.

Shane's smile softened, like he could see that. Which, maybe he could – he'd gotten so good at reading Ilya, over the years. "You wanna take Anya out with me, before my parents get here?"

Ilya nodded.

So they bundled up in winter coats and toques and headed out. It was snowing – an actual White Christmas.

Ilya had never cared much for North American Christmas. It was later in the Eastern Orthodox Church, for one, but MLH also didn't take too much of a break for it, particularly if you were playing in the Winter Classic at the start of the year, which Boston had done more than once. No one on Boston had ever really known about his loneliness – most of them had decamped back to families elsewhere, or their own wives and kids in the city. Boston, itself largely a college town, tended to empty out in the weeks leading up to the holiday. He had spent many years alone in his apartment, drinking good vodka and trying very hard not to

think bitterly of Shane Hollander, up in Canada in a warm home with parents who loved him. Trying very hard to quell the surge of *want* the image brought to him. Trying to squash down his feelings for Shane, his stupid secret dreams of an impossible future.

Ilya was with Shane Hollander now, though, in that warm home. With those warm parents. It made Christmas better. Granted, their *last* Christmas hadn't been exactly the best – Ilya pushing at something until it broke, lashing out at Shane because he hadn't known how to say what he wanted. But he knew this year would be better. This year, they were cooking duck for Yuna and David, and tomorrow Yuna and David were hosting them, and on Boxing Day they were going to Bood's, like Ilya had wanted so badly last year. This year, he and Shane were doing better at saying what they wanted and needed and listening to what the other wanted and needed. It was all good. Who needed the fucking All-Star Game, when he had all this love? All this happiness?

"You okay?" Shane asked, lightly. Ilya became aware that they had walked several blocks in complete silence. Anya was trotting happily ahead of them on her leash, sniffing absently at every streetlamp. Ilya reached over and took her leash from Shane, at least partially to indicate he was present and aware and partially to free up Shane's hand for holding.

"I am good. Thinking about how Yuna will know I am best son tomorrow when she opens my gift."

Shane scoffed. "My gift isn't *bad*, Ilya, come on."

"Not *bad*, just less *thoughtful*." Ilya had framed several photos he'd taken over the years of Yuna and David and Shane, to join the many already hanging in their house. He had also, at Shane's suggestion (perhaps insistence), included a couple of himself and Yuna and David and Shane taken by others. He refused to give Shane any credit for that idea, but he knew that Yuna would be grateful. She always said she needed more Ilya on her walls – she had him winning the cup, and him and Shane at the CCM shoot, and him and Shane together over the years at the cottage and in Ottawa, perfectly domestic. She also had the one childhood photo of Ilya that he'd saved to his phone – had insisted on putting it up, despite his protestations. It was of him and his mother, on some beach in Russia, grinning widely, covered in sand and sun. It hung in the entryway, for everyone who went in the house to see. Sometimes Ilya spent the time after dinner staring at it, until Shane came and took him by the hand and led him quietly back into the living room.

Shane had bought his mother a very nice pot.

"It's a *good piece of cookware,*" he insisted, even now, scowling in that way that Ilya knew was largely for show.

"It is good you married me, really," Ilya said. "So your parents can finally get nice gifts."

In the past Shane might have turned red in indignation and anger. Now, though, he just threw his head back and laughed, genuinely. Ilya was so struck by him in the snow – the perfect line of his jaw and nose, the way he laughed so easily now. When Shane was done laughing Ilya tangled their fingers together, unable to help himself. Shane smiled brightly at him. And in the snow, with all the holiday lights around, Ilya couldn't stop himself – he leaned forward

and kissed Shane softly on the lips. Once, twice, three times, a gentle press each time, right there on a public street, onlookers be damned.

If Crowell was going to try and stifle them by cancelling the All-Star Game, then Ilya would just have to love Shane even louder and more publicly than before. What a *burden*. (What a joy. What an endless, wonderful, perfect joy.)

“I love you,” Shane said, still smiling.

“I love you too,” Ilya said back. “And I love your parents, so I suppose we should head back and cook dinner.”

“I suppose,” Shane said.

They held hands the entire way back.

—

Ottawa Pride Night – January 28th, 2022

Harris cornered them a few weeks ahead of the event, ushering them into an office to sit down. Shane was on edge nearly immediately, but Ilya figured some of that was leftover from Montreal, where all news was bad news and everyone who worked there was a massive dickhead.

Ilya knew better – he trusted Harris implicitly. And so, truly, did Shane. This was just a trauma response, when it came down to it, as Galina might say.

“So,” Harris said, clapping his hands together dramatically. “Pride night is coming up.”

Shane seemed to relax minutely. Already a good sign. “Okay,” he said, like he had no idea what this had to do with them.

So adorable, Shane. No clue why the social media manager of the team would want to talk to its *married gay couple* about Pride Night.

“As you know,” Harris continued, “there’s a lot of excitement about you two with the fans. We had some ideas about how we might incorporate you into the festivities. If that’s something you’d be interested in, of course.” He said the last bit in a rush, almost nervous. He really, *really* didn’t want Shane to feel pressured. That was sweet. Harris was such a good guy, treating Shane like one of his scared rescue puppies. It made Ilya want to give him a hug.

“Oh,” Shane said, sounding genuinely surprised. He looked at Ilya and raised an eyebrow. The eyebrow was saying something like *how do you feel about this?*

Ilya shrugged back, to say *I am willing to shout from every rooftop in the world that I love you, but I would not do anything that you do not want to do.*

He was a very expressive shrugger.

