

When The Ice Breaks

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/76506186) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/76506186>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Yuna Hollander , David Hollander
Additional Tags:	Hurt Shane Hollander , Anxious Shane Hollander , Stubborn Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander Needs a Hug , Injury , Major Character Injury , Established Relationship , Angst and Hurt/Comfort , Emotional Hurt , emotional breakdown , Protective Ilya Rozanov , Miscommunication , Soft Ilya Rozanov , Possessive Ilya Rozanov , Medical Conditions , Hiding Medical Issues , Sexual Tension , Mild Sexual Content , Conflict Resolution , Possessive Shane Hollander
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of The Files of Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-27 Completed: 2026-01-01 Words: 32,618 Chapters: 3/3

When The Ice Breaks

by [LeviosaWitch](#)

Summary

Shane hides a career ending injury from Ilya for months, terrified of disappointment and loss. When his body gives out, so does his carefully constructed facade.

or

Shane is stubborn and doesn't want Ilya to worry.

Notes

Sooo after watching the final episode (and rewatching the entire show multiple times), I just HAD to write a fic. I hope you guys enjoy!!

Chapter 1

The hit came from nowhere.

One moment Shane Hollander was skating hard toward the boards, stick extended, eyes on the puck. The next, the world exploded into white light and spinning darkness. He heard the crack—felt it reverberate through his skull, his shoulder, down his spine—before his brain could process what had happened.

The ice rose up to meet him, cold and unforgiving.

Somewhere far away, he heard shouting. The referee's whistle. The roar of the crowd at the Bell Centre shifting from excitement to horrified silence. Shane tried to move, tried to push himself up, but his body wouldn't respond the way it should. His left arm screamed in protest. His head felt like it was splitting open.

"Don't move him!" someone shouted.

Hands on his shoulders, gentle but firm. The team doctor's face swam into view above him, mouth moving, but Shane couldn't make out the words over the ringing in his ears.

Everything after that came in fragments.

The stretcher. The ambulance. Bright lights overhead. His mother's face, pale and frightened, her hand gripping his. The emergency room, all antiseptic smell and beeping machines. Doctors asking him questions he couldn't quite answer. What day is it? Who's the Prime Minister? Can you squeeze my hand?

He must have answered correctly enough, because they let him drift after that, pumping him full of something that made the pain recede to a distant, manageable throb.

When Shane opened his eyes again—he wasn't sure how much time had passed—the hospital room was dim, lit only by the glow of monitors and the light filtering in from the hallway. His mother was gone. His father too. But someone else was there.

Ilya.

He sat in the chair beside Shane's bed, elbows on his knees, head bowed. Even in the low light, Shane could make out the tension in those broad shoulders, the way Ilya's hands were clasped so tightly his knuckles had gone white. He was still wearing his suit—he must have come straight from Boston after his own game.

"Ilya," Shane tried to say, but it came out as barely a whisper.

Ilya's head snapped up immediately. In an instant he was on his feet, moving to Shane's bedside. His hand found Shane's right one—the one that wasn't attached to the arm in a sling—and gripped it carefully.

"Shane." Ilya's voice was rough, strained. "Fuck. You scare me."

Shane tried to smile, but his face felt strange, disconnected. "Sorry. Didn't mean to."

"Don't apologize." Ilya's thumb traced circles on the back of Shane's hand. "How do you feel?"

"Floaty," Shane said honestly. Whatever they'd given him was good stuff. The pain was still there, lurking beneath the surface, but it felt far away, like it was happening to someone else. "Everything's... soft around the edges."

Something that might have been a smile flickered across Ilya's face, but it didn't reach his eyes. Those dark eyes that Shane loved so much were filled with worry, fear barely contained. "That the medication. Your mother say they give you something strong."

"Where is she? My parents?"

"I send them get coffee. They been here hours. They need break." Ilya's free hand came up to brush Shane's hair back from his forehead, so gentle it made Shane's chest ache. "I tell them I stay. With you."

"They're okay with that?"

"Shane." Ilya's voice was patient. "They know about us. They know for months. Your mother hug me when I arrive."

Right. Shane remembered that now, though the memory felt fuzzy. His parents had been surprisingly understanding when he'd finally told them about Ilya. His mother had cried, but not from disappointment—from relief that Shane had finally trusted them enough to share that part of himself. His father had been quiet, thoughtful, then asked if Ilya made him happy. When Shane said yes, his father had nodded and said that was all that mattered.

"I forget things," Shane mumbled. "My brain's all... scrambled."

Ilya's jaw tightened. "Doctor say you have concussion. Bad one. You need rest, let brain heal."

"Can't rest. Season's not over."

"Shane—"

"We're in the playoffs, Ilya. I can't just—" Shane tried to sit up and immediately regretted it. Pain lanced through his shoulder, sharp enough to cut through the medication. He gasped, and Ilya's hands were immediately on him, steadying him, easing him back down.

"Stop," Ilya said firmly. "You not go anywhere. You hurt."

"I'm fine."

"You not fine. Hit so hard, you don't remember what day."

Shane blinked. "What day is it?"

"Thursday."

"Oh." That seemed right, maybe. "What time?"

"Almost midnight."

"You should go home. You have practice tomorrow."

Ilya made a sound that was half-laugh, half-growl. "You think I care about practice now? I hear you get carried off ice on stretcher, Shane. I get in car, drive here fast I can. I not going anywhere."

The intensity in Ilya's voice, the raw emotion barely contained, made something warm bloom in Shane's chest despite everything. "You're going to get in trouble. If someone sees you here."

"I don't care."

"Ilya—"

"I don't care," Ilya repeated, more forcefully. His hand tightened around Shane's. "Let them see. Let them write articles, take pictures. You in hospital bed. You think I leave you because people talk?"

Shane's eyes burned suddenly, tears threatening. Damn medication making him emotional. "I love you," he said, the words slipping out unbidden.

Ilya's expression softened immediately. He leaned down, pressing his lips to Shane's forehead, lingering there. "Я тебя люблю, моя любовь," he murmured against Shane's skin. "So much, it scare me."

"Don't be scared."

"Too late." Ilya pulled back just enough to meet Shane's eyes. "When I see you fall... when you not get up... I think—" His voice cracked. He stop, swallow hard. "I think I lose you."

"Takes more than that to get rid of me," Shane tried to joke, but it fell flat.

"This not funny."

"I know. I'm sorry." Shane squeezed Ilya's hand as hard as he could manage, which wasn't very hard at all. "I'm okay. I'm going to be okay."

Ilya studied his face for a long moment, and Shane could see him struggling with something, some emotion he was trying to keep locked down. Finally, he nodded. "You better be. Because I not done with you yet. We have plans, remember? This summer, we going to—"

"Travel," Shane finished. "See the views in Switzerland."

"Yes. So you need to heal. No rushing back. No being stupid about this."

"I'm never stupid."

That actually got a real smile out of Ilya, small but genuine. "You always stupid. Especially taking care yourself."

"That's why I have you."

"Yes," Ilya agreed quietly. "That why you have me."

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, Ilya's thumb still tracing those gentle circles on Shane's hand. Shane felt himself starting to drift, the medication pulling him back under. He fought it, wanting to stay here in this moment, with Ilya beside him.

"Tell me something," Shane mumbled. "Something good. To think about."

Ilya considered this. "You remember first game we play this season?"

"You mean when you checked me into the boards and then skated past and said I looked pretty when I was angry?"

"Yes, that one." Ilya's smile widened. "You so mad. Face all red. But after game... you come my hotel room and—"

"And we didn't talk much," Shane finished, feeling his own face heat at the memory.

"No, we didn't." Ilya's voice dropped lower, intimate. "'But before... you remember what I tell you?"

Shane tried to think through the fog in his brain. "You said... you said you'd been thinking about me all day. That you couldn't focus on anything else."

"I still cannot," Ilya admit. "Every game, every practice, every moment... you there. In my head, in my heart. I used to think it make me weak, worse player. But no. It make me stronger. Because I know you out there too... working hard, wanting it same. It make me want be better."

"You're already the best, baby," Shane said softly.

"No. We the best. Together."

Shane's eyes were getting heavy, harder to keep open. "Stay," he whispered. "Please stay."

"I not going anywhere," Ilya promised. "Sleep, моя любовь. I be right here when you wake up."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Shane let his eyes close, let the medication pull him under. The last thing he felt was Ilya's lips pressing against his knuckles, tender and reverent, like a prayer.

He didn't see the nurse come in a few minutes later, didn't see Ilya reluctantly release his hand and step back. Didn't see the way Ilya looked at him one last time before leaving, his expression full of love and fear and desperate hope.

Shane slept, and dreamed of ice and light and Ilya's smile.

— — —

Shane woke to sunlight streaming through the hospital window and his mother asleep in the chair beside his bed. His head felt clearer than it had the night before, the fog of medication lifted somewhat. But with that clarity came pain—a deep, throbbing ache in his shoulder and a sharper, more concerning sensation running down his spine.

He tried to shift position and immediately regretted it. His left arm was immobilized in a sling, and when he tried to move his legs, something felt... wrong. Not paralyzed, exactly, but not right either. Like the signals from his brain were getting scrambled somewhere along the way.

His mother stirred, opening her eyes. When she saw he was awake, she sat up quickly. "Shane. How are you feeling?"

"Like I got hit by a truck," he said honestly. "Where's Dad?"

"Getting breakfast. He'll be back soon." She reached out to touch his face, her expression worried. "The doctor wants to talk to you this morning. About your scans."

Something in her tone made Shane's stomach drop. "What scans?"

"They did a CT scan last night, and an MRI this morning while you were sleeping. To check for... to make sure everything was okay."

"And is it? Is everything okay?"

His mother's eyes filled with tears. "The doctor should be the one to tell you."

That was answer enough.

Dr. Reeves came in twenty minutes later, after Shane's father had returned with coffee and muffins that Shane couldn't imagine eating. She was a middle-aged woman with kind eyes and a no-nonsense demeanor that Shane appreciated. She didn't try to soften the blow.

"Shane, I'm going to be direct with you because I think that's what you need right now. Is that okay?"

Shane nodded, his heart hammering.

"You have a severe concussion—grade three. That means you lost consciousness, and you're experiencing confusion and memory issues. That will improve with time and rest, but you need to take it seriously. No screens, no bright lights, no physical activity. Your brain needs to heal."

"Okay," Shane said. He'd had concussions before. He knew the drill.

"You also have a broken collarbone. Clean break, should heal well with immobilization. Six to eight weeks."

Shane's heart sank. Six to eight weeks meant the rest of the playoffs. But he nodded. "Okay."

Dr. Reeves hesitated, and Shane knew whatever came next was going to be worse. "The scans also showed damage to your cervical spine—your neck. Specifically, there's compression and inflammation around your C5 and C6 vertebrae, which is affecting the nerve roots in that area."

"What does that mean?" Shane asked, though part of him didn't want to know.

"It means you're experiencing nerve damage. The symptoms can include pain, numbness, tingling, and weakness in your arms and hands. In more severe cases, it can affect your legs

as well—balance issues, difficulty walking, muscle weakness."

