

but they bring their boys up different

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but they bring their boys up different

by Anonymous

Summary

Ilya knows what he is. He has always known what he is. The word for it in Russian tastes like something you'd scrape off a boot.

The word in English is *bisexual*, which is a nicer word, which he has heard, which he does not use. He uses other words. He uses the word his brother taught him. He uses it on himself before anyone else can.

He grows up. He gets good at hockey. He moves to America. He... falls in love.

(Or, five times people fail to notice Ilya being queer, and one time they have no choice.)

Notes

hello! yes. this fic contains various homophobic slurs used by and towards ilya, both internal and external. also the work hockey has become unrecognizable to me in my time writing this fic lmao

mini premise but i used marlow/marleau interchangeably while writing this and didn't want to go back and fix it... maybe later? i just wanted to get this up asap after my normal edits

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

1.

2011—Nashville, Tennessee

He knew by the time he was nine years old.

This is not a thing Ilya has ever romanticized. He knew the way you know you have a cavity; not from looking, but from a particular pressure, a wrongness you locate eventually by pushing at it with your tongue. He pushed at it. Then he stopped pushing. Then he pushed again. By nine he had a name for it, in Russian, from his brother, who had used it to describe a boy in their building who walked a certain way. *Pidor*. By twelve that name had calcified into something useful: a fence, four walls, a shape around the thing he was always going to be regardless of whether he ever let it out.

His father had not used the word directly. His father had said, *cut your hair*. His father had said, *stop making that face, you look like a girl*. His father had said nothing at all for three weeks after walking in on Ilya and Sasha talking in the bathroom, which was its own kind of communication. And then his father had said, *you are going to be a hockey player*, as though that resolved it.

It did, mostly. Hockey was not the kind of life where you thought too hard about the particular texture of your own desire. Hockey was practice at five, school until you could drop out, ice, muscle, pain, and the blank animal relief of being good at something so enormous it left no room for anything else. He was grateful for this. He had been grateful for this for years. And he wasn't—he wanted to be careful about this, in his own head—he wasn't *only* this. He liked women. He genuinely liked women. He had not constructed a false performance and then lived inside it: there was real warmth in that direction, real appetite. He was a person of wide and varied appetites, as Varkov had helpfully told him in several locker rooms. What he also was, underneath, tucked behind all of it, was something else.

A *faggot*, his brother's word said. A *cocksucker*, the locker rooms of his youth had said, aimed at other boys and absorbed by Ilya like a net absorbs a puck—the momentum of it, the intended recipient, the word itself bouncing back to him with his own name attached. He had, over years, decided that these words were at least honest. The word *bisexual* existed. He knew it. He had read it, in English now, in Russian then. It was a clinical word, a careful word, a word with smooth edges that did not catch on anything. The other words caught. He found he preferred words that caught.

He had a system for the something else. The system required discretion, rotation, and an absolute refusal to get attached. He had been fine. He had been, in fact, extraordinarily functional. He was a womanizer of some professional standing, which his teammates found both exhausting and impressive, and which he had long since stopped performing and started simply being, because this part was genuine and so there was no maintenance cost to it. All the maintenance cost went elsewhere.

By his second year in Boston he had loosened, the way you loosen when you've survived one winter in a new country and stopped flinching at jokes you were a half-second behind. His English had found its footing. He had figured out Cliff Marleau, who was, despite all appearances, a person of unusual warmth and only moderate stupidity. He had stopped eating every meal alone.

The All-Star game was in Nashville. Ilya loved Nashville. He loved anywhere that wasn't frozen, loved the particular American energy of a city that understood it was a party, loved that nobody outside the arena cared about him in the specific way that press and management cared about him, which was to say: as a commodity that could develop public-image problems.

After the skills competition and the press conference and the terrible catered dinner—Ilya had given Hollander a look across the room at the catered dinner, the look that meant *this chicken is an insult to chickens specifically*, and Hollander had looked away very deliberately, but the corner of his mouth had moved—Cliff had announced they were going out.

"There is a bar," Cliff said, "that Korogyi claims has a mechanical bull."

"I am going to ride the mechanical bull," Ilya said immediately.

"You are going to get a concussion off a mechanical bull."

"Then I will get concussion with style. Come."

There were five of them from Boston—Cliff, Ilya, Carmichael, Korogyi, and a rookie winger named Petrov who was technically Russian and practically useless but who was trying very hard, which Ilya respected more than competence in the absence of effort. They found a corner booth at nine and began the serious business of the evening.

The thing about Nashville was that it was loud in the specific way of a city that had decided music was its whole personality, which Ilya respected. The bar Korogyi had found was the kind of place that had a mechanical bull in the back room and a live band playing something with steel guitar in the front and a long bar in the middle staffed by people who were genuinely pleased to be there. Ilya approved. He ordered something with bourbon in it on principle.

He was at the bar waiting for the second round when the man beside him—a civilian, some conference attendee or tourist or whatever Nashville collected in February—leaned over and said something about the band. Ilya answered. The man laughed. They talked for three minutes about music, which Ilya knew something about because he had had a period at nineteen of listening to American pop with aggressive enthusiasm as a language-learning exercise, and he said so, which made the man laugh again, and Ilya was aware in some low-frequency way that he was being—not flirted with, exactly, or maybe exactly—regarded with a particular quality of interest that wasn't purely social.

Ilya knew what this felt like. He had a very accurate internal sensor for it, calibrated over fifteen years of pretending the sensor didn't exist. He did not do anything with this information. He picked up the drinks and went back to the booth and that was that.

What happened next was Korogyi's fault. Korogyi had found a table of women at a conference, women who turned out to be structural engineers from Phoenix, and he had introduced Ilya with an unnecessary amount of ceremony. The engineers were interesting in the specific way that people who understood physics as a practical daily matter tended to be interesting. Ilya stayed. He bought a round and Korogyi drifted back to the booth and Adams followed and Cliff was in an argument with the mechanical bull operator that had started over insurance liability and escalated into a philosophical dispute about risk, and Petrov was in the corner being quiet.

And Ilya, for approximately twenty-five minutes, forgot to manage anything at all.

He was just talking. He was funny, deliberately, and one of the engineers laughed at a joke that had a double meaning she was entirely welcome to, and Ilya was comfortable, and at some point he had leaned forward to hear better and found himself resting his chin on his hand in a way that he knew, from long acquaintance, was exactly the kind of thing his father had meant when he said *stop making that face*. His wrist was loose. He was gesturing in the way he gestured when he was comfortable. He was, he understood in some background part of his mind, being exactly as much of a faggot as he always was when nobody was watching. His whole body had relaxed into it like a key finding a lock it recognized.

He didn't correct it.

He was, in some deep and complicated way, curious whether anyone would notice. Whether anyone would give him the acknowledgment he had spent years pretending not to want, not an accusation, not a slur, but a *look*, a recognition, the specific low flicker of one person identifying another across a crowded room. *I see you. I know what you are*. He had gotten that look from a handful of people over the years, strangers mostly, and each time it had burned through him like good vodka; warming and yet gone in seconds.

The engineers were telling him about a bridge project. He rested his chin in his hand and listened with his whole face, the way he listened when he was interested, the way that people who grew up with him might have said was *too expressive, too much, what is wrong with you*. He was nineteen years old and winning hockey games in a new country and for twenty-five minutes in Nashville, Tennessee, he let himself be, in at least this way, the thing he was.

