

we're strangers, we're not friends

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/77042006) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/77042006>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander , Svetlana Vetrova
Additional Tags:	hockey nerd au , Rookie Year , dumb teenagers with big feelings
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-04 Words: 5,359 Chapters: 1/1

we're strangers, we're not friends

by [isozyme](#)

Summary

The Metros really were lousy at hockey. Shane Hollander was the only talent they had, which was why they threw the C on his chest before they even made it to the All Star break. The Raiders hadn't given Ilya even an A yet. Coach had taken him aside and told him they weren't going to think about a leadership role on the team until he'd finished his rookie year. He had enough to deal with, Coach said, which was nicer than saying Ilya was still nineteen, and his English sucked shit, and they weren't quite done being worried about "character issues."

Ilya Rozanov's rookie year reimaged by someone with serious hockey-watcher brainrot.

Notes

Please forgive the artistic liberties taken with when the lottery rules changed about how many spots a team can move up in the draft. I'm mad at the Islanders so let's pretend it's like that in MLH.

Title from legendary Canadian indie-pop duo Tegan and Sara's Wake Up Exhausted.

Ilya knew it was going to be on the television, him having what the Canadians would call something patronizing, like *little outburst*. If the referees in the MLH weren't absolute dogshit, he wouldn't have broken the camera in the box that wouldn't stop staring at him. Five minutes for kneeing. Fucking joke. For a collision! He didn't stick his leg out, he didn't do anything, he was just trying to find open ice and the Vancouver player skated straight into him and then fell on the ice crying like a bitch. Ilya swore the guy had smirked at him as Ilya got escorted to the box.

The Raiders had been up by one at the start of the third, but by the time Ilya got out of the box, they were down by one instead. By the end of the game, they were down three. A humiliating loss at home, in front of their fans.

Ilya sat in his stall with his gear getting wetter and colder as Coach LeClaire chewed them all out. It was mostly just loud sounds to him, but he knew what the gist would be. Not good enough, not disciplined enough, not acceptable. From the way nobody else in the room would look at him, Ilya could tell he was getting blamed, even if he couldn't pick his name out of the yelling.

Coach walked out, and everybody picked up where they left off peeling out of their pads. Ilya stayed sat where he was, then grabbed his stick from where it was leaning next to him and broke it in half over his knee. Then he broke the halves in half, then tried to do it again but the pieces were too short and he felt his chest knot up in unbearable frustration and embarrassment and rage. Then he was the one crying like a bitch because they lost and it was his fault, and also the MLH's fault, and also Canada's fault for not being fair to anyone who wasn't from their precious little continent. America too, fuck them. Ilya sniffed hard and spat on the floor, trying to be done, but another furious wet gasp shook him and he hated it here, he *hated it*.

Someone sat down next to him. "First year's hard," Marly said, and patted him on the back with a big heavy hand.

"Fuck off, you're fake nice," Ilya said thickly.

"No, I got—" he used a word Ilya didn't know which made him miss half a sentence "—get a phone call from the league, but it's not a big deal. Should be just a fine, no suspension."

"No suspension? It's fine?"

"Yeah. Just a fine."

"Right. All a fine." Ilya corrected himself. English with its stupid "a" and "the" that his tutor kept trying to get him to remember.

"Shit, no, *a* fine's like, um, like you have to pay money. But no missed games."

"Okay," Ilya said. That was no issue. He had money. He couldn't get back the two points in the standings, but he could line the league's pockets a little to make a problem go away.

What got under his skin was that none of the other young stars had to put up with this shit. When other rookies got stuck in the mouth, the refs blew the whistle. Ilya had five stitches inside his cheek that hadn't merited a call.

He'd been pissing himself when they sent him to the team dentist between periods that game, trying to hide how much he didn't want to get in the vinyl-covered chair and open his mouth. Dentists were bad men who liked to hurt people, everybody knew that. He'd tried to pretend he wasn't bleeding into his mouth but the athletic trainer wasn't buying it and didn't have patience for players hiding injuries after a decade with the team.