Shane thought about the strange sensation when he'd tried to move his legs earlier. "How severe is mine?"

"Moderate to severe. We won't know the full extent until the swelling goes down, but Shane..." Dr. Reeves leaned forward, her expression grave. "This is a serious injury. It's going to require extensive treatment—physical therapy, possibly surgery if it doesn't improve. And even with treatment, there's no guarantee of full recovery."

The room felt like it was tilting. Shane gripped the bed rail with his good hand. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying your hockey career might be over."

The words hung in the air like a death sentence.

"No," Shane said immediately. "No, that's not—I'll do the therapy. I'll do whatever it takes. I'll—"

"Shane." His mother's voice was thick with tears. "Honey, you need to listen to what the doctor is saying."

"I am listening, and I'm telling you I'll be fine. I've come back from injuries before. I can do it again."

Dr. Reeves's expression was sympathetic but firm. "This isn't like other injuries. Nerve damage is unpredictable. Some people recover fully. Others don't. And even if you do recover enough to play again, there's a significant risk of re-injury. Another hit like the one you took last night could leave you permanently disabled."

Permanently disabled. The words echoed in Shane's head, drowning out everything else.

"How long?" he managed to ask. "How long until we know?"

"Months. At least three to six months of intensive therapy before we can assess your progress. And Shane, I need you to understand—even if you regain function, even if the pain improves, you may never be at the level you were before. Professional hockey requires peak physical condition. Your body may not be able to handle that anymore."

Shane couldn't breathe. The room was too small, too bright, too full of people looking at him with pity in their eyes. His whole life had been hockey. Since he was four years old, skating on the pond behind his grandparents' house. Every choice he'd made, every sacrifice, every moment of pain and triumph—it had all been for this. For the NHL. For the dream he'd worked so hard to achieve.

And now some doctor was telling him it might be over.

"I need to be alone," Shane said abruptly.

"Shane—" his mother started.

"Please. I just... I need a minute."

Dr. Reeves stood. "I'll give you some time to process this. But Shane, I want you to know—this isn't the end of your life. It might feel like it right now, but there are other paths, other possibilities. You're young, talented, intelligent. You have so much ahead of you."

Shane didn't respond. He kept his eyes fixed on the window, on the bright spring sky outside, until he heard the door close behind her.

His mother came to sit on the edge of his bed. "Honey—"

"Don't," Shane said, his voice breaking. "Please don't. I can't... I can't fall apart right now."

"You're allowed to fall apart."

"No, I'm not." Shane forced himself to take a deep breath, to push down the panic threatening to overwhelm him. "I need to think. I need to figure out what to do."

"What do you mean, what to do? You heard the doctor. You need to rest, do the therapy—"

"I mean about Ilya."

His mother went very still. "What about Ilya?"

Shane finally looked at her, and he knew his eyes were wild, desperate. "I can't tell him. About the nerve damage, about my career maybe being over. I can't."

"Shane, he has a right to know—"

"No." Shane's voice was firm despite the fear coursing through him. "Mom, you don't understand. Ilya is... he's everything. He's brilliant and talented and he has this incredible career ahead of him. He's going to win championships, break records. He's going to be one of the greatest players in NHL history."

"And you think he won't want you if you're not playing?"

"I think he deserves better than someone who's broken. Someone who can't keep up with him anymore." Shane's throat was tight, making it hard to speak. "I think if I tell him now, while everything is still uncertain, it'll just hurt him. He'll worry, he'll try to fix it, and there's nothing to fix. Not yet. Maybe not ever."

"So what are you going to do? Lie to him?"

"I'm going to tell him about the concussion and the collarbone. That's true. That's enough."
Shane met his mother's eyes, pleading. "Please, Mom. I need time to figure this out. To see if I can recover. If I can't... if it really is over... I'll tell him then. But right now, I just need time."

His mother looked at him for a long moment, her expression torn between understanding and disapproval. Finally, she sighed. "I don't like this, Shane. I don't like you keeping secrets from someone you love."

"I know. But I'm asking you to trust me. Please."

"Your father and I won't lie to him if he asks directly."

"I know. I wouldn't ask you to." Shane swallowed hard. "But if he doesn't ask... if he just assumes it's the concussion and the collarbone..."

"Then we won't volunteer information." His mother squeezed his hand. "But Shane, you can't hide this forever. Eventually, he's going to notice. He loves you. He pays attention."

"I know," Shane whispered. "I just need a little time. That's all."

His mother didn't look convinced, but she nodded. "Okay. A little time. But promise me something."

"What?"

"Promise me you won't push him away. Whatever happens, whatever you're going through—don't shut him out completely. He's stronger than you think. And he loves you more than you

know."

Shane's eyes burned with unshed tears. "I promise."

It was a lie, and they both knew it. But his mother let it stand, because sometimes love meant giving people the space to make their own mistakes.

Even when you knew those mistakes would break their hearts.

— — —

The first month was the easiest, because everyone expected Shane to be recovering. The concussion symptoms were real and visible—the headaches, the sensitivity to light, the fatigue. When Ilya came to visit, which he did as often as his schedule allowed, Shane could blame his slowness, his careful movements, on the head injury.

"You push too hard," Ilya said one afternoon, finding Shane trying to do simple exercises in his living room. "The doctor said rest."

"I've been resting for three weeks," Shane argued, even as pain shot down his spine from the movement. "I need to start rebuilding."

Ilya crossed the room in three long strides and physically picked Shane up, carrying him back to the couch despite Shane's protests. "You need heal first. Then rebuild."

"I am healing."

"Your collarbone... still not fully heal. You not push, yes?" Ilya settled Shane on the couch with exaggerated care, then sat beside him, close enough that their thighs touched. "Why you in such hurry?"

Because I'm terrified, Shane thought. Because every day that passes without improvement is another day closer to the end of everything I've worked for.

"I just want to get back out there," he said instead. "I miss it. I miss playing."

Ilya's expression softened. "'I know. But you miss it much more if you rush back and hurt yourself worse.'" He reached out, tucking a strand of Shane's hair behind his ear. "Be patient, моя любовь. Your body need time."

Shane leaned into the touch, letting himself have this moment of comfort. "How's your season going?"

"We make it second round of playoffs. But we lose last night." Ilya shrugged, but Shane could see the disappointment in his eyes. "It's okay. We come back stronger next year."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there."

"Don't be sorry. You cannot help getting hurt." Ilya's hand moved to cup Shane's face. "Besides, next year you back, and we face each other in finals. Just like we always plan."

Shane forced a smile, even as his heart cracked a little more. "Yeah. Just like we planned."

— — —

The second month was harder.

The concussion symptoms were improving, slowly but surely. The headaches were less frequent, the light sensitivity fading. His collarbone was healing on schedule. But the nerve damage wasn't improving at all. If anything, it was getting worse.

Shane started physical therapy, working with a specialist who focused on spinal injuries. The exercises were grueling and often left him in agony, but he pushed through, desperate for any sign of progress. Some days were better than others. Some days he could almost convince himself he was getting stronger.

Other days, his legs would give out when he tried to walk across the room.

He got good at hiding it. He learned to recognize the warning signs—the tingling, the weakness—and would quickly sit down or lean against something before anyone noticed. He started wearing compression sleeves on his arms to help with the numbness. He told Ilya they were for the collarbone, for support.

Ilya believed him, because why wouldn't he? Shane had never lied to him before.

"You look tired," Ilya observed one evening. They were at Shane's apartment, curled up on the couch watching a movie. Or rather, Ilya was watching the movie. Shane was trying not to think about the burning pain running down his left side.

"Just a long day of therapy," Shane said, which was true. He'd had a three-hour session that morning and could barely move afterward.

"Is helping?"

"Yeah. Slowly but surely."

Ilya shifted, pulling Shane closer against his chest. The movement jostled Shane's spine, and he had to bite down hard on his lip to keep from crying out. Ilya didn't notice.

"I proud of you." Ilya murmured into Shane's hair. "I know this hard. But you do so well."

Shane closed his eyes, guilt washing over him. "Thanks."

"When you think you be cleared to skate again?"

"I don't know. Another month, maybe? The doctor wants to see how the collarbone heals."

Another lie. Dr. Reeves had told him last week that even if his collarbone healed perfectly, she wouldn't clear him for contact sports until the nerve damage improved significantly. And there was no timeline for that. There might never be.

"That's good," Ilya said. "That mean you ready for training camp in fall."

"Yeah. Maybe."

"Not maybe. Definitely." Ilya's arms tightened around him. "I cannot wait play against you again. I miss it. Miss see you out there... all fierce, all determined. You... beautiful when play, you know?"

Shane's throat closed up. "Ilya—"

"I mean it. Everyone else... they play hockey. But you... you make it art. The way you move, the way you read ice... like watching poetry."

"Stop," Shane whispered.

"Why? It true."

"Because I—" Shane stopped himself just in time. Because I might never play again. Because I might never be that person you're describing. Because I'm lying to you every single day and

I hate myself for it.

"Because what?"

"Because you're going to make me cry," Shane said, forcing a laugh. "And that's embarrassing."

Ilya chuckled, pressing a kiss to Shane's temple. "Okay. I stop. But only cause I love you."

"I love you too," Shane said, and meant it with every broken piece of his heart.

— — —

The third month was when things started to fall apart.

Shane's collarbone had healed. The concussion symptoms were almost entirely gone. By all accounts, he should have been cleared to start skating again, to begin working his way back to game shape.

But he wasn't. Because the nerve damage was still there, still limiting his movement, still causing pain and weakness that he couldn't explain away anymore.

Ilya was getting suspicious.

"Why they not clear you?" he asked one night, his voice tight with frustration. They were at his apartment in Boston—Shane had driven down for the weekend, even though the drive had left him exhausted and aching.

"They want to be cautious," Shane said. "It was a bad concussion."

“Three months, Shane. Three months. Your collarbone healed. You say headaches gone. What they wait for?”

"I don't know. They're doctors. They know what they're doing."

"Do they?" Ilya stood up, pacing across the room. “Because from where I stand... look like they being too cautious. You should get second opinion.”

"I trust my doctors."

“Then why you look like in pain all the time?”

Shane froze. "I'm not—"

"Yes, you are." Ilya turned to face him, his expression intense. ““You think I not notice? The way you move so careful, like afraid something break. The way you wince... when think I not see. Always tired... always making excuse not do things we used to do.”

"I'm just recovering—"

"It been three months!" Ilya's voice rose. "You should be getting better, not worse!"

"I am getting better," Shane insisted, even though it was a lie. "It just takes time."

“How much time? Another month? Six months? One year?” Ilya run hands through hair, gesture Shane know... frustration. “Talk to me, Shane. Tell me what really going on.”

"Nothing's going on. I'm healing. That's all."

"Bullshit."

Shane stood up too quickly, and immediately regretted it. His legs wobbled, and he had to grab the arm of the couch to steady himself. Ilya was at his side in an instant, hands on Shane's arms, supporting him.

