

The Other Side of the Road

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The Other Side of the Road

by [broccolicheddarchicken](#)

Summary

"No m'not," Shane said, somehow pressing his face even more into Ilya's body. "All I ever did was play hockey. Now, I don't know what I'm gonna do. I hope we have a baby soon."

The car went quiet at that. When Shane looked up, Ilya was looking out the window, jaw set.

"S' something wrong?" Shane asked. He ran his fingertips along the warm skin of Ilya's forearm.

Ilya turned back to face him, expression softened. Whatever pensiveness had taken hold of him was gone.

"No. Everything is perfect."

After sixteen seasons of professional hockey, Shane Hollander retires from the NHL in the interest of starting a family with his loving husband. It's maybe a little earlier than he would've liked, but with his thirty-five year old knees beginning to protest, it makes sense.

He's happy. He and Ilya have been working towards this for nearly a decade.

He's also terrified, wondering if this is the biggest mistake of his life, and thinking that maybe he should take it all back. But mostly, he's happy.

Notes

hello, everyone! I really should've been doing schoolwork, but instead I headed into the kitchen to cook up another post-canon oneshot for y'all. i hope you love it.

the biggest of thanks to my insightful, talented, lovely, gorgeous beta readers for this one: artimus13 and [moonsock](#). seriously this fic would not be nearly as polished or touch on as many themes as it does without their feedback.

as always: I hope you enjoy reading this at least half as much as I enjoyed writing it :)

The lights of the tunnel were brighter than normal. Shane squinted as he faced out towards the crowd. Unlike years prior, Ottawa's arena was always packed, but it seemed like they had somehow managed to double the capacity for the final series of the playoffs.

Or maybe the fans were just screaming twice as loud.

"Repeat after me," Ilya said from behind him.

Shane was hesitant to agree, but decided to do so anyway. "Okay."

"You're gonna fucking do it."

Shane nodded along. "I'm gonna fucking do it."

"Why?"

Shane turned to Ilya, behind him in the line, and smiled at him. "Because I'm Shane fucking Hollander."

"Better. You aren't allowed to do that self-doubt bullshit, you know that."

Bood, in front of Shane, snorted. "Is that how you normally keep him motivated, Roz?"

Shane wasn't facing Ilya anymore, but he could hear his smirk. "I have my ways."

As Shane very well knew, it was a cardinal sin to vocalize any form of self-doubt in Ilya's presence; it was even more of a sin right now, moments before the sixth game of the final Stanley Cup series of Shane's career.

This could be the last game of his career. Shane was trying not to think about that. The series was 3 - 2 in their favor against the San Jose Sea Lions. If they won this game, they won the cup.

If they won this game, Shane's hockey career was over. The fans didn't know that. Shane knew it. Ilya knew it. Their teammates, coaches, and management knew it—it was an open secret.

Shane was trying his best not to feel some kind of way about it, and he was generally succeeding. By the time the game started, he knew he wouldn't be thinking about it at all. If there was one thing he could do, it was push down his feelings and play hockey.

Bood skated out, so Shane prepped for his own entrance. When his name was called, it was exhilarating. Even after five years, it was still a high like no other to hear his hometown arena scream for him. His city loved him. Sometimes, the force of their admiration overwhelmed him.

Ilya skated out to his adoring crowd, completing their circle, and, *yeah*, Shane was gonna fucking do it.

The game had been rougher than anticipated.

It started off strong. Barrett scored them an early goal in the first period that boosted everyone's confidence. The excitement was short-lived: their morale was nearly destroyed when Haas took a rough tumble against the boards after a bad check. He wasn't laid out, thankfully, but he was out of commission for the rest of the game.

After that, Shane was forced to watch helplessly from the bench as the Sea Lions got one through, and the next time he went out, he was *feral*. He made damn sure he was where he needed to be to score and get their lead back.

The first period ended.

The second period was much worse. Without Haas, Shane was sharing a line with Tanner Dillon, and that was always... an experience. Without a competent right winger, he didn't even manage to get a scoring chance, let alone an actual goal. All Shane could hope for was to keep the other team from scoring while he was out. Thank god it wasn't all reliant on their line.

The Sea Lions scored twice in quick succession, finally snagging a lead, but Ilya tied things up off a beautiful pass from Bood. Shane always paid attention during his games, but he would've enjoyed watching Ilya regardless. Some part of him always noticed how graceful Ilya was on his skates, saw his long legs and dark curls, but right now, a far larger part of him was focused on how they were not currently winning this fucking game.

When the third period started, Shane wanted to break down, but he wasn't permitting it. The difference between an NHL player and a minor league player was primarily their mental game. As appealing as it sounded, Shane was not going to let his stresses and worries control him. He was a *professional* hockey player. He was going to go out there and play good hockey. He was going to go out there...as soon as it was his turn. Ilya's line was out at the moment.

Then one of the Sea Lions got a penalty for high-sticking after nearly knocking out Dykstra's teeth. The Cens were on a power play, and that meant Shane needed to go. He lept over the boards and wove a path between a couple of opposing players. He wasn't the fastest player in the league, but he was still *fast*, and he got around them as if they were in the minors.

He didn't need to look behind him to know that Ilya would be there. He turned back. One of the Sea Lions had caught up and was attempting to poke the puck away from Ilya, so he passed it to Shane.

Shane took a shot the instant he had the puck. It was a little less controlled than he'd like, but it paid off. He'd been too quick for the goalie to react, and the puck was buried into the net.

Scoring off of Ilya always sent a thrill through Shane, but scoring off of him to turn a tie into a lead felt even headier.

After that, the clock continued to wind down—the Lions got desperate. They pulled their goalie for the extra offensive power. In the final few seconds, Shane had the puck. He could see in his peripheral vision that he was being pursued. He looked around desperately, but none of his teammates could take a pass right then.

Alright. It was all on him. That wasn't a cause for concern. It wouldn't be the first time. Shane just needed to wind the clock down, just a couple more seconds-

When the buzzer rang, Shane froze. He was afraid he might start trembling.

It was still there. The little black disk of rubber was still tucked safely against the curve of his stick. No one had managed to take it from him, which meant the Sea Lions hadn't tied the game. Which meant there wouldn't be overtime. Which meant it was over. Which meant—

His train of thought was interrupted by someone's large frame crashing into him, strong arms wrapping around him, and yes. The scoreboard said 4 - 3, Ilya was screaming in his ear, and he'd fucking done it.

On the eve of his retirement, Shane had managed to nab one last victory.

The tension seeped out of him. He'd fucking done it. He hadn't fizzled out. He hadn't failed. No—he'd sent his career off with the bang it deserved. The last image the hockey world would have of Shane Fucking Hollander was him outskating the opposition to protect his team's lead and win the Stanley Cup.

When Shane turned up to face Ilya, he could feel his own grin splitting his face in two. He pushed off his own helmet, then Ilya's, letting them crash onto the ice without a care in the world. In that moment, Shane wouldn't have noticed if the roof of the arena caved in.

Ilya's curls were sweaty between his fingers, and his palms were just as damp as they held Shane's face. Shane didn't care. He pulled his husband down and pressed their lips together, and the world narrowed to a single point of contact: Ilya's mouth moving against his and the screaming crowd around them. They didn't kiss at work, usually. It was unprofessional. There was one exception, though, and that was winning the Stanley Cup together. They'd kissed the first time, after their very first season playing on the same team. They'd kissed the second time, which had only been a year ago.

Even the third time, it was an intoxicating, addicting, devastating experience. He could've had it a thousand times without it being enough.

This would be the last. Shane knew this would be the last. He savored it.

The arena spun around him when he pulled back. It had been a good kiss—Ilya looked almost as dazed as he did. The crowd was still screaming as his teammates were surrounding him and hugging him and squeezing him, and Shane could see his own shocked smile on the Jumbotron. Shane had just won his sixth Stanley Cup, and he'd kissed his captain like he was sending him to war not thirty seconds ago. Their wedding rings were hanging from chains around their necks. Everyone in the goddamn arena was screaming Shane's name.

Never again, he thought. Soak it in. You won't ever get this again.

Right there on the ice, surrounded by people he loved, Shane figured he must've done something very good in a past life. It was the only reasonable explanation for why he'd been deemed worthy of this.

Shane managed to convince Ilya to slip away from the after party a bit earlier than they'd originally intended to. Boon was great and his house was fun and he always threw the best parties, but Shane did *not* want to be in public while he came down from winning the Stanley Cup. He wanted to be home with his husband.

It hadn't taken too much. The first time Shane asked to leave, Ilya had pouted. A few carefully placed kisses along Ilya's jaw and a whispered *I want you* later, and all of a sudden Ilya was saying his goodbyes and ordering their Uber.

The drive was barely twenty minutes, but it felt like an hour. The moment Shane was inside the house, his hands were sliding up Ilya's shirt.

"Fucking *champion*," Ilya growled above him. He had Shane shoved up against their front door in seconds, pinning him there. Shane had his own goal: get his husband naked. But, it was hard to stay focused when Ilya took his mouth like he wasn't sure he'd ever get the opportunity to kiss him again.