"Be brave and I'll get you a sucker after," the trainer had told him. Ilya tried to kill him with his eyes but failed. Now he had prickly little strings bothering him whenever he tried to eat. A piece of broccoli had gotten stuck underneath one of his stitches at team lunch, and Ilya tongued at it idly while he glared at the floor and wondered how many goals he'd have to score before the MLH treated him with respect.

*

There wasn't anything fun to do after a loss like that, so Ilya went home to his expensive, empty apartment. He watched half of a Russian movie just to hear something familiar, got bored, and checked the scores around the league instead. Montreal was still playing the Houston Pumpjacks and getting destroyed, down four to nothing. That sounded fun, so Ilya turned it on.

The Metros really were lousy at hockey. Shane Hollander was the only talent they had, which was why they threw the C on his chest before they even made it to the All Star break. They'd traded every piece they had to secure the first spot in the draft, and they'd had it until the Raiders won the lottery and jumped ahead of them from tenth place. Obviously, their fans said that they wanted Hollander anyway after Ilya was picked first overall. Somehow that didn't make them hate Ilya any less.

On the broadcast, the camera lingered on Shane's face, close enough to see the sweat on his upper lip and the acne under his cheekbones. He looked like he'd rather be chewing glass than sitting there while his team iced the puck again. Ilya watched Montreal lose a face-off and get promptly pinned in their own end again. A graphic popped up on screen with how long Montreal's defensive pair had been out on the ice, ticking upwards: from two minutes fifteen, two minutes thirty-five, two minutes fifty. Montreal was so gassed they could barely move by the time the Jacks finally stopped dicking around with them and scored. The guy didn't even celebrate, just smiled and tapped the teammate who sauced him the puck on the helmet. He knew they'd wrapped this one up and wasn't going to rub it in.

Of course Sportsnet couldn't ignore Hollander for more than thirty seconds at a time, so Ilya got to study the exact lines of Shane Hollander's face as he watched his team lose.

If it had been Ilya sitting there with a C stitched to his sweater, he would have been barking up and down the bench, telling them to at least fucking try. A team should have some dignity in that situation, not lie down in a corner and die. Not that the Raiders had given Ilya even an A yet. Coach had taken him aside and told him they weren't going to think about a leadership role on the team until he'd finished his rookie year. He had enough to deal with, Coach said,

which was nicer than saying Ilya was still nineteen, and his English sucked shit, and they weren't quite done being worried about "character issues."

Perfect Hollander would never lose his temper like that. No, he just sat there like he was focusing on holding in a giant shit. Only his eyes betrayed him, two black pits of outrage. He could pretend all he wanted, but Shane hated this.

You resent them, Ilya thought. If you had even a half-decent team you could carry them to a playoff spot, but they're not half decent. Without you, they'd barely be MLH-caliber.

Hollander held it in. He took the next shift and played fucking beautiful hockey just like he always fucking did. Two minutes before the horn Hollander got one back: wove through three Jacks and roofed it. A pointless goal that would still end up on highlight reels. Hollander didn't celebrate, just skated down the bench for his fistbumps with a classic Shane Hollander strained smile. Spezzia, Montreal's veteran alternate captain with twelve hundred games under his belt, skated up, bumped his shoulder into Hollander, and smacked him on the ass. Hollander ducked his head as his face broke into a genuine grin for a moment, and then the camera cut away.

*

"Fuck my entire existence, Sveta, they're terrible here."

"What did they do this time?"

"LeClaire put me on the *wing*. The wing! Like I haven't scored thirty for them at center already, like they have a better second line center than me. Like they have a better *first* line center!"

Svetlana sighed over the phone. "How are you so angry already at — what time is it there — at whatever it is in the morning."

"It's ten, that's not early. And I'm not angry, I'm getting screwed by a coach who doesn't know what he's doing."