"See?" Ilya said, his voice breaking. "This not normal. Not just concussion. Something else wrong, and you not tell me what."

Shane pulled away, even though it hurt to lose Ilya's touch. "I'm fine. I just stood up too fast."

"Shane—"

"I said I'm fine!" Shane snapped, louder than he intended. "Why can't you just trust me?"

Ilya stared at him, hurt flashing across his face. "I do trust you. That why this so hard. Because I know you lie to me... and I don't understand why."

Shane's anger deflated as quickly as it had risen, leaving only exhaustion and guilt. "I'm not lying. I'm just... I'm tired, okay? I'm tired of talking about this, tired of everyone asking me how I'm feeling, tired of being treated like I'm made of glass. Can we please just drop it?"

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Then he nodded slowly. "Okay. We drop it. For now."

The "for now" hung between them like a threat.

— — —

The fourth month was when Shane started avoiding Ilya.

It wasn't intentional at first. He was just busy with therapy, with doctor's appointments, with trying to figure out if there was any possible way he could recover enough to play again. But then Ilya would call, and Shane would let it go to voicemail. Ilya would text, and Shane would respond hours later with brief, noncommittal answers.

He told himself he was protecting Ilya. Protecting their relationship. If Ilya knew the truth, it would destroy him. Better to keep some distance, to give himself time to figure things out.

But deep down, Shane knew he was just being a coward.

"You're avoiding him," his mother said during one of her visits. She'd been coming by once a week, bringing food and checking on him. Shane suspected his father had asked her to, worried that Shane wasn't taking care of himself.

"I'm not avoiding him. I'm just busy."

"Shane." His mother's voice was gentle but firm. "You can't keep doing this. It's not fair to him, and it's not fair to you."

"I don't know what else to do," Shane admitted, his voice small. "The therapy isn't working, Mom. I'm not getting better. If anything, I'm getting worse. And every time I see Ilya, every time he looks at me with all that hope and love, I feel like I'm dying inside. Because I know I'm going to disappoint him."

"You could never disappoint him."

"Yes, I could. I already am." Shane's hands were shaking. "He fell in love with a hockey player. With someone strong and capable and whole. Not... not this."

"He fell in love with you, Shane. Not your career. Not your ability to play hockey. You."

"You don't understand. Hockey is who I am. Without it, I'm nothing."

His mother's eyes filled with tears. "That's not true. You're so much more than hockey. You're kind and funny and intelligent. You're a good son, a good friend, a good partner. Those things don't go away just because you can't play anymore."

"But what if I can't be a good partner anymore? What if I can't keep up with him, can't be what he needs?"

"Then you talk to him about it. You let him decide what he needs, instead of deciding for him."

Shane shook his head. "I can't. Not yet. I need more time."

"You're running out of time, baby. He's going to figure it out eventually. And when he does, he's going to be hurt that you didn't trust him enough to tell him the truth."

"I know," Shane whispered. "I know."

But still, he didn't tell him.

— — —

The fifth month was when the pain got really bad.

Shane had been pushing himself too hard in therapy, desperate for any sign of improvement. His therapist had warned him to slow down, to listen to his body, but Shane couldn't. Every day that passed without progress felt like another nail in the coffin of his career.

The result was increased inflammation, increased pain, and decreased function. There were days when Shane could barely get out of bed, when even the simple act of walking to the bathroom left him breathless and shaking.

He stopped answering Ilya's calls entirely. Stopped responding to texts. Told himself it was temporary, just until he felt better, just until he could figure out what to do.

Ilya showed up at his apartment on a Tuesday afternoon.

Shane heard the knock and knew immediately who it was. He'd been lying on the couch, trying to work up the energy to make himself lunch, and the sound of Ilya's fist on the door made his heart race with panic.

"Shane, I know you in there," Ilya called through the door. "Your car is in parking lot. Open the door."

Shane didn't move.

"Shane, please. I worry about you. Just let me see you okay."

Still nothing.

"Fine. I calling your mother."

That got Shane moving. He dragged himself off the couch, biting back a cry of pain as his legs protested the movement. He made it to the door and opened it just as Ilya was pulling out his phone.

Ilya's eyes widened when he saw Shane. "Fuck. You look terrible."

"Thanks," Shane said dryly. "That's exactly what every guy wants to hear."

But Ilya wasn't joking. He pushed past Shane into the apartment, his eyes scanning Shane from head to toe with obvious concern. "When last time you eat? Or shower? Or leave apartment?"

"I don't know. A few days ago?"

"A few days?" Ilya's voice rose. "Shane, what the hell is going on?"

"Nothing. I'm just having a bad week."

"Bad week?" Ilya scoff. "You ignore me almost month. I go crazy... thinking something happen to you. Thinking you hurt, or sick, or—"

He stop, jaw tight.

"Or you not want be with me anymore."

Shane's heart broke at the vulnerability in Ilya's voice. "No. God, no. That's not it at all."

"Then what is it? Because I cannot keep doing this, Shane. I cannot keep wondering if you okay... if we okay. I need you talk to me."

"I know. I'm sorry. I just—" Shane swayed on his feet, the room tilting. "I need to sit down."

Ilya was there immediately, supporting Shane's weight, guiding him back to the couch. Once Shane was settled, Ilya sat beside him, close but not touching. The distance felt like a chasm.

"Tell me the truth," Ilya said quietly. "Are you sick? Is something serious?"

"No. I mean, yes, but not like you're thinking."

"Then what?"

Shane opened his mouth to tell him, to finally admit the truth. But the words wouldn't come. Because once he said them out loud, once Ilya knew, everything would change. And Shane wasn't ready for that. Wasn't ready to see the disappointment in Ilya's eyes, the pity, the realization that Shane wasn't the person he thought he was.

"I'm just struggling with the recovery," Shane said instead. "It's harder than I expected. And I didn't want you to see me like this. Weak and pathetic."

"You not weak. And you definitely not pathetic." Ilya reach out, take Shane hand. "But you scare me. This not like you. You always strong, always determined. Now... you just giving up."

"I'm not giving up."

"Then what you call this? Hiding in apartment, not answer calls, barely take care of yourself?"

"I call it having a bad month, okay? I'm allowed to have bad months."

“Of course you are. But you not supposed go through it alone. That what I here for. That what relationship mean.”

Shane pulled his hand away. "Maybe that's the problem. Maybe I'm not good at being in a relationship."

Ilya went very still. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying maybe you should go. Maybe you should focus on your career, on your life, and stop worrying about me."

“You breaking up with me?”

"I'm saying maybe it would be easier—"

"Easier for who?" Ilya's voice was sharp now, angry. “For you? Because it sure hell not easier for me.”

"Ilya—"

“No. You not get do this. You not get push me away because scared... hurt... or whatever going on with you.” Ilya stand, pace again. “I love you, Shane. I love you so much... it scare me sometimes. And I not let you throw that away because too stubborn to let me help.”

"You can't help me," Shane said, his voice breaking. "Nobody can."

“Why not? What so terrible... you cannot even tell me?”

Shane looked up at Ilya, at this beautiful, brilliant man who loved him despite everything, and felt something inside him crack. "Because I'm broken, okay? I'm broken, and I don't know how to fix it, and I can't stand the thought of you seeing me like this. Of you realizing that I'm not worth it."

"Not worth it?" Ilya's voice was incredulous. "Shane... you worth everything to me. Everything. How you not know that?"

"Because look at me!" Shane gestured at himself, at his too-thin frame, his unwashed hair, the way he was sitting so carefully to avoid aggravating his spine. "This isn't who you fell in love with. This isn't the person you deserve."

"You right," Ilya say, Shane heart stop. "This not who I fall in love with. Person I fall in love... never give up. Never hide from me. Never think so little of self... or of me."

Shane flinched as if he'd been struck.

"But you know what?" Ilya continue, voice soft. "I still love you. Even like this. Even when you idiot. Even when push me away. I love you, Shane Hollander and I not go anywhere. So... you either tell me what really going on, or keep lie to me. But either way I stay."

Shane stared at him, tears streaming down his face now, unable to hold them back anymore. "You shouldn't. You should leave. You should find someone better."

"There is no one better. There only you." Ilya knelt in front of Shane, taking both of his hands. "Please, моя любовь. "Please, let me in. Let me help you. Whatever it is we face it together."

And Shane wanted to. God, he wanted to so badly. But the fear was still there, paralyzing him, keeping the words locked inside.

"I can't," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I can't."

Ilya's face crumpled, just for a moment, before he got it under control. He stood up slowly, releasing Shane's hands. "Okay. If how you want it."

"Ilya, wait—"

"No. You make your choice. You don't trust me enough tell me truth and I cannot force you." Ilya headed for the door, then paused, looking back. "But Shane? When you ready stop running... when you ready let me love you how you deserve— I be here. I always be here."

Then he was gone, and Shane was alone with his pain and his secrets and the crushing weight of his own cowardice.

— — —

Three weeks passed.

Three weeks of silence between them. Three weeks of Shane staring at his phone, wanting to call, wanting to text, wanting to apologize and explain and beg Ilya to come back.

But he didn't. Because nothing had changed. He was still broken. Still lying. Still terrified of losing the one person who mattered most.

His therapy continued. Some days were better than others. He had moments where he thought maybe, just maybe, he was starting to improve. Then he'd have a bad day, and all that hope would crumble.

Dr. Reeves was talking about surgery now. A procedure to decompress the nerve roots, to try to relieve some of the pressure. It might help. It might not. It might make things worse.

Shane couldn't decide. Couldn't think clearly about anything anymore.

He missed Ilya with an ache that was worse than any physical pain. Missed his laugh, his touch, his presence. Missed the way Ilya could make everything seem manageable, even when it wasn't.

But he'd pushed Ilya away. Had told him to leave. And Ilya, despite his promise to stay, had respected Shane's wishes and given him space.

Shane hated himself for it.

It was a Friday night when Ilya showed up again. Shane had just gotten out of the shower—a process that had taken almost an hour because his legs were particularly weak today—and was shuffling toward his bedroom in sweatpants and a t-shirt when he heard the knock.

His heart leapt into his throat. He knew that knock.

Shane made his way to the door, moving as quickly as he dared. When he opened it, Ilya was standing there in jeans and a leather jacket, his hair slightly damp from the rain outside. He looked tired, Shane thought. Tired and sad and beautiful.

"Hi," Ilya said softly.

"Hi," Shane managed.

"Can I come in?"

Shane nodded, stepping back to let Ilya pass. As Ilya walked by, Shane caught the scent of his cologne, familiar and comforting, and had to resist the urge to reach out and grab him.

Ilya turned to face him, and for a moment they just looked at each other. Shane drank in the sight of him, memorizing every detail like he might never get the chance again.

"I missed you," Ilya said finally.

"I missed you too."

"I know I say I give you space. But I cannot anymore. I cannot stay away from you, Shane. I try... and I cannot." Ilya took a step closer. "So I here. And I not leaving until we talk. Really talk."