Shane turned back to Harris. “What were you thinking, exactly?” There were, Ilya reasoned, probably limits to what Shane would say yes to. For instance, he’d repeatedly shot down Ilya’s suggestions that the Ottawa Centaurs post thirst trap videos of him working out shirtless and oiled up to sell more tickets. So modest, his husband.

“It’s actually inspired by your parents,” Harris said, brightly.

Ilya could see the cogs in Shane’s head turning. He was, like, 99% sure that the first thought that came to Shane’s head was *but my parents aren’t gay.* It took every single ounce of Ilya’s extremely limited patience to not leap across the room, push him against the wall, and kiss that adorably confused look off his face. But he held on, for Harris’ sake, if nothing else.

Speaking of, Harris had seemed to realize that Shane was not going to figure this one out on his own. “The, uh, the jerseys they had made, you know? ‘Hollander-Rozanov’, and it has both your numbers?”

“Oh!” Shane said. “Right, yes, of course. You’re thinking, what, a stadium giveaway?”

“Yes!” Harris seemed delighted that Shane had finally gotten in tune with the conversation. “Only, well, you know – *Hollander-Rozanov* is a bit wordy, so we were thinking maybe. . . Hollanov?”

“Hollanov?” Ilya asked. It was his first contribution to the conversation, which he only realized when both Harris and Shane turned to him like they were slightly startled he was still in the room. A bit rude, actually, considering he’d been the star of this team before Shane came along, which meant Harris should think of him first always, and because he was actively *married to Shane*, which meant Shane should also think of him first, always. He was really underappreciated these days.

“It’s a portmanteau," Harris said. Then, realizing this might be an English word Ilya didn’t know, he continued “oh, that’s–”

“No, no, it blends our names, I get it,” Ilya said. “We joked about this, when we got engaged. Just. . . will fans get it?”

“Oh! Oh, well.” Harris suddenly looked horrifically embarrassed. “It’s your, uh, ship name?”

“Ship name?” Shane’s nose was scrunched in confusion. God, he was so cute. Ilya’s self control was fading rapidly. Usually after practice they went home right away to work out all the pent up sexual frustration watching each other skate gave them. This meeting was beginning to feel a bit annoying.

“Like, uh, people who . . . ship you. On the internet? Like they–” Harris cut himself off abruptly. “Actually, you know what? It’s better you two don’t know more about that. My point is, fans will get it. We’ll do it in the rainbow colors, give it away to the first however many people show up. Sound like a plan?”

Shane looked like he was about to follow up on the *ship name* thing for a second, but every second in this room was a second *not* spent at home making out. Waste of time. Ilya stood up.

“Sounds good. Anything else, Harris?” He hoped his tone conveyed that there should be nothing else.

“Oh, well,” Harris started. He began to shuffle through some papers on his desk.

Good enough for Ilya – nothing important would be on a *paper* Harris couldn’t even find.

“Sounds good then, we’ll be going!” he said, wrapping his hands around Shane’s wrist to drag him out.

“Woah,” Shane said. And then, turning over his shoulder to call out at Ilya dragged him away. “Uh, sorry Harris. Thanks!”

“Yes, thank you Harris,” Ilya offered boredly, and kept tugging Shane along.

It was only a few weeks later, at Pride Night, that Ilya realized he maybe should have let Harris keep talking.

Pride Night in Ottawa was a big deal. Ilya had played in a few other teams' Pride Night games, and he knew that wasn’t a universal truth across the league. Some teams did the bare minimum, which used to be a special jersey and an acknowledgement of the night. Now, MLH had walked even that back – Pride Nights were optional, and special jerseys no longer required. (They had done that over the summer, not too long after Shane and Ilya’s wedding. Privately, he thought it was a very strange act of revenge by Crowell.) More than a few teams had rolled back immediately. It was like the existence of gay players in the league meant the league no longer had to pay lip service to gay fans. Who needs Pride Night? There were *four* active gay players! That should be good enough for you, no? Stop bitching about it already!

Ottawa, of course, wasn’t like that. Partially because three gay players all happened to be on the team; partially because of Harris and the team and their dedication to fan outreach. But also, partially, because Ottawa just loved stuff like Pride Night – loved any excuse to pack the stands and show support. The fans loved to show up and show out for a team worth doing that for. After years of being nobodies, the Centaurs were somebodies now, and fans wanted to celebrate that any way they could.

Which meant that the arena was packed. If he squinted, he could see the Hollanov jerseys throughout the arena – they had turned out amazing. Ilya had actually teared up a little when Harris showed them to him and Shane last week. He teared up a little again as they approached the stadium earlier in the day and saw people already lined up for the giveaway, decked out in pride gear. It was just – it was nice to have so much support. So much support for a love that came as natural as breathing, to him. Something they wouldn’t have let him have, back in Russia.

Shane had taken him by the hand, then, in front of every fan and the local reporters, and they’d walked into the rink with their fingers intertwined.

And now here they were, in the middle of the game, surrounded by signs of support and screaming fans as a DJ was playing Lady Gaga on full blast. The Centaurs were currently up

by one at the end of the second period against Minnesota. (A team who had not walked back Pride Night, at least, and whose players seemed mostly pretty game to be here.)