Nobody noticed. The engineers were talking about load capacity. Korogyi was across the bar. The mechanical bull operated in the back with periodic crashes and cheers. The band played something about heartbreak. Nobody noticed.

Then Cliff materialized at his shoulder and said, "Hey, Roz, we're heading out. You coming?"

"In a bit," Ilya said.

Cliff looked at the engineers. He looked at Ilya. Ilya waited, with the patience of a man who had been waiting for variations of this moment his entire life, and Cliff looked away.

"Alright, I'll grab your jacket," he said, and went back toward the booth.

Later, in the cab, Cliff punched him lightly in the shoulder. "Good night?"

"Very good night," Ilya said.

"Cool." Cliff looked out the window at Nashville going past, all neon and music and the specific American excess of a good time being had publicly. Then: "Hey, the engineers were interesting, yeah?"

"Very interesting," Ilya said. "Bridges."

"Cool." A beat. Then Cliff was quiet. He stayed quiet for the rest of the ride, watching the streetlights. Ilya watched the side of his face—the jaw set in the way that meant he had thought something and filed it—and felt nothing specific. Cliff had noticed nothing. This was the correct outcome. The system was working.

He went back to the hotel. He was meeting a woman named Mara in forty minutes—she had texted from the lobby, *here when you're ready*—and in the meantime he sat on the edge of the bed in his room and looked at the wall and thought about the Nashville bar and the specific quality of his own ease in it, the looseness of it, the particular feeling of being seen by no one that was starting, somewhere in the back of his chest, to feel like something other than safety.

He texted Mara: *ten minutes*.

He thought about the engineers, who had not noticed. He thought about Cliff, who had not noticed. He thought about the man at the bar earlier, whose interest had not been returned or denied but simply absorbed and filed, like so much else. He thought about Petrov, who had been in the corner of the booth all evening with an expression Ilya recognized from the inside—that particular stillness of a man watching a room and performing calculation—and whom Ilya had not looked at directly, because some things you didn't look at directly.

The system works, Ilya thought. *You are fine. Everyone is fine. Nobody knows what you are.*

Somewhere in Nashville, he thought, in another hotel room on another floor, Shane Hollander had won the shot accuracy competition yesterday and was probably in a state of controlled satisfaction, because Hollander was always in a state of controlled satisfaction after a win and it had been driving Ilya insane since the World Juniors and would probably continue to do so indefinitely.

He straightened his jacket. He went downstairs. He was, by all available external evidence, a man of entirely conventional appetites who needed to work on his forehand. The system worked.

Nobody had noticed a thing.

2.

2014—Las Vegas, Nevada

The Cup happened.

It happened in the way Ilya had always known it would happen if you were good enough for long enough, not with the transcendence that the television version suggested, but with something larger and more physical than he had prepared for. The weight of the trophy, the noise of the arena, the sensation of his own face doing something he had no control over. He had held it above his head and felt his mother's name on his sternum like a heat source. He had cried in the locker room the way everyone cried in the locker room, which was completely and without dignity and which was understood by all parties to have not occurred.

He let Cliff hug him for a full forty seconds in the parking lot. "I love you, man," Cliff had said into his hair. "You did it, you absolute disaster, you actually did it."

"Yes," Ilya had said. "Obviously."

They had both been crying. It was fine. It had not occurred.

The league, in what Ilya chose to interpret as a sense of humor, asked him and Hollander to present together at the Awards. Most Sportsmanlike. He appreciated this. He filed it under *they have no idea* and moved on.

He was supposed to meet Hollander backstage with three minutes to spare and chose to arrive with forty-five seconds instead, which was, in his view, correct prioritization. He had been in the green room with three other presenters and a bowl of almonds and a man from league PR who was asking him about charity work with an expression of someone who had gotten very good at pretending not to be terrified, and Ilya had answered two questions, eaten most of the almonds, and then simply left when it was time.

Hollander was backstage in his tuxedo, alone, radiating the specific frequency of annoyance he reserved for Ilya and bad officiating.

"Where the hell have you been?" Hollander said, which was not technically his business but was delivered with such conviction that Ilya admired it.

"I am here now," Ilya said. "We're on in one minute."

"Fifty *seconds*—"

"Is fine." Ilya looked at him. The tuxedo was good. Hollander had gotten better at wearing things as he'd gotten older, which was not a thought Ilya was having, because he was not having thoughts about Hollander right now; he was *performing* not having thoughts about Hollander, which was different and increasingly expensive. "You look nervous."

"I'm not nervous."

"You are making the face."

"I don't have a face."

They were on.

They read their lines about sportsmanship. Ilya wrapped his arm around Hollander's shoulders for the selfie—he had written the bit himself, had pitched it to the producers, had made sure he would have the excuse to do it—and felt the particular charge of standing this close to someone you had been carefully not-thinking-about for five years, with twenty thousand people watching and none of them understanding what they were looking at.

Don't ask, don't tell. He had learned this phrase two years ago, from an American teammate who had said it about something unrelated. He had filed it immediately. It had been his operating principle for twelve years before he learned it had a name.

He let his fingers brush the back of Hollander's neck when he dropped his arm, because he was a person with a catastrophically underdeveloped sense of self-preservation, apparently.

They handed over the trophy. They left the stage. Hollander kept walking with the focused energy of a man who had a destination, and Ilya followed at a slight angle, and they ended up in a small bathroom backstage that Hollander entered without checking if Ilya was behind him, which meant he had known Ilya would be behind him, which was—

Hollander rounded on him the moment the door was shut. "What was *that* with your hand?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ilya said.

"The neck thing."

"I am an affectionate man," Ilya said. "This is known."

Hollander stared at him. He was wearing the expression he wore when he was furious and also something else—the something else being the relevant variable. "You're insane."

"Probably," Ilya agreed. He looked at Hollander's jaw, which was doing the thing it did when he was performing indifference and failing. "You won the Ross."

"I know I won."

"Congratulations." He paused, deliberately. "You are not going to win Hart tonight."

"That's—you don't know that."

"I know that," Ilya said, because he had had a good season and he knew what his season had been. "But I will make deal with you, Hollander. If I win—" He stepped closer, enough to watch Hollander's breath change. "You come to my room tonight. You will do whatever I say. And then we will see."

Hollander's jaw moved. He stared at Ilya with the full weight of whatever he had been refusing to call what it was for five years. "And if I win?"

"Same," Ilya said, and then he kissed him—rough and brief and sufficient—and left.

The party was terrible in the way that NHL Awards parties were always terrible: obligatory and overcrowded and full of people performing enjoyment. Ilya had a drink and accepted congratulations from approximately twenty-five people with the patience of a man who had somewhere better to be, and then accepted the Hart Trophy from a man in a very expensive suit with the patience of a man saying something into a microphone while thinking about a specific hotel room on a specific floor.

He left early. Hollander had sent a text from across the party forty minutes ago: *Room number?* Ilya had sent it. He had left the party with the focused calm of a man who had decided something and was executing on the decision.

In his room—enormous, because the team had booked it without showing him the number—he undressed to his tuxedo pants and half-unbuttoned shirt. He thought, idly, about having a cigarette. He thought about the Hart Trophy sitting on the table, which was heavier than expected and more affecting than he had prepared for, and which he was going to have feelings about privately at some later date.

