The Hit

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by perachdavida

Summary

At forty years old and on the brink of retirement, it only takes one bad hit to convince Shane and Ilya that maybe this should be the end.

Notes

While not strictly necessary, my Shane/Ilya fics are all conceptually linked and are best enjoyed in chronological order, which is as follows:
The Interview
The Offer
Two Are More Than Twice As Much Work As One
A Day In Disney
Date Night
First Day Of School
A Perfect Christmas
The Mouse House
The Hit
Family Hockey Game
The Changeling
Sasha's Story

Shane circled the rink, warming up for the preseason game against Colorado. For the whole of his long career, there was nothing he looked forward to more than the start of a new hockey season and the fresh promise and potential it brought. But this year felt different.

He and Ilya had recently turned forty years old. While they were both still putting up good numbers, and had escaped the worst of the physical injuries that sidelined players permanently, they were getting tired. Forty in hockey was elderly. Decrepit, almost. They weren't as fast as they once were, and the constant travel felt more exhausting every year. Even in his most optimistic imaginings as a rookie, he could only have hoped he would make it this long. He and Ilya had finally decided over the summer that this season or the next should be their last.

Still, the thought of retirement was terrifying. Shane had never wanted to do anything besides play hockey. How would he fill his days? He would definitely like to spend more time with the twins, maybe coaching for their team, helping with homework, volunteering at their school. Even just being able to eat dinner together with any consistency would be wonderful. But outside of that, he was at a loss.

He lifted his eyes to the players' section right behind the bench, where his parents sat with his children scrunched up between them. They jumped and waved frantically when they saw him. He lifted his hand to wave back and skated up to the glass. They jumped over two rows of seats to stand in front him.

Eva held a sign that said "My Dads Can Outscore Your Dad". Sasha held an Ottawa pennant. They had just turned eight, and they were already promising hockey players. Their favorite activity was cheering at home games.

Ilya skated up next to Shane with a big grin on his face. "Good sign!" he praised Eva. "I promise I will try to outscore all the other dads here, including this one," he said, pointing a gloved thumb at Shane. The twins twittered with laughter.

"Yay, a goal competition!" Eva yelled. "I bet you can do it, Papa!"

Shane's mouth dropped open. "Hey! Excuse me, little miss traitor."

"You can do it too, Daddy! I have faith in you."

"Hhmmpf. Playing both sides, I see," Shane said with narrowed eyes as Eva twisted back and forth with a mischievous grin on her face. He tried to look stern, but it was hard. She was so adorable. "Fine, let's see which one of us can score more goals. What does the winner get?"

Sasha raised his hand, jumping up and down. "Ooh ooh, I know! The winner gets to pick our next movie night. Papa can pick a car racing exploding movie if he wants and Daddy can pick a hockey documentary if he wants, and no one can be mad or complain."

Shane's lips twitched and he turned to Ilya. "You heard your son, Rozanov. What do you say?"

He held out a fist for Shane to bump. “Deal.”

They blew the twins kisses and pushed off from the wall as the kids scampered back to their seats. They turned to each other and laughed. “Maybe we should remind Eva that it’s still more important to outscore Colorado than each other,” Shane said.

Ilya rolled his eyes hard. “That girl. I thought you were the most competitive person I ever met, but I was wrong. She beats you.” Shane just sighed, because it was true.

The game kicked off to a good start. It felt great to be back in competition, the place where they thrived most. They were up 3 to 1 by the beginning of the third period. Colorado was playing a very physical game and Shane was trying to keep focused on the puck and stay out of their way. A roughing call led to them having a power play, and Ilya jumped the boards to join him on the ice. They were battling for the puck and Ilya had just snatched it up and started on a breakaway when a Colorado defensemen slammed into him from a bad angle and sent him sailing headfirst onto the ice.

Shane watched in horror as Ilya slammed down and then stayed still, unmoving. There was a stunned second of silence before a roar filled the stadium and Shane threw himself forward and down next to Ilya. The refs yelled at him not to touch Ilya, but he couldn’t hear anything. He kept calling Ilya’s name as the paramedics rushed in and pushed him aside. Vaguely, he heard persistent screaming that registered somewhere deep in his dad brain, and he snapped out of his daze long enough to realize the screaming was coming from his son.