Shane's fingers froze as he kissed back, letting them tangle in the stiff fabric of his shirt. Ilya had a different kind of air about him tonight: desperate, aggressive, and determined. Not that Shane was complaining. He was still riding their six-hour old adrenaline high, and he certainly couldn't fault Ilya for feeling the same.

The kissing got rough and messy in a way that was special and almost a bit nostalgic for them. Kissing was a science, a science they'd practiced and perfected. The desperation that was radiating off his husband made it feel fresh; Ilya's tongue in his mouth felt simultaneously new and familiar. Shane was helpless to do anything but sigh and finally force his fingers to get back to their job of pushing buttons through holes.

"Do you like this shirt?" Ilya asked, lips trailing down to suck against the sensitive curve of Shane's neck.

Shane gasped. "Fucking love it. You look like a goddamn model."

"Not mine," Ilya said between kisses. "Yours."

What?

"It's fine, I guess. I have, like, five identical ones—"

That was all it took. Ilya took a firm grip of Shane's collar and ripped the shirt open, buttons flying and clattering across the hardwood flooring of their home. Before Shane got the chance to recover from that, he was being picked up and carried upstairs.

Were Shane even slightly less horny than he was, he'd be complaining. First about the reckless destruction of an innocent shirt, then about being carried up to bed like a bride about to be deflowered. However, as it stood, about eighty percent of the blood in his body was in his cock, and that meant none was left for his brain, so he bit hard into Ilya's collarbone and yelped when he got tossed onto the bed.

Shane wasn't about to be shown up. Sure, he was being picked up and ragdolled around, but he was still an active participant, damn it. He got on his hands and knees and crawled to the edge of the bed, pawing at Ilya's cock through the dark jeans he'd changed into for the party. Shane had succeeded in unbuttoning his shirt, but it was still on Ilya's body.

"What do you want, moy lyubimmy?" Ilya's voice was dark and rich, and that fucking *accent* was going straight to Shane's dick.

"Want you in my mouth." Shane looked up at his husband with wide eyes.

Ilya swallowed, like he still couldn't believe the words, despite the last fifteen years. He pushed his jeans and underwear down his hips but didn't bother with the shirt. Shane had *exactly* what he wanted right in front of him, and he wasn't going to waste it.

When Shane's mouth closed around Ilya, he was met with a hiss from above. Ilya took one fistful of Shane's hair, and then a second.

As Shane ran his tongue along the sensitive underside, he got an idea. It wasn't *new*, they'd done this before, but it was an uncommon treat. Shane had to be in a specific state for it. A state he was most certainly in now—watching his impossibly attractive husband excel always did something to him, and he'd gotten a two-hour show of just that.

When Shane pulled his lips away from Ilya's cock, a spider-silk thin line of spit connected the head to his lower lip. He stared at it for a moment, utterly entranced, thinking that maybe it was the hottest thing he'd ever seen. Ilya changed his grip in his hair, which reminded Shane that he'd wanted something.

Shane turned his head up and met Ilya's eyes. "Fuck my mouth."

"What?"

"You heard me."

Ilya's expression made it clear he was quite enamored with the idea and Shane's conviction. Still, there was a moment's hesitation. "You are sure?"

Shane grinned. "Never been more sure of anything in my life."

Reassured, Ilya mirrored Shane's grin and took hold of his head. He readjusted how he was standing. It took a little effort to keep still, but Shane did it. He let his jaw drop open and kept his eyes on Ilya.

Ilya started gentle. He slipped the blunt tip past Shane's lips and kept things slow and shallow, letting Shane get used to it. The increase in speed was noticeable but gradual—nothing more than Shane could handle. Shane closed his eyes and he whimpered and he took it.

He let Ilya set the pace. Ilya, who knew where his lines were, who would never go rougher than Shane could handle, who loved him more than he loved life itself, and Shane was elated. Elated to have a partner he could *trust* to do these sorts of things with. To know that it would be good and enjoyable because Ilya wouldn't pull for more than Shane could give.

And, oh, it was *good*. One of Ilya's hands was tight in his hair, the other was digging carefully into his jaw, keeping Shane open for his cock. Shane thought that if he were permitted a toy to ride or a hand between his thighs, he could come just from this. His eyes were stinging, he was drooling, his jaw ached, and the noises he was making were obscene, but he fucking loved it. Every single time his nose was buried in short, coarse hair, Shane could feel himself grow impossibly harder.

Even now, keeping his mouth soft and warm and letting his husband fuck into his throat until he choked on him, Shane didn't feel submissive. He could see the way it affected Ilya. His eyes screwed up, his hips stuttered, and his grip on Shane got tighter—Ilya was barely keeping it together. Shane didn't even have to *do* anything. He could just sit there with his mouth open and Ilya would fall apart for him.

It was fucking glorious.

When Ilya started to lose his rhythm, he pulled himself out of Shane's mouth (although that seemed to be quite the struggle). Shane panted, trying to catch his breath. His throat felt raw, his jaw felt sore, and he could feel that he was leaking in his pants.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya said above him, his breath coming in heaves. At least Shane wasn't alone, although Ilya's breathlessness was for a different reason.

Shane grinned wickedly and adjusted himself so he was on his back in the middle of the bed. "Gonna finish the job?"

Something about Shane's raspy, broken voice seemed to flip a switch in Ilya. He undid Shane's belt and pulled his pants and underwear off in a single motion, surprisingly efficient given how far gone he was right now. Ilya grabbed the lube from the nightstand before settling on top of Shane, pinning his wrists above his head with a single hand.

"Mine," Ilya said, nipping Shane's collarbone.

"Yours," Shane replied breathlessly. It would be over quick from here, he knew it would. They were both close, both desperate, both wanting nothing more than to be thrust over the edge.

When Ilya took his hands off of Shane's wrists, it was with an expression that said *stay*, and Shane was in no rush to disobey. He stayed how Ilya had positioned him, watching Ilya coat his fingers before pushing one inside.

"You were on fire today," Ilya murmured into his skin. "I was worried when we lost Haas. Stupid of me. You're a *champion*, it's in your fucking blood. Of course we were just fine."

"Shit, *Ilya*." Shane never knew how to respond when Ilya got like this, his praise of Shane's talent and his body tangled together in overwhelming acclaim. There was a second finger inside him now, curling and pressing into every spot that made him see stars. Shane ground down on Ilya's fingers, desperate for more stimulation.

"Do you know how unreal it feels? To watch you out there and know I'll have you like this when we get home? That I'll have you begging for me?"

Shane should've argued, but he couldn't as Ilya's fingers continued to work him open. Once again, the throbbing between his legs stopped him. "Always. Fucking need you, always."

"You have me. Always."

That was too much. "Ilya, please, I can take it."

Ilya didn't need to be told twice. He loved to tease, but right then he must have been just as desperate as Shane. There was the familiar emptiness as he pulled his fingers out, and Shane was expecting him to push in right away. Instead, Ilya picked up his legs and hooked Shane's calves over his shoulders. Ilya leaned forward, changing their position, and Shane gasped out of surprise rather than discomfort. He was basically folded in half.

Ilya's cock was pressing right against his rim. He squirmed and wiggled his hips to try and get Ilya inside him.

Ilya was, apparently, not in as much of a rush. He was kissing the hollow of Shane's collarbone messily. "Is this okay? Not uncomfortable?"

"What the fuck do you think all the yoga is for?"

Ilya laughed against his collarbone. "You say flexibility and fitness."

"And now I'm getting to use it for just that. Are you going to actually fuck me tonight?"

"Brat," Ilya chided. "You are so demanding."

Shane let him get away with it, since he was *finally* pushing in. He watched Ilya's face—one of his favorite things to do when they had sex. There was always a moment where Ilya

seemed overcome by it all. Shane felt the same as he tangled his fingers up in the sheets. Then, Ilya *finally* moved. Shane's mind went blank. It was impossible to think of anything other than the feeling of Ilya inside him.

"Moya zvezda." Ilya's breath was hot against Shane's ear. "Can't believe I've gotten to have you all these years."

You always will, Shane thought. *Every year I live, I'll be yours.*

From the very first thrust, Ilya set an unforgiving pace. Shane knew he could take it, and he knew *Ilya* knew he could take it. He was keening and pleading, their position meaning Ilya could reach unbelievably deep inside him. It wasn't enough. He needed Ilya to find the right angle and fuck him until he couldn't think about a single thing except his husband's cock.

Shane should've known that Ilya didn't need to *find* the angle, he knew Shane's body like it was his own. No, that sweet spot was being saved for the right moment. As soon as Shane seemed to be getting somewhat used to the rapid, deep strokes of Ilya inside him, Ilya shifted his hips slightly, and *holy fuck*, it was almost blinding.

"Oh god- oh, fuck, *Ilya*, shit, shit, shit-"

Ilya was panting above him and cursing in Russian, sweat rolling in beads down his forehead. "You sound perfect like that, sweetheart."

