

Tightrope

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Tightrope

by [yzba](#)

Summary

Las Vegas, 2014

Shane doesn't walk out of the hotel suite, choosing honesty instead.

Notes

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

Ilya can hear Hollander walking across the room and the suite's door opening. There's a moment's pause, longer than it should probably be, considering how paranoid the man is of getting caught.

Ilya holds his breath. What just happened was probably one of the hottest encounters of his life, and yet, there's something strangely unsettling in his gut that he's trying hard to ignore.

There's a lot he's been trying to ignore in the last few months, but it's easier to manage if he doesn't have Hollander in front of him.

The door finally closes, and Ilya exhales slowly, but his relief is short-lived when he hears careful footsteps make their way back to the bedroom. He glances up, and finds Shane walking toward the large window, seemingly carefully avoiding looking at him.

"Wh-" He barely has time to think before he's interrupted.

"Stop." Shane seems to breathe in sharply. "If I leave without saying something, I don't know what version of me is going to walk out that door."

Ilya frowns and straightens up. "Hol-"

He's interrupted again.

"Shut up. If you've got any minuscule shred of respect for me, and I know that's a bit of a stretch, but if you do, as a human being, as a fellow hockey player, as the guy you've been doing." Shane gestures, seemingly trying to encompass years of shared history. "Whatever the fuck you've been doing with."

There's a second of irritation. Is he supposed to acknowledge the request, or just let the other man go on? "I do. Respect you."

"Then let me get this out before I chicken out and change my mind. I'm about to hand over a fuckton of ammunition I'd rather not give you, but I think I need to." Shane breathes in and out, and Ilya can see him brace himself. By now, the other man is standing in front of the window, his back to Ilya. The angle allows Ilya to see his face in the reflection, but he doubts the reverse is true.

Besides, Shane is clearly not looking at anything in particular. His gaze is distant, lost somewhere.

"I'm gay." Shane says, then snorts. "Irony that the only time I've ever used the words out loud is to the one person on the planet who already knows it."

It's still staggeringly courageous. Ilya doesn't think he's ever outright confirmed his own sexuality to anyone, even those who already know.

"I've always had a fucked up relationship with sex. Attraction-" Shane seems to be hesitating. "It's not something that's ever come easy. I've never quite understood it the way

other people seem to. There've been girlfriends, and more or less successful attempts at satisfying them. I thought there was something wrong with me. I used to wonder if men would work better, but it felt abstract. I've spent most of my life in locker rooms, and I'd never in my life been even the slightest bit tempted to look at anyone. The showers were never an exercise in self control."

Ilya desperately wants to speak up, but Shane continues on. "There is one fucking exception to that. A single time where I couldn't seem to keep my eyes to myself, and it's just my luck that it happened to be an obnoxiously mouthy Russian asshole."

That particular shower is forever implanted in Ilya's mind. He remembers the steam rising around the both of them, and the water streaming down that perfect body, remembers the weight of Shane's gaze and the heat twisting in his own guts. He also remembers being crashed on the floor in a hotel gym, sweat pouring down with his heartbeat pounding in his ears, and not all of it had to do with the gruelling cardio session. A lot of it had to do with dark eyes staring at him, and the way Hollander's freckles seemed starker in the bright light. He remembers meeting those same dark eyes for the first time in Regina and being intrigued. He'd heard of Shane Hollander before, of course he had. The boy was lauded as one of the best players seen in generations. He'd known they would be pitted against each other during the tournament, and probably during the upcoming draft.

None of that explained the heat he remembers feeling back then despite the extreme cold of that particular December day.

6 years later, and that heat is still there, only it's turned into an out of control inferno.

"Men are definitely more satisfying than women ever were, but even then, it's mostly a biological thing. It's not really attraction. It's something I do to relax and get rid of excess energy, and honestly, most of the time I'm fine with handling myself. I'm only hooking up when it feels like I'm crawling out of my skin."

This whole discussion is fucking with Ilya's mind. For one, the difference between their libidos is sort of insane. For two, what he's hearing is so very far from his own experience with taking this man to bed that he has trouble reconciling the two.

For three, the implied fact that he's not the only man in Shane's bed makes him mildly homicidal. Also a hypocrite considering his own body count.