Shane's pulse was racing. "Okay."

"Okay?" Ilya looked surprised, like he'd expected more resistance.

"Yeah. Okay. You're right. We need to talk." Shane took a breath, trying to gather his courage. "But first, can I just—can I just have a moment? With you? Before everything changes?"

Ilya's expression softened. "Of course."

Shane closed the distance between them, and Ilya met him halfway. Their lips came together in a kiss that was desperate and tender all at once, months of longing and fear and love poured into that single point of contact.

Ilya's hands came up to cup Shane's face, his touch gentle, reverent. Shane melted into it, into him, letting himself have this one perfect moment before reality came crashing back in.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing hard, Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's. "I love you," he murmured "Whatever you need tell me whatever going on—this not change. Okay?"

"Okay," Shane whispered, even though he didn't quite believe it.

Ilya smiled, that beautiful smile that Shane loved so much, and leaned in to kiss him again. This time it was deeper, more insistent. His hands moved from Shane's face to his shoulders, his waist, pulling him closer.

Shane kissed back with everything he had, trying to memorize this feeling, this moment. Ilya's lips moved to his jaw, his neck, finding that spot just below Shane's ear that always made him shiver.

"I miss this," Ilya murmured against Shane's skin. "Missed you. Missed touching you."

"Me too," Shane gasped as Ilya's teeth grazed his pulse point.

Ilya walked them backward toward the couch, his hands never leaving Shane's body. Shane went willingly, lost in the sensation, in the feeling of being wanted and loved and—

Ilya gave him a playful push, the kind he'd done a hundred times before. Teasing, affectionate, meant to tumble them both onto the couch in a tangle of limbs.

But Shane's legs, already weak from the shower, couldn't handle the sudden shift in balance.

He felt them give out, felt himself falling, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Pain exploded through his spine as his body tried and failed to catch itself.

Ilya's arms were around him in an instant, catching him before he hit the ground, taking his full weight. "Shane! Fuck, I got you. I got you."

Shane couldn't speak. The pain was overwhelming, radiating from his spine through every nerve ending. His legs were completely useless now, unable to support any weight at all. If Ilya hadn't caught him, he would have crumpled to the floor.

"Shane, what wrong? What happen?" Ilya's voice was panicked as he carefully lowered them both to the ground, keeping Shane cradled against his chest. "Did I hurt you? Fuck, "I sorry, I not mean push so hard—"

"Not your fault," Shane managed to gasp out. "It's not—you didn't—"

"Then what? Shane, your leg just give out. That not normal. That not—" Ilya's hands were running over Shane's body, checking for injuries, and Shane could feel them shaking. "I'm calling ambulance."

"No. No ambulance. I'm okay."

"You not okay! You cannot stand!"

"I know. I know. Just—give me a minute. It'll pass." Shane closed his eyes, trying to breathe through the pain, trying to will his legs to work again.

But they wouldn't. They just wouldn't.

"Shane." Ilya's voice was tight, controlled in a way that meant he was barely holding it together. "What going on? And do not tell me nothing. Do not lie to me again."

Shane kept his eyes closed, unable to face the moment he'd been dreading for months. "Ilya —"

"No. No more excuses. No more deflecting." Ilya's hands moved to Shane's hips, gripping firmly, and Shane could feel the tremor in them. "Your legs just give out. Completely. That

not concussion. That not broken collarbone. So tell me what wrong with you.”

"I can't—"

"Yes, you can!" Ilya's voice rose, echoing in the small apartment. "You can, and you will, because I am terrified right now, Shane. I am holding you and you cannot stand, and I do not know why. It is killing me. Do you understand? It is killing me to see you like this and not know how to help you.”

Shane's eyes flew open at the raw emotion in Ilya's voice. Ilya's face was inches from his own, and Shane could see tears tracking down his cheeks, could see the fear and frustration and love all warring in those dark eyes.

"Please," Ilya said, his voice breaking. "Please, моя любовь. Tell me what happen. Let me help you."

"You can't help," Shane whispered. "Nobody can."

"Let me try. Please. Just tell me truth."

Shane looked at him—really looked at him—and saw the desperation there. Saw how much his silence had hurt this man he loved more than anything. And suddenly, he couldn't keep lying. Couldn't keep pretending. Couldn't keep pushing away the one person who'd never given up on him.

"It's not just the concussion," Shane said finally, his voice barely audible. "There's... there's nerve damage. In my spine. From the hit."

Ilya went very still. "Nerve damage."

"Yeah. The doctor told me the day after the injury. There's compression and inflammation around my C5 and C6 vertebrae. It's affecting the nerves in my arms and legs. Causing pain, weakness, numbness." Shane's voice was tight, the burn turning into nausea. "That's why my legs gave out. It happens sometimes. When I'm tired, or when I push too hard, or sometimes for no reason at all."

"The day after injury," Ilya repeated slowly. "You know about this since the beginning."

"Yes."

"And you did not tell me."

"No."

Ilya's grip on Shane's hips tightened, almost painful. "Why?"

"Because I was scared."

"Of what? Of me?"

"Of losing you!" Shane's voice cracked. "Of you seeing me like this and realizing I'm not who you thought I was. That I'm not strong or capable or any of the things you fell in love with."

"That bullshit," Ilya said flatly.

"It's not—"

"It is." Ilya's eyes were blazing now, anger mixing with the fear. "You think I fell in love with you because you are a hockey player? Because you are strong? Shane, that is not why I love you."

"Then why? Why do you love me?"

"Because you are you!" Ilya's voice rose again, frustration evident. "Because you make me laugh. Because you kind and thoughtful, and you remember little things... like how I take coffee, what my mother favorite flowers. Because with you, I can be myself, not person everyone expect me be. Because you see me... really see me, like no one else ever has."

Shane was crying now, tears streaming down his face. "But I'm broken, Ilya. I might never play hockey again. The doctor said—she said my career might be over. And even if it's not, even if I recover enough to play, I'll never be at the level I was before. I'll never be good enough."

"Good enough for who?"

"For you! For the NHL! For—" Shane's voice broke completely. "For myself."

Ilya made a sound that was half-sob, half-growl. He pulled Shane closer, wrapping his arms around him fully, holding him tight. "'You stupid, beautiful idiot. You already good enough. Always been good enough. Hockey not define your worth. Not define who you are."

"But it's all I know. It's all I've ever been."

"No, is not. You are so much more than that. And fact you cannot see it—it breaks my heart." Ilya pulled back just enough to look Shane in the eyes. "Do you know what I thought when I first met you? Before I knew you were a hockey player, before I knew anything about you?"

Shane shook his head.

"I think you have the saddest eyes I ever see. Like you carry weight of whole world on shoulders. And I want know why. I want know what make someone so young look so tired." Ilya's thumb brushed away Shane's tears. "Then I get to know you, and I realize—you try be perfect whole life. Perfect son, perfect player, perfect everything. And you so afraid fail, afraid disappoint people, that you not let anyone see when you struggle."

"I didn't want to disappoint you."

"You could never disappoint me. Never." Ilya's voice was fierce. "But you know what really hurt? You not trust me. You lie to me for months. You push me away when I could help you, support you, be there for you."

"I'm sorry," Shane sobbed. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know what else to do. I was so scared, and I thought if I could just fix it on my own, if I could just get better before you found out—"

"But you cannot fix it alone. This not how it work." Ilya's hands moved to frame Shane's face, forcing him to maintain eye contact. "We supposed be partners. That mean we face things together. Good and bad. Victory and defeat. All of it."

"I know. I know that now. But I was so afraid of losing you—"

"You almost did lose me," Ilya said quietly. "Not because of injury. Not because of your career. But because you shut me out. Because you make me feel I not matter enough for you to be honest with me."

Shane's heart clenched. "You matter more than anything. You're everything to me."

"Then prove it. No more lies. No more hiding. Tell me everything. The diagnosis, the prognosis, what doctor said, what you going through. All of it."

Shane took a shaky breath. "Okay. Okay, I'll tell you everything. But can we—can we move to the couch? My back is killing me."

Ilya's expression immediately shifted to concern. "Fuck, yes, of course. Can you stand if I help you?"

"I don't know. Maybe. My legs are still pretty weak."

"Okay. I going to pick you up. Tell me if hurts."

Ilya stood, lifting Shane with him as if he weighed nothing. Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya's neck, burying his face in his shoulder, breathing in his scent. Ilya carried him to the couch and set him down carefully, then sat beside him, close enough that their thighs touched.

"Better?" Ilya asked.

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Now talk. Tell me everything."

Shane took a deep breath and began.

He told Ilya about waking up in the hospital, about Dr. Reeves explaining the nerve damage, about the fear that had gripped him when she said his career might be over. He told him about the months of physical therapy, the exercises that left him in agony, the days when he could barely move.

He told him about the numbness in his hands that made it hard to grip things, about the weakness in his legs that made walking difficult, about the pain that radiated through his

spine at random moments. He told him about the nights he'd spent lying awake, terrified of the future, of losing everything he'd worked for.

He told him about the shame he felt, the sense of failure, the belief that he was letting everyone down. His team, his family, his fans. And most of all, Ilya.

"I thought if I could just push through it, if I could just work hard enough, I could fix it," Shane said, his voice hoarse from crying. "I thought I could get better before you found out. Before anyone found out. And then everything could go back to normal."

"But it did not get better," Ilya said quietly.

"No. If anything, it got worse. The more I pushed, the more damage I did. My therapist kept telling me to slow down, to listen to my body, but I couldn't. Because every day that passed without improvement felt like another day closer to the end."

"The end of what?"

"Of everything. My career. My identity. Us."

Ilya's hand found Shane's, lacing their fingers together. "Why would it be the end of us?"

"Because you deserve someone whole. Someone who can keep up with you, who can be your equal. Not someone who's broken and useless."

"Stop calling yourself that," Ilya said sharply. "'You not broken. You injured. There is difference.'"

"Is there? Because it doesn't feel like there's a difference."

“Yes, there is. Broken mean unfixable. Injured mean healing. And you healing, Shane. Maybe not fast like you want, maybe not way you expect, but you are.”

Shane shook his head. "You don't understand. The doctor said I might never fully recover. That even with surgery, even with more therapy, I might never be able to play professional hockey again. And if I can't play—"

"Then you find something else," Ilya interrupted. "'You will coach, or scout, or work in management. Or you do something completely different. You smart, Shane. You capable. You have many options.'"

"But I don't want other options. I want hockey. I want to play. I want—" Shane's voice broke again. "I want to be the person I was before. The person you fell in love with."

"I fell in love with you," Ilya said firmly. "Not hockey player. Not perfect athlete. You. The man who bring me coffee in bed even if not morning person. The man who listen me talk about mother for hours, even if not speak Russian well. The man who hold me when I have nightmares about losing, who tell me it okay to be scared sometimes."

"That's different—"

"It not different. It same. You think your worth tied to what you do on ice, but it not. Your worth in who you are as person. And that person still here, still whole, still man I love."

