

The Edge of the World

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The Edge of the World

by [MeOnly](#)

Summary

The Ford is a rusted-out red bucket, the tent is a mess of orange nylon, and the Norwegian woods are a lot steeper than they looked on the map. The wilderness doesn't care about NHL standings, and right now, it's winning.

For six years, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov have lived in the quiet of hotel rooms and the heat of the game. But here, far away from the cameras and the crowds, their guard is finally starting to drop. Between charred sausages, a ruined pair of sneakers, and a leaking tent, they are running out of ways to hide from the truth.

As the summer ends, they have to decide if they are brave enough to stop being rivals and start being something else entirely.

The morning is quiet. The grass is grey with dew as they pull out of the driveway, the air cool enough to make Shane shiver. He'd insisted on renting this red Ford—a rusted-out bucket that he called "the authentic experience"—and it coughs as Ilya hits the street. Ilya looks at the dashboard like it's a personal insult. Shane knows he's thinking about his Ferrari.

Shane watches Ilya's profile in the dim light. He listens to the engine's uneven beat and almost hopes the car just stops. A stall would freeze the world right here. It would keep them trapped in the smell of old upholstery and cold air, holding the moment still before the real world starts calling them back.

A bottle of bug spray rattles in the door, breaking the silence. Shane reaches out to steady it and glances at the mess in the back seat. Tents, sleeping bags, and groceries are piled to the roof. It's a disaster, honestly.

They leave the city behind, passing quiet streets where only a few windows are lit. Shane leans his head against the glass. For six years, this is all they've had: fast, desperate nights in hotel rooms in cities like Detroit or Columbus. Quick sex after games where they spent an hour trying to smash each other into the boards.

Even then, Ilya always made a point of pinning Shane down. Shane can still feel it if he closes his eyes: the silver cross Ilya wears dangling cold against his skin, and the sound of Ilya's ragged breath in his ear. He loves it—the feeling of being held there by someone who actually can. Shane smiles at his reflection. He definitely has a thing for being pinned down.

Lately, though, it's been different. The hotel rooms turned into tuna melts in Ilya's Boston apartment and long nights on his massive sofa. And Shane, being Shane, freaked out. He remembers storming out of Ilya's place, stammering some lie about an early practice while trying not to see the hurt in Ilya's eyes. Maybe Ilya can feel him starting to spiral again, because he suddenly reaches across the gearbox and takes Shane's hand.

The shift happened so slowly Shane didn't even notice. Ilya Rozanov—the arrogant Russian superstar who can score fifty goals or bruise Shane's hips with the same ease—has become something else. Shane doesn't have a name for it yet. He just knows he somehow ended up asking Ilya to come to Norway. He blames the drugs they gave him in the hospital after his last concussion. They were good drugs. He still remembers Ilya visiting him in that white, sterile room, his large hand brushing Shane's cheek. It was the only thing that felt real.

Now, though, he's stone-cold sober and terrified. Coming out has never felt like an option. Not in their world. The locker room is still a place where "faggot" is a punchline and any sign of being "soft" is a target. Even with guys like Scott Hunter leading the way, the fear is still there, eating at him.

Every time he thinks about the flight back, a knot tightens in his chest. The new season is waiting for them, and the questions won't stop looping: What if Ilya decides this is too much work? What if the distance and the risk aren't worth it?

Or worse—what if he stays, and ends up in a grey interrogation room back home because he's been "corrupted" by a Canadian? It sounds like a bad Cold War parody, but the fear is real. Shane is most definitely freaking out. Again.

Ilya strokes the back of Shane's hand with his thumb. He meets Shane's gaze, and his eyes are uncharacteristically kind. Fuck.

Maybe it will be easier in the woods, away from the slurs and the cameras. He hopes so. Because when this car eventually turns back toward the airport, summer is over. The world will expect them to be rivals again. Just the thought of it makes it hard to breathe.

"We should've bought the one that expands," Ilya says. "Like fucking Transformer." He sounds just as pissed off as he does after a missed breakaway in the third period.