"*Fuck!*" Shane was close. He was so goddamn close, and he wanted to wrap a hand around himself, but he also wanted to get there without it.

It wasn't every time that Shane could come untouched. It didn't matter how well Ilya was fucking him, sometimes the planets were just misaligned and it would never happen. Right then, though? Shane could feel his orgasm building, inevitable and strong.

"Fuck- Ilya, don't stop, if you stop I swear to god-"

"I'm not stopping." Ilya's voice was almost as broken as Shane's.

It didn't take long from then. Shane felt his thighs and calves clench around Ilya's shoulders, his toes curling so hard that his feet nearly cramped. All at once, he was coming. It rang through his whole body, his release painting his stomach and chest in thin white stripes.

The rhythm changed as Ilya chased his own orgasm. It was so much. It was *too much*. Shane was overwhelmed. Right when he was about to ask Ilya to stop, his hips shook in that tell-tale way, his last thrust aborted. Shane let every muscle in his body go boneless as Ilya came inside him.

It took a while for Shane to come back to his body. His toes were flat against the bed because Ilya had unhooked his legs from his shoulders. His knees were bracketing Ilya's thighs. His hands were subconsciously fretting over Ilya's sweaty back. His chest had Ilya's head on top of it.

Shane took a deep, grounding breath. He wasn't even sure how to describe what had just happened. "That was..."

Ilya chuckled against Shane's chest, lifting his head so they were looking at each other. "That was a good one."

"A good one?" Shane grinned. "That belongs in a history book, are you fucking kidding me?"

The joke earned him a full laugh. "Come on," Ilya said, taking his weight off of Shane's body. "We'll shower, and then we can change the sheets and I'll make you that tea you like."

"Tea? Isn't it a little late for tea?"

"I think a hot drink would be good for you. You sound..." Ilya touched his own throat and waved his hand slightly, searching for a word. Shane could see the moment he failed to find it and chose to rephrase. "Your voice is weak. I wasn't too rough, was I?"

"I think the word you were looking for is 'raspy', and, no, you weren't. You know exactly how far to take it. You're perfect."

Ilya smiled in response. Shane drank in his husband's confidence, and then sat up and followed Ilya to the bathroom. They kissed lazily as they waited for the shower to get hot and whispered '*I love yous*' while holding each other.

It was quiet, and affectionate, and just for them. It was the perfect end to a storybook night, and Shane wasn't sure he could've had a better ending to his career.

Shane's career had ended. The thought was startling. This would hardly be the first time they'd celebrated a big win with victory sex, but it was going to be the last. Shane had taken his last locker-room shower, he had put on his uniform for the last time. He'd scored his last goal and won his last game.

If he allowed himself to think about it too hard, the weight of that realization would've crushed him. He chose not to. He packed the thought into a box, saved it for tomorrow or the next day or maybe never, and focused on Ilya's large hand skimming over his back.

Shane was retiring. He was trying so hard to be cool about it, and moments like this made it easier. A lifetime of Ilya holding him just like this would be the perfect reward for a career's worth of single-minded dedication.

Of course, there was still the small problem of telling the public.

Ilya was just on the other side of the door.

Well, one of them. Shane was standing in a hallway between two doors. To his right was Ilya. He was sitting in the PR team's break room and chatting with one of the interns about his Instagram profile. Behind the other door was one of the arena's many, many meeting rooms.

This meeting room happened to be packed with reporters who were waiting for him to step inside. Reporters Erin had hand-picked. Reporters they had good relationships with. Shane had never been more afraid of reporters in his life. He felt like he was dying on his back in the desert and watching the vultures circle.

Ilya couldn't be there. They'd agreed on that. This wasn't about *them*—this was about Shane, and they didn't want to give the impression otherwise. But, this was quite possibly the scariest thing Shane had ever done, and *god*, what he'd give to have his husband by his side in that conference room.

Until this very moment, Shane could still easily take his decision to retire back. Ottawa had respected his choice, but they'd also made their own position clear: if he changed his mind, there was a two-year renewal contract with favorable terms sitting in the general manager's filing cabinet, ready for him to sign. Until the words '*I'm retiring from the NHL*' left his mouth, nothing had to change.

Though, Shane supposed, things didn't *have* to change afterwards. He could probably still sign the contract after today. Sure, it would be a little awkward to announce and then un-announce his own retirement immediately after, but it was nice to keep his options open.

This was possibly the biggest change Shane would ever make. The only decision that even came close to it in impact was his choice to get married to his arch-rival.

To Shane, giving up hockey felt like cutting out a major organ. It was one of two constant presences in his life, the other being his parents. His entire existence had built up to this: his *career*, his hard-won victories, his achievements. And here he was, ready to give it up... for what? A bum knee? He could deal with the pain. He certainly didn't need to *retire* over it.

No, not for his knee—for Ilya.

Not even just for Ilya. For *them*. For the shared future they'd been looking forward to for almost a decade now.

Shane was terrified. There was no other way to describe it. But even with that deep-set dread, Shane was completely convinced that he was making the right decision.

As good as that contract sounded, the rest of his life sounded better.

Shane sipped his water and pictured Ilya leaning against the other side of the door. He'd be cheering Shane on even if he wasn't in the room with him.

With one last internal steeling, Shane gestured to Erin that he was ready. He crossed through the door. The room was, unsurprisingly, packed. When an aging hockey star calls a press conference in July, there's often only one reason why; Shane Hollander's retirement would be quite the scoop.

The noise in the room died down and the attention was turned on to him. It was expected, but the weight of everyone's eye looking at him still rattled Shane. He sat down in the chair that had been set out for him as Erin explained how the press conference would go. Shane was going to talk for about twenty minutes, and then there would be twenty minutes of questions.

As she spoke, Shane's gaze drifted towards the paper in front of him, which had his bullet points. Shane hated this. He hated reading these long statements- it always felt awkward and stilted. But in this case, it was necessary. This was one of the biggest days of his life, and he had a lot he needed to say. He needed to make sure he got all of it out. All of it had been written with and approved by Farah, and Ilya had seen all of it as well.

Well, almost all of it.

Shane looked around the room. He recognized some of these journalists, and the ones he knew had always been respectful. It eased a few of his remaining nerves that Erin really had been as picky as she promised.

"Hi. Thanks for coming," Shane said. "I'll try to be fast since you can probably guess why you're here."

A light laugh went through the room at that. Shane felt a little braver. He knew that there was a camera that fed into the TV in the PR team's break room—they needed to be able to keep an eye on things even during their breaks. He wondered if they had it turned on now, if Ilya was watching him.

Of course he was.

Shane looked down at his paper. He just had to read. He'd done this a million times. A breath. He twirled his wedding ring on his finger as he spoke.

"Okay. Uhm," One more breath, and Shane was ready to talk. "I can't actually remember a time before I started playing hockey. I mean that very seriously. My dad played for McGill in college and my mom is the most dedicated hockey fan I've ever met. I had skates on my feet from the moment I could walk. Some of my earliest memories are of my parents taking me to my neighbor's house down the street. He would flood a rink every year because his yard was massive and he'd let us kids play in it whenever we wanted."

Shane sniffed. Fuck, this was the easier part where he was just talking about his career. He couldn't be getting emotional already.

He let out a laugh that sounded more nervous than he intended. "That makes me sound like I was pushed into this. I wasn't. I loved it. I've always loved it. I love the competition. I love the way hockey makes me feel. I love how it feels to get a breakaway, I love how it feels to steal the puck, I love... I love all of it. I love hockey. From the time I was just a little kid, I knew I wanted hockey to be my life. And so I worked really, *really* hard. And I trained when other kids were having fun, and I turned down hangouts with my friends, and I basically lived in a rink for the first eighteen years of my life, and that all eventually led to me being drafted second overall for the Montreal Voyageurs."

Shane felt the emotion rising in his chest, clogging up his throat, and he pushed it away the best he could. He could let all of that out later—he needed to get through this.

"I... I can't neatly summarize my career up to now. I mean, I could read you my stats, but those don't come close to expressing what my career means to me. How proud I am of what I've done. How grateful I am to the people who got me here, how hard it was sometimes, and how many times I wondered if I was even good enough to be in the room. When I was younger, I thought just making it into the NHL would be enough. When I got in, I realized that it was just the beginning. I realized that just being a pro wasn't enough for me. I wanted to be one of the very best, but it's so damn hard. You have to fight like hell for every achievement—even the little ones, because everyone else wants it just as bad as you do. Well, let me be the first to tell you: I fought. And I'm proud of what I've accomplished so far."

Shane dragged a hand over his face. Why was this statement so fucking long? It had all felt important to say when he was writing it, but now his voice and hands were shaking and things were beginning to feel superfluous.

"I'm proud of the things I've found through hockey, but I'm also grateful. Almost all of my closest friends are teammates, former teammates, or someone I met through a teammate. Hockey allowed me to realize who I really am, and it gave me the ability to give back to my community through the Irina Foundation."