The team was having a rest day, and Ilya had already fumed his way through one team meeting, followed by watching tape with the Raiders video coach after learning they were planning to try him at right wing. When he got to his car in the parking lot he'd sat down, slammed the door, and called Svetlana to complain.

"You have the least seniority on the team," Svetlana said, being reasonable, which wasn't what Ilya wanted. "Even in the KHL they wouldn't give you what you want."

"Shane Hollander gets twenty-two minutes a night on the top line!"

"Right, of course, Shane Hollander. He's beating you in the rookie points race isn't he?"

"I don't follow stats," Ilya said.

“Liar.” Svetlana put on an exaggerated version of Ilya’s voice that she’d been using since they were kids and never failed to get under Ilya’s skin. “Listen Sveta, I don’t care even one bit about Shane Hollander with his fifty-three-point-one-four percent face-off percentage, I actually hate him so much, how dare he get more draws than me when I’m first overall and I play center with a whippy little sixty flex twig and can’t win more than four in ten.”

“Shut up, I’m screening all your calls.” Hollander was actually fifty-four and a half percent on the dot, but saying so would damage Ilya’s pride even more.

Svetlana sighed again. “Your coach doesn’t think you play the right way. North American hockey is different than at home.”

“I’m trying,” Ilya said.

“You’re ahead of Hollander in goals, and your points per sixty are even. It’s the ice time and the assists making the difference. You have to try harder to please them.”

“It’s not fair.”

“It was never going to be fair, you dumb bitch.”

Ilya pinned the phone between his cheek and his shoulder so he could dig around in the cupholders for his cigarettes. If Svetlana was going to be mean to him he deserved one. But all he was able to turn up was a Thor-branded lighter. He must have left the pack in a coat pocket somewhere. He hoped they didn’t go through the washing machine, but had a sinking feeling about it.

“Tell me something nice,” Ilya demanded. “Who are you fucking in Moscow, is he cute? Is his dick smaller than mine?”

“*I’m* fucking him,” Svetlana said smugly. “I found a dick for him that’s way bigger than yours. And it vibrates. Yours doesn’t vibrate even a little.”

“I can buy you something that vibrates,” Ilya said. “Online shipping is very discreet in America. Visit me.”

“After you were so rude and unwelcoming last time? No. Be good and tell me of your latest conquests, Mister Vibrodick.”

Ilya had a sudden, uncalled for impulse to tell her that Hollander sucked his dick, and would definitely do it again if he asked. He wanted somebody to know that the perfect, inspirational Montreal captain was, at his core, one whispered hotel room number away from being just as much of a filthy, sweaty, sex-hungry animal as one Ilya Rozanov.

He couldn’t, of course.

Even though it would be really funny to tell her the guy was a quickshot.

He still couldn’t.

“The Scandinavians know where all the blonde exchange students go drinking in Cambridge,” he said instead. “We all got one, mine told me about her rival mathematics students at MIT and Elias got one who told him if he did a bad job she’d do engineering homework topless and make him watch with his hands above the covers.”

“You dog,” Svetlana said, laughing. “Someone should put a leash on you.”

Ilya coughed and had to wipe his mouth on his sleeve. “I’d let you,” he said, way too late, and then had to hold the phone at arms length in horror because *what the hell, that wasn’t cool at all*.

When he put the phone back to his ear Svetlana was still cackling at him. “You’d *let me*,” she giggled. “In your wet dreams you’d let me!”

*

Ilya always had too much time on his hands during homestands. It was so hard to resist killing time watching videos that would make him annoyed, and it was so easy to look up every interview from Hollander on youtube. If Ilya didn’t understand the questions the first time and had to re-wind and re-play while staring at Hollander’s stupid face, that was his cross to bear.

“Do you feel responsible for Montreal’s scoring difficulties lately? How do you handle that?” asked an off-camera reporter.

“It’s a team effort. We all need to pull together to simplify our game, play the right way, and we know the goals will come,” Hollander said.