"Once again, the only outlier is Ilya fucking Rozanov." Shane shakes his head. "The only man who can match me on the ice, the only one who can make me see actual red by pissing me off. The only time I've ever stared at someone in the shower, and the only person who can turn me into a cock hungry slut." There's a sneer in Hollander's voice that makes Ilya flinch. "I'm terrified of what other exception you might turn out to be. You already turn me inside out, and it's getting dangerous. It feels like I'm getting to the point of no return. Fuck." A hand raises up to press against dark eyes.

Ilya swallows hard.

“Tonight’s just the proof that I can’t keep doing this if I want to be able to keep looking at myself in the mirror.” The hand drops, along with Shane’s head. There’s a tremor in his voice when he goes on.

“I’m so fucking close to something life ruining. And it would be.” The words seem to hurt as Shane speaks them. “I could deal with falling for someone who can challenge me on and off the ice, with someone who can take me out of my own head. Someone who was so fucking careful with me that he made sure to ask if I was okay about a dozen time the first time he fucked me. I could probably deal with being one of many no matter how I feel about it.” He snorts. “I can deal with being called boring, and a prude.”

There’s a pause and Ilya braces himself because he doesn’t like any of this, but it feels like it’s about to get worse.

“I can’t risk falling for someone who’s perfectly happy to ghost me for six months only to use me as little more than a blow up doll. Yes, tonight was scorching hot, but it also feels like I could have been any hole and you’d have gotten the same result. And honestly, if that’s how it is, silicone would do the job, and wouldn’t leave me feeling like a cheap trick. This is fucking with my head, and I can’t-” Shane swallows, and closes his eyes.

Ilya looks at him, and aches.

“I’m terrified of what I’ll accept if I fall in love with you. You saw me on the verge of a breakdown in that bathroom tonight, and instead of asking what was wrong, you decided the best thing you could do was push me a little closer to it. Fuck. you saw me hanging by my fingernails, and you didn’t even have the decency to just walk away. No, you took my hand and decided it’s more fun if you just let me drop off that ledge.”

It hurts.

Watching this particular man breaking down in front of him, because of him feels like something is shredding his insides. Ilya knows he’s always had a streak of selfishness. He takes people to bed, and discards them without a thought the moment they’re done. He’s reckless with himself and rarely cares about the collateral damage he might be inflicting on bystanders. The list of people he truly cares about is small.

He’s spent the last six months trying to convince himself Shane Hollander isn’t at the top of that fucking list.

Shane isn’t the only one who’s realized how bad an idea they are, or how impossible it would be to let this go on as it has.

This man, this rival who’s the only real competition he’s ever had on the ice, who’s everything Ilya isn’t, shouldn’t have the hold he has on his heart.

Shane Hollander is serious where he himself tends to be anything but. He shies away from crowds and the spotlight. He’s quiet, polite and he’s reserved. The only waves he seems to be comfortable making are on the ice and he does his best to be all but invisible unless it

concerns hockey. He doesn't seem to indulge in any sort of vice and could be the poster boy for healthy living.

He should be boring.

And yet, he haunts Ilya's days. Not just the taste of his skin or the scent of his hair (though it does feature heavily in the lineup), not even the freckles he wants to take his time mapping out (and that's something he's been thinking about since Regina).

It's the way he can make "asshole" sound affectionate, the way he smiles on the ice and lights up after he's scored. The way he gives himself to Ilya, seeming to trust he wouldn't be hurt. It's his reputation as a captain and the way French seems to flow out of him as easily as English does.

It's the constant challenge of him and the way it forces Ilya to be better.

His nights aren't any better. Memories and fantasies mixing in equal parts. The common need to not think about him whenever he's with someone else.

Failing at that last one more often than not. Waking up, reaching for something he's never had.

He's ashamed at the knowledge that tonight was an attempt at having his cake and eating it too. Sex, but nothing else, and as much distance as could be feasible given what they were doing.

Unable to help himself, he gets up, off the bed, and crosses the room, headless of his lack of clothing. He makes his way until he's standing behind Shane, desperate to touch, but knowing it's not the time. This close, he can see the way those dark eyes glisten in his reflection.

