

Ottawa Centaurs #24

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/77821201) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/77821201>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander & Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Zane Boodram , Evan Dykstra , Luca Haas , Wyatt Hayes , Nick Chouinard , Troy Barrett , Yuna Hollander , Hayden Pike
Additional Tags:	Found Family , Good Friend Hayden Pike , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Ottawa Centaurs (Game Changers) , We all love the Centaurs , Montreal Metros are shit , Overwhelmed Shane Hollander , Ilya to the rescue , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-17 Words: 8,506 Chapters: 1/1

Ottawa Centaurs #24

by [HappyWinterbell](#)

Summary

Would they get into trouble with their own team over this? Probably.

Would it be worth it?

Abso-fucking-lutely.

“He’s doing it again,” Dykstra stage-whispered, pulling Ilya back to reality. “It’s getting weird.”

Bood nodded. “Yeah. How he actually managed to land Hollzy with that creepy smile is beyond me.”

Ilya snorted. “Fuck off, idiots.”

“Ah,” Wyatt made a cheerful noise. “He’s back! We missed you, Cap.”

“But we’d also appreciate it if you could stop grinning like a lunatic,” Chouinard said, pointing at Ilya’s face. “You look like you’re about to become the Metros’ worst nightmare.”

OR

For months, Shane has been treated like an outcast—branded a traitor by the city he once called home. Now he can’t wait to leave Montreal behind for good. Yet, determined to keep his dignity, he takes part in one final fan event to raise money for a children’s hospital.

On the surface, it’s simple enough. Fans exchange money for an autograph, a picture and a fleeting moment with their former hero—nothing Shane hasn’t done countless times over the past decade. This time, however, his final obligation to the team doesn’t end the way he expects.

Notes

These guys live rent free in my head for weeks now.

I should be concerned.

But I'm not.

Enjoy!

“Don’t forget what we talked about.”

“Yes, Mom.”

“I’m serious. This whole spectacle is ridiculous in itself. If they utter even one wrong word, I will unleash a storm beyond anything they have ever faced.”

Shane did his very best not to laugh out loud. “I know you would. But stop worrying. I’m really fine.”

He could hear his mother’s loud sigh through the phone. “I know you’re not, Shane,” she said gently. “But I appreciate you trying to make me feel better.”

Shane remained silent for a moment. “It’s like you said—a last appointment as a Montreal Metro. We’ll get a clean cut after that. No drama. No unnecessary attention.” God knew he had had more than enough of *that* over the last couple of weeks. “As soon as this is over, I’ll pack the last of my things and be gone for good.”

“Call us”, she said a short while later, still sounding unhappy but willing to let it go. “Your Dad and I are here if you need us. Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“Good. Good.” Yuna took a deep breath. “Then go and make your Montreal fans happy one last time. You were their star player and role model for over a decade. Their captain. And despite what happened in recent weeks, you still have plenty of loyal fans left. They’ll definitely miss you.”

“I’m not so sure about that last part.”

“Oh, believe me—they will, all of them,” Yuna said with mock seriousness. “Especially once they realize Montreal just kicked out their only hope of winning another Cup anytime soon. Honestly, they’re screwed without you. Montreal without you is basically a rink full of confused penguins.”

“Mom!” Shane pretended to cough, the only way to cover up his laughter. “God, don’t let Hayden and JJ hear that. They’ll be heartbroken.”

“Oh, right. Our dear Hayden.” She paused dramatically. “Well, he could be an Emperor Penguin—those ones have like a million kids, you know? All the other players are just the boring zoo ones.”

It was quite hilarious. After years of loyalty to Montreal—the team that had drafted him and had been part of his life for a decade—his mother had turned into their biggest enemy. If anyone dared to remind her that she had once questioned Ilya’s loyalty, back when he decided to leave Boston for Ottawa, she would simply act as if it had never been an issue.

His mother could be scary, so usually no one dared to ask any follow-up questions.

Shane noticed her lack of acknowledgement of JJ but decided not to mention it. Even though he had forgiven JJ for his actions after Shane's unwilling coming out, his mother was still holding an unwavering grudge. He wasn't sure if she would ever be able to welcome JJ back into their lives as she had before.

A quiet clearing of a throat made him turn around. In the doorway of the empty locker room stood Hayden, wearing a Montreal jersey and a simple pair of black trousers. He tapped his left-hand fingers against his right wrist, forming the silent words "Time to go" with his lips.

"Mom? The Emperor Penguin just told me it's time to leave," Shane said, grinning at Hayden's offended expression. "I'll call you later when I'm in the car, okay?"

Yuna laughed. "All right. Please give Hayden my regards—and tell him he's at least a very handsome penguin."

Shane shook his head, amused. "Not so sure that's really a compliment. But I will. Love you."

"Love you too."

Shane ended the call, slipping his phone into the back pocket of his jeans.

Hayden eyed him warily. "Did you just call me a penguin?"

Shane chuckled as he grabbed his own jersey from the hanger in his soon-to-be former cubby. "An Emperor Penguin," he clarified. "And according to my mom, a handsome one."

Hayden opened his mouth, then closed it again. "I won't ask," he said dryly. "We have to hurry a bit. They're about to start soon. The fans are already waiting."

"Oh? I didn't realize I talked that long on the phone. Why didn't you say anything earlier?"

"Thought you needed a last prep talk with your mother before we start the shitshow outside."

Once again, Shane realized that Hayden knew him better than anyone—and that leaving him behind would hurt more than he wanted to admit.