The third period was about to start, and they were back on the bench waiting for the refs to signal that it was time to get back on the ice, when music started playing. It was something Ilya vaguely recognized, an old crooner humming that he couldn't take his eyes off of you. Ilya looked up at the jumbotron and saw that it was a Kiss Cam, bumping around the arena.The camera was landing, over and over again, on visibly queer couples. People with rainbow flags and jerseys, with pins and t-shirts, a person holding a sign that said WE'RE HERE, WE'RE QUEER, WE LOVE HOCKEY who turned to kiss her girlfriend passionately as the camera fell on them.

He nudged Shane, who was next to him on the bench fussing with his stick tape. Shane looked up at the screen, and Ilya watched as he recognized what was happening and his face bloomed into a small, sweet smile. It was still tough for Shane, he knew, to be so *accepted*. A part of his beautiful, deeply anxious husband would always be prepped for the worst case scenario. Ilya wanted so badly to ease all that tension out of Shane's shoulders; to make him really understand that this city loved him, and wouldn't turn on him like Montreal. Things like this helped. In the seven months since Shane had signed his contract, Ilya had seen him relax more and more. The performance diet slackened; Shane went out after games more often, and even sometimes had *two entire beers* when he did so; he initiated contact in public more often, holding Ilya's hand on walks with Anya, kissing him on the cheek while they grocery shopped. He hadn't entirely stopped looking over his shoulder, but Ilya hadn't entirely stopped that either. They both had spent too long doing that to forget it overnight. But they were getting better about it, day by day, together.

Ilya was still looking at Shane looking at the jumbotron when Shane's expression slipped into one of surprise; the crowd roared wildly. "Oh," Shane said, very softly, and when Ilya followed his gaze up he saw that the kiss camera had landed on the two of them, next to each other on the bench.

Ah. Perhaps that had been the paper Harris couldn't find on his desk then.

He turned to Shane to see that Shane was already looking at him. Still smiling softly. Ilya nudged his head towards the jumbotron, a question. *Should we?* He would defer here. He'd always been the one more comfortable with attention, after all.

Shane shrugged a little, still smiling, a look Ilya understood well. Something he did on the same line on the power play, across the room at parties, walking slowly towards Ilya in the bedroom, desire on his face. *Why not?*

So, Ilya listened to the camera and leaned forward to kiss Shane. He slipped his glove off so he could press his hand to Shane's jaw. He meant for it to be chaste, short – the way they usually kissed in public. But then Shane was licking into his mouth, deepening the kiss to something so *close* to filthy, but also somehow not close enough. A tease, in kiss form. Shane's hand was pressed against Ilya's thigh, and just when Ilya was thinking *forget the game, I will forfiet and we can go home and fuck all night* Shane pulled back. He was grinning. Ilya was sure he had a stupid, wide-eyed, lovesick look on his own face. The crowd

was going absolutely insane, cheering and clapping wildly and then dropping into a chant – *HOLL-A-NOV! HOLL-A-NOV!*

Shane looked up and waved. Ilya did as well, still feeling completely dazed. Fuck, how was he supposed to play hockey after that? The camera finally cut away from them, ending the moment.

He turned to level a little pout at Shane. "And everyone thinks *I* am menace in this relationship," he said.

Shane grinned back. "I'm just giving the fans what they want, Rozanov." He leaned forward and dropped his voice low, so low Ilya almost couldn't hear it over the roaring of the crowd. "And maybe after we win this game, we can go home and I'll give you what *you* want, yeah?"

Ilya's jaw actually dropped. "I thought you said I wasn't allowed to sext you before games."

Shane shrugged, loosely. He was still smiling. It was a very addictive smile, one of Ilya's favorites. The one that said that he truly felt *at ease.* Here, in this stadium, on this team, in Ilya's life, by Ilya's side. "This isn't sexting, it's talking," Shane said. "And besides, it's the *middle* of the game."

A horn sounded, signaling the period was about to begin. Ilya was rooted to his spot, just gaping at Shane. "I think they need you on the ice," Shane said, smile edging into something more teasing.

Ilya stood, feeling a little wobbly on his own feet. "Later," he said, "I will get you back for this."

"I look forward to it, *captain*," Shane said, still smirking.

Bood groaned on the bench next to him. "Okay, seriously you two, we're going to risk getting some sort of violation for. . . whatever this is."

"Major flirting," Haas offered. Which was cute, Haas trying to chirp with his elders, but not *appreciated*.

"Oh this isn't major," Shane said, turning to Hass now. "Major is–"

"Alright, enough! Will *someone* get on the goddamn ice?" Wiebe interjected. But Ilya could see he was trying and largely failing to hide a grin.

Ilya skated onto the ice. "Later," he said, jabbing his glove at Shane.

Shane shrugged again. "Only if you score a goal," he offered back.

Ilya scored two. Just to be sure.

—

Luca's Birthday Party – March 31st, 2022

Technically, Luca had turned 21 over the summer, but it had been a bit of a crazy summer for Ilya, and Luca had gone back to Switzerland for most of the break, so the date had passed by without a larger team celebration. This was a problem that Ilya needed to solve. It simply wasn't right for someone as young as Luca to *not* be treated to a million drinks on his birthday, especially now that he was legal in the United States, where they played half their damn season.

Plus – they'd clinched a playoff spot. They were *going to the playoffs*. Celebrations were required. *Mandatory*, even.

The plan was simple – they were in Boston for a game, and Ilya still knew the best clubs in Boston and was still popular enough to easily book a VIP room. He would use his million dollar salary to treat the Centaurs to one loud, obnoxious night of drinking on the road, after the Boston game but before they dragged their asses back to Ottawa in the morning.