He whipped his head toward the stands where his parents and the kids were sitting. Sasha was wailing “Papa! Papa!” at the top of his lungs and trying desperately to get to the ice as Shane’s dad struggled to keep hold of him. Eva just sat there, white as a sheet, her eyes wide as saucers and her mouth hanging open. Shane had never felt so torn, wanting to stay at Ilya’s side but unable to watch his kids in such a state.

He forced himself to skate over to them. Sasha broke away and threw himself at the plexiglass in front of Shane, throwing his arms up, crying and reaching for him. Shane wished more than anything he could hold and comfort Sasha, but then looked back at the medics loading Ilya onto a board and preparing to carry him off the ice. By this time, Eva had jolted out of her stupor and pushed out of Shane’s mom’s hold to run down next to Sasha.

“It’s OK.” He spoke fast, trying frantically to reassure them. “I promise it’ll be OK. I’m so sorry buddy. I love you so much. I know you’re scared. But Papa is going to be fine. I just need to go with him to the hospital.” Sasha kept wailing, and now Eva had started crying too. Shane felt like he was being ripped in two. “Please go home with Grandma and Grandpa,” he pleaded. “I swear I’ll call as soon as I can. Just go home and then you’ll be able to see him soon.”

Though it was physically painful to leave his kids while they sobbed, he forced himself to return to Ilya as he was carried off the ice and down the chute. Shane didn’t even ask Wiebe permission to follow the paramedics out, and Wiebe didn’t question him, only promising to head to the hospital as soon as the game was over.

For a moment in the ambulance, Ilya fluttered to consciousness and looked at Shane, but then faded out again. Shane just held his hand tight. Though they had both been through concussions before, it was still frightening. Head injuries were serious. You never knew what could happen. He sighed and bowed his head over Ilya's chest. His adrenaline was pounding and he felt lightheaded from the tangle of emotions. For the first time in his life, retirement was starting to look appealing.

Ilya came to slowly. He couldn't make sense of his surroundings. His body felt heavy, his brain like soup. He had trouble opening his eyes. The droning noise in the background of his awareness grew louder and louder until he realized it was medical machinery. He finally understood he was in a hospital room. He shifted his head slightly to the left and saw Shane next to him, slouched in a chair with his eyes closed. He tried to speak but his throat felt dry and rough. He squeezed Shane's hand that was entwined with his.

Shane startled awake, his eyes widening when he realized Ilya was conscious. "Hey," he said softly. "You're awake."

"What happened?" Ilya croaked.

Shane lifted Ilya's hand and kissed the knuckles, then brushed them across his cheek. "Ehler tripped you and you hit the ice head first. You have a concussion. You've been in and out. We've had this conversation a couple times already. We might have it a couple more before your short term memory comes back online."

Ilya closed his eyes. As he awakened further, he could feel the headache growing. "Shit. So I'm out."

"Yeah. Probably for a few weeks at the least. Though that shouldn't be your top concern right now. Let's just focus on getting you better."

Ilya sighed and realized he was parched. "I need a drink."

Shane helped him sit up slightly and poured him a plastic cup of water. "Slowly," he admonished. "Small sips. You might be nauseous." Ilya obeyed, then settled back against the pillows.

Ilya had many questions but he really only cared about one thing. "Did we win?"

Shane huffed out a laugh and rolled his eyes. "No. I wasn't going to keep playing with you unconscious, and both of us being out screwed the lines. But like I said, that's the least of our worries."

The dense fog in Ilya's head slowly started to diminish. His memory began to clear and he groaned. There was, in fact, a more important thing than winning that he cared about. "Fuuuuck. The kids were there."

Shane winced. “Yeah. Sasha was pretty hysterical. The whole arena heard him. I think Eva was just stunned. I really wanted to go to them, but I couldn’t leave you.” He gently brushed Ilya’s hair back. “My parents are here with them in the waiting room. They threw a fit and refused to go home. I told them you would be fine. That both of us have had concussions before. But I think they won’t feel OK until they see you.”

Ilya tried to think for a second. His brain felt like a swamp of molasses. This was a deeply unpleasant experience. Concussions: 0 out of 10. Do not recommend.

“You should bring them in. Just…I need some pain meds first.”

“Yup. Let me get the nurse.” He stood up, let go of Ilya’s hand and leaned down to kiss him tenderly. “I love you. This is just one more day in the NHL. You’ll be fine.” Ilya tried to smile but moving his face muscles hurt too much.