“But with how much hype has surrounded your rookie season as you finally make it to the MLH, it must be a lot of pressure on you to score goals when the rest of the team doesn’t have the same pedigree. Can you comment on that?”

“Um, I don’t think about that stuff,” Hollander said, like a perfect little liar. The media always asked questions like that, super long sentences where they said what they wanted to write and then asked you to agree with them at the end.

Ilya paused the video and pulled out his phone. *thinking of you*, he texted Hollander. *i like how you act polite to rude reporters and want them to die*

While he waited for a reply he went back to the interview. “How about your next matchup against Ilya Rozanov and the Boston Raiders? Will playing against them be different from a regular game, given how things went at the draft?”

Hollander’s throat worked and Ilya knew, he *knew*, that when Hollander heard his name he’d remembered Ilya’s dick.

“Well, they’re division rivals, so it’s an important four points for us. We’re staying focused on trying to make the playoffs — I mean, okay, that’s a big goal — we wanna play good hockey. Win the next one, that’s the mentality.”

God, it was like Hollander was reflexively boring.

Fuck off. came the text back from Hollander.

that's how you should say it to them, Ilya wrote. *they love that*

“Question over here — we noticed you haven’t changed your suit up the last few games. Superstitious?”

“I’m not superstitious,” Hollander answered. “Just don’t change what works.”

Everybody knew Hollander was the most superstitious, and the media loved to talk about it. He wouldn’t eat fish on game days, always sat in the same seat on the bus, and refused to touch even a fridge magnet in the shape of the Cup. Ilya had grown out of all that before he graduated from U16s. He ate fish whenever he wanted, and tacos, and pastrami sandwiches with sauerkraut and pink sauce.

Hollander smiled, wide and nervous, and Ilya stared at his too-perfect, too-white teeth. They had to be fake — he could afford it. Ilya’d been lucky. He was missing half a molar and had a few chips but he hadn’t needed any real work done. Russians were polite about their sticks. It was only a matter of time, playing in the MLH, before Ilya paid for it in teeth.

your mouth is pretty when you are mad, Ilya texted. *you think they notice?*

Ilya wanted to stick his fingers back in that mouth and feel how easily Hollander would open and suck.

Jesus Christ, do you ever quit? Hollander replied.

no)))))) Ilya sent. *you like it,* he added.

How do you know what I like?

What could Hollander be doing while he let Ilya needle him? Maybe sitting on the weight bench between reps, sweaty hair sticking to the back of his neck. Or reading emails from shoe companies that wanted to sponsor him. Maybe he was acting out of character and sitting in the back of a cab, headed out with his garbage teammates to unwind after playing a week of garbage hockey.

you keep coming back for more yes? Ilya typed. Then he deleted it.

is jane not still saving herself for me and not blowing other hockey players?

No, Ilya deleted that too. If Hollander asked what Ilya had been up to, he’d have to either own up to the thing last week in the bar parking lot, which would be awkward, or lie about it, which would give Hollander wrong ideas. Like that Ilya had no game. It was important for Hollander to be aware Ilya had lots of game, on and off the ice.

But he wanted to *know*.

are you a big slut now? looking for other people give you what you like?

Yeah. Ilya sent that.

Fuck. Off.

tell me!

Ilya chewed on his bottom lip to keep back a grin as Hollander typed and typed. Hollander was putty in his hands. So easy to stretch between his Canadian hockey robot persona and his insatiable hunger for big sexy Russian dick. Ilya could play with this particular toy forever and be happy.

*

“What kind of fucking number is 81?” Hollander chirped as he slid up to the dot at the start of the second period.

“Your mom’s favorite,” Ilya replied, and won the faceoff. It took him a little by surprise, since Hollander usually smoked him clean, and instead of gaining possession the Raiders fumbled with the puck and ended up in a fight for it on the boards.