He had been thinking about having this exact conversation with Hollander—a different kind of conversation, the ending-it conversation—for approximately a year. The math was simple: two men on rival teams, no agreement spoken between them, no language available for what they were doing, the risk climbing gradually with every hotel room, every brush of a hand in a locker room corridor, every text sent through a contact saved under a woman's name. At some point the math would stop adding up.

Hollander knocked. Ilya opened the door.

Hollander stood in the hallway in his tuxedo, two buttons undone, bowtie across his shoulders. He looked at Ilya with the expression he always wore in these moments; the controlled one, the one that cost him something to maintain. He had won his point in the scoring race all season but hadn't won tonight, which Ilya suspected was doing something particular in the back of his head, and Ilya felt, as he always did when Hollander was standing right in front of him, the ending-it conversation dissolve at the edges.

He crowded Hollander into the room.

What happened over the next several hours was the usual negotiation of their specific dynamic, except different in the way that everything felt different after you were speaking for the first time in months, after silence and ignoring and after *winning*. Ilya was generous. He was, he thought, almost gentle. Hollander responded to this the way he always responded to unexpected gentleness from Ilya, which was by acting like it wasn't happening and then responding to it with his whole body anyway, which Ilya found privately devastating and refused to examine further.

After, Ilya lay on his back with a cigarette and watched the Las Vegas ceiling. Hollander was on the other side of the bed being quiet in the way he was quiet when he was thinking about something he had decided not to say.

"You can't... do that again," Hollander said eventually.

"What again."

"Sochi—" He paused. "You can't ignore me for months. Not if you want this to continue."

Ilya smoked. He thought about the ending-it conversation. He thought about the math.

"Maybe," he said.

Hollander made a small sound that was not quite agreement and not quite disappointment. He was looking at the ceiling. In the low light, the freckles on his face were not visible, which Ilya was noting only because he was an observant person and not for any other reason. His jaw did the thing.

"Hollander," Ilya said.

"What."

"I won the Hart."

Hollander closed his eyes. "I know you won the Hart."

"Next year," Ilya said.

"Shut up," Hollander said, but not unkindly.

They lay in silence. Las Vegas operated below them, indifferent and bright. Ilya finished the cigarette. He thought about the balcony and about Varkov, who had found him out there earlier in the evening and asked him why he was alone, which was a question with a very long answer and a very short one. He thought about Petrov, who was at the hotel bar downstairs right now, three years into his NHL career, still wearing the expression Ilya had first clocked in Nashville.

He texted Hollander and then set it face-down on the nightstand and forcefully did not examine why.

"So you'll return my texts now," Hollander said, from the other side of the bed.

"Yes," Ilya said.

"That's new."

"Many things are new," Ilya said. "I have won Stanley Cup. This seems like appropriate occasion."

Hollander was quiet for a moment. Then, very carefully, as if testing the weight of it: "Yeah. Okay."

The next morning, in the elevator going down, Ilya passed three teammates from the Western Conference party and the league PR man from the day before. He was in last night's shirt. He was carrying his jacket. He was, by any observable metric, a man returning from an entirely conventional evening.

He had been, he thought. He had genuinely also been. This was always the complicated part: the thing that was real and the thing underneath the thing that was real. Both present. Both his.

In the lobby he found a mirror and straightened his collar. He looked at himself for a moment. His hair was a disaster. He looked, he thought, like a faggot who had gotten lucky, but nobody looking at him was going to think *that*—they were going to think the regular version, which was both a comfort and its own peculiar grief, the one he was not currently unpacking. He smoothed his shirt. He looked like the Hart Trophy winner. He looked like a man with entirely conventional appetites. He looked like himself, which was the same as all of those things and entirely different from all of them.

He went to breakfast. He ate a great deal of it. He sent Varkov a picture of the enormous breakfast, and Varkov sent back three question marks.

In his pocket, his real phone had a text from a contact he had just saved under *S.H.* that said: *You left your cufflinks in my pockets.*

He smiled, looking at his phone in the middle of a Las Vegas hotel breakfast buffet, and felt, just for a moment, entirely visible. No one was looking at him. No one was there to see it.

He texted back: *bring them to boston in october.*

Three dots appeared and disappeared twice before the reply came: *Okay.*

The math was still the same. He was going to have the ending-it conversation eventually. He was.

He had excellent cufflinks.

3.

2017—Montreal, Quebec

The game was in Montreal.

This was relevant because it meant Ilya spent the entire third period—and the two hours preceding the third period, and the six hours preceding that, and most of the flight from Boston—in the specific state of mind that playing Montreal produced in him, which was a state he had not examined with any precision and did not intend to. He had been planning to end it. He had been planning, since March, since his father's funeral and the particular quality of exhaustion that had followed, to find a moment before or after a game and say: *the math doesn't work. We have to stop. This is the thing I came to say.* He had the words. He had been keeping them arranged in the correct order for several weeks.

He had already broken one of his own rules that afternoon. He had shown up at Shane's apartment at one o'clock on game day. He had texted: *come over?* He had waited outside the door of his own suite listening to Shane knock and opened it knowing exactly how this was going to go, and none of that was the ending-it conversation. None of that was the math. That was something else, something he had been trying not to name for longer than he could locate the beginning of, something that was costing him more than the system had been designed to absorb.

After the game, he had told himself, after. You will say it after.

He was on the ice when the hit happened.

He heard it before he saw it; the specific crack of the boards taking Shane's full weight, the crowd noise curdling from noise into silence the way crowd noise did when something had gone wrong. He turned and Shane was already down. Motionless. The wrong shape on the ice.

What happened in Ilya's body in the three seconds that followed was not something he could have described to anyone. He was moving before he understood he was moving. He was aware of himself saying something, *Shane, hey*—in the surge of players and medical staff converging—and simultaneously aware of a voice in his skull that was very loud and extremely clear: *stop. They can all see you. Every camera in this building is on the ice right now. You stop, you go back, you get your face right, you do it now.*

He stopped. He got his face right.

He stood five feet back from the cluster of people bent over Shane and kept himself exactly as still as a man with professional concern for a rival, nothing more. His jaw was locked. His hands were loose. He had been practicing this particular stillness since he was twelve years old.

The medical staff were talking. Shane's eyes blinked open, unfocused, moving across the blur of faces above him. He said something that was not quite a word, but instead the slurred non-syllable of a man whose brain was catching up to the rest of him.

Then, mumbled, directed at no one and everyone and specifically at Ilya because Shane even concussed knew what Ilya would need: *"Tell him I'm fine."*

Ilya looked away. He went back to the bench. He played the remaining four minutes of the period with the focused blankness of a man on automatic. stick, ice, puck, play, nothing else. Boston won. He scored once. Cliff looked sick the entire third period and Ilya did not look at him, because looking at Cliff right now would produce something in his face that he didn't have room to manage.

Afterward, the reporters: *Rozanov, your thoughts on the Hollander hit?*

"Was legal play," he said. "Marleau feels bad. This is part of game."

His voice was steady. His face was the right face. He went back to the locker room and sat in his stall for a while before he could trust himself to shower.