Truthfully, he hadn't expected Shane to want to come. Outside of the fact that he didn't really drink, a nightclub certainly wasn't his *scene*. The Kingfisher and Monk's could get rowdy, but they were bars with seats and quieter music and dart boards – much more on the Hollander "no more than two beers and in bed before 1am" level. This was dancing until sunrise and strobe lights and sweat and, at least in Ilya's past experience, women in short shimmery dresses leaning forward to lick said sweat off your neck.

Not that Ilya would be participating in *that* anymore. The only person he wanted licking his neck ever again was Shane, thank you very much. Ilya had his own plans – he'd put down a credit card, drink two to three glasses of vodka, and then call a car back to the hotel well before midnight so Shane was still awake enough that Ilya could fuck him into the mattress for a couple hours before bed. Perfect plan.

Except, when he suggested the club outing to the team a few weeks ahead of the trip, sitting in the locker room in Ottawa after practice, Shane looked up from untying his skates and said, "sure, I'll go."

"What?" Ilya asked, baffled.

Shane's eyes narrowed in that teasing way they did sometimes. "Oh, sorry, am *I* not invited?"

Chouinard laughed. "I guess bringing your husband to the club ruins your reputation as resident playboy, huh Roz?"

"No, shut up," Ilya snapped. He knew it was a joke but he hated even the implication that he was ashamed of Shane – that he preferred his days of meaningless, empty sex with strange women to his current married life. None of those women had been as hot as Shane, anyway. Certainly none of them had given Ilya the type of happiness he had, for a long time, assumed would be permanently out of his reach. Shane had given him that. Shane had given him *everything*. (Except a second dog, but Ilya was pretty sure he was going to win that one eventually.) Chouinard held his hands up in surrender, face apologetic, and Ilya realized

perhaps he'd snapped a bit too hard, but whatever. Important reminder to everyone to not joke about that. He turned back to Shane. "You hate nightclubs."

Shane shrugged noncommittally, like this wasn't an *objectively true statement of fact*. Nightclubs included a number of Shane's least favorite things: music that was too loud, people standing too close to him, strangers trying to talk to him (or worse, hit on him), the threat of having to dance. It made absolutely no sense for Shane to willingly subject himself to torture. It wasn't like Luca would take it personally if Shane didn't go – it wasn't even actually his birthday!

"Maybe I'm turning over a new leaf," Shane said, dryly.

"Don't turn over new leaves," Ilya said. He could admit his tone was a bit whiny. "I like your leaves. I married your leaves."

"I think you've lost control of that metaphor, Roz," Hayes said, not unkindly.

"Whatever!" Ilya tossed his hands into the air in frustration. "Point is you hate nightclubs! You don't have to do something you hate!"

"I don't *hate* them," Shane said, getting up from the bench to stand in front of Ilya and lie through this fucking teeth, apparently. "You know I *can* be fun sometimes." Ilya opened his mouth to reflexively remind Shane that he was *very, very* aware of all the many absolutely filthy ways Shane could be fun, but Shane cut him off, jabbing a finger into his chest and snapping, "*do not make a sex joke!*"

Ilya shut his mouth promptly.

"We're celebrating Luca's birthday. I like this team. I enjoy hanging out with you all," Shane said. Some of the guys cooed like this was adorable, and Bood faked a swoon. "It'll be fun," he finished, looking Ilya in the eye as he said it.

He didn't *look* like he was lying. But Ilya knew Shane well enough to know there was something he wasn't saying, underneath all of this.

He didn't find out *what* until the night of the party, though.

A part of him thought that Shane would back out – that for all he claimed it sounded fun, once he was actually faced with *going to the nightclub* he'd politely make an excuse to stay back. Which was fine, really – Ilya would rather have Shane tucked in and happily reading a boring hockey book or half-watching *Law & Order: SVU* (the only show legally allowed to be shown in hotel rooms, apparently) while he fell asleep than standing miserably in a place he hated, counting the minutes until he could go home. Instead, after the game Shane showered and got ready to go out. He even *commented on Ilya's outfit*.

"The red one's sexier," he'd said, leaning lazily against the bathroom door frame, eyes roaming across Ilya's body hungrily. Hungrily enough that Ilya was halfway to suggesting they *both* skip the nightclub, except he really couldn't do that as party host.

“Good sexy or bad sexy?” he asked instead. Shane was not *often* jealous – Ilya was the one much more prone to it, mostly because Shane simply had no idea how utterly and unfairly gorgeous he was and tended to assume people were just *being nice* when they were giving him bedroom eyes. (It’s why Ilya’s straightforwardness had worked out so well – not a lot of room for interpretation about someone looking you in the eyes and jacking themselves off in a public shower, really). Still, even though Shane was less likely to get weird and possessive and literally growl at men who stood too close in public places like Ilya did, Ilya wanted to make sure Shane didn’t feel *uncomfortable* with how he was presenting himself. You know. Just in case.

“Good sexy,” Shane had said, making direct eye contact. “*Very* good sexy.”

And then it clicked into Ilya’s head, the whole beautiful thing. What Shane was *doing*.

“Shane Hollander you absolute *slut,*” he said with utter fondness. “This is a *thing* for you!”

“I have no idea what you mean,” Shane said, all fake casual again. But Ilya could see *through* it now, to what he’d been playing at the whole time.