At the start of the third period, the game was tied 2-2 and the Raiders got called for too many men on the ice. Ilya turned around to look at Coach behind him. He wasn't on the penalty kill, he could get a breakaway out of the box if Coach would just put him in there.

"Fine, Rozanov, go," Coach said, and Ilya jumped the boards with a grin.

It worked perfectly. Marly got the puck to him right as he stepped out of the box and Ilya was away, free and clear. He could hear the nearest Metro player three paces behind him, closing but too slowly, still two paces behind him as he crossed the blue line, and this guy was fast but not fast enough. His stick smacked at Ilya's thighs, harsh breath over Ilya's shoulders, and Ilya could almost recognize it, the way air whooshed in and out of those lungs.

Ilya lined up his shot, faked backhand-forehand and the goalie took the bait, the gap between his pads opened up, and just as Ilya was about to flick the puck home the Metro behind him slashed him *hard* in the hands.

Pain cracked through Ilya's fingers and he lost the handle on the puck. He swerved to avoid crashing the goalie and skidded into the boards, clutching his hand.

"Fuck!" Ilya shouted, bent double as he got up, pulling his glove off and trying to flex his fingers. That felt bad. Really bad. *"Fuck."*

A whistle sounded and Ilya looked for the ref's arm going up, but there wasn't a call — the goalie had just covered the puck. Meanwhile Marly was pushing someone up against the boards, shouting in his face. Ilya saw number twenty-four and knew exactly who had just busted his fingers.

"Fucking joke," Ilya spat as he skated past the ref. "Are you blind? Are you seriously blind?"

"Watch it," the ref said.

It should be a penalty shot, getting slashed like that, but Hollander was going to get away with it. Ilya told the ref so as he skated off the ice and jogged down the tunnel. He smashed his stick against the wall as he went, furious.

A thunderous *REFS YOU SUCK* chant filtered down from the seats, the Boston crowd agreeing with Ilya.

A hovering trainer picked up Ilya's hand and bent his finger to test his range of motion. It hurt, but Ilya wanted to get cleared to go back out so he grit his teeth and put up with the prodding. The trainer gave him a skeptical look and bent Ilya's finger in a different spot. Ilya winced. The trainer nodded like he'd proven something.

"Fuck you," Ilya said.

"We're not taking chances with your hands," the trainer said.

"It's *Montreal*," Ilya said.

"So you get to play them four times this season," the trainer hit back.

"The fans are going to freak out, let me go sit on the bench at least, I'll take three shifts, be careful."

"Mmmhmm."

In the end, Ilya missed two games and was angry about it for weeks. When Hollander got asked about it by the media, he said *it was a hockey play*. When the team doctor got a look at an X-ray he said *hairline fracture*.

"What is that?" Ilya asked. "Hairs?"

"It's broken, but not badly," the doctor said. He pointed at a shadow on the computer monitor. Ilya crowded up next to him to see.

"This?" he asked.

"No, here," the doctor said.

Ilya couldn't believe it. Hollander broke his fucking finger!

"I want a copy of this picture," Ilya told the doctor.

"For your records, sure."

"For remember," Ilya said. He wasn't going to let Hollander live this one down, not in a million years. He was going to circle the spot and show everyone: *Shane Hollander did this*.

New line combos came out right before warmups. Ilya had already started taping his sticks and Coach had a surprise for him: the third line wing instead of the second line this time. Ilya lost his head. It wasn't *fair*.

Marly noticed Ilya wiping his face.

"Let it out, kid," he said. "This is part of development. You're not the best kid in juniors anymore. I remember how that is."

The fact people could tell he was angry made Ilya angrier. His entire job was to control his body and make it do amazing things, but the second he felt something it betrayed him. Every loss still caught him behind his eyes and in his throat and he'd find himself crying pussy tears at some point before he fell asleep. If he was lucky, not where anyone could see. He wasn't always lucky.