His mood started going down as he pulled the jersey over his head. It felt weird putting it on, knowing it would be for the last time. Shane stared down at the blue fabric, the familiar Montreal Metros logo with its red and white stripe. He had won two freaking cups with his team. Two! It would be a lie to say his departure wouldn't face him. But after what had happened over the last few weeks—after his relationship with Ilya became public... he couldn't wait to close that chapter once and for all.

Well, at least partially. Because there would be future encounters with Montreal—but he

would be wearing a different jersey. Admittedly, a fucking ugly one.

“How is this whole thing supposed to go?” Shane asked a short while later, walking through mostly empty hallways with Hayden at his side.

“It’s basically just a meet-and-greet with everyone who bought a ticket for the charity. Twenty bucks per ticket gets them a signature and a picture with a player of their choice,” Hayden explained. “The money goes to the Montreal Children’s Hospital.”

Shane nodded, ignoring the fact that even as a soon-to-be captain, he should have known all of that. But after making his departure to Ottawa official a few weeks back, management and staff had decided not to inform him of anything anymore, simply accepting Shane’s presence until his contract expired.

“So at least we’ll be helping a good cause.”

Hayden snorted, clearly unimpressed. “We both know that whole thing is just PR management trying to save their tarnished reputation. Even though they tried to hide it, a lot of people noticed the shitty way they—and some players and staff—had treated you after you were outed. They’re trying to save face by forcing you on stage and pretending everything is fine. It’s not like you really had a choice.”

Shane nodded thoughtfully. Hayden *was* right. He had been backed into a corner. Refusing to participate in such a charity event would have been basically career suicide. Showing up on his last day to collect money would not only give Montreal the chance for some desperately needed image improvement, it would also help consolidate Shane’s own reputation.

Besides, the event itself wasn’t really a problem for Shane in the first place. He had always participated in those kinds of events, even though meeting fans, signing autographs, and taking pictures was often exhausting and full of awkward small talk. It was part of the job. And being able to make a difference, even a small one, made it worth it.

A few moments later, they came to a stop after leaving the premises.

Shane adjusted his jersey, eying the big stage that had been built just outside the arena. Because they were standing behind the platform and were therefore slightly hidden, Shane couldn’t see the fans waiting in front. But he could definitely hear them.

The whole team and a fairly large number of staff members had gathered behind a partially concealed stairwell that would lead them up to the stage. Shane could feel their gazes as he and Hayden joined them. The only one who gave him a quick wave was JJ, who stood beside two rookies who seemed unsure whether to greet them as well or keep quiet.

Shane didn’t hold it against them when they chose the latter.

In front of everyone stood the GM, Coach Theriault, and two other men and one woman whom Shane recognized as members of the PR team.

“Now that we are finally all here,” Theriault began, giving both of them a pointed look. “You have all been briefed on how this is going to work. I know meeting fans can be unpredictable, especially in numbers as large as today’s. But I only want to see bright smiles, happy faces, and absolutely no drama. Got it?”

Shane remained expressionless as Theriault’s gaze lingered on him, the silent warning unmistakable. God, he couldn’t wait for this whole farce to be over.

“Any questions?” Theriault asked. No one answered. “Good. Now get out there.”

The players started moving, following the GM, Theriault, and the PR team up onto the stage.

Shane took a deep breath and forced himself to remember that all of this was for a good cause. He could do this. One last time—as a Montreal Metro.

He looked at Hayden. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

“We will really miss you.” A young girl, no older than twelve or thirteen, turned around so Shane could sign her jersey. “Letting you go is the biggest mistake Montreal could have made!”

Shane smiled politely, trying not to show how good it felt to hear those words. “Thank you.”

Another girl, not much younger than the first one, nodded in agreement while patiently waiting for Shane to sign her jersey as well. “You’re my favorite player. I don’t even know if I want to stay a Montreal fan anymore! Maybe I’ll support Ottawa from now on!”

“Me too!” the first girl grimaced. “But their jerseys are so... ugly.”

Shane couldn’t help himself and let out a soft chuckle. “In terms of aesthetics, I unfortunately have to agree.”

“Seriously,” the girl added, “whoever designed that logo should be put in jail.”

More than amused, Shane put away the black marker and pointed to one of the Metros’ staff members holding an old-fashioned camera that would print the newly taken picture immediately. “Ready, girls?”

Both nodded enthusiastically and stepped closer. With one girl on each side, they all smiled at the camera. As soon as the photographer gave a quick thumbs-up, Shane turned back to them. “Thank you for your support. I’ll definitely miss you guys when I play in Ottawa.” He lowered his voice a little and gave them a quick wink. “It would be really nice to start over with the Centaurs knowing I already have two loyal fans on my side.”

Both girls burst into giggles.

“So it’s official. We’re Ottawa fans from now on,” the first girl announced proudly. “We’ll have to get new jerseys.”

“And we’ll have to convince our parents to drive us to Ottawa,” the other added in a stern tone. “My grades are really good at the moment. I’m pretty sure I can convince them—at least once.”

Shane laughed softly. “I can’t wait to see you there,” he said and gave the slightly impatient staff member with the camera a brief nod. “Your picture is ready. And I should say hi to the next fans waiting in line,” he added. “Thanks again for coming today.”

“Thank you for having us,” they both said simultaneously before turning to leave.

Shane watched them collect their picture, amused by their little happy dance, before turning around to meet the next fans. He hadn’t taken more than a few steps when some commotion broke out behind him.

“Please wait!”

Shane turned around, surprised to see the first girl again, breathing heavily. The other girl had already left the stage, which meant she had run back on her own.

“Sorry, sorry!” she said hurriedly. “I almost forgot! I have something for you!”

Shane stopped in his tracks. “Excuse me?”