Shane swallowed. "Hockey gave me the love of my life. That will always be the thing I'm the most thankful for."

One small weight lifted itself from Shane's chest. Even after five years, it felt strange acknowledging his marriage at work. Shane didn't care, it needed to be said, but he still struggled with it. That first difficult sentence down, Shane enjoyed the very temporary reprieve.

"Uhm... I'm telling you this today because I've been thinking a lot about what hockey means to me and what it means for my future. I've been playing this sport professionally for sixteen years. It has been the driving force of my existence for as long as I can remember, and I went most of my life thinking it would be the most important thing I'd ever have, but in the last few years... I've come to realize that that's not true."

Shane's hands were visibly trembling now. He set the paper down, smoothed it against the table, and leaned away from the microphone to catch his breath. Tears stung his eyes and he blinked them away.

"I'm thirty-five, and in the regular world, people call that 'not-quite middle aged', but in hockey world, that's ancient. When you're older, your injuries start to stack up. For me, that's meant my right knee really doesn't like playing hockey anymore. It doesn't like skating at all, actually. It's been bad this last season, and after a lot of conversation with the team's medical department, we determined I could continue playing, but it would be a lot of work and a lot of pain. At first, that seemed like the obvious answer. Of course, I would do whatever it took to keep going."

That had been the decision at first. Keep playing at all costs. If he needed a new knee at the end of it, so be it. There was no way he'd willingly offer his head to the executioner.

Shane started to reconsider when further imaging proved that his knee really was shredded. The choice to retire was made when he remembered that he and Ilya were only getting older and they'd been waiting on certain things for over a decade. Having children had been a perennial discussion for several years, but they agreed that they didn't want to start a family when they were both still on the road. It put them in a strange stalemate—neither one of them willing to ask the other to do the unthinkable, and neither one of them willing to volunteer. The years kept passing.

With Shane retired, they could finally have a baby. From that perspective, Shane's knee tapping out was a mix of "worst nightmare" and "blessing-in-disguise".

Sure, incredibly high performance had been Shane's baseline for his entire life, and the thought that his body was beginning to fail made him feel physically ill. And yeah, maybe Shane was a little bitter that after years of treating his body like a temple and watching Ilya treat his like a trash bin, *he* was the one having to step back first.

He was keeping that one to himself. It would either start a blowout fight or spark the full brunt of Ilya's concern; neither reaction seemed productive.

Shane's injuries weren't the point. Despite whatever was going on with him, this decision was his, not his body's. The knee had been the catalyst but it hadn't forced his hand. If he really wanted to keep playing, he could. A family with Ilya was simply more important to him.

Shane checked his notes before continuing to speak.

"After thinking about it more, though, and talking to the people I love and trust, and thinking about what I want out of my own life, I realized I have other things to look forward to now. There's a whole other chapter waiting for me to hang up my skates and take it."

Bile rose in Shane's throat. The tension in the room was at its height- everyone seemed to know what the next words out of his mouth would be.

"I've thought about this for months, from basically every angle. I've talked to my family about this until my voice went raw. And I've decided I want that next chapter more than I want-" Shane's voice cracked. He covered his mouth with his hand until he recovered. He needed to say it. "I called this conference today to announce that I am retiring from the NHL." He spat it out- quicker than he'd meant to, not giving the moment the weight it called for. "After eleven seasons with the Montreal Voyageurs and five with the Ottawa Centaurs. This sport has given me everything I have today and I am so, *so* very grateful."

There. It was done. He said it. There was palpable intrigue in the room, but these were seasoned journalists and they knew better than to interrupt.

"I have some people I want to say thank you to. I can't possibly express gratitude to everyone who got me here, so consider this the highlight reel."

Before Shane started his thank-yous, he looked in the camera that fed to the break room. He offered a small smile—*see, I did it?*—and then turned his attention back to the room. This was another easy part.

"Uhm, first I want to thank my parents. The first time I told them I wanted to play in the NHL I was... five? I think? Maybe younger. And from that moment on, they were entirely convinced it was going to happen. They invested in me with their time and their money and their support. They never once wavered or told me I was aiming too high. I never would've gotten drafted without them. Thanks to my mom and dad."

Shane checked his paper.

"Thanks to the Centaurs owners and management for believing in my athletic integrity and giving me a home after everything happened with Montreal. Thank you for being so great to me and my family for the last five years. You guys always understood me as a person first, as a player and asset second, and it made me feel really valued. Thank you."

"Thanks to Coach Wiebe for working with me and trusting me. I know it was awkward when I first showed up." He laughed a bit to himself. "Having Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov on the same team is... quite a lot of depth to have at center, but you never doubted my experience or abilities, and you let me find my place on the team pretty much from day one." He paused. "That being said, I still think I should've been on the first line, but no coach is perfect."

The next bullet point brought a small smile to Shane's lips- Boodram, Wyatt, Barrett, Haas. All of them were younger than him, but he looked up to them. They were so kind, so deeply accepting, and brought a sense of humanity to the locker room that Shane hadn't experienced anywhere else.

"Thanks to my teammates for welcoming me so quickly when I first came to Ottawa. I mean, I've only joined a new NHL team twice, but I've joined a new *hockey* team a dozen times, and it usually takes a few months to feel comfortable. That wasn't the case with the Cens. From the first time I played with them, I felt like these guys were my friends. They were poking fun at me in, like, less than twenty minutes of knowing them"

Shane glanced down at his notes. Going in, he thought this final part would be the most difficult, but he was actually excited for it. He couldn't wait to see Ilya's face when he came out of this conference.

"So, this last little bit is about my husband. We read my whole statement together, but he doesn't know about this part, so, uhm, sorry for the surprise."

He looked up and focused his gaze on the break room camera. Shane didn't care that he should've been looking at the back wall towards the reporter's cameras. This would look a little off in the news segments later, but this wasn't for them.

"Ilya. I want to start by thanking you for being the most incredible husband I could have ever asked for. You are... thoughtful, and funny, and handsome, and strong, and I'm so excited for

the next sixteen years with you, and then the sixteen after that, too. You balance me out and keep me sane. I'm so lucky to have married you."

Shane took a moments' pause, but he didn't need to check his notes for this part.

"Second, thanks for being a great captain for the last five years. Seriously. I'm never going to admit this again, so don't ask me to, but having you as my captain made me a better player. I'd been an NHL captain for five years when I joined the Cens, so the transition from leader to follower was bound to be difficult, but having someone I respect so much in the driver's seat made it a lot smoother than it would've otherwise been. You helped me think about my game from angles that I don't think I ever would've considered otherwise. You're an extraordinary leader."

Shane smiled as he thought about what he was going to say next—the closing section was interesting. He wasn't sure how Ilya would react to it.

"Finally, I want to thank you for one last thing. Thank you for keeping me hungry. When we got drafted to Boston and Montreal, you inspired me to play the best hockey I'd ever played, even if only to beat you. A lot of fuss was made about our 'rivalry' when we were younger, and obviously it's dead and buried now, but when you go your entire life thinking you're the best of your generation, it is absolutely Earth-shattering to meet your match. It was exhilarating. Playing against you gave me a level of drive I'd never experienced before—I really don't think I'd be the player I am today without you. So, thank you, Ilya Rozanov. Thank you for being my life partner, but also for being my competition and my motivation. I love you."

It was done. It had been hard, but he'd done it. He addressed the room one last time.

"Okay, that's it from me. Let's do questions."

The moment the Q&A ended, Shane rushed out of the room. Ilya, bless him, was right on the other side of the door. He'd known he'd be needed.

Shane collapsed into Ilya. His arms wound around Shane's body. Shane pressed his face into his husband's neck. He couldn't hold back the tears any longer, not when he was in Ilya's embrace.

It was done. It was over. He was nearly hyperventilating; his chest was rising and falling like he'd just come back from a run. He felt Ilya's warm hand soothing over his back, felt the tight grip around him, and it was so *caring* and *secure* and *loving*.

For a while, they just held each other.

"I did it," Shane said.

It was only then that Shane noticed that Ilya's eyes were watering, too. "You did it."

"And now the rest of my life starts."

"*Our* life," Ilya gently corrected. "Do not think for a second that I'm not thankful for what this means for me, too."

Shane nodded slowly, pressing his face back into Ilya's neck.

"Did you mean it?" Ilya asked.

"Did I mean what?"

"In things that you said hockey gave you, you said you were the happiest it gave you me. Did you mean that?"

Shane laughed softly and kissed the soft skin under Ilya's jaw. "Of course I meant it. I wouldn't say anything I didn't mean."

Shane could *feel* Ilya's smile, radiant and unguarded. In that moment, he fell in love with Ilya again. He'd fallen in love with him so many times now that he'd lost count.

It would happen so many more as the next years came. Shane couldn't wait.

Not a month after winning the Stanley Cup, Shane found himself sitting in a slightly-crowded bar, sipping a drink with his husband draped across him. It had been Ilya's idea, of course. Shane didn't think a retirement party was necessary, but Ilya was so excited and Shane couldn't bear to tell him no.