"You don't fucking get it, Marly!" Ilya said. "I get one chance to make them decide who I am and then I am that forever. Coach says all this shit about me — working on two-way game, faceoffs coming later, getting used to American ice — and they are deciding I am that. Forever!"

Marly raised an eyebrow. "Hey, c'mon, you're growing your game, putting in the work. They'll notice."

He clearly hadn't expected Ilya to blow up at him, but wasn't getting pissed about it because he was a good guy. Ilya grit his teeth. "No."

"Roz, they'll notice."

Marly was so fucking American, he was never going to get it. "Who took my fucking flame tape?" Ilya snarled instead, digging around his stall. "Not funny, I need that."

"Nobody took your flame tape, it's baby shit," Waller said from two stalls down. "You probably forgot it."

"Not forgot it! Was in my bag, now not!" He knew he was making English mistakes and couldn't make himself care.

It had started as a joke, wrapping some flame tape around the shaft of his stick and laughing about how it made him look like the cockiest kid in midget hockey, because Ilya was the cockiest bastard in the MLH too. Now he did that every game, just one of his things. It was unacceptable that someone had messed with it.

The flame tape didn't show up, so Ilya sat in his stall furiously drawing ugly, lopsided flames on white stick tape with a sharpie while Waller rolled his eyes and Marly made concerned faces.

"How's your finger?" Marly asked in the tunnel. "You remember to tape it up?"

"It's fine," Ilya said. "No problem."

*

come to ottawa, we have night off tonight, Ilya texted, because he hadn't forgiven Hollander but that didn't mean he'd taken a vow of celibacy.

What? You're crazy.

two hours drive! come!

You're at a hotel! There's coaches and hockey players there.

No shit Hollander, Ilya thought. Also, that wasn't a no. Ilya had thought it through — he wanted ass tonight, and he had a plan to get it. He could find a girl easier, but, well, he didn't want to. That wasn't a crime, not in Canada.

i will get Love Motel

Ottawa has...that kind of motel?

no idiot, regular motel that i fuck you in. that makes it Love

Several hours later, Ilya got a text from Hollander that he was fifteen minutes away and called a cab to take him from the Marriott to the Motel Ritz. It was nice and far away from where they'd be playing so Hollander wouldn't freak the fuck out about getting caught. He texted Hollander the room number and told him to just park and knock — Ilya would deal with the keys and the front desk to protect his paranoia.

"I can't believe I'm doing this, I should not be doing this," was the first thing Shane said when Ilya opened the door.

"Nice to see you, too," Ilya said, and got to work peeling their clothes off.

"This just feels so...I don't know...trashy," Hollander said.

Hollander was such a prick. Ilya had *specifically* checked the Yelp reviews to make sure his Love Motel wouldn't have bedbugs.

"You are trashy. You drove two hours because you are horny."

"I drove two hours because *you're* horny," Hollander grouched. "I was going to watch a golf tournament at home."

"So boring," Ilya said, and shoved him onto the bed.

*

"So," Hollander said into the awkward silence. He wiped his hands on his bare thighs, standing next to the bed like he didn't know what to do next now that they'd finished fucking and he'd rinsed himself off. "I watched some of your tape."

"Okay," Ilya replied, looking at him sideways. "You watch my tape, good job." Hollander's forehead creased into a thinking frown. His mouth was still bitten red from Ilya's teeth.

"Your teammates don't pass to you because they don't trust you to pass back. You shoot too much."

What the hell. Where did Hollander get off? Other than all over Ilya's abs, obviously. It was, maybe, kind of a relief that Ilya wasn't the only one of them watching the other in games and interviews. Hollander watching his interviews and thinking about his hockey made Ilya — really annoyed, actually. Because Hollander was being mean about it.

"We are doing insults? You play like a dirty little bitch. I shoot, I score, no problem."

"Hey, I'm trying to help," Hollander said. "As a...thank you."

"Don't want it," Ilya shot back. "Especially not from Shane Hollander. Your mouth is so much better for other things, okay?"