Shane sways a little. "I need this to stop before it's too late. Bad enough that I'm gay, if I'm lucky, I can keep that underwrap until I retire and fade out of public life. I can get by with anonymous hookup in bars."

A long slow blink is accompanied by another sway, like Shane's body wants nothing more than to lean back into Ilya's. "There's nothing special about me. If I can avoid getting caught, there's no reason for the press to look too closely."

Ilya very much disagrees with that statement.

"I need this to stop. I need you to keep fucking other people, and to forget you've ever seen me on my knees. If you could forget this discussion, I'd appreciate it, but I'd settle for not using it as chirp material."

He can see Shane swallow a few times and has to bite his cheek to avoid speaking up.

"Hopefully, by the next time we play each other, I'll have my walls shored up, and we can just ignore each other whenever the league decides to pit us against one another."

Something in the phrasing, in the tone makes Ilya think this was it. He takes a few moments, hoping he won't garble his English too much because this feels too important.

Unfortunately, emotions running high are always the times when it's harder to find the right words.

He takes one more deep breath. "Is okay to talk?"

Shane gives a jerky nod in answer.

"I'm sorry." He says, and finally meets Shane's gaze when the other man looks up in surprise. It's still through their reflections, but it's better than nothing. "Tonight, I protect myself. Forgot to protect you too."

Dark eyes widen.

"Tried to give us what we want, not what we need."

Shane frowns, and Ilya lets out some Russian, cursing himself for his inability to make himself understood.

He tries again. "I know it's dangerous. Needing you, this," he gestures, trying to encompass everything they were to each other. "Is bad idea. Feel too much so I tried to stay away." He swallows. "Six months. Failed. Can't. I thought maybe something would be better than nothing. Could be enough."

He rubs at his face, impatient with himself. Shane moves, turning around to face him, and Ilya finally finds himself face to face with the man he can't get away from.

Doesn't really want to get away from in truth.

"Sorry. More important a topic is, harder English is." He tries to explain.

Shane takes a step forward, closing some of the distance between them. "Take your time, I don't mind."

Ilya tries to slow himself down. A lot of the time, translating most discussions is easy. He's still learning vocabulary, and his structure still sucks, but he's improving constantly. In fact, he finds himself needing to outright translate less and less.

But not right now.

Right now, it feels like he's only just starting to understand the language. He has a flash of a memory, of himself in an alley behind a rink, somewhere in the middle of Saskatchewan, face to face with the very same man and having to search for his words - he'd been tongue-tied then too.

"You're in my head all the time. Every day. Too much." He shakes his head. "Russia not so accepting of people like us. Is dangerous. There are many bad laws." He swallows. "Sochi was reminder."

Something seems to dawn on Shane's face. "Don't know how to have hockey, Russia and you. Is impossible."

"Being back in Russia made you realize you had to choose between your country and your sexuality." Shane prods.

Ilya nods than shakes his head no. "I wanted to show you Moscow, introduce to friends, try Russian food." He hesitates for a moment. "Show you my mother's grave."

"Ilya." Shane breathes out, and it sends a shiver down Ilya's back. It's the first time he's heard his name coming from Shane and he instantly wants to hear it again and again.

"Wanted to play one on one where I learn to skate. Wanted to call after Latvia game. Wanted hug. Too much."

One more deep breath, and he finally admits out loud what he's been fighting against for so long.

Probably years. Maybe from day one.

"Of course I want sex. You're perfect. But I want more. Want you. I want to wake up with you. I want to argue every day."

Shane blinks rapidly, staring at him. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Can't say words." He has a moment of hesitation, but those warm brown eyes are robbing him of the desire to elude the question. "Mean them."

Shane takes another step forward, not quite touching, but close enough to feel the warmth of his body. "I need to make absolutely sure I just heard you right. I'm sorry if you feel like I'm doubting you, but I'm going to recap what I just got from that, and I need you to say yes or no. Is that okay?"

Ilya is nodding before Shane is done asking. "Is good idea."

"Alright, don't hesitate to stop me, or to ask for precision if you're not clear on a word. I don't mind the language barrier and I don't mind explaining."

This time, it's Ilya's turn to blink rapidly, because it's clear how sincere Shane is.