They're parked at the base of a trail that goes straight up the mountain. The plan was simple: pitch the tent, look like they know what they're doing, and start hiking before lunch. Instead, it's a total disaster. This tent—bought during a rush of "we're going to be outdoorsmen" energy in Oslo—is more complicated than any play Shane has ever seen on a whiteboard.

Shane leans against the rusted Ford and just watches him. He can't help but smirk. Ilya Rozanov, who can deke out the world's best defenders, is currently losing a fight to a pile of orange nylon. His hair is a mess, and he's somehow managed to tangle a cord around his ankle like a trap.

For a guy who spent the whole flight acting like a mountain was just another challenge to beat, Ilya looks exactly like what he is: a prince from Moscow who grew up in five-star hotels. He knows as much about the woods as Shane knows about Russian opera. In the NHL, someone else handles everything. Someone else books the flights, carries the bags, and makes sure the towels are warm. Out here, there's no PR team to make their incompetence look like "grit."

"The box said it's a four-man tent," Shane says, holding the manual. It's written entirely in Norwegian.

"Only if those four men are very small," Ilya mutters, "and have no personal boundaries at all." He gives the fabric a shove and looks up at the grey peaks and the endless trees. "Seriously, Hollander. You bring me to the edge of the world just to prove we are both idiots?"

"I think we bought a garden ornament," Ilya adds, kicking a pole. "Not a shelter."

"Maybe it's a test," Shane says. It's the kind of empty encouragement he usually uses in the locker room when they're down by three. "If we survive the tent, we might survive the trip."

That arrogant grin flickers across Ilya's face—the one that's way too charming to ignore. It makes it hard for Shane to keep his guard up.

Shane finally steps in and grabs a pole. They fumble through it together. Shane grew up in Ontario; he's seen trees, he's been to cottages. But he's starting to realize that this wilderness isn't like the woods back home. It's steeper, older, and right now, it's winning.

Leaving the crooked tent behind feels like a win, but Norway doesn't really do flat ground. It's all vertical rock and roots that look like they've been waiting a thousand years for a Canadian to trip over them. The sun is bright and mocking as Shane sits down on a slab of granite, trying to figure out how a single sock can cause this much trouble.

Physically, he's fine. He's a pro athlete; he's used to taking hits from guys twice his size. His lungs aren't even burning. But his left heel is screaming. He'd insisted on wearing his favorite white sneakers—the ones that looked so cool in Oslo—and now they're ruined. A dark, wet circle of red is soaking straight through the fabric.

"You okay down there, Hollander? Or did you find an interesting rock to talk to?"

Ilya is twenty yards up the trail, looking way too relaxed. He's wearing sneakers too, but he had the sense to buy thick wool socks at the airport. He's moving over the rocks like it's a flat sheet of ice.

Shane doesn't look up. He's pissed at himself. He's supposed to be the guy who's prepared, the one who handles the details. Being taken down by a blister feels like a stupid joke.

Ilya jogs back down, that familiar smirk on his face. "What is this? The great Canadian woodsman is defeated by a little hill? Is very embarrassing, Shane."

He stops when he sees the blood. The smirk doesn't go away, but the sharp edge of it softens. He drops down next to Shane, his eyes narrowing at the ruined shoe.

"Okay, wow," Ilya says, his voice changing. "That is actually a lot of blood. You decided to just walk until the bone shows? Very brave. Very stupid."

He looks around at the empty forest. "We have no Band-Aids. No kit. Instead, we have three types of expensive cheese and that water you said we needed. Maybe we can wrap your foot in brie?"

Shane looks at the empty space between them. A prickly heat crawls up his neck. He stares at a patch of moss, unable to meet Ilya's eyes as the full weight of his mistake hits him.

"It gets better," Shane says. He lets out a dry, sharp laugh. "The food? It's still in the car."

Ilya just stares at him. "You're joking."

"In the cooler. In the trunk. It's probably having a great time while we're up here starving."