“Yes you *do*,” he cooed back, triumphant. Shane turned and walked back into the bathroom and Ilya followed him, his red shirt unbuttoned and hanging loosely over his frame. “This is your exhibitionist thing, Hollander, you can’t trick me!”

He was very proud of himself when he learned that word. Such an accurate way to describe the way Shane got all hot when they fucked in hotel rooms with thin walls, or when Ilya dragged him into semi-public parts of the arena to blow him. He’d act flustered and embarrassed about it later, but Ilya knew better – knew like he’d known at the All-Stars Game last year, when Marleau had banged on their door during sex and Shane had *lit up.*

Shane Hollander: not so boring after all. Eighteen year old Ilya would be shocked; thirty year old Ilya was just so happy Shane was *all his*. That there were no nice men in Montreal; that the big strong top in Mexico had been disappointing enough for Shane not to want to go back to him.

Shane was looking at Ilya through the mirror, his back turned. His face was thoughtful, like he was really considering what to say next. “Do you remember the first time you and I were at a nightclub together?”

Ilya thought about it. He and Shane had gone *out* many times, but to clubs almost never. There were some utterly unmemorable afterparties that popped up in his mind, but those couldn’t be what Shane was referencing.

Then he remembered.

Shane, with his arms around Rose Landry. Ilya pressing his mouth into some strange girl’s neck.

Fuck.

It must have shown on his face, that he remembered, because Shane turned around and placed his hands on Ilya's hips, just lightly, still leaning back against the sink. "You know I thought about that girl and you a lot," he said.

Ilya frowned. Shane knew it didn't mean anything – Ilya had admitted long ago that he hadn't even *slept* with that girl. (Shane *had* slept with Rose Landry, which Ilya still, sometimes, felt absolutely irrational about, but that was a different point. Rose was cool. They texted about Real Housewives. Shane was *gay*. And *married to him*. It was *stupid* to be jealous of Rose. But. Still. *Sometimes*.)

"I was so jealous of her," Shane continued. His voice had dropped very low, in a horrendously sexy way. It was like a small ember hitting a patch of dry twigs in Ilya's stomach. *Fuck*. "I wanted to be her so badly. I wanted you to touch me like that. In public. Everyone watching. No one caring."

"This is. . ." Ilya trailed off. He licked his lips. Jesus, he was half hard already and they hadn't even *left yet*. "What you want? Why you want to go tonight?" *So you can get me hard on the dance floor and I can take you into a bathroom and fuck you against a sink?* he thought, but didn't say out loud, because they had to *leave* soon and articulating that thought would probably completely derail both of them. And also there was no way Shane wanted to fuck in a public bathroom. Think of the *germs*.

(Although he *had* seemed to be game for Ilya blowing him after the MLH Awards that one time. So, maybe?)

Shane's face softened. "I want to do some shots with my teammates. I want to chirp Luca for being a lightweight, even though I *know* that's hypocritical. And. . . yes, I want to dance with my husband. In public. Where anyone can see." He shrugged, closing his eyes. "And maybe I want you to be all over me. Just a little." He opened his eyes and met Ilya's gaze head on. "Maybe I want a redo of that night. Maybe I want to make a night that's better."

Fucking *hell*. Twelve years of sleeping with Shane Hollander and still he managed to be a surprise. A *very sexy* surprise.

"Then I suppose you are right," Ilya said, grinning and leaning down to kiss Shane, "it will be a *very fun* night indeed."

And it was.

Nearly everyone turned out, which was nice. A few of the older guys had skipped out, which made enough sense, but the rest of the team was crowded into the VIP section of one of Ilya's favorite old haunts. The music was loud and thudding, and he and Shane were pressed close together in a booth, his hand higher up on Shane's thigh than he usually dared in public.

He was still, honestly, pretty turned on. Shane was drinking beer straight from the bottle, and Ilya kept getting distracted by the way his lips pursed against the rim, the way his fingers sat on the neck.

Obviously the two of them had skipped some of the normal Western ways of doing weddings. He hadn't had a bachelor party. He'd remembered, though, going to a few when he was on the Raiders. Guys jeering about their *last night of freedom*. Some of the married guys would get too drunk and tell the young ones to never get married – *she'll stop giving it up for you once she's got the ring.* It had always been stupid, sexist bullshit, which pissed Ilya off even when he was twenty and was, perhaps, not the most respectful to women either.

He hadn't been afraid that he and Shane would have *less* sex after marriage – if only because they were going to finally *live in the same city together*, which they'd never really done before, and living in separate cities was big barrier to having regular sex anyway – but also because he and Shane were so on the same page. Shane was ridiculously, constantly turned on by Ilya, which was a massive ego boost, and Ilya, in return, was entirely obsessed with Shane.

(Besides, even if they never had sex again – even if tomorrow Shane decided he was done, as totally unrealistic as that was – it wouldn't have mattered. Ilya would still love him. Ilya loved him on his knees and on his back and with tears in his eyes from being fucked out and a smirk on his face when he knew Ilya was about to come, but he also loved him sitting quietly on the couch with his nose in a book, or asleep on Ilya's shoulder on the airplane home, or pissed off and seething and five seconds way from biting Ilya's head off in an argument. He loved Shane always. He had no conditions.)

Still, nights like tonight were fun, because Shane was, as Ilya so liked to point out, a bit of a slut. Something about being so buttoned up all the time did it, maybe. Shane had been *Shane Hollander* since he was about fifteen years old, and had dutifully carried all that came with that bearing – the brand deals and the pressure to perform and the expectation of being Canada's Perfect Golden Hockey Boy. But when the lights were off, and it was just him and Ilya, and he was just *Shane*, it was like something came loose in him, and he could really *want*.