"At some point around the Olympics, you came to a few realizations." Shane starts, lifting a hand with a single finger raised. "The short boring Canadian that's always around isn't just a hookup."

Ilya smirks.

Another finger goes up. "You want to show said short boring Canadian your life in your home country like it's some sort of montage in a rom com movie."

The smirk turns into an amused grin, appreciating the gentle humor in an emotionally loaded moment.

A third finger. “Your home country is filled with homophobes who would rather arrest us than tolerate seeing us hugging, never mind anything slightly more explicit.”

The grin fades, and Ilya reaches for Shane’s pinkie, tugging it up alongside the other three.

“Russia is difficult. Family is difficult.”

“How so?”

Ilya hesitates. The last few months have been particularly difficult on the family front, and he would rather avoid the topic completely.

But Shane’s already been so honest, breaking himself open for Ilya.

“My father is not proud. He’s hard man, police. Blamed me for losing Latvia match. Wanted me to play KHL, not NHL.”

Shane stares at him for a second. “Time out. He blamed you for that game? Ilya,” a shiver goes down his spine at the way his name sounds, and from the glint in Shane’s eyes, the man caught the movement and is probably planning on using it against him. “You were the only thing that wasn’t a shit show during that game. Your team was a disaster, your goalie was injured and Latvia was on fire. There’s no way you could have won that game by yourself.”

“Was captain. Was my responsibility.”

“Well that’s bullshit.” Shane mutters.

Ilya agrees, but simply goes back to the earlier topic. “My brother, Alexei, he’s not good man. Wants money, always more money.” A beat. “Also police.”

“So on top of being in your homophobic home country with the guy you want to cuddle and show around, you have to deal with a lot of familial pressure.” Shane raises his thumb. “And also, knowing you and how competitive you are, the Latvia loss was just one more thing that would have gotten stuck in your head.”

“Da.”

“With all of that running around your brain, your best solution was to ghost me because you had no idea how to have the discussion that you wanted to stop everything.”

Ilya winces. “Not proud.”

Shane shrugs. “Heh. I won’t lie and say I’ve never been tempted to do that exact same thing.” He shakes his head a little. “What about tonight? Because I can understand what happened for those six months, but I—” Shane stops and stares at Ilya.

Who can only send him a sheepish smile.

“You fucking panicked. You were a dumbass, and I can’t bitch about that, because I’ve been a dumbass about you too, but you saw me, and what, went into extra obnoxious mode?” Shane realizes.

“Was happy to see you but could tell something wrong. Had to follow you to bathroom. Couldn’t stay away.”

“I followed you in Sochi, and that was stupid of me, so I get that part.”

It’s not a conscious choice, but Ilya suddenly finds himself reaching for Shane, hands sliding underneath the jacket and cupping the other man’s hips. “You had tears. Could tell you hurt, and I-” He swallows. “I wanted to touch, to wrap in my arms. Knew I couldn’t. Sex, is good way to make me feel better, and could get to touch you.” He adds.

“You mean the hormones you get from it help your mood? And it was an easy way to touch me without having to admit to anything.” Shane asks, and Ilya’s once again grateful for the way he doesn’t seem to mind having to reformulate.

He nods. “Yes. Hormones help.” He hesitates before adding. “Tried to keep a little distance once here. Couldn’t do it face to face. Feel too much.”

Shane swallows hard, but presses one hand to Ilya’s chest. “You didn’t let us kiss. Was that a conscious decision?” He asks.

Ilya knows he makes a face at the question, but he can’t help himself. “I wanted to. Always want to. I love your mouth, love kissing you, but I was afraid couldn’t let you go if I did.”

Shane closes his eyes and takes the final step that still separates them. He leans forward, and presses his forehead to Ilya’s collarbone. “It hurt.” There’s a tremor in his voice that sends a sharp stab of regret through Ilya. “It was the worst part of it. I don’t mind the power games, but not kissing you, that’s the part that really got to me. It felt so impersonal. I think it’s my favorite part of being with you.”

Finally, finally, Ilya allows himself to wrap his arms around Shane in the hug he’s been wanting for so very long. “I think I show too much.” He murmurs.