The girl pushed up the sleeve of her jersey, revealing countless colorful bracelets, one beside the other. “I made all of them myself,” she explained seriously. “And I made one for you, too.”

Realizing what she meant, Shane crouched down in front of her so they could speak at eye level. “That’s really nice of you.”

“I’m not that good at it—I just started making them a few months ago. But I did my best with these,” she said, carefully removing one of the bracelets from her arm and slipping it onto Shane’s wrist. “This one is for you. I hope you like it.”

Shane looked down at the bracelet. She had chosen muted colors—light greys and soft blue tones—the kind he actually wore on a day-to-day basis. Soft woolen threads were braided together in a rather complicated pattern and decorated with small, painted beads.

He turned his wrist to get a better look. “Is that...?”

There, on four closely placed beads, were clearly written letters.

Followed by an unmistakable paw print.

Shane felt his heart grow heavy and the loud noise around them suddenly faded away.

“I have two daddies, you know?” she said, smiling shyly while looking proudly at her work. “And sometimes some idiots try to tease me because of it. I try to ignore it most of the time, but sometimes it still makes me a little sad. Then I look at my bracelets and remember that my dads are the absolute best people in the world, and I’m not so sad anymore.”

Shane was lost for words, his chest tightening with every sentence she spoke. She showed him one of her own bracelets, one marked with the letters H+R+J.

“I’m Joanna,” she explained. “And my dads are Henry and Richard.”

As if she hadn’t just shocked Shane to the core, she pointed at his bracelet. “I read on the internet, that some people are really mean to you and Ilya. So I wanted to make some bracelets for you guys as well. Maybe they’ll help when *you* feel a little sad.”

Caught completely off guard, Shane watched her loosen another bracelet from her wrist before handing it over to him. This one was the complete opposite of his—bright colors mixed with mismatched beads, chaotic and rough, almost wild. It was absolutely perfect, especially the four little beads that matched the ones on his own bracelet.

“That one’s for Ilya,” she said proudly. “Do you think he’ll like it?”

Shane swallowed hard, fighting to find his voice and stop his suddenly watery eyes from shedding tears. “He’ll absolutely love it. Thank you so much.”

Joanna beamed, her whole face lighting up.

“Shane?” Hayden’s voice brought him back to reality and reactivated the loud noises Shane had managed to completely block out. “We have to keep going,” he said, smiling warmly at Joanna. “Your waiting line isn’t getting any shorter, you know?”

Hayden’s face revealed that he would have preferred not to burst their little bubble. But being the alternate captain basically forced him to keep the event going. That—and the grim look on the GM’s face, who stood just a few feet behind Hayden.

Shane glanced briefly over his shoulder. People had already started to get a bit restless.

“No problem! I have to go anyway,” Joanna said happily. “Good luck in Ottawa!”

Shane wouldn’t have been able to hide his smile even if he had tried. “I can’t wait to see you in the stands.”

“Me either!”

“Thank you for coming. Have a safe trip home.”

Shane did his best, but after over three hours, it became harder and harder to keep a genuine smile on his face. Meeting one fan after another, making a bit of small talk, and signing jerseys, caps, posters, or other random objects—including, occasionally, body parts—began to wear him out. Sure, seeing so many people happy just to meet him, and knowing that even after the chaos of the last few weeks he still had a loyal fanbase in Montreal, was fulfilling.

But his social battery was getting emptier by the minute.

Lucky for him, the next group of fans would be from the VIP section. Paying not twenty dollars but a whopping two hundred per ticket, these ticket holders were able to cut in ahead of regular fans and didn’t have to wait in line. Shane wasn’t able to see them yet, but a Montreal staff member seemed to be busy checking tickets and assigning time slots.

Which gave Shane at least a few moments to breathe and get himself back on track.

“How are you holding up?”

Shane wasn’t surprised when Hayden stepped to his side, looking slightly worried.

“I’m fine,” he said. “A bit tired. My hand’s starting to hurt from all the signing, but all in all, I’m good.” Which wasn’t a lie—at least not really.

Hayden studied him, skepticism written all over his face.

“Hayd.” Shane tried to make his eye-rolling not too obvious. “I really appreciate your concern, but I don’t need a babysitter. I’m fine.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

It wasn’t the first fan meeting he had ever participated in. Montreal had organized these kinds of events a few times since he joined a decade ago. He’d survived all of them, even if he always ended up completely exhausted, passing out in his apartment afterward.

“Go back to your own line,” Shane continued after a quick look around. “Theriault is already shooting daggers at you. I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“In trouble? For what? For talking to the captain of the team?” Hayden grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest. “Because no matter whether he likes it or not, you *are* still our captain.

“Hayd...”

“No, Shane. I won’t let him—or anyone else—stop me from talking to my best friend. You are the godfather of one of my children, for God’s sake!” He shook his head. “It’s totally ridiculous—they acting like you don’t exist anymore. Let them be pissed at me tomorrow, but today I’m going to enjoy my last chance to do something like this here with you. End of discussion.”

Shane stood there, stunned into silence. He really shouldn’t have been surprised anymore, but Hayden had managed to do so countless times over the past couple of weeks. He wasn’t just a friend; he was family. One of the few people among the Montreal Metros who stood by his side and kept trying to include Shane in everything like before, even when Shane himself had already given up.

“Thank you, Hayd. For everything.” *And please know I’m sorry that I’m not able to put into words how much it means to me that you keep being my friend.*

Hayden looked at him like he knew exactly how hard this was for Shane. A faint smile tugged at his lips—then vanished when his gaze drifted past Shane. His eyes widened.