Thankfully, they doped him up with the good shit. Once he felt like he could see the kids without scaring the hell out of them, he told Shane to go get them.

A few minutes later, the twins tiptoed into the room. Sasha’s face was wet with tears. Eva, looking startlingly pale and subdued, was holding his hand. They came to the side of his bed. Sasha leaned over and whispered in his ear. “Daddy told us we have to talk quietly because of your headache. And we need to be gentle and can’t climb on you or anything.”

Ilya’s mouth twitched. Sasha was such a sweet boy. “Thank you. Those things would be good. But it is ok for you to hug me. Come here.” He held open his arms and they gently laid their heads against his chest.

“I feel scared,” Sasha said, his voice quavering. “Are you going to be OK, Papa?”

He kissed Sasha’s forehead and tried to smile, though he didn’t think he was very successful. “Yes, sweetheart, I will be fine. I might feel bad for a week or two, and need to sleep a lot. But I will be back to normal soon.”

“You promise?” Eva asked softly. Which was concerning as Eva had never been quiet a day in her life. It only showed how shaken she was.

Ilya ran his hand over her silky hair. “Yes, baby, I promise. Cross my heart.”

“Good,” she said, looking relieved. “Then what about the goal scoring bet? How do we judge who won?” Of course she wouldn’t let that go, even in a hospital. Ilya looked up at the ceiling and whispered a prayer for their survival during her teenage years.

“I guess neither of us won,” Ilya answered ruefully.

“No,” Shane countered. “You’ll be ok, so that means we all won. Hockey will never be as important as our good health.” Eva’s face said she doubted that very much, but was smarter than to argue.

“Ok guys,” Shane said, clapping his hands together. “I really think Papa needs to sleep so his head can heal. I want you to go home with Grandma and Grandpa. I’ll come see you as soon

as I can."

"OK," Sasha sniffled.

Eva nodded her agreement, but added, "Only if you promise we can talk to you on the phone before we go to sleep."

Shane huffed out a half laugh, half exasperated sigh. "Sure. I'll tell Grandma to video call me when you're ready for bed."

They both hugged and kissed Ilya before Shane put a hand on each of their shoulders and walked them out of the room. Ilya settled back on his pillows and closed his eyes, feeling drained by the short conversation. He must have fallen asleep because the next thing he knew, Shane was sitting beside his bed again, holding his hand.

"Hey," Shane said softly. "Please tell me you remember everything and I don't have to explain it all again."

Ilya huffed. "I am very glad to report that I remember about the concussion and the kids being here. Did I miss anything else?"

"No, that's it," Shane said, sounding relieved. "Thank God."

Ilya's face turned serious. "Shane, I know we have talked about it, but I am getting too old for these hits. And I hate scaring the kids like that. I think it's time to retire at the end of this season."

Shane looked down at the floor, brow furrowed. "Yeah. I was thinking the same thing in the ambulance."

Ilya frowned. "Do you want to stop?"

Shane smiled sadly. "Not really. You know that I'd rather play forever. But it could just as easily be me in this bed instead of you. We're both 40. That's an insane age to still be playing hockey. It makes sense to quit while we're ahead." He paused. "I have no idea what I'll do with myself."

Ilya squeezed Shane's hand. "We will figure it out. But this is my decision, not yours. If you want one more season, I will support you. We don't have to do this together."

Shane looked up sharply, like the thought had never occurred to him. Maybe he was tempted, just for a moment. But then his face softened. He leaned over and kissed Ilya gently. He pulled back only an inch and breathed against Ilya's lips. "No. We started this together, a million years ago. I want to finish it together."

Ilya reached up and toyed with Shane's hair. He gazed at him with all the fullness of 23 years in his heart. "I love you. I loved competing against you and I've loved playing with you, and I'm going to love being retired with you."

Shane smiled. “If this is going to be our last season, we should make it a good one. So let’s get you healed up and back on the ice.” They pressed their foreheads together and closed their eyes.

Who could possibly have imagined on that cold winter day in a Seskatuwan parking lot, that they would be here 23 years later, having spent their entire careers together, and then their lives, at both an end and a beginning. It had been a wild ride. Ilya knew such a big transition as retirement was bound to be rocky. But they had already been to hell and back, and come out the other side. He knew they could make anything work, as long as they did it together.

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