And he was *so, so good* at wanting. At being wanted. Shane, a little adrenaline high and embracing the part of him that liked to show off was the sexiest fucking thing on Earth.

"You're staring again," Shane said lightly. His eyes were a little hooded. Fuck. *Fuck*.

"You know," Hayes said, dragging Ilya out of a very *inappropriate for public* train of thought, "I didn't sign up to third wheel you in this booth. Holly and I were having a *conversation*, Roz." He was grinning as he said it though, obviously delighted to be giving Ilya shit as Ilya so often gave shit to everyone else.

"Shut up Hazy," he said, huffing with fake offense. "It is not my fault I can distract Hollander so easily from your boring conversation."

"It wasn't boring," Shane said, mostly to Wyatt, in a kind tone. Because Shane was just *like that*. He seemed, in fact, a bit poised to start talking to Hayes again, as if to prove he didn't think the conversation was boring. Which just wouldn't do. It wasn't fair for Shane to be so utterly sexy and hiding it all in a booth.

"Hollander," he said, very seriously. "Dance with me."

This was the type of request Shane almost always batted away. It was a fun back and forth – Ilya asking for a dance, Shane saying no, Ilya buying him another beer and asking again, letting his voice go pleady and whiny until Shane finally capitulated. At which point Ilya promptly mocked him for being a terrible dancer just to see his face go red in indignation.

He was prepared for that little game tonight, but Shane continued to surprise him. "Sure," he said, shrugging. Even *Hayes* looked a little gobsmacked by this.

"Wow, he really *is* turning over new leaves," the goalie muttered half under his breath. And then, a bit louder, "or, wait, am I about to see some really upsetting foreplay?"

Ilya scoffed. "Our foreplay is not *upsetting* Hazy. It is beautiful and sexy and makes you long for your wife."

Shane groaned loudly, dropping his head into his hands in embarrassment.

"Just remember I share a *wall* with you tonight, will you?" Hayes said.

"Maybe Dykstra and Bood will let you crash on tiny hotel couch," Ilya offered. And then he tugged Shane up from the booth. "Goodbye Hazy, have to go dance with my sexy husband now!"

Shane let himself be dragged to the floor, where Ilya promptly wrapped him up in his arms. The dance floor was fairly packed – it was easy and acceptable to pull their bodies perfectly flush together. Hell, everyone *else* was doing it.

Shane leaned forward to speak into his ear. "You don't *have* to traumatize *all* our teammates, you know."

Ilya scoffed again. "This coming from the man who wanted me to wear sexy shirt so he could get slutty with me at the club. I see through you, Hollander! You like when I traumatize our teammates."

Shane was blushing, but he was also grinning – that loose, bright smile that he wore more and more often these days. Seeing it made every part of Ilya's body warm with pleasure.

"I love you," Ilya said. Shouted, really, to be heard over the din of the music.

Shane's lips tugged even farther upward. "Ya tebya lyublyu," he said back, nearly perfect on the pronunciation. His Russian wasn't perfect, not like his French, but he was getting better at the phrases he said most often. (*I love you; I need you; harder, please* – the big ones.)

Suddenly it was all too much – the thudding baseline, Shane's perfect smile, the smell of sweat and cologne and booze. Ilya felt overwhelmed with emotion – with *getting to have this*. What a delight, to get to love Shane. What a treasure, to get to do it so openly – here, in this shitty club in Boston playing shitty music while their stupid teammates got uproariously drunk and coeds snorted coke in the bathroom. It was better than he'd ever dreamed of, better than he could have ever hoped to have. His mother reading him bedtime stories about

fairytale princes and true love's kiss – he never once allowed himself to really, truly think those things were in his grasp.

He pulled Shane closer to him, pressed their lips together. Shane opened up to him immediately, seemingly uncaring that they were in public. Except, Ilya supposed, they sort of weren't. No one else on this dance floor gave a shit. They were all so wrapped up in their own lives, their own sexual needs, their own heartaches and crushes and lust. It was public, but it was also private.

It was *very* sexy. Like they were the only two people in the world. Or the only two people who mattered, anyway. Shane was clutching Ilya's waist and Ilya had his hands in Shane's hair. The music was so loud, Ilya could feel it in his chest, his heart bumping along to the rhythm.

Eventually they pulled apart to breathe, but Shane leaned forward and peppered kisses along the edge of Ilya's jaw, feather light and almost sweet. Ilya spared a moment to think of himself in that nightclub all those years ago – watching Shane with Rose Landry, her hands up his shirt, his eyes focused only on her. How *badly* Ilya had wanted Shane, then. How impossible it was to have him. He'd gone home to a cold, empty bed in a horrible hotel room and had fallen asleep trying to will himself to stop wanting what he couldn't have – what he could *never* have.

And here, the object of all his desires and dreams and stupid, horrible hope, was in a nightclub in Boston pressing teeth into his pulse point.

Sometimes he wished he could go back in time. To the Ilya who fell asleep in that hotel room, yes, but to other Ilya's too. The one dodging his father's calls in the locker room; the one waking up oddly unsatisfied with a strange woman in his bed; the one alone in a freezing room the night after his mother's funeral, shaking and trying not to cry loud enough to be heard. He wished he could find all of those versions of him and whisper in their ears – *stay strong. One day you will get everything you have ever wanted. One day you will get more than you could possibly even know to want.*

"Hey," Shane said, softly. His hands were on Ilya's face, thumbs brushing against cheekbones. "Where'd you go?"