“Besides,” he said slowly, “I guess I’m not the center of attention anymore.”

Shane frowned. “What do you mean—?”

He turned around and immediately understood.

There, just climbing onto the stage, was his smug-looking husband. Followed by five familiar faces of the Ottawa Centaurs.

Contrary to popular belief, Ilya Rozanov wasn’t actively trying to cause trouble. Sure, his whole image had been built around being this Russian hockey star slash bad boy who did whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, without caring about the consequences.

And yes—for a long time—that *had* been true.

Until he met the freckled love of his life, and everything changed.

Yes, he was still his old self. But no longer able to think only about himself—having to include his boyfriend-turned-husband *did* change a man. And Ilya loved it. As hard as it had been to leave Boston, it had been one of the best decisions of his life. Not only had he gained Shane, Yuna, and David, but there was also pretty much the whole roster of the Ottawa Centaurs, who had sneaked into his life with the intention of never leaving again.

At first, it had been quite confusing. Ilya had always thought his relationships with several

players in Boston had been close. Ottawa had proved him wrong rather quickly.

He could still remember the words Bood had said to him not long after he had joined the team. At that time, it had still been hard for him to find his place—meeting so many new people and basically changing everything that had come naturally to him for years.

“You can relax, Roz. We’re family here. And family sticks together.”

Ilya must have looked pretty confused, because Bood had barked a laugh and put his arm around his shoulders.

“It’s easy, you know? In the good and the bad, in the good and the stupid. We’ll stick by your side whatever happens. No chance to get rid of us now. Got it?”

Ilya had rolled his eyes, even as a small smile had tugged at his lips. Big words from his then captain. The kind of thing you said to the new guy to make him feel welcome. Nothing meant literally.

Boy, had he been wrong.

Because no mere teammates would get up at the crack of dawn to drive two hundred kilometers just to crash another team’s charity fan meeting. Or break into their own team’s equipment department, fully aware they’d be risking the scolding of the century from their coach, the GM, and the PR department all at once.

No. That kind of insane shit was reserved for friends—*family*.

A family that, at this very moment, behaved far more like a bunch of idiots than fierce hockey players.

“I feel like a spy, walking into enemy territory.”

“Well, we *are*,” Bood said dryly. “But you being a spy? Forget it.”

“Hey!” Dykstra looked at him, appalled. “I’d make an *awesome* spy!”

“You tried to open three different doors today by pushing the handle, even though every single one clearly said ‘pull.’ Sorry, man, but if that’s already too much for you, I don’t see a big James Bond career in your future.”

“I feel unloved,” Dykstra complained. Ignoring the snickering from Luca Haas and Nick Chouinard behind him, he turned to Ilya. “Captain, do something. Defend my honor!”

Under normal circumstances, Ilya wouldn’t have missed a chance to fire off a snarky remark. Unfortunately, his mind was already busy evaluating their situation. His gaze drifted to his goalie, who was currently talking to a tall woman with a clipboard on the other side of the fenced-off area where the team had been sent to just minutes earlier.

Ilya still couldn't quite believe they had actually made it inside. Sure, they weren't on the stage yet, but so far, everything had gone smoothly. He had bought the tickets for the charity event online a few days earlier and booked a VIP time slot for himself his teammates. The ticket check hadn't been an issue either—security had cleared all of them within just a few minutes. Everything went way too easy. Ilya still waited for the other shoe to drop.

“Good call leaving the talking to Hayes.” Troy stepped up beside him, hands shoved deep into his pants, eyes on Wyatt as well.

Ilya shrugged. “Figured he'd be the only one of us they might not recognize. Mask and all.”

All of them were dressed in bulky hoodies, baseball caps, and sunglasses. Under normal circumstances, the group would've stood out like a sore thumb. At an event like this, though, where almost everyone wore some form of athletic wear, it helped them blend in—at least a little.

“I can't believe your plan actually worked,” Troy muttered, more to himself than to Ilya, still somehow voicing Ilya's exact thoughts. “This is completely insane.”

“It is,” Ilya agreed. “But maybe that's why it's working. No one expects us to do... well, *this*.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Ilya spotted Dykstra, Bood, and Chouinard teasing a visibly blushing Luca about something he couldn't quite hear. The rookie had been the quietest of them all on the drive to Montreal. No surprise the others had decided to pick on him—especially since Luca's habit of turning a deep shade of red had become a running joke among the team.

“You do realize we're all going to be murdered by coach if this goes sideways, right?” Troy asked cautiously.

Ilya nodded, entirely unfazed. “Probably.”

“The GM is going to rip us apart.”

“Most likely.”

“And PR is going to make us film about a hundred social media videos to soften the fallout.”

Ilya snorted. “Yeah, spending even more time with Harris would be your personal nightmare.”

To his satisfaction, a faint blush crept across the other man's face. Troy was just about to respond when Wyatt finally returned to their little group, instantly drawing everyone's attention.

“How did it go?” Ilya asked.

Wyatt smiled, reassuring as ever. “All good. Four other people went on stage just before we were sent here.” He nodded toward the woman standing behind them. “Miranda said we should be up next in ten to fifteen minutes.”

Ten to fifteen minutes. Ilya didn’t mind waiting a bit longer—though he couldn’t wait to see Shane again. They’d talked on the phone the night before, and no matter how hard Shane had tried to hide how exhausting the hostile work environment with the Metros had become, Ilya had noticed immediately.

Ilya had been blessed with an unbelievably understanding and supportive team. After his and Shane’s involuntary outing, the Centaurs had stood firmly by his side, helping him navigate the professional fallout of what the public insisted on calling a scandal—absolute nonsense, in Ilya’s opinion. He’d gotten a boyfriend, for fuck’s sake. It wasn’t like he’d murdered anyone.