Shane wanted to believe him. God, he wanted to believe him so badly. But the fear was still there, the voice in his head telling him he wasn't enough, would never be enough.

"What if I can't get better?" Shane whispered. "What if this is as good as it gets? What if I'm like this forever?"

"Then we deal with it. Together." Ilya squeezed his hand. "Shane, I not going anywhere. I not care if you never play hockey again. I not care if you need help walk, or if you in pain, or if

things harder than before. I love you. All of you. Good parts and hard parts and everything between."

"But your career—"

"My career will be fine. Better than fine, because I have you support me. Cheer me on. Be there when I win and when I lose." Ilya's voice softened. "You not see? You make me better. Not because you hockey player, but because you you. Because you believe in me, even when I not believe in myself. Because you love me, even when I difficult, or cocky, or impossible."

Shane looked at him, really looked at him, and saw the truth in his eyes. Saw the love there, unconditional and unwavering. And something inside him finally broke.

Not broke like shattered. Broke like a dam bursting, releasing all the fear and pain and shame he'd been holding inside for months.

Shane collapsed against Ilya's chest, sobbing so hard he could barely breathe. All the emotions he'd been suppressing, all the terror and exhaustion and grief, came pouring out in great, heaving waves.

Ilya held him through it, one hand stroking his hair, the other wrapped around his waist, keeping him anchored. He murmured soft words in Russian, endearments and reassurances that Shane couldn't quite make out but understood anyway.

"I'm so tired," Shane gasped between sobs. "I'm so tired of pretending I'm okay. Of hiding how much pain I'm in. Of being scared all the time."

"I know, моя любовь. I know."

"I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to be this person."

"You do not have know. We figure it out together."

"What if I can't? What if I'm not strong enough?"

"You the strongest person I know," Ilya said fiercely. "You deal with this alone for months. Push through pain, go therapy, try get better, pretend everything fine. That take incredible strength. But you not have be strong alone anymore. You have me. You have family. You have people who love you and want help you."

"I'm sorry," Shane sobbed. "I'm so sorry I lied to you. I'm sorry I pushed you away. I'm sorry ___"

"Shh. It okay. I forgive you. I understand why you did, even if I do not agree with it. You were scared. You were trying to protect me. I get it."

"I was trying to protect myself too," Shane admitted. "Because if I didn't tell you, if I kept it secret, then it wasn't real. I could pretend it wasn't happening. But it is happening. It's real, and I can't fix it, and I'm so fucking scared."

"I know. I is scared too." Ilya's arms tightened around him. "But we going get through this. One day at time. One moment at time. And I going be right here next to you, every step of way."

Shane cried until he had no tears left, until his body was shaking with exhaustion, until he felt completely wrung out. And through it all, Ilya held him, steady and solid and real.

When Shane finally quieted, his face still pressed against Ilya's chest, Ilya spoke again. "Tell me what you need. Right now, this moment. What you need from me?"

Shane thought about it. "I need you to not give up on me. Even when things get hard. Even when I'm difficult or scared or pushing you away again."

"I won't. I promise."

"I need you to be patient with me. While I figure out how to accept this, how to move forward."

"I can do that."

"And I need you to remind me that I'm more than just a hockey player. Because I keep forgetting."

"I remind you every day if I have to." Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of Shane's head. "What else?"

"I need you to hold me. Just like this. For a little while longer."

"I do that too."

They sat like that for a long time, wrapped around each other, Shane's head on Ilya's chest, Ilya's arms around Shane's waist. The apartment was quiet except for their breathing, the sound of rain against the windows, the occasional car passing outside.

Finally, Shane pulled back enough to look at Ilya's face. His eyes were red, his cheeks wet with tears. Shane reached up to wipe them away. "I made you cry."

"You scare me," Ilya said simply. "Seeing you fall like that, seeing you in pain—it scare me. And then I find out you deal with this alone for months... Shane, I cannot lose you. I cannot."

"You're not going to lose me. I'm right here."

“Promise me you not shut me out again. Promise me if things get bad, if you struggle, you tell me. Even if hard. Even if you scared.”

"I promise," Shane said, and meant it. "No more secrets. No more hiding."

"Good." Ilya leaned forward, pressing their foreheads together. "Now, what we do next? What the plan?"

"I don't know. The doctor wants me to consider surgery. To try to decompress the nerves, relieve some of the pressure. But it's risky. It might help, or it might make things worse."

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know," Shane admitted. "I'm terrified of making the wrong choice. Of doing something that ends my career for good."

"Then we talk to the doctor together. We get all the information, weigh the risks and benefits, and make decision together. Okay?"

"Okay."

“And meantime, you going take care of yourself. Really take care, not just pretend. That mean eat proper, sleep, not push yourself too hard in therapy.”

"Yes, sir," Shane said with a weak smile.

“I serious, Shane. You cannot keep run yourself into ground. It not help you heal.”

"I know. You're right." Shane took a deep breath. "I'm going to need help. With a lot of things. And I'm not good at asking for help."

"I know. But you going to learn. Starting now." Ilya stood up, then held out his hand. "Come on. When the last time you ate?"

"Um. Breakfast, I think?"

"It almost nine at night. You need food." Ilya helped Shane to his feet, keeping a steady hand on his waist. "Can you walk to kitchen, or should I carry you?"

"I can walk. I think. Just... slowly."

They made their way to the kitchen together, Ilya matching Shane's careful pace, ready to catch him if his legs gave out again. Shane's heart felt lighter than it had in months, despite everything. Because he wasn't alone anymore. He didn't have to carry this burden by himself.

Ilya made them both sandwiches while Shane sat at the kitchen table, watching him move around the space with easy familiarity. He'd been here so many times before, knew where everything was, felt comfortable in Shane's space.

"I missed this," Shane said quietly. "Missed you being here. Missed us."

"I miss it too." Ilya set a plate in front of Shane, then sat down across from him. "But we here now. That is what matters."

They ate in comfortable silence, and Shane was surprised to find he was actually hungry. He'd been barely eating for weeks, his appetite suppressed by pain and stress. But now, with Ilya here, with the truth finally out in the open, he felt like he could breathe again.

After they finished eating, Ilya insisted on helping Shane get ready for bed. He supported Shane as they walked to the bedroom, helped him change into clean pajamas, made sure he took his pain medication.

"Are you staying?" Shane asked as Ilya pulled back the covers.

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes. Please."

"Then I staying." Ilya helped Shane into bed, then stripped down to his boxers and climbed in beside him. He pulled Shane close, arranging them so Shane's head was on his chest, his arm draped over Ilya's waist.

"Is this okay?" Ilya asked. "Am I hurting you?"

"No. This is perfect."

They lay in the darkness, listening to each other breathe. Shane felt safe for the first time in months, cocooned in Ilya's warmth, his strength.

"Ilya?" Shane said softly.

"Yes?"

"Thank you. For not giving up on me. For staying, even when I tried to push you away."

"You not have thank me for loving you, Shane. That not something you earn. It just... it just what I do. What I always do."

Shane's eyes burned with fresh tears, but these were different. Not tears of fear or pain, but of relief. Of gratitude. Of love.

"I love you," he whispered. "So much."

"Я тебя люблю, моя любовь," Ilya murmured back. "Now sleep. We figure everything else out tomorrow."

Shane closed his eyes, letting exhaustion finally claim him. For the first time in months, he slept deeply and dreamlessly, safe in the knowledge that he wasn't alone anymore.

— — —

Shane woke to sunlight streaming through the bedroom window and the smell of coffee. For a moment, he was disoriented, unsure what had woken him. Then he heard movement in the kitchen and remembered.

Ilya was here. Ilya knew everything. And he'd stayed.

Shane sat up carefully, testing his body. His back ached, but it was manageable. His legs felt weak but functional. He swung them over the side of the bed and stood slowly, gripping the nightstand for support.

He made it to the kitchen without incident, finding Ilya at the stove, making eggs. He was wearing his jeans from last night and one of Shane's t-shirts, which was slightly too small on his broader frame.

"Good morning," Ilya said, turning to smile at him. "How do you feel?"

"Sore. Tired. But better than I have in a while." Shane made his way to the table and sat down. "You didn't have to make breakfast."

"I wanted to. Besides, you need to eat." Ilya plated the eggs and brought them over, along with toast and coffee. "I call my coach this morning. Tell him I need few days off for family emergency."

"Ilya, you don't have to—"

"Yes, I do. You more important than practice. And we have things to figure out." Ilya sat down across from him. "I want come with you to next doctor appointment. I want hear what she say about surgery, about your options."

Shane's throat tightened. "Okay. Yeah. That."

Ilya grabs shane's hand, turning it to place a kiss on his inner wrist. "We get through it together, моя любовь."

Shane looks at his boyfriend whose eyes shine with determination, Shane felt his insides melt.

"Yeah. Yeah we will." Everything will be alright with Ilya by his side.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

You wanted, I wanted. You asked, and I delivered! We all suffered a good amount of angst so I thought why not continue it. As you can see, the fics out of 3 parts. Third part should be up on New Year's Eve, but enjoy part 2!

(Let me know if you notice any mistakes!)

Chapter Notes

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

They ate in comfortable silence, and Shane found himself watching Ilya—the way the morning light caught in his dark hair, the focused expression on his face as he scrolled through his phone with one hand while eating with the other. This was what he'd almost lost. This quiet domesticity, this partnership.

"What you think about?" Ilya asked without looking up.

"You. Us. How I almost fucked this up completely."

Ilya set his phone down and reached across the table to take Shane's hand. "But you not. We here now. That what matter."

"I don't deserve you."

"Stop." Ilya's grip tightened. "No more of this. You deserve all good, Shane. You just need start believe it."

Shane nodded, not trusting his voice.

"Now," Ilya said, his tone shifting to something more businesslike. "Tell me about your physical therapy. When is your next appointment?"

"Thursday. Two days from now."

"I coming with you."

"Ilya, you have practice—"

"I miss practice. Or I come after. But I coming." Ilya's expression left no room for argument. "I want to understand what you dealing with. What exercises you doing. How I can help."

Shane felt something warm unfurl in his chest. "Okay. Thank you."

— — —

Thursday morning arrived cold and gray, typical Montreal weather for late winter. Shane woke early, his body already tense with anticipation. Physical therapy sessions had become a special kind of torture—necessary, but brutal reminders of everything his body could no longer do.

Ilya drove them to the clinic, one hand on the wheel and the other resting on Shane's thigh. The touch was casual, grounding, and Shane found himself grateful for it.

The clinic was in a nondescript building near the hospital, all beige walls and fluorescent lighting. Shane checked in at the front desk while Ilya settled into one of the waiting room chairs, looking distinctly out of place among the elderly patients and injury recovery cases.

"Shane Hollander?" A woman in her mid-thirties appeared in the doorway, clipboard in hand. She had her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail and wore navy scrubs. "I'm Rebecca, I'll be working with you today."

Shane stood carefully, and Ilya immediately rose with him.

"This is Ilya," Shane said. "My... he's my friend. I asked if he could sit in on the session."