"You're too good to be fucking around like you are," Hollander persisted. "Goalies are getting more tape on you every game, it's not going to work for more than one season."

The worst thing about Hollander, aside from the fact that he had tricked the entire MLH into loving him, was that his hockey IQ at nineteen was better than half the video coaches in the league. And apparently he had decided to turn that IQ on Ilya to torment him. It had been so much easier touching him, feeling the muscles under his skin. Maybe Hollander felt the need to bring Ilya down to earth with his words, cut through some of the fun that came from being the only guy the MLH's favorite rookie phenom trusted to give him the fucking he so desperately needed.

Hollander sat down on the bed with his back to Ilya, not touching.

"Remember when you slashed me in the hands and broke my finger?" Ilya asked, once it was clear Hollander was going to just sit there in silence maybe forever.

"I broke it?" Hollander asked. "Shit, sorry."

"Yeah, it sucked. Ow. Kiss it better."

Ilya stuck his hand in front of Hollander's face, then shivered as Hollander kissed the knuckle, then licked it, then bit him gently. Everything was simpler when they touched. Ilya liked Hollander so much when they were skin to skin. Not other times. Other times Hollander sucked so bad.

"When you broke my finger, I'm thinking, Hollander has such a pissy attitude. But now I'm thinking, you don't trust yourself with playing physical, maybe it's too much touching, maybe they know. So you use your stick instead to make everybody pay."

Hollander stilled, his lips just barely brushing Ilya's finger. He didn't move for a long time, just breathed damply against Ilya's skin. Ilya finally grabbed Hollander's hip with his free

hand and tugged at him until Hollander flopped down and made a home for himself with his head on Ilya's chest. His hair tickled the bottom of Ilya's chin.

"You don't worry," Hollander said. For once he didn't sound entirely like he was asking a question.

"Not about that, no," Ilya said.

"I guess I deserved you saying something to me that sucks after I called your play selfish. Fuck you, though."

"It's true?"

"Maybe? Probably." Hollander groaned and scratched at one of his freckles, checking if it was a scab. Ilya could have told him it was always there, part of his skin. "You pay attention."

"Yes. *Maybe probably* your thing is true also."

*

The last game of the season was against St. Louis, and somebody explained to Ilya that if they won it meant that Minnesota got to go to the playoffs and if they lost it would be Chicago, which made *no sense* and he wasn't going to do the math to understand it. The Raiders had clinched a week ago, so LeClaire was giving Ilya *almost* top line ice time so the big guys could rest. It was nice, sort of, and gave Ilya the chance to pad his stats for the Rookie of the Year race. Total points was a lost cause, but Ilya had six more goals than Hollander.

St. Louis, down one, pulled their goaltender at the end of the third for the extra man, which the Raiders promptly capitalized on. Waller plucked the puck off the boards and that was it — he and Ilya had a clear route to an empty net.

It would be easy to pot the goal, and Waller had a defenseman nipping at his heels. If Ilya took the shot, one hundred percent they got the goal. If he passed, maybe ninety percent. Waller was pretty good. But nobody would blame Ilya for just — except Hollander's stupid voice popped into his head, sex-wrecked and deliberate. *You shoot too much.*

Ilya decided to prove him wrong, and passed the puck.

Later, after showers and media and the winding drive home, Ilya flopped down on his couch and finally checked his phone.

Have fun in the playoffs., Shane had texted a few hours previously. *Hope you lose.*

good luck in the draft lottery, Ilya texted back. *maybe metros pick first overall this year*

Buffalo is last in the standings, not us. Dickhead.

okay and mlh draft not rigged)))

It's not rigged! There's ping pong balls and stuff.

oh, Ilya replied. ping pong balls. i see now, very fair.

You're annoying.

Ilya smiled and kicked his feet up on the couch to get more comfortable.

Then he sent Hollander a dick pic and stuck a hand down his pants while he waited for the outraged reply.

*

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