Shane snorts, but doesn’t bother moving away. “If I allow myself to really look at it without any denial filter? You absolutely do, but I think it’s a big part of why I kept coming back. You were always careful with me and downright tender at times. I felt important. Like I matter. Even that very first kiss made me feel like I was special.” He rubs his nose against Ilya’s chest a little and Ilya tightens his hold in answer. “The deliberate lack of it tonight, on top of the last six months and the mind games, it was the last straw. I could feel myself shattering in slow motion. I wasn’t exaggerating when I said I didn’t know what would walk out of here if I didn’t speak up.”

Ilya whines a little. “I’m sorry. I did not think I could go back to how things were if I kiss you.” Laying his cheek on the top of Shane’s head, he lets himself ask. “Is too late?”

The hand that's still pressed against his breastbone glides up until Shane buries his fingers in Ilya's hair, looking up at him. "I don't know if there's such a thing as too late with you. Even if I'd just walked out of here, I don't think I could have stayed away."

Ilya knows he wouldn't have been able to either. The only possible answer is to let his head be tugged down to meet Shane's.

The kiss is everything he's wanted for so long. There's heat because it's them and there's been heat since the first time they shook hands. But more than that, there's affection and tenderness, and a level of care that promises to be utterly addicting. There's no rush here.

He doesn't know how much time goes by before he gently disengages, just enough to murmur. "Stay the night?" Another press of lips. "Want to wake up with you."

"It's such a bad idea." Shane whispers back.

"I'm not hearing no." Ilya gently teases.

"Because I don't want to say no." Shane presses a kiss to the underside of Ilya's jaw. "You sure?"

"Dumb question." He says with a grin. "I think you should get out of your clothes and into bed with me."

Shane rolls his eyes. "Of course you want me naked." He pushes away and lets his eyes wander down. "I am enjoying the reversal though. You're a hell of a sight."

"I really liked the view earlier." Ilya comments, hands travelling up to push the jacket off Shane's shoulders.

Undressing him takes longer than it usually does, but that's because Ilya takes his time with it.

By the time they slip back under the sheets, both of them are more than half hard, but the moment feels too precious to do anything about it.

They settle on their sides, facing each other, and Ilya tangles his legs between Shane's.

"What now?" Ilya asks and Shane sighs.

"I guess it depends on the risks we're willing to take. We could just do nothing, but I'm already pretty damn certain it wouldn't work for long. Not now that I know I'm not the only one who feels too much."

Ilya gives a small shake of his head, discarding the idea. Now that he knows their feelings are shared, he can't imagine calling everything off.

"Status quo. We see each other for a few hours a few times a year whenever our teams are playing each other and when we have to make appearances together."

“Not enough.” Ilya blurts out and gets a snort in answer.

“No kidding. We can try to give this a real go. Find ways to be together as much as possible despite our schedules. Hope we can keep it quiet until we’re ready to hang up our skates.”

Ilya breathes in before voicing the last option. “Or we come out.”

“Probably killing both our careers and putting your legal status in jeopardy.”

“No right answer. No easy answer.” Ilya murmurs.

Shane shrugs. “No. Nothing about this is going to be easy.” There’s a beat of silence. “Would you be willing to do the third option, and try to plan an eventual coming out?” He asks, cautiously.

“What do you mean?”

“I think there are some factors that make a coming out impossible in the short term. But we might be able to mitigate some of those.”

Ilya scrunches his nose. “Mitigate?”

“Ease up, lessen. Maybe get rid of some of them.” Shane explains.

“Like what?”

“Your legal status for one. If you’re willing to apply for either a Canadian or American citizenship, it would protect you.”

“Americans are dumb. They have stupid laws. They don’t really like Russians all that much, and not all of them have open-mind.” He answers, thinking it through. He can’t say he’s never considered the idea. Every trip back to Russia is more uncomfortable than the previous one. The older he gets, the more he understands just how constrictive his nation is.

Being in Russia feels like holding his breath.

“And Canada?”

“Boring, but better. Maybe possible.” He says.

“It would mean trading to a new team.” Shane warns. “I can think of four teams that would allow us to be within the same radius as we are now. Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa and Québec.”

Ilya hums.