Shane shuts his eyes, waiting for the ground to just open up and swallow him. It would be easier than sitting here, bleeding and empty-handed, under the gaze of the one person he always wants to impress.

Ilya keeps staring, the silence stretching between the pines until he breaks into a loud laugh of pure disbelief. He reaches out and claps a hand on Shane's shoulder. It's a warm, solid weight. Shane can't help it—he starts laughing too. The absurdity of it finally cuts through the pain in his heel.

"We are remarkably useless, aren't we?" Shane says.

Ilya grins. "Speak for yourself, Hollander. I'm a victim of your terrible leadership. I was told you had 'Canadian DNA.' Is fraudulent marketing, Shane. I should call your agent."

Shane presses his lips together and forces himself up, ignoring the spike of pain in his foot.

"We're going back down," he says, trying to sound like a captain again. "And you're going to walk ten feet behind me so I don't have to see you gloating."

"Yes, Captain," Ilya says, the smirk practically audible. He follows Shane down the trail, watching the pained hitch in his step with a soft, amused look in his eyes.

"This might be the best thing I've ever eaten," Shane says, holding up a blackened fork. It's a pathetic meal, but after the long walk back and the struggle to get damp twigs to burn, it feels like a feast. At least the beer is ice-cold.

"You see? Not total disaster," Ilya says, biting into his seventh charred sausage.

Something warms in Shane's chest that has nothing to do with the fire. Ilya leans back against a log, watching the sparks drift up toward the trees. "I'm glad we're here, Hollander. I mean it. I'm glad you invited me."

Shane watches the firelight on Ilya's face. Without thinking, he leans closer and hooks a finger around one of Ilya's dark curls, pulling it slightly before letting go. It springs right back against Ilya's forehead. Around them, the forest is a wall of black. It smells like woodsmoke and damp needles.

Ilya pokes at an ember with a stick. He looks like he's about to make a joke, but his voice is quiet when he finally speaks.

"Tell me about your parents," Ilya says.

Shane blinks, surprised by the shift. "What do you want to know?"

"Are they boring? David and Yuna, right? Is that where you get it from?"

Shane's mouth hitches up. "My dad works for the Treasury Board of Canada."

"Crazy," Ilya mutters.

"Fuck you," Shane replies, the words soft.

Ilya doesn't look away from the flames. "Do they know about you? That you're gay?"

A knot tightens in Shane's gut. He's spent years weaving a net of lies to protect them, or maybe just himself. He hates the deception, but he loves them too much to risk the truth. He looks out into the dark. It feels like the trees are leaning in, listening.

"No." He gives a quick shrug.

Ilya's face reflects the orange glow. "It's my fault?"

"I didn't say that." Shane swallows. "Don't—" He can't finish the thought. "But," he adds, quieter, "it might've been easier. Without... this. Without you."

Ilya doesn't answer. He just stares into the fire until the silence gets heavy.

"Do you think they would be okay?" Ilya asks. "If you told them?"

Shane looks at the shadows. "I don't know. Maybe. They're good people. It's just—they have this version of me in their heads, and I don't know what happens if I break it."

They sit in the quiet, the only sound the crackle of the wood. Ilya keeps glancing over his shoulder toward the edge of the light.

"What are you looking for?" Shane asks.

"Are there wolves here?" Ilya whispers.

Shane almost laughs, but he catches it. He keeps his face perfectly still.

"Thousands. But the birch trees are the real killers. They wait until you're sleeping and then they just... lean. They tilt over you until you're gone."

Ilya glares at him, like he's ready to bolt for the tent. Instead, he stretches out on the grass and drops his head into Shane's lap.

"Fuck you," he says, but Shane can see the small smile. Shane knows he's going to have a freezing, wet ass for the rest of the night, but he doesn't move. He wouldn't move for anything.

"I don't have to go back there anymore," Ilya says quietly. His feet are inches from the embers. "To Russia."

Shane feels a strange, lightheaded sensation. He just sits there under the weight of Ilya's head.

"Have you talked to your brother?" Shane asks.

"Alexei?" Ilya scoffs. "No. Not since the funeral. He only calls when he needs money."