Shane, on the other hand, had faced the complete opposite reaction.

If there was a handbook on how not to handle a player being outed as gay, Montreal had followed it to the letter. Not only had they done absolutely nothing when Shane became the target of open hostility from his own team, at times they’d seemed to quietly encourage it. From the ridiculous claims that Shane had gifted Ilya wins when they played each other, to outright accusations of betrayal—because those idiots couldn’t wrap their heads around the fact that, yes, there was a world outside of hockey. A world that was private, and none of their damn business but Shane’s and Ilya’s.

Intentionally throwing games. What a fucking joke.

For fuck’s sake—if Shane ever admitted he’d lost on purpose just to please him, Ilya would file for divorce on the spot. Because the man he loved would never do that. Not to the game. Not to his team. And certainly not to Ilya.

Then came the final game of the playoff series between Montreal and Ottawa, and everything truly fell apart. Shane had managed, for a while, to navigate an unhelpful management, an ignorant coach, and a locker room full of assholes—but after that specific game, any chance of staying with the Metros had turned to dust. His departure had been inevitable, and the announcement hadn’t surprised anyone who’d been paying attention.

A handful of staff members who hadn’t completely ostracized Shane did their best to make his remaining time in Montreal bearable. But with most of the players, the coaching staff, management, and the GM himself stacked against Shane, there was only so much they could do.

Ilya couldn’t overstate how relieved he was knowing that after this final obligation as a Metro, Shane would finally be free—away from that toxic environment. Then the Centaurs could show him what it really meant to be part of a team. Not just when you kept your head down and played your role in a franchise, but also when things went wrong and everything went to hell.

And with today marking Shane's final day as a Metro, Ilya had decided to make his husband's departure memorable—for the entire fucking franchise. But most of all for Shane himself, who hadn't deserved to be treated that way after everything he'd given to that team over the past decade.

Was Troy right? Would they get into trouble with their own team over this? Probably.

Would it be worth it?

Abso-*fucking*-lutely.

"He's doing it again," Dykstra stage-whispered, pulling Ilya back to reality. "It's getting weird."

Bood nodded. "Yeah. How he actually managed to land Hollzy with that creepy smile is beyond me."

Ilya snorted. "Fuck off, idiots."

"Ah," Wyatt made a cheerful noise. "He's back! We missed you, Cap."

"But we'd also appreciate it if you could stop grinning like a lunatic," Chouinard said, pointing at Ilya's face. "You look like you're about to become the Metros' worst nightmare."

Ilya wouldn't go that far himself. But scaring the shit out of Shane's soon-to-be former team? That sounded like a lot of fun. Especially since most people couldn't see past Ilya's cold, unpredictable Russian menace persona.

He glanced around the small circle of players gathered around him. When he'd first told Boods about his plan to crash the Metros' fan meeting a little over a week ago, he hadn't expected Bood to sign on—let alone the other four.

Dykstra and Chouinard had been immediately excited. Wyatt loved being part of anything remotely resembling a team activity, and Luca had more or less been swept along before he fully realized what was happening. And Troy? Troy had joined a day later—probably after talking to Harris and being strongly encouraged by his boyfriend to come along so at least one sane person would be present.

"You guys know none of you have to do this, right?" Ilya said slowly. "Just stay off the stage. You won't get into any trouble. Not with me. Not with Centaurs management."

"Oh great, the good behavior police is here," Dykstra said, raising both hands in mock surrender. "Way to kill the vibe, Cap."

"It's a little late to back out anyway," Troy said, sounding far more relaxed than Ilya had expected. "So let's just do it."

Bood pointed at him. "Exactly. Listen to that guy."

“Besides, we didn’t do anything illegal,” Chouinard added with a shrug. “We’re just here to support our captain—and a soon-to-be new member of the team. That’s a *good* thing.”

Wyatt hummed thoughtfully. “Probably. If we ignore the part where we broke into the equipment department. That’s definitely going to bite us in the ass.”

“Hey, this is basically a team-building exercise. And for that, you need proper gear. Otherwise, it’s just not effective,” Dykstra said, slinging an arm around Luca’s shoulders with a grin. “Also, we didn’t even break anything. Thanks to our youngster here. Who knew our sweet, innocent summer child could pick a lock?”

Luca shoved him away, cheeks turning red all over again. “Oh, shut up.”

“No, Dyks is right,” Bood chimed in. “I expected it from anyone but you. It’s always the quiet ones.”

Laughter rippled through the group, none of them particularly concerned about the chaos they were undoubtedly about to cause. Out of the corner of his eye, Ilya spotted Miranda talking to another staff member before waving them over.

He grinned, took down his glasses and tossing the simple back baseball cap he had been wearing to the side. “Showtime.”

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For a split second, everything froze.

Shane’s eyes darted from his husband to his soon-to-be teammates standing behind their captain like a solid, grinning wall. Even Troy Barrett and Luca Haas, clearly less at ease than the others, stayed firmly in place.

To say Shane was shocked would have been an understatement. He had expected anything on this day—literally *anything*—but this? Yeah, he definitely hadn’t seen *this* coming.

“What—what are you—?” Shane shook his head, unable to find the right words. “What are you *doing* here?!”

Ilya had put on his public face again. The unreadable mask that had fooled so many people over the past decade. But Shane didn’t miss the small smile tugging at his husband’s lips, even though he was clearly trying to hide it.

“Moj lyubimyj,” Ilya said simply, his voice low, his gaze fixed only on Shane. “Miss me?”