“Not Montreal. Would love to play with you, but couldn’t hide us.” He muses out loud.

“Agreed.” Shane’s obviously amused at the comment.

“Toronto as shithead on team. Ottawa is bad, and Québec speaks only French.”

“Not the players, but for the city, you’re mostly right. Honestly, whichever you choose, it feels like asking you to sabotage your own career.”

Ilya trails a calming hand down Shane’s back. “Even without you, I would think of citizenship. America still be shitty choice.” He considers. “Other cities in Canada, what can you tell?”

Shane takes the time to think it through. “Winnipeg, Calgary and Edmonton are generally a lot more conservative than the rest of the country. Vancouver would definitely be friendlier.”

“But other side of the country.”

“Yes.”

Another moment of consideration before Ilya just shakes his head. “Need to think about it. I still have a few years on my contract with Boston.” He makes a face. “Probably need new agent. Mine is Russian.”

“That was my next suggestion. Would you be willing to share an agent with me?”

“I think so, why?” He questions.

“Farah is fantastic, and I think we could probably tell her everything. She’d be able to help us. Eventual trades, accidental coming out, citizenships, maybe even get us shared appearances.”

“Like CCM shoot?” How he remembers that one.

Shane blushes lightly. “Maybe. I can’t guarantee anything, but I think having her on our side would be a really good thing.”

“Is good idea.”

“I have others. Ways to see each other more often.” There’s something sheepish in the way Shane says it.

“Been thinking about it, have you?” He teases.

“Might have been wondering. A bit of an impossible dream, but it kept me busy when I wanted to text you but didn’t dare.”

“You always can.” Ilya says, and tugs Shane’s leg over his own, bringing the other man closer.

He craves the contact, and a part of him wants to gorge himself for the upcoming drought.

“Tell me those ideas.” He prods rather than thinking about going back to Russia and spending months without being able to see Shane.

“We sit down with the game schedule as soon as possible and we plan. Meet halfway between Boston and Montreal when we have longer breaks. We both have major airport hubs close by. There are plenty of cities we can meet in if we’re willing to spend a couple of hours on a plane. If we share an agent, we might be able to get you some gigs during the summer so you can’t spend all summer in Russia. My cottage is very private and we could hide out there easily. We can meet up if both our teams play in New York at the same time. There might be some layovers that match too.”

He seems to hesitate.

“Tell me.” Ilya prods again.

“My team is already convinced I am, or at least was hooking up with someone called Lily in Boston. If you’re okay with it, I could use that story, turn it into something serious.”

“A fake girlfriend?”

“Maybe. It might even allow me to spend the night at your place when we’re playing in Boston.”

Ilya frowns. “Won’t they want to meet her?” He asks.

Shane snorts. “I could say she’s a die hard Bears fan and we’re dating despite me playing for Montreal and she has no interest in meeting my team. I could give her a job working shifts and explain that we have so little time together, introducing her to them isn’t exactly a priority. Depending on how far we want to take things, I could say she’s actually working for the Bears’ organisation, that would help explain the schedule, and might justify her travelling with the team when you come to Montreal.” He shrugs. “They all know I disappear as soon as possible after a game against Boston. I don’t think they would be surprised if Lily turned into an actual girlfriend. I don’t know if you’re aware of just how much we actually text each other, and while we know it’s a lot of trash talk and scheduling, the rest of them don’t know that.”

Still frowning, Ilya asks. “They won’t ask questions?”

“How often have you called me boring?” Shane gives him a pointed look. “I’ve been hearing that shit from pretty much everyone since I was a teenager. I don’t share my private life, I rarely go out, I don’t have scandals. Never thought being a cliché would help, but then again, I never thought I’d have a reason to lean into it.”

“Cliché? I do not understand.”

Shane sighs. “Japanese people are notoriously serious, and hard working. Dating is infrequent and quiet. They’re overachievers and polite. Boring.” He shrugs. “I am most of that. My life revolves around hockey and I’m famously obsessive about it. I’ve never been fond of it, but might as well make it work for us.”

“I-” Ilya starts, but doesn’t quite know what to say. He has called Shane boring a lot, ever since they first met. A lot of the time, he’s meant it, even if it’s also been a useful taunt to

tease and hide how he felt.