Shane thinks about it all: the brother, the father who finally stopped breathing, the mother who's been gone so long.

“You must miss them,” Shane says softly. “Even if they suck.”

Ilya’s body goes stiff. The playfulness is gone.

“My mother didn’t suck.”

Shane realizes he wants it all. The messy parts, the quiet parts, the things Ilya kept locked away back in Moscow. It’s a strange feeling, holding him like this while he finally lets his guard down.

“How did she die?” Shane asks, his voice barely a whisper.

“By mistake,” Ilya says, his voice flat. “She swallowed a bottle of pills. My father was so hard on her.”

Shane doesn’t know what to say. He finds Ilya’s arm, his thumb tracing a slow line over the muscle.

“I found her,” Ilya adds. The last word breaks.

Shane feels a wave of grief for the kid Ilya was. He pulls Ilya closer, maneuvering him until he’s lying on his back in Shane’s lap. He holds him tight, like he can keep the rest of the world out. Ilya doesn’t fight it. He turns his face into Shane’s neck, his fingers twisting into Shane’s shirt. His breath comes in short, quiet hitches.

Above them, the stars are bright. When Ilya pulls back, his eyes reflect the firelight.

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” Ilya says.

Shane looks down at him—this giant he’s supposed to be rivals with. His heart is hammering.

“I mean...” Ilya starts, looking almost scared.

“I love you too,” Shane says.

Ilya stares at him, then lets out a broken breath. They are a mess of arms and legs, just holding each other while the fire dies down.

The orange glow is disappearing into white ash, and the damp cold has finally soaked through Shane’s pants. It’s impossible to ignore, even after everything they’ve just said.

“We should go to bed,” Shane whispers into the top of Ilya’s head.

Ilya sits up slowly, wiping his face with a soot-stained hand. He looks tired and completely open, the usual arrogant set of his shoulders gone. Shane watches him, feeling a pull in his chest that’s almost terrifying.

“This might be... interesting,” Ilya says. His voice is a little rough, and he’s looking at the tent with a lopsided, knowing grin.

Shane follows his gaze to the orange heap a few feet away. In the moonlight, it’s remarkably crooked.

The moment the flap is zipped shut, sealing them into the dark, the heat in Shane’s chest flares like wildfire. Ilya crowds Shane back against the sleeping bags. He’s so much larger than the space they’re in. It smells like nylon, old earth, and their own skin.

“Off,” Ilya mutters. It’s not a request.

Getting naked in a space built for children is a clumsy, desperate war. They’re on their knees, tangled in sleeping bags and hiking gear. Shane pulls at Ilya’s shirt with a roughness that nearly rips the fabric. In the scramble to get his own shirt off, Shane cracks his head against the main tent pole.

The structure groans. A clip snaps above them and a section of the roof sags, letting a sliver of moonlight cut through the dark. It hits Ilya’s face, catching the sharp line of his jaw.

“You’re very sexy when you fight tent, Hollander,” Ilya pants, his low laughter vibrating against Shane’s throat.

“Shut up,” Shane grunts, his hands already at the buttons of Ilya’s pants.

Ilya’s long limbs are everywhere—a knee knocks into a lantern, a foot gets tangled in a strap. But even as he trips over a rogue boot, his hands never leave Shane’s skin. They’re hot and searching, calloused palms sliding over Shane’s ribs, his grip leaving marks on Shane’s hips.

Shane’s heart is hammering. He watches Ilya’s silver cross swing in the moonlight, the metal cold as it grazes his collarbone. He wants the weight. He wants to be pinned down until he forgets everything else.

“The kit,” Shane gasps. His voice is wrecked. “In the side pocket. The blue bag.”

Ilya reaches back, knocking over a water bottle as he rumbles through the bags. He finds the tube of lube, but the box of condoms is buried somewhere under the collapsed corner of the tent.

Ilya’s hand stops for a second. “Shane,” he says, his voice rough and controlled. “Tell me.”

Shane’s throat works. “Don’t stop.”