In for a penny, in for a pound—Shane had been uncharacteristically open-minded about the whole thing. When Ilya came pitching ideas, he'd admitted to Shane that he'd expected him to pick the "celebratory dinner at home" option, not the "rent out a bar, start out quiet, then let it turn into a rager" one.

But now that Shane was retired, there'd be no more parties like this. Shane would never be expected to "go out" after a win again. Besides, renting out a small, vintage-themed bar for just them and their friends seemed like a fun, but safe, option away from strangers.

Since the venue was decently sized, at least compared to their house, Shane and Ilya had been able to be pretty loose with the guest list. Between teammates, friends, and plus ones, there were just under one hundred and fifty people invited. Most of them even bothered to turn up.

Shane had been a good sport all night, drinking beer until ten, after which he switched to vodka sodas (with a splash of cranberry juice). He'd sat half in Rose's lap while Wyatt and Bood gave a PowerPoint presentation on his career. Some of the information was real (his all-

time record for career assists, which he was extremely proud of, especially knowing Ilya wouldn't be able to break it. It required a long career on a good team, and Ilya had spent too long on a bad one). Some of the information was... based in fact, but not exactly relevant (apparently, Shane had been in fewer on-ice fights than literally any other forward on any of the four main lines). Some of them seemed made up (they'd somehow statistically proven that Shane was the most polite player in the league). It had all carried an energy of good-natured teasing. It was just him and his friends hanging around, drinking, and laughing.

It also reminded him, repeatedly, that he'd sung his swan song and would be stepping away from the thing that had defined him for the last thirty years. He was trying to ignore that. Tonight was about having fun with his friends.

The karaoke sounded like a good, fun idea when Ilya had first mentioned it. They had a DJ anyway, might as well get their money's worth, right? Shane made it clear that *he* wasn't going to be singing a fucking thing, and Ilya made it clear that he didn't have to. He could sit in his chair, drink his drink, and watch his friends make idiots of themselves.

Dykstra sang some terrible country love song with a lot of violin in it to Caitlin. Rose belted out a ballad from the soundtrack of her upcoming film with unsurprising talent. Cassie and Selena screamed *Fergalicious* while nearly every woman Shane knew got up to dance along with them. It was fun and Shane was enjoying himself. Later, the karaoke would go away, and the music would get louder and the lights would get lower, and Ilya would beg Shane to dance with him. Because he loved him and because Ilya had been denied the simple things for far too long, Shane would say yes.

However, right now was definitely still karaoke time, and, frankly, Shane should've seen *this* coming. Ilya was standing at the front of the bar, holding the microphone stand between both his hands while staring Shane down with the sweetest, most innocent smile on his face. He was *absolutely* about to embarrass Shane. It was only a matter of seconds before Shane discovered how.

The music started. Ilya gave Shane the most intense stare of his life. Shane had no clue what the song was, but half the bar was cheering, so it must've been popular.

When Ilya started to sing, it was with his biggest, cockiest, and most grandiose smile. He exaggerated his expressions, gazing at Shane through it all. "Super troupers beams are gonna blind me, but I won't feel blue, like I always do, cause somewhere in the crowd there's you." He was damn-near *crooning*.

Shane covered his face with his hands to hide the smile that forced its way onto his lips. He didn't know the song—it was vaguely synthy, definitely from the eighties—but based on that line, he knew exactly what inspired Ilya to pick it: Shane had promised to watch him, to come to every home game he could. If this selection was any indication, Ilya was a fan of that idea.

Suddenly, it felt like someone was pushing on his leg. He opened his eyes and looked down, and *holy fuck*, Ilya was *on his knees* and was resting his hand on Shane's thigh. He looked up at Shane with a blinding grin on his face as he sang. It was a direct serenade—it was a *lot*. Did Ilya have no sense of shame?

Of course he didn't; Shane should know that by now. This was Ilya Rozanov, king of not giving a fuck about what others thought, and they were with their closest friends. Although, Shane was pretty sure Ilya would've done this at center ice if he thought it would make Shane laugh. And despite how insane and stupid and ridiculous this whole situation was, it *was* making him laugh.

Ilya stood up, dragging his hand over Shane's shoulders which redirected his attention to the rest of the bar. Ilya was so charismatic like this—a natural performer—and Shane wondered in passing if he'd rehearsed this whole stunt.

The lyrics were repetitive, but it hardly mattered with how much energy Ilya was putting into them. Shane was utterly entranced with how Ilya was putting on a show for the room, but really it was a show for *him*. The way he was making eye contact and tossing his head back was all to make *Shane* smile.

It was deadly to have the sole attention of a man that lustrous.

Shane leaned over to Hayden. "What song is this?"

Hayden's voice was disgusted. "You don't know ABBA?"

Shane just shook his head—he'd ask Ilya later.

Once Ilya finished his song, screaming about feeling like a number one, he said something to the DJ. It was nearly midnight, so Shane guessed he was telling him to start playing music so people could dance. Then he crossed the room and sat right next to Shane, and Shane, feeling affectionate towards the absolute dork he'd married, leaned into him.

"That was a cute song," Shane said. "Nobody's ever sang to me before."

Ilya smiled like he was pleased with himself, and he leaned in to kiss Shane's forehead. "I thought it was..."

Ilya paused for a moment. He was hunting down a word. It was always so easy to tell (or maybe it was just easy for Shane): his forehead would scrunch up and his eyes would narrow, as though he were suspicious it was actively hiding from him.

"I thought it was pertinent," Ilya finished.

Shane nodded. Good word. "I liked it. What song was it?"

The DJ had finished his transition—the music was in full swing. Shane had expected it to take a while for people to begin to make use of it, but, nope, basically as soon as the music had started, his friends were getting up to dance.

Shane frowned. He still had half a drink to finish.

"It was Super Trouper by ABBA. I'm surprised you don't know that one. It is one of their biggest hits," Ilya said.

"Who's ABBA?"

Ilya blinked once. Slowly.

"You do not know ABBA?"

Shane shook his head. Ilya looked horrified.

"ABBA? One of the best selling pop groups of all time?"

"Ilya, we've been over this, I don't really listen to music."

Ilya seemed no less aghast. "Is ABBA! Do you know Michael Jackson? Rihanna? Taylor Swift?"

Shane rolled his eyes. "Yes, I know those ones. We danced to Rihanna at our wedding." *Don't ask for any song titles beside Diamonds, though.*

"ABBA is at the same level, basically."

"Clearly not, because I don't know them."

Shane yelped—Ilya had pulled him up from his seat. "What the fuck do you think you're getting at?"

"We are going to go dance."

"You can't ask nicely?"

"Please, this way is more fun."

Before Shane could protest further, Ilya was tugging him away. Shane planted his feet and scowled in Ilya's direction.

Ilya stopped and turned around. "What?"

"If you want me to dance with you, you have to buy me another drink first."

"Buy you?" Ilya laughed. "Does the money not come from the same account? Did we not pay for an open bar?"

"I don't care, order for me. It's the principle of the thing. "

Ilya smiled fondly, an amused expression that was reserved for Shane alone. He took a step back towards Shane. "You know, I don't think I've ever bought you a drink."

Shane had never thought about that before, but come to think of it, Ilya was right. Little things like that reminded Shane just how ass-backwards their whole relationship was.

"Exactly. Really, you should thank me for giving you the opportunity."

Shockingly, Ilya didn't argue as he took them over to the bar. The music was blaring but not so loud that they couldn't talk. With a practiced ease Shane had never developed at these kinds of places, Ilya ordered Shane another vodka soda and some sort of tequila for himself.

They stood together, sipping their drinks and smiling and chatting about the guests. It felt strangely first-dateish. For a moment, Shane let himself entertain a brief fantasy that this was how they met: Ilya got to openly woo him after catching his eye in some bar. He dreamed that things hadn't been so complicated. That Ilya hadn't married him before ever buying him a drink.

Shane's chain of thought was broken when the next song started and Ilya gasped like he was personally witnessing the second coming. He waved his hands, pointing at the speakers. "See? Dancing Queen! *This* is ABBA!"

Shane smiled, drunk and happy and fuzzy. He felt safe in the privacy of a rented out bar with only the people who knew the *real* them. He took one step forward and got on his toes to whisper in Ilya's ear. "I don't care. Kiss me."

Ilya did not need further instruction. He pushed Shane up against the bar, his hands resting solidly on Shane's body. His thumbs drew circles on Shane's hip bones as they kissed, neither of them cognizant that there were other people in the room. This was part of the fantasy too. He'd watched Jackie and Hayden make out just like this on the night they'd met; Shane and Ilya needed to make up for lost time.

Shane was dazed when the kiss broke—it felt too soon. He didn't want these moments to end. "That was nice," he said. "I want one more drink."

Ilya kissed him again, just briefly. "As you wish."

Shane watched Ilya flag down the bartender. His skin was illuminated in pinks and blues from the lights in the bar. He was stunning. Even were he not surrounded by his friends, even were he not five drinks in and about to have his sixth, Shane knew he would've had an incredible night, just by virtue of having this beautiful man to share it with.