He went back to the team hotel. His phone was producing a trickle of news updates about Shane's condition—concussion confirmed, multiple possible fractures, out for playoffs—and he lay on his back in the dark of the Montreal hotel room and refreshed the sports sites and felt the tight specific anger of a man who had nowhere to direct it. Cliff had not meant to. The hit was legal. Shane knew it was legal. All of this was true and none of it was doing anything useful for the tight thing in Ilya's chest.

He found the game footage at midnight and watched the two seconds around the hit four times. Then he found a sports panel discussing it. The anchor said: *And you can see Rozanov right here in the feed, right after impact*—and Ilya sat up very fast, his spine cold.

He watched himself on a television panel. He watched from a camera angle he hadn't known existed—positioned high, behind the play, catching the Boston bench and the cluster on the ice and Ilya standing five feet back with his hands loose at his sides. He watched himself take a half-step forward. He watched himself stop. He watched his face, in the three seconds after the hit, do absolutely nothing that any camera in the world could use.

He started laughing.

It came from somewhere in his chest, unguarded, a little unhinged, the laugh of a man who had just watched himself perform the greatest feat of emotional containment in his professional career and seen it rendered completely invisible by the same act. He pressed his hand over his mouth. He was alone in a Montreal hotel room at midnight laughing at a sports panel that had absolutely no idea. The commentator was talking about Marleau's mechanics. He had looked right at the two seconds of Ilya's life that contained the entire truth of the situation and had seen a hockey player being professionally concerned.

This is it, Ilya had thought, on the ice. This is the thing that finally does it. Someone with a camera was watching my face.

Nobody had been watching his face. Or rather: everyone had been watching his face, and nobody had seen anything.

The laugh subsided into something flatter. He put his phone down. He stared at the hotel ceiling and thought: *if that wasn't enough to show what I am, then what could possibly be?* He had stood over the man he had been fucking, *loving* for three years, on national television, in front of twenty thousand people and every camera at the Bell Centre, and the cameras had looked right at him and seen Ilya Rozanov being sportsmanlike about an opposing player's injury.

He had thought he was so obvious. He had believed, for fifteen years, that everyone in every room could read him, that the system was necessary because without it every camera and every coach and every teammate would simply see what he was. That the walls were the only thing keeping the truth from being visible. That without the management and the maintenance and the careful performance of himself, someone would just look at him and know.

He was not obvious.

He was, apparently, invisible. And he did not know yet what to do with that, whether it was relief or loss or both at once, whether the cage had been the bars or the man inside them all along.

Eventually he went to sleep.

He was at the hospital before the team bus left for the airport.

He had told Cliff: *I am going to check on Hollander. Team captain courtesy.* Cliff had looked at him for a moment and then nodded, which was either because he accepted the explanation or because he was still feeling sick about the hit and didn't have the bandwidth to interrogate it. Either way, Ilya had a car at seven-fifteen and a room number from a woman at the desk who seemed genuinely impressed by the sportsmanship.

The door was open a crack. He pushed it open. Shane was elevated in the hospital bed, his left arm in a sling, his face doing the thing it did when he was performing fine, a version of fine, presentable, the face for anyone who might walk in. When he saw Ilya it shifted into something else.

"*Ilya!*" he said, and it came out startled, warm.

"Hi," Ilya said. He was standing in the doorway of a Montreal hospital room at seven in the morning holding absolutely nothing, having arrived completely empty-handed because he had been so focused on getting here that the concept of bringing something hadn't occurred to him. He felt, briefly, like an idiot. "I just needed—are you—?"

"I'm okay," Shane said. He smiled, and it was the smaller private version, the one that cost him something to show. "I mean, I have a concussion, and a fractured collarbone. I'm out for the playoffs. But—"

"Could have been worse," Ilya said.

He had been saying and thinking *could have been worse* since midnight and it kept arriving in his chest as though it were the first time, the particular cold specificity of imagining the versions that were worse.

"Yeah." Shane's mouth moved. "Marlow is—he feels bad," Ilya said, because he needed to say something and this was the thing that was true. "He was very angry at himself. I am also angry at him."

Shane made a sound that was something adjacent to a laugh. "It's part of the game. I know he's not a vicious player. We all get our bell rung eventually, right?" He paused. "He probably doesn't want to meet my mom in a dark alley, though. She's out for blood."

"I will warn him," Ilya said.

He wanted to touch him. He wanted to stand close enough to verify, physically, that Shane was intact—that the version that was worse had not occurred. He stood in the doorway of the hospital room like a man who had not yet decided if he was allowed to come all the way in.

Shane extended his good hand. "Hey," he said, quietly.

Ilya came in. He nudged the door mostly closed behind him and crossed the room to stand next to the bed, and he did what his hands wanted: he brushed his fingers over Shane's face, just the once, the brief verification. Shane looked up at him and the private smile was still there and the quality of his attention was the thing it always was, which was to say: complete.

"You scared me," Ilya said.

"Scared myself."

"But you will be okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be okay." Shane's thumb moved against Ilya's fingers where they'd come to rest against his jaw. "I wanted to tell you last night. I was—I kept thinking, when they were strapping me to the board—I wanted to text you. I just wanted you to know I was okay."

"Tell him *I'm fine*," Ilya said. "I heard."

Shane closed his eyes briefly. "I didn't know what else to do."

Ilya's fingers drifted into his hair, just lightly. He thought about the cameras. He thought about the hotel room ceiling and the sports panel and his own invisible face on a television screen. He thought: *nobody is watching right now. Nobody is going to walk in for at least another few minutes. You are allowed this.* He let his hand stay.

"When will we get a chance again?" Shane asked. His eyes were still closed. "I had been looking forward to last night."

"I will be busy," Ilya said, and made himself put the smirk in it. "Winning Stanley Cup."

Shane grimaced.

"I'm sorry," Ilya said, and meant the whole of it—the playoffs, the six weeks, the hit, the conversation he had arrived in Montreal to have and was not going to have in a hospital room with Shane's arm in a sling. The ending-it conversation had been true when he arranged the words. It was still probably true. The math hadn't changed.

"I wanted to talk to you last night," Shane said. "Before this happened."

"I know," Ilya said. "I wanted to talk also."

Shane looked at him. Something passed between them that was not a question exactly, more the shared knowledge that there were things that needed to be said and that this was not the moment for them.

The door handle turned. Shane dropped Ilya's hand. Ilya stepped back and turned to face the nurse, who entered with the cheerful efficiency of someone who had seen worse things than a hockey player visiting his rival in a hospital room.

"Uh-oh," she said, with a smile. "You're not trying to smother him with a pillow, are you, Mr. Rozanov?"

"No," Ilya said, and found a version of a smile for her. "I was just leaving, actually."

"Thank you for coming," Shane said. All business. The right voice, the right face. "I appreciate it."

"Get well soon, Hollander," Ilya said.

He left quickly. He got in the car. He sat in the back seat and looked at Montreal going past and thought about nothing for eleven consecutive minutes, which was the most nothing he had managed since the hit.

He took a breath.

A week later, Shane FaceTimed him.

Ilya was in his Boston apartment eating cereal at an hour that could not be defended, and Shane's name appeared on his screen, and Ilya answered it and then immediately regretted the cereal situation.