Shane hadn’t even noticed he’d started walking, leaving an equally blindsided Hayden behind as he moved to meet Ilya halfway. “You are absolutely insane,” he mumbled.

“Yeah,” Ilya agreed, closing the distance between them. “But that’s why you love me, yes?”

A murmur ran through the crowd, at first confused whispers of those nearest to the stage, then loud interjections that multiplied within moments. It hadn’t taken long for the Montreal fans to recognize the Centaurs—the enemy on their own home ground.

“You’re making a scene,” Shane said quietly.

“Da. We are.” Ilya’s hand found Shane’s, intertwining their fingers effortlessly. “But only for you.”

Shane shook his head, caught in a silent tug-of-war with himself. The man he used to be would have shut this down immediately. He would have ushered Ilya and the others off the stage, smoothed things over, redirected the attention back to the event where it belonged.

But that man was gone.

He’d lost him somewhere with the last shred of loyalty he had left for the Montreal Metros—the moment they started to make his life miserable.

“Hollander!”

Shane flinched, every muscle in his body going taut. Of course Theriault had noticed.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Theriault stopped a few feet away, his back to the audience as if that could hide the whole commotion. His face was twisted with fury. “How dare you try to turn this event into a fucking joke?”

Shane stared at him. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” Theriault’s nostrils flared. “I knew something like this would happen. We should have cut you the moment the news broke about your *involvement*”—the word came out like poison—“with Rozanov.”

Shane had always taken pride in his composure. In his ability to stay level-headed when others lost theirs. But right now, he wished—*desperately*—that he had even one cutting remark at his disposal.

He didn’t.

The crowd was getting louder. Not shouting yet, but close. A restless, buzzing awareness spread through the area. Whatever this was, the fans knew they were watching something unfold that wasn’t on the schedule.

Shane forced himself to meet Theriault’s gaze, even as instinct screamed at him to look away. Before he could speak, Ilya squeezed his hand—just once. Steady. Grounding.

“I can assure you,” Ilya said evenly, “we’re not here to cause a scene.”

Therault sneered.

“Quite the opposite,” Ilya continued completely unbothered. “We’re here to support your charity.”

Color flooded Therault’s face, dark and furious. “This will have consequences, Rozanov. I swear it will.”

Then his eyes flicked past Shane.

Shane followed the look. The Centaurs had closed in—not aggressively, not openly. Just enough to make a point. A silent line at Ilya’s—and now also Shane’s—back. Their faces were blank. Their message wasn’t.

“But why?” Ilya asked lightly, winking at Shane before turning back to Therault. “We’re here for the same reason as everyone else.”

Therault let out a sharp, humorless laugh. “And that is?”

Ilya smiled.

Not warm.

Not amused.

But sharp enough to draw blood.

“An autograph,” he said, “and a picture with our favorite Montreal player.”

Therault’s face went slack, fury draining away and leaving nothing but stunned silence behind.

Ilya wasn’t finished.

“You see,” he continued calmly, “we bought our tickets like everyone else. Drove two hours to be here. To support this wonderful charity for the Montreal Children’s Hospital.” His smile sharpened, all teeth. “That’s good publicity, yes? For you. And for us.” He tilted his head, almost thoughtful. “I can’t imagine you’d want this to become about anything else.”

Shane stared at him, heart pounding, caught somewhere between disbelief and overwhelming pride. With a single, perfectly placed sentence, Ilya had won.

Therault’s hands were tied. Any public outburst now would do exactly the opposite of what the Metros had hoped to accomplish with this event. And if he dared to throw the Centaurs out—Shane included—it would explode across social media within minutes.

Not that Shane doubted it was already spreading.

Theriault's hands trembled at his sides. Nearly a full minute passed—long enough for everyone to see him scrambling for an exit—before he finally conceded.

“Get your fucking autograph,” he snarled, teeth clenched tight, “and then get off this property.”

“An autograph *and* a picture,” Ilya corrected mildly, stressing each word. He didn't bother hiding his satisfaction. “We'll be gone before you know it.”

Theriault's eyes swept over the Centaurs, stopping on Shane for a heartbeat too long before his expression iced over completely. He turned away without another word, heading straight for the GM, walking by multiple other players of the Metros who looked as shocked.

“I love you,” Shane said the moment Theriault was out of earshot. His voice was quiet, but unshakable. “More than you'll ever know.”

“Of course you do,” Ilya replied, grinning. “I am delightful. What's there not to love?”

“Remember me to never go to war against Roz.” Boods amused voice rang out from behind them. “You can be one mean motherfucker, Rozy.”

Ilya quirked an eyebrow. “Took you that long to realize that?”

“Nah. But you've been so well-behaved the past couple of weeks, I almost forgot how scary you can get,” Bood said with a playful wink, then shifted his attention to Shane. “Hey, Hollzy. Long time no see. How's it going?”

Shane, torn between mortification and amusement, shook Boods hand—which somehow turned into a quick hug. “You guys are completely nuts,” he said, laughing breathlessly as he greeted the rest of the team. “I appreciate it... but I really hope you don't get in too much trouble when Coach Wiebe and the others hear about this.”

“Don't sweat it,” Wyatt said with a grin, nodding toward Theriault, who was deep in conversation with Montreal's GM. “Whatever happens, it was totally worth it.”

Luca nodded. “Besides, Harris knew what we were planning even before we left Ottawa. So at least management wasn't completely left in the dark...”

Troy hummed in agreement. “He's probably already cooking up a strategy to make it look like this was all a planned PR stunt from the start.”

Shane chuckled quietly. “If anyone can smooth over this mess, it's Harris.” He'd only met the guy briefly before, but after years of dealing with PR pros, he knew Harris was one of the best.