In the backseat of the Uber, Shane was coming to realize that perhaps he should've gone a little lighter on the vodka sodas.

"Did you know there is only one country between Russia and Sweden?" Ilya asked from somewhere above him.

Shane tipped his head into Ilya's shoulder, but he nearly fell into Ilya's lap in the process. His brain was moving so slowly. He didn't understand what Ilya was trying to say.

Then it clicked into place.

"Oh!" Shane said. "You're almost borderline Swedish then, right? And you're good at singing. So you're basically a member of that band, uh, fuck, what was their name? BABA? From the bar? Is that the joke?"

Shane felt Ilya's ribs shaking under him. It felt nice.

"Yes," Ilya said breathlessly. "You figured it out."

Of course he figured it out—Shane knew Ilya better than anyone, and he could always figure out what he was trying to say. Although, Ilya's statement had made him curious about something.

"What country is between Russia and Sweden?"

"Finland." And then, "Do they not teach you European geography here?"

Shane nuzzled Ilya. His husband smelled of cologne and sweat and something else overwhelming his senses. Ilya always smelled so good. How did he always smell so good? Even after a workout, Shane wanted to bathe in it.

"No, they do," Shane said. "I was..."

He couldn't get his brain to form the words he wanted. It was like when he was first learning Russian, except they were speaking English right now. At least, Shane was *pretty* sure they were speaking English.

"Uhm. I never did super well in school," Shane said, finally finding some sort of way to express himself. "I'm not smart. I just play hockey. Except I don't do that anymore."

Shane felt warm fingertips pushing his hair back from his forehead. He was so hot. Why was it so hot in the car? Ilya didn't seem to mind as he kissed his sweaty skin. Shane loved him so much. He was so sweet. And so pretty.

"Don't say that," Ilya murmured into his hair. "You're very smart."

"No m'not," Shane said, somehow pressing his face even more into Ilya's body. "All I ever did was play hockey. Now, I don't know what I'm gonna do. I hope we have a baby soon."

The car went quiet at that. When Shane looked up, Ilya was looking out the window, jaw set.

"S' something wrong?" Shane asked. He ran his fingertips along the warm skin of Ilya's forearm.

Ilya turned back to face him, expression softened. Whatever pensiveness had taken hold of him was gone.

"No. Everything is perfect."

It really shouldn't have been as difficult as it was, but with shaking hands and an alcohol-soaked brain, Shane couldn't get his key into the latch.

"This is why I keep saying we need those smart locks," Ilya mumbled from behind him, and, before Shane knew it, he had been stripped of his keys. Ilya slid the key into the lock and turned it with no difficulty or fanfare.

"Ilya, those are *horrible* for security. I told you that already."

Shane came to notice that Ilya was standing inside the house. When Shane failed to follow him, Ilya gently took his hand and pulled him through the doorframe.

"What, you think someone is going to hack it?" Ilya asked.

"Maybe! I dunno."

The argument came to its natural conclusion when Ilya pulled Shane against his chest. He was holding him tighter than usual, nose pressed into Shane's hair, and for a brief moment Shane felt almost squished.

Shane wiggled a bit. "Uhm..."

Ilya's voice was soft and affectionate when he spoke. "Let's go to bed."

That was the best idea Ilya had ever had. Ilya let him go. Shane immediately took his hand and pulled him in the direction of their bedroom. He only stumbled once or twice (okay, maybe three times) as he went up the stairs. Their house swirled around him in pretty colors, and then there was the familiar sight of their bed.

The navy blue bedding had never looked quite so enticing. Shane rushed over and turned at the last second. He collapsed onto the soft mattress, and then he fell into a fit of uncharacteristic, unabashed giggles. He knew exactly what was coming next. His suspicions were confirmed when Ilya crossed the room and stood over him. It was dark, so Shane could barely make him out at first—just a narrow waist, broad shoulders, and a halo of curls—but it was enough.

Ilya leaned down and reached towards him. Shane decided it would be far more fun to mess with him a little. He planted his foot on Ilya's stomach, preventing him from coming any closer.

"Mmm.... we're gonna have sex now, right?" Shane asked.

As if they didn't make each other equally crazy, Ilya looked at him with his most neutral expression. Shane grinned; he loved when Ilya played hard to get.

"Yes," Ilya said flatly. "That is exactly what's about to happen."

Shane tilted his head back into the pillows, giddy with victory. The only thing that could've possibly made today better was ending it with his husband fucking him. Maybe they'd break the headboard again!

"Perfect," Shane said through a yawn. He felt a weird tug at his hips and looked down. Ilya's was taking off his belt, which was more difficult than usual because Shane wasn't lifting his body to help. He'd do it, except his muscles felt so heavy. Moving was so hard. How had he played hockey so well for so long? Distantly, he knew that he was incredibly athletic, but in that moment he felt like it must've been some sort of dream. There was no way he used to skate super fast or whatever. He couldn't even lift up his legs. Good thing Ilya was the one who did the fucking in their relationship. He could just roll over onto his stomach and enjoy it.

His thoughts were interrupted by Ilya telling him to sit up. Shane tried, but he was so dizzy. The muscles in his stomach trembled with the effort. Couldn't Ilya just flip him? Why did he have to sit up?

Ilya's hands, large and stable and warm and perfect, came to rest on Shane's back, helping him up. Once Shane was settled and balanced, Ilya began to unbutton his shirt. The orange of the streetlights came through the blinds and caught in his hair, making it look so perfectly bronze.

"I can't wait for you to fuck me. It's gonna be so nice."

Ilya chuckled as he rolled Shane's shirt off his shoulders, then down his arms. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Shane said. Ilya was lowering him back down into bed. He was just in his underwear now. He wanted to take them off, but maybe Ilya left them on for a reason. Sometimes he liked to tease Shane, to keep that final layer on as long as possible until neither of them could stand it anymore. That must've been what was going on.

Ilya put the covers over Shane.

Shane didn't want the covers. "Wait. Why...?"

Shane looked up at him. Ilya adjusted how the blankets were laying, then stood up. Only then did he seem to notice that he was being pouted at.

"Don't want you to get cold before I come back," Ilya said.

Oh, *duh*. Ilya was so sweet. So considerate. Shane loved him so much.

Shane watched Ilya go into the bathroom, the door left open. He stood at the sink and began to brush his teeth. That was so thoughtful—he wanted to have fresh breath when they inevitably made out. Shane was so lucky. And so comfortable. When did their bed get so comfortable?

Shane rolled onto his side and waited for his husband. He let his eyes slip shut—just for a moment. Just until Ilya came back.

The first thing Shane became aware of when he woke the next morning was a vicious pounding in his head. He could feel his heartbeat in his eyes. Opening them proved to be a very poor decision, the morning light intensifying the throbbing tenfold. He rolled onto his stomach and buried his face into his pillow.

The second thing he noticed was a lack of weight or warmth in the bed. Ilya had gotten up before him, and *that* meant he must be truly be wrecked, because Shane had been waking up an hour before his husband for basically the entire course of their relationship.

Shane risked a peek away from his cocoon of darkness to check the alarm clock. It was 11:30. *Shit*. Sleeping in was becoming a habit for him. Even knowing it was far later in the day than he normally permitted himself to lounge, he had no interest in getting out of bed.

Before he was able to hide his face in the pillows again, something else caught Shane's eye. A blue tube was on the nightstand. With a heavy blink, Shane realized it was a bottle of Gatorade. Even better, there was a box of ibuprofen next to it.

Shane had never loved Ilya more than he did in that very moment.

The box was easy to rip open, and he tore the side of it away instead of carefully opening the flaps like normal. There was a degree of ferocity in his movements that was simply unnecessary, but his head *hurt*. After swallowing three of the pills and half the sports drink, Shane flopped onto his back in his bed and covered his eyes with his hand.

Shane was far too old for this shit. He hadn't even liked getting wasted when he was twenty, let alone pushing middle age.

What had he done last night? Shane could recall the beginning of the party perfectly- everyone's friendly 'congratulations', the first few beers, the way Ilya had smiled so proudly, Wyatt and Bood's presentation about his career stats. Things started to get spotty when he switched to liquor and the karaoke got started. He didn't remember the first few songs, but he remembered telling his teammates that *no*, there was no chance in hell he'd be getting up there. He could clearly picture Ilya kneeling down in front of him and singing that wretched ABBA song, and then things got hazy again. He remembered laughing with his arm around Rose, and he remembered being pressed up against the bar, the pressure of it against his back as he got kissed within an inch of his life. The rest of his memories were blurry and distant, as if they were dreams. He remembered getting in the car. He remembered Ilya undressing him, but then things fizzled out.

It didn't matter. The whole bar had been rented out, only their teammates and friends invited. He could've embarrassed himself pretty badly without it coming back to bite him in the ass.

Well, at least, not in a public sense. If he'd done anything too rowdy, he'd certainly be putting up with teasing from Ilya for the next ten years.