Rebecca smiled warmly. "Of course. It's actually great to have support people here. Come on back."

The therapy room was larger than Shane expected, filled with various equipment—parallel bars, exercise balls, resistance bands, weight machines. Other patients worked with their own therapists in different corners of the space.

"Alright, Shane," Rebecca said, gesturing to a padded table. "Let's start with an assessment. I want to see your range of motion, test your strength and sensation. Then we'll work on some exercises."

Shane sat on the table, acutely aware of Ilya watching from a chair against the wall. Rebecca went through a series of tests—having Shane lift his legs, flex his feet, push against her hands with varying degrees of pressure.

"Good," she said, making notes. "Now let's test sensation. Close your eyes."

Shane obeyed, and felt the light touch of what must have been a small brush or feather against his legs. "Tell me when you feel something and where."

"Left shin," Shane said. Then, after a pause, "Right thigh." Another pause. "Left foot, I think?"

"You think?"

"It's... faint. Like it's far away."

Rebecca made more notes. When Shane opened his eyes, he caught Ilya's expression—concerned, focused, taking in every detail.

"Okay," Rebecca said. "Let's start with some basic exercises. I want you to lie back."

For the next forty-five minutes, Rebecca put Shane through a series of movements that looked deceptively simple but left him sweating and shaking. Leg lifts that he could barely complete. Resistance band exercises that made his muscles scream. Balance work that had him gripping the parallel bars with white knuckles.

"That's it," Rebecca encouraged as Shane struggled to hold a single-leg stance for more than five seconds. "You're doing great. Just a few more seconds."

Shane's leg gave out and he stumbled, catching himself on the bars. Frustration burned hot in his chest.

"It's okay," Rebecca said. "This is hard work. You're recovering from a serious injury. Progress isn't linear."

"I used to skate for hours," Shane said through gritted teeth. "I could do complex footwork without thinking. And now I can't even stand on one leg for ten seconds."

"You will again," Rebecca said firmly. "But it takes time. Your nerves are healing, but it's a slow process. We're essentially retraining your body to communicate with itself."

Shane nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He glanced at Ilya, who was leaning forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, watching intently.

They moved on to core strengthening exercises—modified planks, gentle twists, pelvic tilts. Each movement required intense concentration, and Shane found himself exhausted by the mental effort as much as the physical.

"Alright," Rebecca said finally. "That's enough for today. You did really well, Shane. I know it doesn't feel like it, but you're making progress."

"How much longer?" Shane asked as he sat up slowly. "Until I can skate again?"

Rebecca's expression was sympathetic but honest. "I can't give you a timeline. Every spinal injury is different. Some people recover fully in six months. Others take years. And some..." She trailed off, but Shane knew what she wasn't saying.

Some never recover at all.

"But you are making progress," Rebecca continued. "Your strength is improving, even if it doesn't feel like it. Keep doing your home exercises, come to your sessions, and be patient with yourself."

Shane nodded numbly. Ilya stood and came over, offering his hand to help Shane off the table. Shane took it, hating how much he needed the support.

In the car on the way home, Ilya was quiet. Shane stared out the window, watching the city pass by in a blur of gray and brown.

"That look hard," Ilya said finally.

"It was."

"You did well."

"I could barely do anything."

"You do everything she ask you. You not give up, even when I see how much it hurt." Ilya's hand found Shane's again. "That not nothing."

Shane closed his eyes. "I just want to be better already. I want to be back on the ice. I want to feel like myself again."

"I know, моя любовь. I know."

— — —

The home exercises were worse in some ways because Shane had to do them alone. Well, not entirely alone—Ilya had started staying over most nights, and he'd memorized the routine Rebecca had written out.

"Come on," Ilya said one evening, finding Shane on the couch scrolling through his phone. "Time for exercises."

"I did them this morning."

"Rebecca said twice a day."

"I'm tired."

"Shane." Ilya's voice took on that firm edge that meant he wasn't going to budge. "Get up."

Shane wanted to argue, but the look on Ilya's face stopped him. He hauled himself off the couch and followed Ilya to the cleared space in the living room where they'd been doing the exercises.

Ilya had printed out the instruction sheets and taped them to the wall. He consulted them now, even though Shane knew he had them memorized. "Leg lifts first. Twenty each side."

Shane lay on his back on the yoga mat and began the exercises. Ilya counted, his voice steady and encouraging. When Shane's leg started shaking on the fifteenth rep, Ilya knelt beside him.

"Five more. You can do five more."

"I can't—"

"Yes, you can. Come on, Shane. Five more."

Shane gritted his teeth and pushed through, his leg trembling violently by the twentieth rep. He switched sides, and Ilya's hand came to rest on his shoulder, a steady presence.

They moved through the routine—bridges, clamshells, ankle pumps, gentle stretches. By the end, Shane was exhausted and frustrated, his body refusing to cooperate the way he wanted it to.

"I hate this," he said, still lying on the mat. "I hate being weak. I hate needing help with everything."

Ilya lay down beside him, propping himself up on one elbow. "You not weak. You recovering. There is difference."

"Doesn't feel like it."

"I know." Ilya's hand traced patterns on Shane's chest. "But you getting stronger. I see it, even if you not."

Shane turned his head to look at Ilya. "How do you stay so patient with me?"

"Because I love you. And because I know you do the same for me." Ilya leaned down and kissed him softly. "Now come on. Let get you in shower."

"I can shower by myself."

"I know you can. But I want to help. Let me help, Shane."

There was something in Ilya's voice—not pity, but genuine desire to care for him—that made Shane relent. "Okay."

— — —

Two weeks later, Shane had his next appointment with Rebecca. This time, Ilya had practice and couldn't come, so Shane went alone. He told himself he was fine with it, that he didn't need Ilya there for every appointment.

But as he struggled through the exercises, his legs shaking and weak, he found himself wishing for Ilya's steady presence.

"You seem distracted today," Rebecca observed as Shane failed to complete a set of step-ups for the third time.

"Just tired."

"Are you doing your home exercises?"

"Yes." Most of the time. When Ilya was there to push him.

Rebecca gave him a look that said she didn't quite believe him, but she didn't push. "Let's try something different. I want to work on your proprioception—your body's awareness of where it is in space."

She had Shane stand on a foam pad, which immediately made his balance precarious. Then she had him close his eyes.

"Now lift your right foot just slightly off the pad."

Shane tried. His body swayed dangerously, and he had to put his foot down quickly to avoid falling.

"It's okay. Try again."

They worked on it for ten minutes, and Shane managed to hold the position for maybe three seconds at most. By the end, he was frustrated and discouraged.

"This is important work," Rebecca said as they finished up. "Your nervous system needs to relearn these pathways. It's going to feel impossible at first, but it will get easier."

Shane nodded, but he wasn't sure he believed her.

That night, he was quiet over dinner. Ilya had made pasta, and they ate at Shane's small kitchen table.

"How was therapy?" Ilya asked.

"Fine."

"Shane."

"It was hard, okay? Everything is hard. I couldn't do half the exercises, and the ones I could do, I could barely complete." Shane set his fork down. "I don't know if I'm getting better or just getting better at pretending."

Ilya reached across the table and took Shane's hand. "You getting better. I see it. You standing longer, walking more steady. Last week you make it up stairs without stop to rest."

"That's not enough. That's not skating. That's not playing hockey."

"Not yet. But it progress." Ilya squeezed his hand. "I know you frustrated. I know this not timeline you want. But you can't give up."

"I'm not giving up. I'm just... tired. I'm so fucking tired, Ilya."

"I know, моя любовь. I know."

— — —

A month into physical therapy, Shane had a setback. He'd been feeling stronger, more confident, and decided to push himself a little harder during his home exercises. He attempted a single-leg squat—something Rebecca hadn't cleared him for yet—and his leg gave out completely.

He went down hard, catching himself on his hands but wrenching his shoulder in the process. Pain shot through his back, and for a terrifying moment, he couldn't feel his legs at all.

Then sensation returned in a flood of pins and needles, and Shane lay on the floor, breathing hard, trying not to panic.

"Fuck," he whispered. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

He managed to roll onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. His shoulder throbbed, and his back felt like someone had driven a spike into it. Slowly, carefully, he tested his legs. They moved. Sensation was there, even if it was muted.

He'd been lucky. But it was a stark reminder of how fragile his recovery was.

When Ilya arrived that evening, he found Shane on the couch with an ice pack on his shoulder.

"What happen?" Ilya demanded, immediately crossing to him.

"Nothing. Just pushed too hard during exercises."

"Shane." Ilya's voice was sharp. "What did you do?"

"I tried a single-leg squat. My leg gave out. I fell." Shane wouldn't meet Ilya's eyes. "It's fine. I'm fine."

"You not fine. You icing your shoulder." Ilya sat down beside him, his jaw tight. "Why would you try something you not cleared for?"

"Because I'm sick of being treated like I'm made of glass! I'm sick of taking baby steps when I should be skating!" Shane's voice rose. "I need to push myself, or I'll never get better."

"You need to follow therapist's instructions, or you hurt yourself worse!" Ilya shot back. "What if you hit head? What if you damage spine more? What if—" He cut himself off, running a hand through his hair. "You can't be reckless with this, Shane. You can't."

"I'm not being reckless. I'm trying to recover."

"By doing exercises you not ready for? That is definition of reckless." Ilya stood, pacing. "I can't watch you hurt yourself. I can't sit by while you push too hard and set yourself back."

"Then don't watch! I didn't ask you to babysit me!"

The words hung in the air between them, sharp and cutting. Ilya stopped pacing, his back to Shane.

"Is that what you think I'm doing?" Ilya's voice was quiet, dangerous. "Babysitting you?"

Shane closed his eyes. "No. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"I here because I love you. Because I want support you. Not because I think you need babysitter." Ilya turned around, and Shane could see the hurt in his eyes. "But if you going be stupid and reckless, then yes, maybe you do need someone watch you."

"I'm not—"

"You are. You so desperate be back to normal that you willing risk your recovery. And I get it, Shane. I understand frustration. But you have to be smart about this."

Shane looked down at his hands. "I just want to feel like myself again."

Ilya's expression softened. He came back to the couch and sat down, pulling Shane carefully against his side. "I know. But you have to trust process. Trust Rebecca. Trust your body."

"What if my body never comes back? What if this is as good as it gets?"

"Then we deal with that when we know for sure. But right now, you still healing. You still improving. Don't sabotage that by being impatient."

Shane leaned into Ilya's warmth, breathing in his familiar scent. "I'm sorry. For what I said. You're not babysitting me. You're... you're the only thing keeping me sane right now."

"Then let me help you. Really help you. That mean following the plan, even when frustrating." Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane's temple. "Promise me you won't try anything stupid again."

"I promise."

"Good. Now let me see your shoulder."

— — —

The next physical therapy session, Shane confessed to Rebecca what had happened. She examined his shoulder, tested his range of motion, and gave him a stern look.