Shane's eyes flicked back to Ilya, who was grinning like he'd just won the lottery. Shane

returned a smile, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

He barely had time to blink before multiple responses hit him.

“Hey!” Wyatt gasped, feigning offense. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dykstra crossed his arms, feet planted like a stubborn statue. “We paid two hundred bucks for these tickets, and you expect us to just *leave*?!”

Bood leaned back, utterly unbothered by the disapproving glares from nearby onlookers. “Pretty bad service here,” he said with a shrug. “No wonder nobody likes the Metros.”

Shane knew they were just messing with him, but the chaos of the moment made his chest tighten slightly. He glanced at Ilya, silently pleading for an explanation. “I... don’t understand—?”

Instead of helping, his husband seemed determined to pick sides—and it wasn’t Shane’s.

“Listen to your new team, moj lyubimyj,” Ilya said, eyes sparkling. “You don’t want to make bad impression, no?”

Shane gave the Centaurs an uneasy glance. “You... want to have—?”

“An autograph. Yes.” Ilya nodded, letting go of Shane’s hand. “Why else would we be here?”

Before Shane could even frame his next sentence, the Centaurs moved in perfect sync. Hoodies flew over heads, revealing not the standard Montreal Metros colors everyone expected, but the black and red Ottawa Centaurs jerseys.

A collective gasp swept through the audience, followed by whistles and, to Shane’s utter shock, *cheers*.

For a heartbeat, Shane was once again distracted by the hideous Centaurs logo, unsure why the crowd was going wild. Then Ilya, grinning from ear to ear, plucked the cap off the pen Shane was still holding.

“This is my new favorite jersey. Sign it right in the middle—so it can be seen, yes?”

They all spun around at once, and the scene hit Shane like a punch: every single player wore a Ottawa Centaurs jersey—‘Hollander’ in bold letters across the back, number 24 beneath.

Not just any jersey.

Shane’s future jersey.

“But-,” Shane stuttered, completely dumbfounded. “Where the hell did you get that from?!”

Technically, he wasn’t even part of the team yet. Sure, the trade had gone public weeks ago

when he had signed the contract, but aside from a single official photo for Ottawa's social media, nothing else had happened. All the PR stuff was scheduled for when he officially would start in just over a month. *He* hadn't even seen his new jersey until now.

Something tightened in Shane's chest. Ridicules, he thought. Standing there, in front of hundreds of Montreal fans, getting sentimental over a jersey. But he couldn't stop it. After months of being treated like an outcast, being embraced this openly, without judgment, felt like balm for his soul.

"We're still waiting, Shane," Ilyas voice drew him back from his thoughts.

Ilya hadn't turned all the way around. He was still facing the crowd, but had shifted just enough to peer over his shoulder. That cocky, testing smile was there as always-but in his eyes, Shane saw something softer this time, almost gentle.

"We don't want to keep anyone waiting, yes?"

Shane swallowed, steadying himself before stepping behind his future teammates. His hand trembled as he signed the first jersey—Wyatt—then moved slowly from left to right. Bood. Dykstra. Chouinard. Luca. Troy. No one spoke as he signed one jersey after another, the moment stretching until he finally reached Ilya, who had waited patiently for his turn.

"I'm a little disappointed," Ilya said lightly, leaning forward to give Shane a better angle. "I'm your husband. Why do I have to wait the longest?"

"Patience is a virtue," Shane replied with a smile, finishing his signature before glancing back at the jersey. "Saving the best for last, you know?" he murmured, softly enough that only Ilya could hear, while his fingertips traced his number on his husband's back. "I still can't believe you're here."

"And let you deal with those dickheads on your own?" Ilya shook his head. "No. You've been doing that for way too long. That shit's over now."

"Exactly," Bood cut in. "You're one of us now, Hollzy—whether you like it or not."

Shane couldn't put into words how much that meant to him. Being part of a team again. A real one. One that actually wanted him there.

"Thanks, guys."

The words came out rougher than he'd intended. His voice cracked, just slightly—but enough. Shane cleared his throat, hoping no one had noticed.

But the Centaurs, unfortunately, were far too attentive.

"Na, na, na! No time for being sad, Hollander," Dykstra said with a grin. "If it helps lift your mood, we could punch a few Metros."

Shane laughed when Dykstra's suggestion was met with murmurs of enthusiastic agreement.

"I appreciate it. I really do," Shane replied honestly. "But I want to end this the right way."

"Even after they treated you like shit?" Chouinard wrinkled his nose. "That doesn't sit right with me."

"Yeah," Bood agreed. "Let us have a little fun."

Compared to the others, Troy and Luca seemed far calmer—almost painfully reasonable.

"No punching Metros," Troy said firmly. "Harris would kill us. Me especially."

Dykstra pouted. "Not even a little?"

Boods nodded eagerly. "Yeah. Just a tiiiiny bit!"

"You're our alternate captain," Troy said dryly. "You really shouldn't be encouraging violence outside the rink."

"But it's the off-season," Bood protested. "No one cares what we do in the off-season!"

"I'm pretty sure all those people care," Luca gestured toward the fans watching the spectacle with open curiosity—even if their conversations were far too quiet for anyone to catch a single word.

Ilya agreed—albeit with considerable reluctance. "Our rookie is right. No punching today. But keep that mindset for our first game against them next season." He grinned maliciously. "Everyone gets a free pass to the sin bin. And a thousand dollars for every black eye on a Montreal player."

Shane shot him a glare. "Really?"

"What?" Ilya shrugged. "What better way to motivate your team?"