Shane was in bed, propped up, the collarbone sling visible, his hair doing something that suggested he had been lying down for most of the day. He looked better than the hospital. He

looked, Ilya thought, like himself again, which was its own specific relief.

"Hi," Shane said.

"Hi," Ilya said. He moved the cereal out of frame.

"How's Boston."

"Cold. Boring. We are going to be eliminated, so." He shrugged. "How is collarbone."

"Hurts." Shane shifted carefully. *"I've been doing a lot of reading."*

"This sounds like you."

"I've also been watching a lot of your games."

"This also sounds like you."

Shane looked at him through the screen for a moment with the quality of attention that was harder to deflect over FaceTime than over the phone, because over FaceTime it had a face attached to it. Then he said: *"Come to my cottage."*

Ilya looked at his cereal.

"I mean it," Shane said. *"We'd have the whole place to ourselves. A week, two weeks, whatever you want. There's nobody there in July."* A pause. *"I know we don't—I know it's not usually how this works. But I want more time. I've always wanted more time."*

He said it simply, without performance, the way Shane said things he had decided to say. Ilya sat with it. He thought about the math. He thought about the ending-it conversation and the words he had been keeping arranged in the correct order and what it meant that he had had every opportunity in Montreal and had arrived at the hospital empty-handed and gone home.

He was a cocksucker in love with his rival. He had known this for at least two years and had been declining to say so, to himself or anyone, because saying so out loud was the kind of thing that made it real in a way that had operational consequences. He was also, apparently, *invisible*, a discovery that was still working its way through his system like a slow bruise. He had stood on the ice at the Bell Centre three seconds after the hit, certain that everyone in the building could see exactly what he was, and the cameras had looked right at him and seen a hockey player being sportsmanlike.

Nobody had ever seen him. Not in Nashville. Not in Las Vegas. Not in twelve years of being, in his own quiet estimation, the most obvious faggot in any room he walked into.

Shane was looking at him through the screen, waiting, doing the thing he did where he simply waited and let the silence be whatever it needed to be.

"Tampa," Ilya said. "January."

Shane went still.

"You said something. In the hotel room." Ilya put the cereal on the counter. He looked at the screen—Shane's face, the collarbone sling, the particular quality of his attention. "You said you were gay. You said it was first time you said it."

"Ilya—"

"I did not say anything back," Ilya said. "This was not generous. I have been thinking about this since January."

Shane's jaw moved. "You don't have to—"

"I am bisexual," Ilya said.

The word landed. He watched it land on Shane's face—the slight parting of his mouth, the still that came over him.

Ilya had said it before, in his own head, in Russian, once to a woman in Copenhagen who had asked him directly. He had other words for it—the ones his brother had used, the ones locker rooms had produced over twenty years, the ones that caught on things because they were honest in the way that *bisexual* was not quite honest, too clean, too smooth-edged for what it actually was. He had been a *pidor since he was nine years old and a cocksucker* since he was seventeen and he had only just now said the polite word out loud to another person and he felt it hanging in the air of the FaceTime call like something physical.

"I know different words," Ilya said. "This is the one I am saying to you." He looked at Shane's face on the screen. "You said a thing and I did not say a thing back. I have owed you this for four months."

Shane was very quiet. The silence had a quality—not quite weight, not quite warmth, both at once—that Ilya recognized as the silence of something arriving after a long time in transit.

"How long," Shane said, finally.

"Long."

"Since—"

"Long," Ilya said, and let him do his own math.

Shane looked at him through the screen. His eyes had gone a little bright, which Ilya was going to pretend he had not noticed. His jaw did the thing. After a moment he said, very quietly: "The cottage. July. Please."

Ilya thought about the dock. The daylight on the lake. A place with no cameras and no systems and nothing to perform.

"Maybe," Ilya said.

"Ilya—"

"Get well soon, Shane," Ilya said.

Shane laughed, startled and genuine, the real kind.

Ilya hung up. He sat in his Boston apartment in the dark with the cereal going soggy on the counter and thought about August, and after a while he went to bed, and that was that.

4.

Fall 2018—Ottawa, Ontario

Harris Drover was hired in September, three months after Ilya started playing with the Centaurs.

The position was Social Media and Digital Communications Manager, which was a title Ilya had no particular feelings about except that it had resulted in Harris Drover appearing in his locker room with a camera and a very specific kind of unshakeable cheer that Ilya found alternately endearing and exhausting. He had dealt with media people before. He understood the necessary function. He had a process. The process involved being charming and giving them something worth using before they found something on their own.

Harris Drover was a problem because he was twenty-three years old and entirely unafraid of Ilya, and also—Ilya had established this within the first two weeks, without trying, the same way he established most things about people—gay.

Openly, flagrantly, *completely* gay.

This was not a performance. Harris didn't signal it in the way that people who were testing whether a room was safe tended to signal it: tentatively, with careful retreat routes. He was simply gay in the specific manner of a person who had been gay for long enough to have stopped thinking of it as a condition requiring management, who had let it leak entirely into the texture of how he moved through rooms and told jokes and organized his face when he was looking at something he found interesting. He was gay like breathing. He apparently did not know it was supposed to cost something.

Ilya found this, privately, like standing outside a building he had been looking at from across the street for years, and being told the door was open. He stood outside and catalogued it.

The jealousy came later. That was the correct word and he knew it, even though jealousy was a complicated word for something this complicated. He was not jealous of Harris in the way of wanting what Harris had and resenting Harris for having it. He was jealous in the way of watching someone eat a meal you had not realized you were starving for. He was jealous the way you were jealous of people who could sleep easily: not angry, exactly, just quietly aware of the deprivation.

Harris could walk into the locker room and exist. That was all it was. Harris could exist in the Centaurs locker room as a gay man, known and unbothered, and everyone around him had simply absorbed it and moved on. And Ilya—Ilya was nearly thirty years old and had won a Stanley Cup and had been, in his quiet estimation, bleeding the obvious his entire career—

The thing he kept circling back to was: *they don't know*. After Nashville, after Las Vegas, after years of playing the specific way he played—with his hands, with his whole body, with the quality of attention he brought to certain situations—they did not know. Harris had been in the building for six weeks and everyone knew Harris was gay. Ilya had been in hockey for

fifteen years and apparently the door had been sufficiently closed that no one had ever put a shoulder to it.

He had thought he was so obvious. He had always thought he was obvious. It turned out he was invisible, and the invisibility that had protected him all this time was also, from the inside, a kind of cage.

Harris could see him, though. Hopefully. This was the part that snuck up on Ilya in the second week. Harris looked at him in the way that queer people had a specific tendency to look at each other—not with overt recognition, not with the calculated-ignorance of the locker room—but with the particular low-frequency awareness of someone doing the same unconscious math. Ilya had been reading rooms since he was twelve. He knew what it looked like when someone else was reading rooms.

Harris was reading him. Or—he was reading the room, and Ilya was in the room, and Ilya was trying to be something Harris could read.

He began, in a way he did not fully consciously authorize, trying to make Harris see it more clearly.

This was embarrassing. He caught himself saying something at practice, some comment with a specific energy in the delivery, and Harris had looked up from behind his camera with a micro-expression of something almost like surprise—*almost*, not quite, not enough—and Ilya had thought: *there*. He caught himself standing differently when Harris was in the room, with a specific quality of ease. He was being funnier, more textured, more himself in the ways that *himself* included the parts nobody was supposed to notice. He was, he understood, trying to be seen.