“Listen, I’m a crap actor, but if I can keep my cool, no one should have a reason to look too deep. Ideally, we’d find a way to change the whole rivalry narrative so we could at least be seen speaking at an event without it making the news. Shit, maybe Lily can make us bury the proverbial hatchet. Sharing an agent could do the same thing for that matter.”

“You’re always afraid. Bought building to fuck in.” He points out. This is a huge amount of risk for someone who’s proven to be so paranoid about secrecy.

“I’m still terrified. I still think I have a lot to lose if we get found out. We’re still a terrible idea.” Shane leans forward a little, and presses a kiss to Ilya’s cheek. “But there’s a difference between hiding repeated gay hookups with my rival, and keeping an actual relationship quiet. The first one is dangerous but the other one? Worth the risk. And now that I know you feel the same way, I feel a little braver.”

Ilya turns his head enough to catch the next kiss on the lips rather than his cheek. It’s quiet and he revels in it. “Plenty brave.” He murmurs. “Also more suspicious to act like we have something to hide.”

Shane snorts. “There’s that. Guess I can sell the building.”

Ilya smirks. “And me? How do we hide me?” A tiny part of him would miss the empty condo, but he’s been wanting to be let into Shane’s private space for so long that he’s mostly excited.

Shane stills and seems to hesitate, so Ilya pokes his chest. “Tell me.”

“It depends on what you want.”

“Shane.” He’s starting to think he won’t like whatever the man has to say.

“Me keeping a serious relationship quiet is probably expected, but you have a very different reputation.”

“Ah.” Is all Ilya can say.

“Jane could be your Montreal hookup and we make up a Boston regular. I could be Jane, and Sheila, and Marie, and Isabel. I could be a dozen of your conquests. We could hide Jane in the middle of your usual roster and no one would wonder.” Shane blurts out before wincing. “I don’t know how many men slip into your regular habits, and I honestly don’t want you to tell me. But can I be the only one from now on?”

Ilya stares. “No man, but you’re okay with women.” He knows it comes out a little flatter than he’d prefer but he’s reeling.

“I’m not asking for exclusivity, I can’t ask you that.”

“Why? And what about you?” He’s getting a little angry.

“We’ve already discussed the differences between my sex drive and yours. I don’t want anyone else in my bed. But Ilya.” Shane swallows. “If even a fraction of your rumored body count is accurate -”

“You think I can’t do it?”

“Do you even want to?” Shane says and raises a hand between them, taking a breath at the same time, obviously trying to calm himself.

Ilya wishes for some of that calm.

“We’re looking at seeing each other once, maybe twice a month if we’re lucky with scheduling. You’re gone all summer, every summer. We’ve always put this on pause during the playoffs. That means weeks, sometimes months without seeing each other. For years on hand. Probably a decade at least. Do you want to go without for that long?” He shakes his head a little. “Would I prefer to be your only one? Of course I would. I’m not looking forward to that part at all. But sharing you is better than forcing you into something you’re not ready to do. You’d end up resenting me, and that’s not something I can deal with.”

“You think I would cheat.” Part of him is insulted, but he’s also very aware of both his public reputation, and their own personal history of encounters. The way he treated Shane a matter of hours ago being only one of many examples of him being shitty to the man.

“I think that no matter how much I trust you, I don’t trust that I can be enough to keep you.”

Ilya reels back. “What?”

“I can’t be your partner to the outside world. It might be a very long time before I can hold your hand in public. Even if we could be seen together, I wouldn’t go out to clubs with you, I am absolutely as boring as you’ve always accused me of being. You love women, and a woman could give you a thousand things I’ll never be able to. You would be able to go to the fucking grocery store together, you could have children, you could keep your citizenship and show her Russia like you’ll never be able to with me. It would be so much easier than having a relationship with me.” There’s a bleakness in Shane’s eyes that breaks Ilya’s heart.