Although Shane was tempted to keep wondering exactly how much of an idiot he'd been at his own retirement party, he could feel a sickening film over his teeth, and came to realize that brushing them likely had *not* been part of the previous night's activities. He forced himself out of bed and into the bathroom to start his dental hygiene routine. He usually saved flossing and the tongue scraper for bedtime only, but seeing as he'd skipped last night, he decided to include them as well. The brightness of the bathroom lights made his head hurt worse, so he shut his eyes and focused on the whirring of his electric toothbrush.

With his eyes shut and his hearing drowned out, Shane should've been startled by the first indication of someone's hands on his waist, but the hands were *big* and *strong* and *warm*, and they came with a familiar nose being pressed into the curve of his neck. Instead of panic, Shane felt nothing but calm.

Shane smiled around the toothbrush but didn't open his eyes until he spit. He wiped the excess foam off his lips, then turned around, still bracketed by his husband's arms. He was pressed between Ilya and the counter, but he never felt *trapped* with Ilya—he'd only ever felt secure.

"Hi," Shane said.

Ilya leaned down and kissed the tip of his nose. "Good morning. You slept late."

"I know," Shane sighed and turned back around to floss. "I hope you don't mind. I'll help clean, now."

"Cleaning is done."

"What?" Shane asked. "All of it?"

Their pre-cottage routine was rather extensive. They'd done most of it in the days leading up to the party, but there was still a good amount left. Every surface should be dusted, every square inch should be swept or mopped or vacuumed, the fridge should be cleared out and cleaned. The kitchen and the bathrooms had to be spotless, and then all the windows had to be locked, appliances had to be unplugged, the water heater checked-

"Everything except this bathroom," Ilya said.

"Huh." Shane made eye contact with Ilya in the mirror, floss still wrapped between his fingers. He smiled at Ilya. "I guess that's why they call taking care of something *husbandry*."

Ilya rolled his eyes, but Shane could see a little smile peeking out from where his lips were pressed to his neck. "Cheesy."

"Since when do you not like cheesy? You're the one who said you were gonna propose with, like, a million candles."

"You are the one who *did*."

"And you're the one who loved it."

Ilya, smiling again, seemingly decided not to argue that point. Shane put the floss in the trash and leaned back into him. His husband's presence had been a lovely balm for the pain still ebbing through him, but as he came back to his own body, he once again became aware of just how awful he felt. He sighed and stood up straight, taking on his own weight again.

"I'm gonna shower," Shane said. "Can you change the sheets, please?"

"Of course."

Shane felt one last little parting squeeze on his waist, a warm kiss on the top of his head, and then Ilya was gone again.

After he'd finished his routine, Shane went into the bedroom and found his husband obediently changing their bedding. He smiled to himself as he pulled a hoodie, fresh underwear, and joggers out of the dresser. After that, he went back into the bathroom and started running the shower.

Ilya came back into the bathroom when he was finished with the bed. "You know, we don't have to leave today," he said. "If you are not feeling well, we can go tomorrow."

Shane shook his head. "M'fine, but I think you need to drive."

Ilya leaned back against the door frame, crossed his arms, and raised his eyebrows. "You will let me drive? To the cottage? On all those rural highways?"

"Well, even if you have no respect for your own life, I think you love me enough to be reasonable. Besides, the SUV is not suitable for drifting, or whatever the fuck it is you do. It's not like we're taking your Porsche."

Ilya smiled at that and turned back into the house. Seconds later, Shane heard a commotion in the closet that was certainly Ilya grabbing his bag—despite years of Shane's protests, Ilya refused to pack his clothes at any time other than the last minute—and then Ilya had it laid out on the bed.

Shane yawned, took off his underwear, and stepped under the hot stream of water. The pressure and the temperature were soothing for his aching head and muscles, and while he didn't feel *normal* when he was finished, he felt much better. He got dressed, went downstairs, and began looking around the house. Sure enough, their home practically sparkled with how tidy it was. He heard noises from the living room and found Ilya watching a TV show on the couch. They couldn't leave until the bedding had made it through the laundry, and with nothing else to do, it made sense that Ilya chose to relax.

Well, he certainly wasn't going to be allowed to do it *alone*. Shane slumped onto the couch next to him and put his head on Ilya's thigh. His hair was still wet, certainly soaking Ilya's pants, but he didn't seem to mind. He traced his fingertips along Shane's jaw.

They stayed like that, peaceful and quiet, until Shane got the distinct feeling he was being watched. He turned his head up and found his suspicions were correct. Ilya had a

mischievous grin on his face. Shane didn't like it—it was the grin Ilya offered up when he had a particularly biting tease.

"What?" Shane asked.

Ilya pushed a wet strand of hair off of Shane's forehead. "I learned something new about you last night."

Shane swallowed and pushed down his nerves at the millions of things that statement could mean. "What did you learn?"

"You have a very nice voice, moy lyubimyy."

Shane's jaw dropped. "Ilya."

Ilya's grin only grew.

"Ilya, I did *not* do karaoke last night."

Ilya adjusted his wet hair again, unhappy with the way it was laying. Or maybe just looking for an excuse to touch him. "Oh, sweetheart. Not only did you sing, you sang a *duet*."

"With who?"

Ilya narrowed his eyes slightly, as if shocked to even hear the question. "Really?"

Shane sighed as he buried his aching head into his hands. "What did we sing?"

"I think you should see for yourself. I had Haas take a video."

Shane moved his hands. "You did not."

"Oh, I did. I am going to show it to our children someday." Ilya was reaching for his phone on the end table. Shane had no choice but to sit up and discover what antics 'Retirement Party Shane' had gotten up to.

Ilya pulled up the video. The thumbnail was just them on stage together, facing each other, effervescent and in love.

When Ilya pressed play, the opening piano riff was *immediately* recognizable.

"Oh my god," Shane said. "How the fuck did you talk me into this?"

"It was your idea."

"Fuck off."

"Ask Rose!"

To the absolute elation of everyone in the bar, Ilya and Shane, smiling and free and practically making heart eyes at each other, were singing "Summer Nights" from Grease.

Shane was barely carrying the tune, but Ilya actually managed to sound like he'd heard the song more than once or twice. He was singing Olivia Newton-John's part in a surprisingly clear falsetto.

Wow.

The video ended somewhere during the second chorus. Ilya set his phone aside, still grinning like the cat that got the cream.

"I don't remember that at *all*," Shane said. "How does that even make sense? I didn't even get that drunk until after karaoke was over."

"We decided to start it up again later in the night because we were having so much fun. The entire third line sang 'Thunderstruck' together, was great."

Shane laughed and shook his head. "I'm glad only our friends were there. I don't need that on Twitter." He paused. "Why the fuck did you sound so good?"

In a welcome surprise, Ilya's face turned pink. "Was not that good."

Shane immediately decided to press. "It absolutely was. You're blushing, so you know it's true."

Ilya was holding back a smile, picking at a loose thread on the hem of his shirt. He wouldn't meet Shane's eyes.

"I used to... I-" He cleared his throat before he continued. "As a child, I was in these childrens' plays at the community center. My mother liked them. Sometimes they had music, so they gave us lessons. I didn't stop with them until I was ten or so."

Shane's jaw dropped for the second time in the last twenty minutes. "What? How am I just *now* hearing about this?"

Ilya shrugged. "You never asked."

"Please, tell me there's a recording."

Ilya chuckled and turned to face Shane.

"It is possible that I have one on the thumb drive. My mother took it. I think I am eight or so."

The thumb drive referred to a sixteen gigabyte USB stick of family photos and videos that Ilya had digitized before he left Russia. His father wouldn't let him take the originals, so that was his second best option. The photos and clips were Ilya's selected favorites, which meant they were mostly of him and his mother or his mother alone. A smaller portion of the photos featured his brother, and very few included his father.

More than once, Shane and Ilya had sat on the couch and plugged the thumb drive into Ilya's laptop, looking at all the old photographs together. From the times Ilya had shown him these

pictures before, Shane remembered how adorable Ilya had been as a small child: nearly platinum blond and chubby-cheeked. He'd never seen Ilya look quite so young; by the time they met, even at only seventeen, Ilya looked like a man. Shane remembered seeing videos of Ilya and Andrei playing together and thinking *did it have to turn so sour?* He remembered seeing pictures of Irina, beautiful and radiant as sun with hazel eyes and golden-brown curls, and thinking *god, he's her spitting image*. He did *not* remember an adorable concert recording.

"How have I not seen it?"

"It was not one of the ones I pulled up. We were looking at pictures, mostly." He sounded almost defensive, as if he felt the need to justify the decision.

Shane grinned. "You're showing it to me when we get to the cottage."

Ilya's face was still pink, but he nodded. "Only a little bit."

"I didn't realize I'd married an actor." Shane wrapped one golden-brown ringlet around his finger, pulled it taut, and let it bounce back into place.

"I am a man of many talents."

Still hungover and sick, but beside himself with affection, Shane leaned over and kissed his husband's cheek.