See me. See me. See me.

The problem was that Harris was twenty-three and completely confident and had apparently decided that Ilya Rozanov was a good ally and a funny man and a generous captain, which was—

Which was *fine*. This was the correct professional outcome. This was what the system produced. The system was working.

Except it felt, from the inside, like standing outside the lit window of a house and being unable to make the people inside look up.

The plan—his and Shane's, agreed in a phone call in the spring—was that Shane would come out to his team first. Something small, contained, just to test the waters. Montreal, not Ottawa. His teammates, not Ilya's. Because Ilya's situation was more complex: Russia, specifically, and the particular violence of what Russia did to men who were publicly faggots, and also the obvious problem that if both of them were quietly known within their respective organizations, someone would eventually connect the dots. Shane first. Ilya stays closeted. This was the math. It was, as far as math went, correct.

It did not make standing in the Ottawa locker room while Harris told an entire story about a boy he'd dated with the casual ease of someone discussing the weather feel less like being hungry.

He wanted community. He wanted, in some specific and private way, to be able to say to a person who was safe: *I know. I also know.* Not publicly, not in the press, not anywhere that mattered professionally. Just—the acknowledgment. The small low-frequency recognition between two people who were doing the same math. He had gotten it from strangers, fleetingly, over years. He wanted it from someone he saw every day.

He wanted Harris to know.

Harris did not know.

The moment it became a specific thing rather than a general tendency was a Thursday in October. Harris appeared in the locker room after practice with a camera and Ilya's still-incomplete media profile form, which he had returned twice with the fun fact section blank.

"Captain Rozanov," Harris said. "Ten minutes of your time."

"No."

"It's a league requirement."

"I have played many seasons. People know enough about me."

"People know your stats and the fact that you have a penthouse," Harris said. "Which, for the record, they find both impressive and deeply alarming." He produced a pen. "The fun fact can be anything. It can be extremely boring. Nobody fact-checks these."

Ilya held out his hand. Harris gave him the form. Ilya looked at the blank line, then wrote *I have seen every episode of The Great British Bake Off* and handed it back.

Harris looked at what he had written. He did an excellent job of not reacting. "Perfect," he said. "Thank you."

It was not subtle. Ilya was aware it was not subtle. He had written it in the specific hope that Harris would look at it and look at him and do the calculation—*Ilya Rozanov, thirty years old, star hockey player, Great British Bake Off completionist*—and arrive somewhere. Harris had looked at it and said *perfect* in the voice of a professional.

"Don't call me Captain when we're not on ice," Ilya said.

"What should I call you?"

"Roz. Like everyone else."

"Okay, Roz." Harris tucked the form under his arm.

Ilya said, before he had decided to: "Harris."

Harris turned.

"The personal questions," Ilya said. "For media. The soft ones about family, relationships, personal life." He paused. "Don't ask them."

Harris looked at him. The expression he was wearing was the particular careful neutrality of someone who had done this specific math before, who understood exactly what kind of conversation was happening and had the grace to let it be whatever Ilya needed it to be.

"Okay," he said.

"I answer if I want. You don't ask."

"Understood."

Ilya watched him leave. Across the locker room Bood was trying to explain something to Dykstra with his hands that required all available space. The ordinary noise of a team reorganizing itself after practice moved around Ilya like water.

He thought about Harris's expression in that moment. The... recognition, the lightness, the careful not-making-it-into-something. He thought: *he knows something*. He thought: *he doesn't know enough*. He thought about the difference between those two things and about the gap between them, which was not so large in inches and which felt, from his side of it, like a country.

He thought about Hunter, who was fifty now and in his twentieth season in New York, and who had posted in August a photograph of himself and his boyfriend at a restaurant in Barcelona in very bright sunlight. Ilya had stared at it for a long time in the dark of his Ottawa apartment. He had felt something that was close to pride and tangled up with something that had no clean name; the recognition, the vicarious quality of it, the specific ache of watching someone do from the outside the thing you had only done in private.

He texted Shane a picture of the Trudeau biography, which he had brought to Ottawa by accident. Shane sent back a string of characters that did not form a recognizable word and might have been a laugh.

You could come this weekend, Ilya typed.

I have a game Saturday.

Sunday.

A pause.

Okay, Shane sent.

Ilya put his phone away. He got up. He went to find out what Bood's hands were trying to explain. It turned out to be a grilling technique that Bood felt very strongly about and that Dykstra was resisting for ideological reasons Ilya did not fully understand. Ilya ate a piece of

cheese from the snack plate and listened to them argue, and the autumn evening came in through the high windows.

In the morning, Harris would be here with his camera. Harris would be openly, cheerfully, completely himself, and Ilya would be the professional version of himself, and the gap between those two things would be the same size it always was.

It was fine. It was mostly fine.

He went home. He was fine.

5.

2020—Ottawa, Ontario

Troy Barrett had been a Centaur for three weeks when Ilya took him to the Kingfisher.

This had not been the plan. The plan had been to walk Troy home after their loss to Toronto, because Troy had been quiet in the particular way of someone who was quiet because the alternative was worse, and Ilya had a read on people and his read on Troy Barrett right now was that he should not be alone with it, whatever it was. The plan had been: walk him to his building, say goodnight, continue to the Kingfisher alone.

But Troy had still been walking next to him at the corner where Ilya would have turned, and something in the look on his face had made Ilya not say *this is where we stop*. So they had both gone in.

Eric was behind the bar doing something he clearly found genuinely satisfying. Kyle was at the end of the bar with a book, or the performance of a book. The place was quiet for a Friday, the good kind of quiet, where the sound didn't arrive as an assault.

"This bar is nice," Troy said, looking around.

"Yes."

Troy looked at the back of the room—a couple in a corner booth, hands close on the table, the particular ease of two people who had stopped calculating the cost of existing in public together. He looked at his hands on the bar.

Ilya ordered them each a drink.

The evening arranged itself. Kyle came up briefly, and said something generic about the season that was generous given the results. A man Ilya vaguely recognized from previous visits came in and ordered something and left. The bar maintained its particular quality of quiet: not empty, not crowded, just the specific atmosphere of a place where people could be without having to perform being.

Troy had been watching all of it with the look of a man performing normal while his interior did something else entirely—a look Ilya had worn at twenty-five and could recognize with his eyes closed.

"My buddy Adrián," Troy said eventually.

Ilya waited.

"We had a plan. Kind of." He was looking at his drink. "An actual plan. For—I don't know. For what comes after." He exhaled. "And then he didn't. And now he's engaged to someone else, so." He shrugged. "Whatever."

"It is not whatever," Ilya said.

"No." Troy's jaw was tight. "No, it's really not."

Ilya looked at his own drink. He thought about the cottage. The dock, the daylight, the specific feeling of being in a place where nobody was watching and the relief of it—how it had felt, those first days, like remembering how to breathe through a chest that had been waiting a long time to expand. He thought about Nashville, 2011, standing in a bar in Tennessee and letting his wrist go loose on a table while nobody noticed. He thought about Harris, with his camera, who had been gay like breathing and had apparently looked at Ilya Rozanov and seen a good ally.