The relief in Ilya’s face is almost violent. “Okay,” he breathes, like it costs him. “Okay.”

Shane lies back, the cold ground pressing against his spine through the thin foam. Ilya moves over him, a massive, solid heat. He’s a tangle of elbows and shoulders, his thigh catching on a zipper, but when he settles between Shane’s legs, the clumsiness is gone.

Ilya takes his time. He works the slickness over his fingers, his eyes never leaving Shane's as he opens him up with a slow, deliberate pressure. Shane arches his back, his fingers clawing at the floor, his breath coming in short, broken hitches.

When Ilya finally pushes into him, it stings—a sharp stretch that makes the world narrow down to a single, pulsing point.

The sting fades into a heavy fullness. Ilya feels massive inside him, a pressure so deep it feels like Shane is being changed from the inside out. It's the weight of the river again, but the current has stopped pulling; it's just a solid force holding him to the earth.

Ilya's face is inches from his, his skin slick and reflecting the moonlight. He looks desperate, stripped bare. He moves with a relentless rhythm that sends shocks of heat through Shane's whole body. There's no grace in it, just a blunt, honest force that makes Shane's breath hitch with every thrust.

"Ilya," Shane sobs, the name splintering in the quiet of the woods.

Shane feels the exact moment Ilya loses his grip. The muscles in Ilya's back coil, and his fingers lock with Shane's, crushing his knuckles against the floor. The pleasure is too much, a high-voltage current vibrating through Shane's blood.

He doesn't even have to touch himself. The friction of Ilya's weight and the heat of his skin is enough to break him. Shane's vision goes white, his body jerking in a release that leaves him gasping for air that won't come.

A second later, Ilya follows him. He lets out a guttural sound, burying his face in Shane's neck as he empties himself inside him. He collapses into a heavy weight, and Shane simply closes his arms around him, holding him there while the world stops spinning.

They stay like that for a long time, their hearts hammering against each other in the dark. The only sound is their ragged breathing and the first quiet drumming of rain against the roof.

The heat between them slowly settles into a deep, vibrating kind of tired. Shane lies there, listening as the rhythm of Ilya's chest steadies beneath his ear. He shifts closer, pulling the edge of the sleeping bag over them to keep the night out.

"I have an idea," Shane says. He keeps his ear pressed to Ilya's heart, his cheek stuck to Ilya's damp skin. The air in the tent has turned sharp—the kind of cold that makes you want to crawl inside someone else. He rolls onto his side, his shoulder digging into the thin mat as he finds Ilya's eyes.

Ilya lets out a massive yawn.

"What?"

"What if you played in Ottawa?"

Ilya doesn't move, but his breath catches for a second against Shane's forehead. "We'd still be rivals," he says, but there's no bite in it.

“Listen,” Shane says. His voice is flat and steady now, the way it gets in a huddle when the game is on the line. “It’s two hours from Montreal. They need a star center. They have the cap space.” He presses his forehead to Ilya’s. “We’re not fucking gladiators, Ilya. We don’t have to keep taking hits until we break.”

Ilya lets out a dry, tired breath. He reaches out in the dark, his fingertips tracing a bruise over Shane’s ribs, slow and distracted.

“We start a charity,” Shane says, his words coming faster now. “A foundation. We meet to discuss a ‘common cause.’ Something public. Something that makes sense for two captains. Like a hockey school.”

“Two captains, united by tragedy,” Ilya mutters. He sounds ironic, but it’s thin, like he’s too tired to really mean it. “Very noble. Very PR-friendly.”

“It’s our cover, Ilya. It’s how we get through the rest of it. All the years we have left on the ice. And then, when we retire...” Shane stops, leaning in to press his face into Ilya’s messy hair. “Then we can be together for real.”

Ilya goes still. He stares up at the orange roof, his eyes wide and dark in the sliver of moonlight. All his armor—the smirk, the hard look—is gone. He just looks raw. Young.

“You really think that far ahead, Hollander?” Ilya’s voice is barely a whisper. “You want that? To be together?”