Ilya swallowed the sudden, slightly embarrassing lump of emotion in his throat. "Nowhere," he said, hoping his voice didn't sound so ruined. "I'm here with you. Always. *Always.*"

Shane smiled, soft and bright and endlessly fond. "You want to get out of here?"

He thought of the hotel room. Of essentially shared suitcases, his stuff always ending up mixed in with Shanes. He thought of sex, yes, but then he thought about brushing their teeth together, and Shane's head on his chest while they caught their breath, the way Shane tended to trace lazy patterns in his skin just before they fell asleep. He thought of the plane ride the next day, when Shane would be horrifically hungover and Ilya wouldn't be because he never was, and Shane would threaten to divorce him until Ilya scrounged up coffee and a greasy breakfast sandwich and all was forgiven. He thought about the plane ride, where he'd put on

some crap movie and Shane would share his headphones and would still, somehow, fall asleep on Ilya's shoulder halfway through, explosions be damned.

He thought about the future. He thought about every day for the rest of his life.

"Yes," he said, pressing a kiss into Shane's cheek. "Let's get out of here."

—

MLH CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES, GAME 7 – June 24th, 2022

In one minute, they'd go into overtime.

Ilya really, *really* didn't want to go into overtime. Though, he'd take overtime over losing, he supposed.

They were in Ottawa for Game 7, and he could *feel* the anxiety radiating off the crowd. Their fans, normally so loud, had gone into a strange, hushed silence – like the whole place was biting their fingernails.

Historically, Ilya was not the type of guy who *got nervous*. It was part of why Shane had thrown him so off-kilter. Once Ilya had figured out he was sexy and people wanted to fuck him, it had been *easy* to fuck. Once he'd figured out he was the fastest kid on the ice and brutally accurate, he stopped being nervous about losing.

Except: then Shane Hollander waltzed into his life and made his palms sweat and his heart race and he hadn't known what to *do* with all his stupid *feelings* that he'd been *repressing* his whole life.

Except: it was Game 7 of the goddamn Cup Championship, and LA had the puck, and they were 55 seconds away from going into overtime.

It had been long enough since his last Cup that he'd sort of – well, *forgotten* wasn't the right word. It was more like he'd let it slip his mind, how stressful it was. He wondered if this was how Jackie Pike kept letting herself get pregnant – her brain sort of decided not to totally remember how awful the last time was? Similarly, Ilya's brain had forgotten the sickly, adrenaline lined feeling of the last few minutes of the last game.

But Boston's Cup had been different. They'd won at Game 5, so there was room for error. They'd been up a point in those last few minutes. The other team had even gone empty net – it was a dream win. One where you allowed yourself the rare moment of thinking *I am going to win the fucking Cup* without feeling like you were completely jinxing it.

Ilya was *not* thinking *I am going to win the fucking Cup* right now. Shane would kill him with his brain if he thought Ilya was getting anywhere *near* to jinxing this shit.

LA iced off of pressure from Chouinard. Ilya's pulse did not slow down at all.

Wiebe called him back to the bench. For a moment Ilya felt *pissed off*. He *needed* to play the last minute of this game. He needed to be on the ice for this. He needed to get this team

across the finish line – this team he'd helped build up, this group of scrappy weirdos who'd become his family, this stadium and this city that he loved so much, that he'd moved to *for love*. He couldn't not be on ice the last minute.

But Wiebe wasn't benching him. "Bood, come in. Rozanov, I'm swapping you to left wing and putting Hollander on center." Wiebe turned to make serious eye contact with Shane. "You've done this before, kid. You can do it again."

Shane nodded once, seriously, and hopped over the boards, bumping fists with Bood as he did so.

Barrett grinned at the two of them – it was a little feral, edging towards mania. Playoff jitters. "Any advice from you two, then?"

"Well," Shane said, mildly. "Hockey is a very complex sport with a lot of nuance. But I say it'd be helpful if we scored a fucking goal."

Barrett barked a laugh, and Ilya couldn't stop himself from chuckling, either.

Shane smirked at him. "Bet you I get the game winner," he said.

Now Troy was frowning. "Isn't that jinxing it?"

Shane shrugged, all loose arrogance. It was sort of amazing – on the Metros he'd carried himself like the world's oldest 25 year old; now here he was, 30 and more boyish than ever. Amazing what good team culture and not hiding who you are could do to a man. "Nah – LA's goalie tweaked something about five minutes ago. Doesn't want to admit it. He's been sluggish moving to the right. You get a puck above the glove there, he won't move fast enough to get it." He was grinning now, sharply. "We've *got this*."

"Christ Hollander," Barrett said. "You scare the shit out of me sometimes, you know that?"

"I have never been more sexually attracted to you than I am right now," Ilya said, very seriously.

Shane's smile got even *larger*, somehow. "Let's go kick their ass."

As always, Shane was right. Once it was pointed out to him, Ilya saw it too – the half second lag on the goalie's movement. If the mask wasn't blocking his face, there would certainly be a visible grimace. Shane went to the faceoff and Ilya hovered nearby, his confidence slowly ticking up. Shane was *right*. This is what Hollander was good at, what he was better at than anyone else – he saw the whole picture, every play. It was like he was a hockey psychic sometimes.

The puck dropped.