He was sixty percent sure of what Troy Barrett was. He was eighty-five percent sure Troy Barrett was standing at the edge of it right now, looking over, trying to see how far down it went.

"Adrián was an idiot," Ilya said.

Troy made a sound that was almost a laugh.

"You are too good for someone who does not choose you," Ilya said. "On ice or off. This is not complicated." He paused. "Slightly complicated. But not very."

"Easy for you to say."

"Yes," Ilya said. "Everything in my life has been easy. I am extremely lucky man." He said it flatly enough that Troy looked at him, and Ilya held his gaze without elaborating. Let him do his own math. "Nobody will choose for you. This is the bad news. Is also the good news."

Troy was quiet for a long time. Then he said, "Can I tell you something."

"Yes."

And Troy told him.

Ilya listened. He did not perform knowing; he did not say *I guessed* or *of course* or any of the other things that would make this moment about Ilya's perception rather than Troy's courage. He listened the way Shane had taught him to listen—just by being fully present. When Troy was done he was looking at Ilya with the face of a man who had handed something over and was waiting to see if he would get it back in the same shape.

"Okay," Ilya said.

Troy blinked. "That's it?"

"Yes." Ilya picked up his drink. "Okay. Thank you for telling me." He paused. "I'm glad you did."

"That's—" Troy looked at him. Then something in him shifted, some enormous release of pressure, his shoulders dropping, a long breath let out. He covered his face for a second with

one hand. "Jesus."

"I can cry if you would prefer," Ilya said. "I am Russian. We have many tears available, we have stockpile."

Troy started laughing. The real kind, unguarded, the first one Ilya had heard from him all night. "You're insane," he said. "You know that?"

"Yes," Ilya said. "But I am also right, so."

Troy was quiet for a moment after the laughter settled. He looked around the bar—Kyle at the end with his mag, the couple in the corner, the warm particular light of the Kingfisher—with the slightly stunned expression of a man who has said a thing out loud and discovered the world did not end.

"You know," he said, "I've heard about this place. From other players. Like—I figured out pretty early that it was... a safe space, kind of. The kind of bar where you could—" He stopped. He looked at Ilya. "Have you been coming here long?"

"A few years," Ilya said.

Troy looked at him. The math was happening visibly on his face, the slow accumulation of evidence that Ilya had been watching people fail to accumulate for years: the specific quality of Ilya's ease in this room, the fact that Ilya had brought him here, the *we all were* that Ilya had said earlier and that was apparently still working its way through Troy's system.

"Long time," Ilya said, before Troy could ask directly.

"Yeah?"

"Long time."

"Like—"

"Long," Ilya said, "time." He watched Troy arrive somewhere. The expression on Troy's face moved through several things in quick succession before settling somewhere quieter, something like: *oh. Oh*. The full realization landing.

And Ilya thought, watching it: *this*. This was the look. The recognition. The one he had been trying to produce in rooms since he was twenty-three, the one that Harris had almost given him and hadn't, the one he had been waiting for from someone inside his actual life and not a stranger in a bar. And here it was, from Troy Barrett, a man he had known for three weeks, arriving seventeen years late.

He felt, unexpectedly, a complicated warmth.

"Long time," Ilya said again, more quietly.

"Oh my god," Troy said, very quietly, doing the math, arriving somewhere. He was staring at Ilya with something that was almost reverence and was also just surprise—the real,

unguarded surprise of someone who had not seen it coming. "*How*—how did I not—"

"Nobody does," Ilya said.

"But you're so—" Troy made a gesture that Ilya understood completely. "I mean, you're—"

"I know," Ilya said, and it came out more flat than he intended, more tired. "I know."

Troy looked at him. He was smart enough to hear what was under it.

"How long have you been coming here before anyone—"

"Good night, Barrett." Ilya put on his coat. He said it gently, with finality. He buttoned his coat.

"Wait," Troy said. "Is it—is it someone I know?"

Ilya smiled. He said nothing.

"Oh my god," Troy said, very quietly. "Oh my *god*."

"Good night," Ilya said.

He walked home. The Ottawa night was cold and clear, the particular clarity of a city that got cold enough to squeeze everything extraneous out of the air. He put his hands in his pockets. He thought about Troy's face in the moment it had landed—the surprise of it, the genuine not-knowing, the way he had looked at Ilya and seen a man he hadn't been looking at correctly—and felt something he hadn't entirely expected. Not just warmth. Something more personal. The recognition of a man watching someone put down something heavy and understanding, from the inside, what that weight had cost. And something else, softer: the knowledge that he had been, finally, seen. By someone who mattered. From the inside of his actual life.

He called Shane from the corner of his street.

"*It's midnight*," Shane said, which meant he had been awake.

"I know. I am calling anyway."

A pause. Then: "*How'd it go?*"

"We lost," Ilya said.

"*I know, I watched.*"

"I went to Kingfisher after. With Barrett."

A longer pause. "*How is he?*"

"He is okay," Ilya said. "He will be okay." He walked. "I think he will be okay."

"*Good*," Shane said.

"Yes," Ilya said. "Good."

The street was empty. The sky was doing the thing it did in December, the dark so complete it had a texture. He walked and talked to Shane, who was in Montreal, who was hours away in a car or ninety minutes on a plane, who was the person Ilya had been not-quite-saying the real thing to for approximately eleven years. He thought about this, as he sometimes did, as a measurement. Eleven years. More than a third of his life. Longer than some careers. Longer than anything else he had ever been doing, quietly, in the background of everything else he was doing.

"Shane," he said.

"Yeah?"

He wanted to say: *can we talk about something. Can we talk about whether we are still waiting or whether we are done waiting. Can we talk about the fact that I walked into a bar tonight and a twenty-five-year-old I have known for three weeks looked at me and saw me, and I have been standing in front of you for eleven years.* He wanted to say: *I think I am done being a coward about this. I think it is time to have an actual conversation instead of a hundred thousand careful ones.*

"Nothing," Ilya said. "Good night."

"Good night, Ilya. I love you."

He went inside. He stood in his dark apartment for a moment, listening to it. He thought about Troy's face. He thought about the Trudeau biography. He thought about a dock on a lake in August with daylight on the water and no cameras and no systems and no math.

He went to bed. He slept well. In the morning he went to practice, where Harris had filmed a reel of him pulling a muscle during warm-up that was going to do extremely well online, and where Troy Barrett looked at him from across the locker room with the slightly stunned expression of a man carrying a secret that had just become lighter, and Ilya nodded at him.

That was that.

+1.

2021—Ottawa, Ontario

The ceremony was late because of Ilya, and the reason it was late because of Ilya was that Ilya had cried during the getting-ready and then refused to stop, which he maintained was the jacket's fault. The jacket was an extremely good jacket. This was not relevant.

"I am fine," he said, to the window of the upstairs bedroom.

"You're not fine," Shane said, from behind him.

"I am fine, this is just—" He pressed his fingers to his sternum. "The jacket is very moving garment."

He heard Shane trying not to laugh. Then he felt Shane's hand on his back, warm through the very moving garment. "Hey," Shane said, quietly.

"I am going to stop in one second," Ilya said.

"You don't have to."