In the car, Shane realized there was one important detail from last night that he truly had no recollection of. (There was another thing he was thinking about, too, but Shane was choosing to ignore that one.) He'd been looking out the window, watching green hills and forests go by, but turned his head to face his husband.

"Did we have sex last night?" Shane asked.

In a rare moment of genuine shock, Ilya flinched. "What?"

"I can't remember. I'm not sore, so I don't think we did, but sometimes when you're slow enough I don't feel it the next day. Did we have sex last night?"

Ilya looked almost offended to be asked. "Shane. You would not have been able to tell me from Rose last night. No, we didn't have sex."

Shane snorted. "I mean, I'm pretty sure I would've been able to tell you from *Rose*. There are some pretty significant differences."

"Fine. Me from Hayden, then."

"That's at least realistic," Shane said.

"Realistic? How is that realistic? You are married."

Shane grinned. He normally wouldn't tease like this, but it was karma for Ilya allowing him to make an idiot of himself in the bar. "Y'know, he's not the worst looking out of all my friends. If I had to fuck someone other than you—"

"Which will never happen."

"Right. Of course. But if I *had* to—"

"Hush."

Shane laughed under his breath and peered down at the floor of the car. He should've been enjoying the banter—that was half the fun of his marriage—but at the moment it felt empty. He was too caught up in his thoughts.

Another mile and a half passed before he worked up the courage to ask the other question in his head.

"Ilya?"

"Mm?" Ilya hummed.

"Uhm," Shane hesitated. Then, he decided to finally rip the bandage off. "Do you think I'm fucking up?"

Shane was sure that Ilya was reacting in some way, but he was staring at a straw wrapper on the floor too hard to see it.

"What?" Ilya asked.

"Do you think I'm fucking up by retiring? Should I have kept playing?"

Talking about this in the car had been a strategic choice on Shane's part. He didn't want to have to look into Ilya's eyes for this, always so gentle and earnest and searching—he wanted to pretend he was having this conversation with the straw wrapper and not his compassionate husband.

He realized too late that his strategic error had been forgetting that Ilya could just pull the car over, which was exactly what he did.

Shane froze. "Ilya, you don't need to—"

"Yes, I do."

Ilya stopped the car on the side of the road, put on the hazards, and took off his seatbelt. Shane stayed very still, even when Ilya turned his entire body in his seat so that he could face Shane.

"Look at me," Ilya said.

Shane, caught between a car door and a Russian, had no options. He looked past Ilya—his expression was unreadable.

"Why do you ask?"

Shane swallowed. If he started talking now, he wouldn't be able to stop.

"Hockey is.. it's all I've ever been. What if I'm not meant for anything else?" He still didn't dare meet Ilya's eyes. "I didn't *have* to quit yet. I mean, my knee was bad, but I could've gotten a few more years out of it, and I don't even know what I'm going to *do* all day anymore, and, and- and everything good I have is because of me being good at hockey. I even said so in my press conference."

Ilya tilted his head. "Everything?"

"Maybe not my parents," Shane said. "Everything else."

"Do you think I love you because you score a lot of goals?"

"I mean, no." Shane turned his head; looking at Ilya was becoming too much. "But you never would've even spoken to me if I couldn't."

Ilya snorted at that, almost incredulous, and it nearly pissed Shane off. He turned back to face him again. "What was that for?"

Ilya just shook his head back and forth. "Six years married, ten years together, and you still don't understand at all."

Now Shane really was pissed. Was he about to get a fucking lecture? Right now? "Don't understand what?"

Ilya looked at him. It was that earnest look he hated because it made him want to tell Ilya everything. His voice was so careful and quiet, accent softening the impact of the consonants. "Shane, all I had to do was lay eyes on you. It would've been over the second I saw you. It *was* over when I first saw you. No matter how we met or who you were. Hockey, no hockey, me buying you a drink, whatever."

Shane's breath caught in his chest.

"You are my everything," Ilya finished simply. "If you are worried hockey is all you are to *me*, then you don't know me."

Shane swallowed; he would process the way those words made him feel later. "Maybe... maybe not to you, but to everyone else-"

"Shane," Ilya shook his head again, taking Shane's hand. "Hockey is not who you are. It is something you do. Used to do. You will do new things now. You will work more at the foundation, like you wanted. You can volunteer at the camps during the year. And someday,

hopefully soon, we can start a family. There are so many things you can do and try that aren't on skates."

"But nobody's gonna care about them."

Ilya frowned. "I will. Your parents will. Our child *definitely* will. The people you help and the charities we fund raise for will. You will get less attention from strangers on the street, but that is what you have wanted your whole life, yes? I thought you didn't like the being famous part."

Easy for you to say. Ilya wasn't the one staring down the barrel of irrelevance. He wasn't the one who'd have his every achievement usurped, almost certainly by the man he loved most.

On paper, Shane was the better player. They didn't talk about it often because the comparison was inherently unfair. Ilya spent three and a half seasons on a team that was... not very good. Shane had only ever been on winning teams, and having good stats wasn't just about personal skill. Your surroundings had to give you the opportunity to perform at your best. For several years, Ilya hadn't had that. His raw talent was enough to keep him on Shane's heels and even surpass him in a few categories, but generally speaking, Shane came out better.

Loathe as he was to admit it, least of all to the man he loved, Shane liked it that way. Married or not, teammates or not, they were direct competitors. It was a strange balance. The husband in him saw Ilya's victories as his own and would always be so incredibly proud of his every achievement. The superstar center in him wanted Ilya to win, yes, but also stay comfortably in second place.

All of Shane wanted to be the best. The husband wanted something to tease with, the athlete wanted his name at the top of every list. And for the last few years, it had been.

Retirement, though. Retirement would ruin all of it. Ilya would have the longer career, the better stats, and would almost certainly break every record Shane had ever held. Shane could expect his record for assists to stand; he doubted Ilya would catch up with him on Cup wins unless the Centaurs had a truly biblical run. Everything else was up for grabs. Everything else *would* be taken—Ilya had always been just behind him. It was when, not if.

How would people think about them in ten, twenty, or thirty years? Would they still be seen as equals?

Would his decision to retire consign him to a place in Ilya's shadow?

Okay, probably not. Shane was maybe spiraling a little—he'd done a lot in his own right. But Ilya was definitely going to pass him by pure numbers and Shane was trying to accept it. Every athletic record would be broken eventually. If someone had to take all of his, Ilya Rozanov was the only person who could possibly come close to deserving them.

Besides, Ilya was right. With rare exception, Shane despised everything that came with being famous. He didn't want to fade into obscurity as an athlete, but he was more than ready for it as a public figure. He'd be stir-crazy for the first year—both of them had already accepted

that— but Shane trusted that he would eventually find some sort of peace in a new rhythm and they'd be happy.

"I- yeah." Shane let his tension out with a sigh. He couldn't hold Ilya existing and being talented against him, but he couldn't quite bring himself to tell him what he was feeling, either. Not yet. Ilya would coax it out eventually. "I guess I'm just scared."

"That's okay. That's normal. It is a big, scary thing. I am scared. You were very brave to go first."

Shane smiled and exhaled through his nose.

Ilya went on. "It will be hard at first. Nothing I can say will make it not hard. But you will adjust, and, in five years, our lives will be very different. No more hockey. No more road trips and morning practices and team workouts. It will be only us."

Shane didn't reply right away. He let himself mull over Ilya's words for a while.

Only them. When they got to the cottage, they'd take Anya out and let her run in the yard. Then they'd bring her back inside and turn on all the appliances. They'd go to the grocery store and buy food and probably bicker over what to have for dinner. They'd plan whatever little projects they wanted to finish that summer—there was always *something* to renovate—and they'd review the foundation's weekly reports together in the evening.

It was peaceful, loving, and just for them.

Why was Shane so terrified of it? Why was he still so terrified of having his happy ending? This was exactly what he and Ilya had fought for: a normal life. A *quiet* life where they could love each other openly but keep their privacy.

It was a lot. It was a big change, but it would be a good one. Shane reassured himself with the thought that he had some time to get used to it, still—the reality wouldn't set in until Ilya went to training camp without him in the fall.

"Okay," Shane said. "Only us."

"Only us," Ilya agreed. He put his seatbelt back on, shut the hazards off, and pulled back onto the road. A half-mile passed before either of them spoke again.

"I'm sorry I'm such a mess," Shane said.

Ilya shrugged. "Is okay. You ended things with the love of your life. I would be a mess, too."

It was a joke. It was meant to make Shane laugh, Ilya knew it wasn't *true*. But in that moment, Shane's reply felt important.

"No," Shane said, putting his hand over Ilya's on the gear shift. "I didn't."

End Notes

moya zvezda -> my star

I hope you liked this one! it will probably be my last oneshot for a while, I'm going to focus on the multichap I started last week so I can start posting that for y'all to see. then again, maybe not. i am terrible at predicting what ideas will grab me, and I always have so many drafts going. but that's the plan.

Thank you so much for reading! Every single kudos and comment is so so very appreciated :)

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