Shane won the faceoff – because of *course* he did – and got the puck over to Barrett quickly. Troy and Ilya sped down the ice. Ilya kept himself on the side the goalie was lagging on, ready for the pass. Barrett got caught up by a defender, but Shane swept in to rescue the puck.

They both approached the goal. So close. So close Ilya could taste it on his tongue, something sweet and brilliant.

Shane passed him the puck. Ilya, because he always knew where Shane was going to go before Shane himself knew, caught it easily. He buried it, top right, above the glove of the goalie, moving a sluggish half second too late. The goal buzzer went. The crowd went insane – so insane that the horrible goal music that Ilya had, equally horribly, grown fond of was basically inaudible.

He risked a look up at the clock. Ten seconds left.

Shane skated up next to him and knocked their helmets together, a small celebration. "One more posession," he said.

"One more," Ilya agreed.

One more – which Shane won, again. He held onto the puck as the seconds ticked down, but it didn't really matter. The guys from LA were already bending over in agony; the crowd in Ottawa was already pressed against the glass, stomping and screaming and cheering.

The buzzer went again. The game ended.

They won the fucking Cup.

In Boston, Ilya had spent the last seconds of the game looking at the scoreboard, too, at the clock – like they'd somehow come on the jumbotron and take it away, say a goal didn't count, say it hadn't been real. Then he'd turned to the fans, their raucous cheering and hollering pumping through his veins. Then he'd been attacked by teammates – Marleau first, crushing him into a hug. A million thumps on his back. He'd thought about his mother. About how much she'd liked watching his games; about how she'd joke about seeing him on TV sometimes. He'd thought about his father – wondered if he was watching the game, if Alexei was watching the game, if he'd get a call in the morning with something approaching pride. He knew he wouldn't, but in the childish excitement of the win he'd let himself imagine.

It was only when the Cup was in his hands that he'd let himself think about Shane. If Shane was watching. If Shane was jealous, or angry. If Shane had seen him score that last goal. What Shane *thought* about that last goal. He'd been filled with the horrific impulse to text "Jane." He could tell himself that he wanted to rub it in – to hold it over Hollander's head, that he'd gotten the Cup first, like he'd gotten the draft first. But the truth was just that he wanted to talk to Shane. That he'd missed him horrifically in the months of self-imposed radio silence. It had been for the best – *obviously,* Ilya's hands were gripping the *Cup* – but it hadn't been easy. And that it hadn't been easy meant it was obviously even *more* for the best. Ilya had gotten caught up in the magnetic pull of Shane Hollander, and it had been distracting. It would be distracting to let himself get pulled back in. So he had resisted the impulse to text, and his promised himself he would only be professional next time he saw Shane at the MLH awards.

A promise he broke immediately. A promise he was so, *so* immensely glad he broke. Because here he was, right now, on the ice, a second Cup to his name. He was again, looking at the scoreboard as the game ended. He, again, thought first of his mother – thought *I do this for you, still, always*. But when he finished that thought, he ignored the crowd – he ignored every other teammate. He scanned the ice for the only person who mattered.

Shane, as it happened, was skating up to him, grinning widely, shedding his gloves and helmet as he did so. He reached Ilya, and without a word grabbed Ilya by the jersey and pulled him into a searing kiss. Ilya let himself get lost in it – the press of Shane's mouth against his own, Shane's *body* against his own, hot even through the layers of the pads. The roar of the crowd dulled into the background. There was just this, now, the two of them. The rest of the world be damned.

Someone crashed into Ilya's back, and Shane pulled away, already laughing a bit. His mouth was red and swollen and his hair was askew. Bood was gripping onto Ilya's back and Barrett was giving Shane a half-hearted noogie. "We just won the cup you lovebirds," Dystraka chirped. "Celebrate with *us*!"

He had a point, so Ilya let himself be dragged away – patted and hugged and cheered at. But he was aware of Shane the whole time, like there was a string between them pulled taught that he could see. He ended up back at Shane's side before long.

"Good kiss, Hollander," he said, grinning. "Crowell will be pissed."

Shane barked a laugh. "Ilya, come on. I don't give a *single fuck* about him. We just won the *goddamn Cup together*."

Fair enough point. Ilya knocked their foreheads together, restraining himself from another kiss if only for the benefit of their still rowdy teammates.

"Wait," he said, suddenly remembering. "I won our bet! I won game decider!" He grinned as wickedly as he could. "What do I get?"

Shane laughed, a truly delightful sound that lit up every part of Ilya's body. "Baby," he said, voice filled with glee. "You get exactly what you would have gotten if *I'd* won." And then Shane – Shane Hollander, the most reserved, professional man Ilya had ever known – put his hands around Ilya's face and kissed him again, bold and openly. Ilya knew it would be on television – he knew it would be everywhere. He thought that, like Scott Hunter kissing Kip all those years ago, it might become *the photo* of the moment. He thought it was possible that tomorrow Shane would wake up and turn red with embarrassment about it – but he didn't think so. They'd won the Cup. They deserved a little celebration.

So Ilya wound his hands around Shane's back, and let his husband kiss him there, in public, for as long as they both wanted.

End Notes

fic title is from Desperate Measures by Marianas Trench

i can assure you there is no world in which the all-star game works this way, but i think it's funny to cancel the 2021-2022 all-star game in universe because it got cancelled in real life (due to covid)

this was supposed to be a short one shot and then i accidentally wrote almost 20k words. my bad! brevity is the soul of wit but i am merely a stupid bitch.

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