"You're lucky you didn't do more damage," she said. "I know you're eager to progress, but you have to trust the timeline. Your body needs time to heal properly."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize to me. Apologize to yourself. You're the one who has to live with the consequences if you push too hard too fast." Rebecca pulled up a chair. "Talk to me. What's really going on?"

Shane hesitated, then the words came tumbling out. "I'm terrified. Every day that passes where I'm not getting significantly better, I'm terrified that this is it. That I'll never skate again. That I'll never play hockey again. And if I can't play hockey, then who am I?"

"You're Shane Hollander. You're more than just a hockey player."

"Am I? Because hockey is all I've ever known. It's all I've ever been good at. It's my entire identity." Shane's voice cracked. "And if I lose that, I don't know who I am."

Rebecca was quiet for a moment. "Have you talked to anyone? A therapist, I mean. Not a physical therapist."

Shane shook his head.

"I think you should consider it. What you're going through—it's not just physical. You're grieving the loss of your abilities, even if that loss might be temporary. That's a lot to process, and it might help to talk to someone."

"I have Ilya."

"And that's great. But Ilya is emotionally involved. Sometimes it helps to talk to someone objective, someone who can give you tools to cope with the mental side of recovery."

Shane nodded slowly. "I'll think about it."

"Good. Now, let's get to work. And Shane? No more unauthorized exercises. If you want to try something new, ask me first. Deal?"

"Deal."

That session was better. Rebecca introduced some new exercises that challenged Shane but were within his capabilities. By the end, he felt accomplished rather than defeated.

Ilya picked him up afterward, and Shane told him about the conversation with Rebecca.

"I think she's right," Ilya said as they drove home. "About talking to someone. This is a lot to deal with, and you don't have to do it alone."

"I know. I just... I don't know if I'm ready for that yet."

"That's okay. But when you are, I'll help you find someone. Whatever you need, Shane. I'm here."

Shane reached over and laced their fingers together. "I know. Thank you, baby."

— — —

Six weeks into physical therapy, Shane had his follow-up appointment with Dr. Reeves. Ilya came with him, and they sat together in the examination room, waiting.

Dr. Reeves came in with Shane's chart and a tablet showing his latest scans. "How are you feeling, Shane?"

"Better than I was. Still not great."

"Tell me about your symptoms. Any changes?"

Shane described his progress—the slight improvements in strength and sensation, but also the persistent weakness, the numbness that came and went, the pain that flared up unpredictably.

Dr. Reeves nodded, making notes. "And physical therapy? How's that going?"

"Hard. But I'm doing it. Twice a week with Rebecca, plus home exercises daily."

"Good. That's exactly what you should be doing." Dr. Reeves pulled up the scans on her tablet. "I've been reviewing your imaging, and I want to talk to you about your options going forward."

Shane's heart rate picked up. Ilya's hand found his, squeezing gently.

"The physical therapy is helping," Dr. Reeves continued. "I can see some improvement in your strength and function. But the nerve damage is significant, and conservative treatment may not be enough to get you back to the level you need for professional hockey."

"What are you saying?" Shane asked, his voice tight.

"I'm saying we should discuss surgical intervention."

The room seemed to tilt. Shane heard Ilya's sharp intake of breath beside him.

"Surgery?" Shane managed.

"Yes. There's a procedure called a spinal nerve decompression. Essentially, we would go in and relieve the pressure on the affected nerves, remove any scar tissue that's formed, and potentially repair some of the damage." Dr. Reeves turned the tablet so they could see the scans. "See here? This is where the nerve is being compressed. And here, this is scar tissue that's formed around the injury site. Both of these are limiting your recovery."

"What would the surgery involve?" Ilya asked, his voice steady even though Shane could feel the tension in his grip.

"It's a delicate procedure. We'd make an incision in Shane's back, access the spine, and carefully work around the nerves to decompress them and remove the scar tissue. The surgery itself would take about four to six hours."

"And the risks?" Shane asked.

Dr. Reeves met his eyes. "Any spinal surgery carries risks. There's a risk of infection, bleeding, and in rare cases, further nerve damage. There's also a risk that the surgery won't improve your symptoms, or could potentially make them worse."

Shane felt like he couldn't breathe. "And if I don't have the surgery?"

"Then you continue with physical therapy and hope for continued improvement. Some patients do recover significant function without surgery. But given the severity of your injury and the lack of substantial progress so far, I think surgery gives you the best chance of returning to professional hockey."

"How much better of a chance?" Ilya asked.

"It's hard to give exact numbers, but I'd say surgery could improve your odds of full recovery from about thirty percent to seventy or eighty percent. It's not a guarantee, but it's a

significant improvement."

Shane stared at the scans, at the visual representation of everything that was wrong with his body. "How long would recovery take?"

"The initial recovery from surgery is about six to eight weeks. You'd be in the hospital for a few days, then home rest, then gradually returning to physical therapy. Full recovery and return to sport? We're looking at six months to a year, possibly longer."

Six months to a year. Shane would miss the rest of this season, definitely. Possibly part of next season too.

"I need to think about it," Shane said.

"Of course. This is a big decision. I want you to take your time, do your research, ask questions." Dr. Reeves handed him a folder. "I've put together some information about the procedure, success rates, what to expect. Read through it, talk it over, and let me know what you decide."

"When would the surgery be? If I decide to do it?"

"I'd want to do it soon. The longer we wait, the more permanent the nerve damage could become. Ideally, within the next month."

Shane nodded numbly. The appointment wrapped up, and he and Ilya walked out to the car in silence.

They didn't talk on the drive home. Shane stared out the window, his mind spinning. Surgery. Spinal surgery. The words felt surreal, impossible.

Back at Shane's apartment, Ilya made tea while Shane sat at the kitchen table, the folder from Dr. Reeves unopened in front of him.

"Talk to me," Ilya said, setting a mug in front of Shane and sitting down across from him. "What are you thinking?"

"I don't know. I don't know what to think." Shane wrapped his hands around the mug, seeking its warmth. "Surgery. Spinal surgery. That's... that's serious."

"Yes, it is."

"What if something goes wrong? What if I end up worse than I am now?"

"What if something goes right?" Ilya countered gently. "What if this is what get you back on ice?"

"Or what if it doesn't work and I go through all of that for nothing?"

"That's possible too." Ilya reached across the table and took Shane's hand. "'But Shane, you hear what she say. Without surgery, your chances full recovery are low. With surgery, they much higher.'"

"Seventy or eighty percent isn't a guarantee."

"No, but it hell of lot better than thirty percent."

Shane closed his eyes. "I'm scared."

"I know. I'm scared too." Ilya's thumb traced circles on the back of Shane's hand. "But I think you should do it. I think it's your best chance."

"What if I can't play again? What if even with surgery, I can't get back to where I was?"

"Then we deal with that. Together. But at least you know you try everything." Ilya's voice was firm. "You never forgive yourself if you don't take this chance and you never fully recover."

Shane knew he was right. The what-ifs would haunt him forever if he didn't at least try.

"Okay," Shane said quietly. "Okay. I'll do it."

Ilya stood and came around the table, pulling Shane into his arms. "I be with you every step of the way. I promise."

Shane buried his face in Ilya's chest, breathing him in. "I'm really scared, Ilya."

"I know, моя любовь. I know. "But you the bravest person I know. You can do this."

— — —

Over the next few days, Shane read through all the information Dr. Reeves had given him. He researched the procedure online, read patient testimonials, watched videos of the surgery (which he immediately regretted—seeing the inside of someone's spine was not comforting).

He called his parents and told them about the surgery. His mother cried. His father was stoic but supportive. They both said they'd come to Montreal for the surgery.

He told his coach, who was understanding and assured Shane that his spot on the team would be waiting for him when he was ready.

He didn't tell his teammates. Not yet. He wasn't ready for their questions, their pity, their well-meaning but exhausting concern.

Ilya was a constant presence, steady and supportive. He helped Shane prepare, made sure he was eating and sleeping, distracted him when the anxiety got too overwhelming.

A week after the appointment with Dr. Reeves, Shane called her office and scheduled the surgery for three weeks out. That gave him time to get his affairs in order, to mentally prepare, to have a few more physical therapy sessions to get as strong as possible going into it.

The night after he scheduled the surgery, Shane was quiet. He and Ilya were on the couch, some movie playing that neither of them were really watching.

"What you thinking about?" Ilya asked, his arm around Shane's shoulders.

"Everything. Nothing. I don't know." Shane shifted to look at Ilya. "What if this doesn't work? What if I have the surgery and I still can't play?"

"Then you figure out what comes next. But you can't think like that. You have to believe it going to work."

"I'm trying. But I'm so scared, Ilya. I'm scared of the surgery, scared of the recovery, scared that I'll never be the same." Shane's voice broke. "I'm scared of losing everything I've worked for."

"Hey, hey." Ilya cupped Shane's face in his hands. "Look at me. You not going lose everything. You going fight, and you going recover, and you going play hockey again. I believe that. You need believe it too."

"I want to. I just... what if I disappoint everyone? What if I disappoint you?"

"Shane." Ilya's voice was fierce. "You could never disappoint me. Never. You understand? Whether you play hockey again or not, whether you exactly same as you were before or not, I love you. That doesn't change."

Tears spilled down Shane's cheeks. "I don't know what I did to deserve you."

"You existed. That all you had do." Ilya kissed him softly. "I love you, Shane. All of you. Not just hockey player. You."

Shane kissed him back, desperate and needy, trying to pour all his fear and love and gratitude into it. Ilya responded in kind, his hands gentle but sure as they moved over Shane's body.

"I need you," Shane whispered against Ilya's lips. "I need to feel something other than scared."

"I got you," Ilya murmured. "I got you, моя любовь."

They moved to the bedroom, Ilya guiding Shane carefully, always mindful of his limitations. Shane hated that Ilya had to be careful with him, hated that he couldn't just lose himself in this without worrying about his body giving out.

But as Ilya laid him down on the bed and covered his body with his own, some of that worry faded. This was Ilya. Ilya, who knew him, who loved him, who had seen him at his worst and stayed.

"Tell me what you need," Ilya said, propped up on his elbows, looking down at Shane with dark, intense eyes.

"You. Just you."

Ilya kissed him again, slow and deep, and Shane lost himself in it. Ilya's hands were everywhere—in his hair, on his face, sliding under his shirt to touch bare skin. Shane arched into the touch, craving more.

"Can I take off?" Ilya asked, tugging at Shane's shirt.

"Yes. Please."

Ilya pulled the shirt over Shane's head, then sat back to look at him. Shane fought the urge to cover himself. His body wasn't what it used to be—he'd lost muscle mass during his recovery, and there were new scars from various medical procedures.

But Ilya looked at him like he was beautiful. Like he was everything.

"You so gorgeous," Ilya murmured, running his hands over Shane's chest, abdomen, sides. "So perfect."

"I'm not—"

"You are. To me, you are." Ilya leaned down and pressed kisses to Shane's collarbone, his sternum, down his stomach. "Let me show you."

Shane's breath caught as Ilya's mouth moved lower, kissing along the waistband of his sweatpants. "Ilya—"

"Let me take care of you," Ilya said, looking up at him. "Let me make you feel good. Please, Shane."