“Don’t want easy, I want you.” He answers and uses a finger to stop any further self disparaging comments. “Yes, have been many people, more and more the longer you and I have been doing this. But Shane? The more bodies, the less satisfied. Tried to lose myself in others, tried to convince myself I wasn’t looking for you in every new body.” He makes a face. “Failed. Still tried again. And again. Tried a lot.” That’s an understatement. He’s not ashamed of his sex life, but he’s not proud of it either. It was absolutely a case of quantity above quality. Because quality has become synonymous with freckles and quads that have been haunting his dreams for years. It’s the slope of an arched back and the eagerness of a once untrained mouth that could now get him off in a manner of minutes. It’s a voice whispering his name in a broken moan and kisses that make him feel drunk. “Life is lonely. I have a lot of friends but still always feel alone. Until text from Jane or game against Montreal. Sex is always a good distraction.” He answers.

Dark eyes examine him for a moment, and Ilya rubs his thumb across a plush mouth. "I just want you." He smirks. "You might end up limping if it's long time between meetings, but you're more than enough. Is Skype too. And phone."

The laughter that bursts out of Shane is bright and loud. "Ah, so it's all a ploy to win against us. Fuck me hard enough to make me limp right before a game."

"Is good idea, but not necessary. Bears is best team with best player." He teases back before tugging Shane closer. "You're enough. I promise."

There's more heat in this kiss, but Ilya's still content to enjoy the freedom to cuddle without fear.

"So how do I do this?" He asks.

Shane shrugs. "I don't know. Me being monogamous and discreet isn't a stretch. You doing either is. It's even worse if you do both at the same time."

"Monogamous means one lover only?" Ilya thinks he's got it right, but it's too important to risk being wrong. Besides, he's enjoying the way Shane doesn't seem to be bothered by his still improving English.

Shane nods in confirmation. "If you stop going out to clubs and picking up women, there'll be a lot of attention on you. If people think you stopped hooking up because you have someone serious, there's going to be a witch hunt to find you managed it. Or maybe an intervention. Guess it depends on your teammates."

"If I get serious girlfriend in Montreal at the same time you have someone in Boston and we disappear when teams play each other, would be too suspicious."

"Too many coincidences. The press and the fans are unfortunately observant."

Ilya hums, turning things over. "Jane stays. I'm attached to her." He says with a smirk and Shane blushes. "My team has seen texting also." He makes a face, because there's only one obvious solution. "I pretend. Still go out, dance with pretty women, but leave alone. Come home to Skype date?" He brushes a hand down a naked back, enjoying not having to second guess every touch anymore. "Slow change. Less and less women. Trade could explain bigger change. New city, new team, new beginning. New outlook. Only one woman."

"If it comes to it, we could find you a beard I guess." Shane says with obvious disdain.

"Beard is hair on a face, yes?"

Shane chuckles. "It's also an expression. Usually a woman who agrees to pretend to be a gay man's girlfriend. We could get an NDA in place."

Ilya nods at the explanation. "Would rather not." He thinks it through. "But I have friend. Since kids, close, intimate." He'd rather avoid saying she's a friend with benefits, but from the glint in dark brown eyes, he doesn't need to. "Maybe she says yes. Very good friend. Sergei Vetrov's daughter." He adds. "She knows about me, she would not judge."

Shane is clearly unimpressed at the idea. “I guess we can think about it. We don’t have to make any decisions right now.”

“Except to be together. That’s a right now decision.” Ilya points out.

“Yeah. Our first move should probably try to get you to sign with my agent. It would potentially solve a lot of issues.”

“Will she say yes?” Ilya asks, curious.

“I’m pretty sure I’ll have to come out. Maybe for both of us, but once that’s done, getting a meeting shouldn’t be a problem. She won’t sign you without a face to face meeting. She takes her relationships with her clients very seriously.”

“You will ask her for meeting? Is okay if you have to tell. You trust her.”

“Alright.” Shane gives a little tug to Ilya’s curls. “Now, we don’t have a lot of time, and I really need more kisses.” There’s a sultry smirk on that beautiful face that Ilya’s helpless against.

Letting himself sink into Shane is probably the easiest thing he’s ever done.

End Notes

I've sort of lost track of what canon comes from the book or from the show, so my personal headcanon is a mix of both, with some backstory of my own, of course. I haven't posted in close to fifteen years, so fingers crossed for me not screwing it up (I kinda want to add a disclaimer about not suing. Yes, it's been that long).

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