Shane fought the urge to strangle his husband and settled instead for a whispered prayer before finally forcing his attention back to the main event. As much as he would have loved to disappear with his new team, he didn't want to derail his plan to end his involvement with the Metros on good terms—at least from his own perspective. Besides, there were still plenty of people waiting for their turn to meet him. He didn't want to disappoint them.

"Alright, you guys have stayed long enough," he said, gesturing toward the cameraman. "Let's get your picture."

It took only seconds for everyone to fall into position. Front and center stood Shane and Ilya, shoulder to shoulder, grinning into the camera, surrounded by equally beaming Ottawa Centaurs. It was the kind of image that would be plastered all over the internet within minutes—and the very same one Shane knew he would treasure for the rest of his life.

As the photographer raised the camera, a quiet wave of emotion washed over Shane.

Then Ilya opened his mouth.

“Smile, everybody,” he said cheerfully. “Say ‘*Montreal is shit!*’”

And to Shane’s equal parts of horror and amusement, six voices roared back in unison:

“*Montreal is shiiiiit!*”

--

9 hours later

Shane didn’t look up from his tablet when Ilya returned to their bedroom, freshly showered and still drying his wet hair with a towel, wearing nothing but a pair of boxer briefs. Propped up against a few pillows, Shane continued scrolling through countless posts on social media. As expected, the Centaurs’ appearance in Montreal had made the rounds—and ended up being the main topic of the day.

“Never thought I’d ever say this to you,” Ilya began, tossing the towel over the small chair on the other side of the room before climbing into bed. “But I think you’ve had enough screen time for now.”

Shane snorted, but still turned off the tablet and set it on his bedside table. “Better, mom?”

“Yuna *would* have said the same. You know that.”

“Yes, yes, yes.”

Shane let out a small chuckle when Ilya pulled him to the other side of the bed. A bit of rearranging later, he was enclosed in Ilya’s arms, his head resting against his husband’s chest, finally able to relax. As expected, Shane felt completely exhausted. Socializing was hard for him on any day—but after talking to countless people for multiple hours? He really needed some rest.

With a sigh, Shane closed his eyes, listening to Ilya’s steady heartbeat.

“You did amazing out there,” Ilya said after a while, drawing small circles on Shane’s bare back.

“Hm?”

“Montreal. With the fans.” Ilya shook his head. “I don’t think I could have done what you did today. Especially after the way they treated you.”

Shane thought about his words for a moment before answering. “I just... didn’t want to regret anything, you know? They treated me poorly, but I didn’t want to stoop to their level. That just wouldn’t have been... me. That’s why I decided to stick to my principles until the very end.”

Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “Stupid but strong. Weird mix, but you’re sometimes a really complicated guy. So it fits you well.”

Shane laughed and sat up slightly, resting his weight on his arms until he could look into his husband’s face. “Do you think I did the right thing, though? Should I have fought back more?”

“You did what was best for you. Here.” Ilya tapped Shane’s temple, then moved his hand to Shane’s chest, right above his heart. “And here. And if you feel good about it, I’m happy too.”

With a smile, Shane leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

They kissed again, deeper this time. A lazy kiss, heavy with the exhaustion of the day, yet filled with so much warmth and love that Shane couldn’t help but let out a contented sigh.

Until he remembered something.

“Fuck! I almost forgot!” He jumped out of bed, leaving a more than slightly confused Ilya behind. A few moments later, after rummaging through their laundry hamper, Shane returned.

Ilya watched attentively as Shane took his right arm and carefully slipped on the bracelet the young girl from the fan meeting had given him. “That’s...” Shane turned it until the letters on the little beads were visible. “...from our newest Centaur fan.”

Ilya examined the bracelet closely. A smile crossed his face when he understood the meaning of the beads. “It’s pretty.”

“I have one too.” Shane lifted his own wrist to show him. “I’d taken it off before I showered. She made one for each of us—to cheer us up when people are mean to us.”

“That’s sweet of her.” Ilya glanced at Shane’s bracelet before returning his attention to his own. “New Centaur fan, you said?”

“Well, she’s *my* fan. And according to her, my trade means she has to be a Centaur fan from now on.”

Ilya nodded. “Clever girl. Really smart. Good choice on her part.”

Shane laughed, smiling at the memory. “She was really sweet. Probably the highlight of my

day.”

That didn’t sit right with Ilya—at all.

“*She* was your highlight?” he gasped, mock horror written all over his face. “Not your incredible husband, who showed up with his team just to support you?!”

Shane chuckled, brushing a strand of hair from his forehead. “You’re close—second place, though. I promise.”

“Pah!” Ilya shoved him playfully off the bed, flopping onto the end and turning his back. “I’m not feeling the love anymore. I think I need some time away from you.”

Shane raised an eyebrow and checked his phone, counting deliberately to a full minute.

“That’s enough sulking, mister.” He leaned forward, pressing a soft, teasing kiss along Ilya’s neck. “I’m tired. And you know I hate being the big spoon.”

Ilya grunted, stubborn as ever, but it only lasted another twenty seconds before he surrendered. With a dramatic sigh, he spun around and wrapped his arms around Shane from behind, pulling him close. “Fine,” he muttered, nuzzling Shane’s shoulder. “But you owe me in the morning. Big time.”

Shane rested against Ilya’s chest, arms tucked close, fingers intertwined. The day’s exhaustion melted away with every steady beat of Ilya’s heart, every warm breath against his ear.

“Tomorrow it is,” he murmured smiling.

“And the rest of our life,” Ilya whispered back, pressing a quick kiss to Shane’s temple.

He laughed softly. “And the rest of our life.”

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