Shane doesn’t blink. “I can’t stop thinking about it.” He swallows. “And yeah. It scares the shit out of me.”

Ilya hooks an arm around Shane’s neck and hauls him in, knocking the air out of his lungs. He holds him there, his grip tight enough to bruise, pinning Shane’s head against his shoulder.

“I want it too,” Ilya says into Shane’s hair. “I’ll do it. Whatever it takes.”

Shane tucks his chin under Ilya’s and closes his eyes. There’s nothing graceful about the way they’re tangled together—just two large, exhausted men in a neon-orange coffin built for people half their size.

“I will, too.”

Shane lets out a long breath and finally goes slack against the damp sleeping bag. The last thing he feels before the dark pulls him under is the soft pressure of Ilya’s lips against his forehead.

Shane dreams he is floating in a cold river. The water is heavy against his ribs, dragging him toward a silence he’s been carrying since he was eighteen. It’s the quiet of a stadium after the lights go out. He feels the current dissolving the ‘Captain’ on his chest and the rigid set of his

jaw. Without the weight of everyone's expectations, he is terrified he might just vanish, leaving nothing behind.

Someone is calling his name from the shore. Their voice is frantic.

"Shane, Shane... wake up!"

He jolts awake. Everything is wet. It's not just damp; it's a flood. Ice-cold water is pouring onto his chest, the sky taking a personal interest in ruining the night. The tent fabric sags under the weight of the rain.

"Holy hell!" Shane yells. He tries to sit up and cracks his forehead against a pole for the second time today.

He blinks through the spray, catching Ilya's outline. Ilya is hunched over their gear, trying to protect a dry towel like he's on a sinking ship.

"The tent is leaking, we have to go!" Ilya's voice is sharp, no irony left. He dives for the exit, grabbing Shane's arm. "Grab the bags!"

They bolt through the downpour, holding bags over their heads. The rain claims them instantly. Cold fabric clings to their skin like ice before they've even gone ten yards. Every step is a gamble in the mud.

"We really should have practiced in a garden first," Ilya pants once they are safely inside the car.

"Yeah, or stayed in my cottage in Ottawa," Shane says. He pulls off his soaked shirt, his hair plastered to his face in thick strings.

The car is a mess of elbows and cold skin as they fumble for dry clothes. It smells like wet wool and woodsmoke. Shane wrings out his socks over the floor mat while Ilya reaches for the keys, his fingers clumsy from the cold.

Ilya twists the ignition.

Click. Nothing. Not even a sputter. Just a hollow sound that disappears into the roar of the rain on the roof. The battery is dead.

Shane stares at the dashboard, then at Ilya, and then he starts to laugh. It's a bright, hysterical sound that bubbles up in his chest. Here they are—two of the most famous athletes in the world—stranded in a dead car in a forest where no one even knows they exist.

Ilya looks at him, his frustration shifting into a slow, lopsided grin. He leans back against the headrest and joins in with a dry chuckle.

"Perfect," Ilya mutters, wiping mud from his cheek. "We survive the trees just to be killed by a Ford."

"The plan, Ilya," Shane gasps, trying to catch his breath. "We have to add a part where we learn how to jump-start a car."

Ilya lets out a slow breath, a small smile softening his face. The rain is still drumming on the roof, but it's okay.

"What was your mother's name?" Shane asks quietly.

Ilya shifts, looking guarded but curious. "Irina. Why?"

"I was thinking about the hockey school. We give the money to suicide prevention. We could call it the Irina Romanova Foundation."

Ilya doesn't laugh. He doesn't move for a long second. Then he reaches across the center console, his hand finding Shane's knee and squeezing it. It's a hard, solid pressure. In a sudden flash of lightning, Shane sees him: the messy hair, the warm eyes, and that smile.

Ilya stays there, quiet, his thumb stroking the fabric of Shane's sweatpants. Shane leans his head against the cold window, watching the rain wash over the glass. This forest might be the edge of the world. But in the dark of the stalled car, it finally feels like he can breathe. The river has stopped dragging him down.

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