"I am going to stop." He did not stop. He looked at the Ottawa backyard through the window—the arrangement of it, Yuna and David's work, Harris's work, two folding tables with good tablecloths and a very specific amount of July light falling over everything—and thought: *here*. Of all the possible places. He had been born in Moscow and grown up in Moscow and moved to Boston and moved to Ottawa, and the place that felt like home was this city that had not been assigned to him by anything except the decision to move toward something rather than away from it.

"We don't have to do this today," Shane said. He meant it, which was the thing about Shane. He always meant it.

Ilya turned around. Shane was looking at him with the complete, unreserved attention he had been looking at Ilya with since 2009, across arenas and hotel rooms and press conferences and a twelve-year accumulation of moments that had, looked at from this particular angle, been entirely, obviously, the same story the whole time.

"Shane," Ilya said.

"I'm serious—"

"I know you are serious. You are always serious. This is your most annoying quality." He reached out and fixed the collar of Shane's jacket, which did not need fixing but which his hands wanted to do. "I am crying because I am happy. This is good thing. This is what I do when I am happy." He paused. "Also I am little bit overwhelmed, but this is different thing."

"You're allowed to be overwhelmed."

"Yes, thank you, this is very generous permission." He smoothed Shane's collar. He kept his hands there for a moment, on the fabric, on his chest, the warmth of him through the layers. "I spent many years very good at hiding things," he said. He said it without planning to. "And I am standing here now not hiding anything and it is—"

He looked for the word. He did not find one in English or Russian that fit the size of what he meant.

"Very large," he said finally. "Is very large feeling."

Shane's expression did the thing. The enormous slow shift of something arriving from a long way away. His jaw moved.

"Do not cry," Ilya said, pointing at him. "I have only just stopped."

"I'm not—"

"You are about to."

"I'm not about to—" Shane pressed his own fingers briefly to his eyes. "I'm fine."

"Yes," Ilya said. "We are both very fine."

Downstairs, Hayden Pike yelled something at the children, who had apparently reorganized themselves in a way he had not authorized.

Shane smiled. He took Ilya's hand. "Ready?"

They went downstairs.

The backyard was: Hayden and Jackie and the accumulated Pike children, including Arthur, who had made Ilya a card in the shape of a very abstract dog that Ilya intended to keep until he died; Cliff and his wife, who had flown from Boston and who had, according to his wife, cried in front of Cliff for the entirety of the flight—or possibly the other way around, Ilya had been emotional and missed a detail; Bood and Cassie; Wyatt and his wife; Harris, camera in hand, who had been crying since he arrived and was making no effort to conceal this; Ryan, J.J., and Scott and everyone else from the Game Changers camps; David and Yuna Hollander, standing close together, Yuna with her hand over her mouth, looking at her son the way someone looks at something they have been waiting a very long time to see.

The justice of the peace, a small, efficient woman named Micheline who had shaken Ilya's hand at the door with the energy of a person who had married many couples and found all of them worthy, called them forward.

There were no vows. They had agreed on this without much discussion: they were not the kind of people who wrote things down and read them aloud in front of witnesses. They were the kind of people who had been saying things to each other, imperfectly, in the gaps between hockey games and flights and eleven years of a life that had happened in parallel before it happened together. The registry was enough. The rings were enough. Micheline moved

through it with economy and warmth, and Ilya stood next to Shane and held his hand, which was the same size as his own and had calluses in all the same places, and looked at him.

He thought about Regina. He thought about being seventeen, in the rafters of an arena in Saskatchewan, watching Shane Hollander score a goal on an empty net in practice and not celebrate, just nod, like he had made a deal with himself. He thought about every subsequent year, the specific through-line of it, how it had always been the same story at different magnitudes.

He thought about his father. About *you are going to be a hockey player* as a door opened and a door closed simultaneously, and about how long he had been living inside the permission of it—allowed to be what he was on the ice, condensed into something smaller everywhere else. He thought about the specific exhaustion of that condensing, accumulated over thirty years, and about how it had been gradually released: a Nashville bar where he had let his wrist go loose on a table and nobody noticed; a Las Vegas hotel room where he had given Shane his real phone number and felt, just for a moment, entirely visible to no one; a Montreal hospital room where he had brushed his fingers over Shane's face for three seconds before the nurse walked in; a Boston apartment at midnight, cereal going cold on the counter, saying *I am bisexual* for the first *real* time and watching the word land on Shane's face across the distance. Harris, who had been gay like breathing and had looked at Ilya and seen a good ally, and Ilya standing outside the lit window of it, wanting desperately to be let in, trying to make himself legible to someone who was already safe. Troy, who had sat across from him in a bar and done the math slowly and arrived, finally, at *oh*—the sound of a man seeing something that had been there the whole time.

He thought: *I thought I was so obvious*. He had thought this for thirty years. He had thought that everyone in every room could see exactly what he was and had simply, mutually, chosen not to say it. He had lived, for thirty years, in the peculiar privacy of the man who believes he is transparent and discovers, slowly, that he is opaque.

The protection of it. The loss of it. Both true.

He thought about Troy, who had kissed Harris in the locker room in front of the whole team in January and who had been, since then, the specific quality of lighter that Ilya associated with putting something down that was very heavy. Ilya had watched him for a moment after it happened and then looked away, because some moments were not for witnesses.

He thought: there is a version of himself who did not arrive here. That version had the system. The system had worked. It had been, in its way, a kind of mercy, a structure that kept him intact when he had needed to be intact. He did not hate that version. He was grateful to that version. But he was also, he thought—standing in this specific backyard, in this specific light, wearing the jacket he had cried into for twenty minutes—done being grateful to the cage for keeping him safe.

Shane looked at him. He smiled the way he smiled when it was just them; not the PR smile, not the press conference smile, not the warm public version, but the particular private one, the one Ilya had first seen in a hotel gym in Los Angeles in 2009 and had been trying to get back ever since.

Micheline said, "You may now kiss."

Ilya kissed him. It was not the best kiss they had ever had—there had been better ones and there would be better ones and the ranking was not meaningful—but it was the one with the most witnesses, which meant it was the most seen. There was something in that. There was something in standing in July light in the backyard of a house in Ottawa, kissing the person he had been in love with across eleven years and two rival teams, with everyone who mattered watching.

From somewhere to his left, Harris made a sound that was not exactly a sob but was adjacent to one. Cliff said, "Oh come on, man," in a voice that was also not exactly a sob. Hayden Pike said "Finally!" at a volume that seemed slightly uncalled for.

Ilya pulled back. He looked at Shane's face: his eyes, the freckles, the smile, the particular quality of his attention which had always felt, from the very beginning, like being completely, utterly seen.

He had spent a long time not wanting to be seen.

He looked at Shane. He thought: *there it is. That's the word.*

It had taken him long enough.

End Notes

thank you for reading !! comments and kudos are little treats that brighten my day, so let me know what you thought heart emoji

there were definitely different scenarios i could have picked for the (5) leading up to the wedding (involving the centaurs more, involving hayden, involving boston more explicitly) but i was happy to keep kind of the haunted theme for this work. if you're interested in seeing any specific take on this small au, let me know!

planning to take this off anon depending on the reception but i'm #shy so not right now

list of some other unintentional changes i realized in post but i was in too deep to change:

- the cliff/shane hit happens in boston, not montreal lmao
- some timeline issues with harris and ilya
- probably other things that you could point out in comments but pls don't (π~~π) most of the changes were intentional i #swear

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!