Shane nodded, not trusting his voice. Ilya hooked his fingers in Shane's sweatpants and boxer briefs and pulled them down slowly, carefully, always watching Shane's face for any sign of discomfort.

Shane was already half-hard, and Ilya's eyes darkened as he took in the sight. "Beautiful," he murmured again.

He settled between Shane's legs, his large hands warm on Shane's thighs. Shane's breath came faster, anticipation coiling tight in his belly.

Ilya started slow, pressing kisses to Shane's inner thighs, his hip bones, everywhere except where Shane wanted him most. It was torture, sweet and agonizing.

"Ilya, please—"

"Patience, моя любовь." But there was a smile in Ilya's voice, and then finally, finally, his mouth was on Shane's cock.

Shane gasped, his hands fisting in the sheets. Ilya's mouth was hot and wet and perfect, and Shane had to fight not to thrust up into it. Ilya took him deeper, one hand wrapping around the base while the other splayed across Shane's hip, holding him steady.

It had been so long since they'd done this. Months of Shane being too injured, too tired, too scared to be intimate. But now, with Ilya's mouth on him and Ilya's hands on him, Shane felt alive in a way he hadn't in months.

"God, Ilya, that's—fuck—" Shane couldn't form coherent sentences. Pleasure was building, hot and insistent, and he was already embarrassingly close.

Ilya pulled off for a moment, his lips red and wet. "It okay. Let go. I want you to."

Then his mouth was back, and Shane was lost. He came with a broken cry, his body arching off the bed, pleasure washing over him in waves. Ilya worked him through it, gentle and sure, until Shane was boneless and spent.

Ilya crawled back up Shane's body and kissed him, and Shane could taste himself on Ilya's tongue. It should have been weird, but it wasn't. It was intimate and perfect.

"Thank you," Shane whispered when they broke apart.

"For what?"

"For this. For making me feel normal. For making me feel wanted."

"Shane." Ilya's expression was serious. "You are wanted. Always. This not change that. Nothing change that."

Shane pulled Ilya down into another kiss, trying to show him what he couldn't put into words. They stayed like that for a long time, just kissing, touching, being close.

Eventually, Ilya helped Shane clean up and get dressed again. They settled back into bed, Shane tucked against Ilya's side, Ilya's arm around him.

"I'm still scared," Shane admitted into the darkness. "About the surgery."

"I know. That okay. Being scared not mean you not brave." Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane's hair. "And I be there. When you go in, when you wake up, through all of it. You won't be alone."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Shane closed his eyes, letting Ilya's steady heartbeat lull him toward sleep. The surgery was still terrifying. The recovery would be brutal. But with Ilya beside him, maybe he could face it.

— — —

The three weeks before the surgery passed in a blur. Shane continued with physical therapy, trying to build up as much strength as possible. He spent time with his parents when they arrived in Montreal. He avoided thinking too hard about what was coming.

The night before the surgery, Shane couldn't sleep. He lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, his mind racing with worst-case scenarios.

Ilya was beside him, also awake. "Can't sleep?"

"No. You?"

"No." Ilya rolled onto his side to face Shane. "Talk to me. What going on in your head?"

"Everything. What if something goes wrong? What if I wake up and I can't move my legs at all? What if—"

"Shane." Ilya's hand found his in the darkness. "You can't think like that. You have to trust Dr. Reeves. She one of best in country. She wouldn't recommend this if she not think it help."

"I know. Logically, I know that. But I'm still terrified."

"That normal. Anyone would be terrified." Ilya squeezed his hand. "But you strong, Shane. Stronger than you give yourself credit for. You going get through this."

"What if I can't play again? Even after the surgery?"

"Then we figure out what come next. Together." Ilya's voice was firm. "But I believe you will play again. I believe you going recover and come back stronger than ever."

"I wish I had your confidence."

"Borrow mine until you find your own again."

Shane turned to face Ilya, their faces inches apart in the darkness. "I love you. I don't think I say that enough."

"You don't have to say it. I know." But Ilya smiled. "But I like hear it anyway. I love you too, Shane. So much."

They kissed, soft and sweet, and Shane tried to memorize this moment—the feel of Ilya's lips on his, the warmth of his body, the safety of his presence. Whatever happened tomorrow, he had this. He had Ilya.

"Try to sleep," Ilya murmured. "You need rest."

"Will you hold me?"

"Always."

Ilya pulled Shane against his chest, and Shane finally felt some of the tension leave his body. He focused on Ilya's breathing, on the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, and eventually, sleep claimed him.

Shane woke at five in the morning to his alarm. The surgery was scheduled for eight, and they needed to be at the hospital by six-thirty for pre-op.

He showered quickly—his last shower for a while, he realized with a pang. After the surgery, he'd need help with everything. The thought made him nauseous.

Ilya made himself tea, since Shane couldn't eat or drink anything else before the surgery. They sat at the kitchen table in silence, both lost in their own thoughts.

Shane's parents met them at the hospital. His mother hugged him tightly, and Shane could feel her shaking.

"It's going to be okay, Mom," he said, even though he wasn't sure he believed it.

"I know. I know. I just worry."

His father clapped him on the shoulder, his expression stoic but his eyes betraying his concern. "You've got this, son."

The pre-op process was a blur of paperwork, changing into a hospital gown, getting an IV started. Dr. Reeves came by to go over the procedure one more time and answer any last-minute questions.

"How are you feeling?" she asked Shane.

"Terrified."

She smiled sympathetically. "That's completely normal. But I want you to know, I've done this procedure hundreds of times. You're in good hands."

"Okay. I trust you."

"Good. I'll see you in the OR."

After she left, a nurse came to give Shane a mild sedative to help with the anxiety. Shane's parents said their goodbyes, promising to be there when he woke up.

Then it was just Shane and Ilya.

Ilya sat on the edge of the hospital bed, holding Shane's hand. He looked tired, worried, but he was trying to hide it behind a calm facade.

"I'm scared," Shane admitted, his voice small.

"I know. But you going to be okay. I know you are." Ilya brought Shane's hand to his lips and kissed his knuckles. "You the strongest person I know, Shane. You going get through this."

"What if I don't? What if something goes wrong?"

"Nothing going go wrong. Dr. Reeves is best. And you a fighter. You never give up on anything in your life. You not going start now."

Shane felt tears prick his eyes. "I don't want to lose you."

"You not going to lose me. I not going anywhere." Ilya's voice was fierce. "I be right here when you wake up. I promise."

"I love you."

"I love you too, моя любовь. So much."

They kissed, and Shane tried to pour everything he was feeling into it—his fear, his love, his hope. When they broke apart, Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's.

"You got this," Ilya whispered. "I believe in you."

The anesthesiologist came in then, a kind-faced woman who explained what would happen. Shane would be given medication through his IV that would make him sleepy, and then they'd take him back to the OR.

"Ready?" she asked.

Shane looked at Ilya one more time. Ilya nodded, his eyes bright with unshed tears.

"Ready," Shane said.

The medication hit fast. Shane felt himself getting drowsy, the edges of his vision blurring. The last thing he saw before everything went dark was Ilya's face, and the last thing he heard was Ilya's voice saying, "I love you."

— — —

Ilya watched as they wheeled Shane away, his heart in his throat. Shane's mother came to stand beside him, and they watched until Shane disappeared through the double doors.

"He's going to be okay," she said, but Ilya wasn't sure if she was trying to convince him or herself.

"Yes," Ilya agreed. "He is."

They went to the surgical waiting room, where Shane's father was already sitting with coffee. The next four to six hours were going to be the longest of Ilya's life.

He tried to distract himself—scrolling through his phone, watching the news on the waiting room TV, making small talk with Shane's parents. But his mind kept drifting back to Shane, to what was happening in that operating room right now.

Dr. Reeves had explained the procedure in detail, but Ilya still couldn't quite wrap his mind around it. They were operating on Shane's spine. On his nerves. One wrong move and Shane could be paralyzed, could lose even more function than he already had.

Ilya felt sick.

"He's going to be fine," Shane's mother said again, noticing Ilya's distress. "He's strong. And he has you. That makes all the difference."

Ilya managed a weak smile. "I hope so."

The hours crawled by. Two hours. Three. Four. Ilya was about to lose his mind when Dr. Reeves finally appeared in the waiting room, still in her surgical scrubs.

They all stood immediately.

"The surgery went well," Dr. Reeves said, and Ilya felt his knees go weak with relief. "We were able to decompress the nerves and remove the scar tissue. Everything looks good."

"When can we see him?" Shane's mother asked.

"He's in recovery now. It'll be another hour or so before he's awake enough for visitors, but then you can see him. He'll be groggy and in some pain, but that's normal."

"Thank you," Ilya said, his voice rough. "Thank you so much."

Dr. Reeves smiled. "He did great. Now comes the hard part—recovery. But if he works as hard at that as I think he will, he should have a good outcome."

After she left, Ilya sank back into his chair, his whole body shaking with relief. Shane was okay. The surgery was over. Now they just had to get through recovery.

— — —

An hour and a half later, a nurse came to get them. "He's awake. Still pretty out of it, but he's asking for you."

Ilya followed Shane's parents to the recovery room. Shane was in a bed, hooked up to various monitors and IVs. He looked pale and small and vulnerable, and Ilya's heart clenched.

Shane's eyes were half-open, unfocused. But when he saw them, he tried to smile.

"Hey," he mumbled, his voice slurred from the anesthesia.

"Hey, sweetheart," his mother said, going to his side and taking his hand. "How do you feel?"

"Weird. Floaty. Hurts."

"That's the pain medication," the nurse explained. "He's on a pretty strong dose right now. He'll be more coherent in a few hours."

Shane's gaze found Ilya. "You stayed."

"Of course I stayed. I promise, did I not?" Ilya came to the other side of the bed and took Shane's other hand. "The surgery went well. Dr. Reeves said everything looks good."

"Good. That's good." Shane's eyes were already drifting closed again. "Tired."

"Sleep, моя любовь. We be here when you wake up."

Shane mumbled something that might have been "love you baby" and then he was out again.

Ilya looked at the nurse. "He okay? He seem really out of it."

"That's completely normal. The anesthesia takes a while to wear off, and he's on strong pain medication. He'll be more alert tomorrow." She checked Shane's vitals. "Everything looks good. He'll be moved to a regular room in a few hours."

Shane's parents stayed for a while longer, but eventually, they went to get food and rest. Ilya refused to leave. He pulled a chair up next to Shane's bed and settled in, his hand still holding Shane's.

Shane woke and dozed throughout the evening, never fully coherent. But each time he woke, his eyes would find Ilya, and he'd relax when he saw him there.

"Still here," Shane mumbled at one point.

"Still here. Always."

By late evening, Shane was moved to a regular hospital room. The nurses got him settled, and Ilya helped as much as he could. Shane was more alert now, though still clearly in pain despite the medication.

"How do you feel?" Ilya asked once they were alone.

"Like someone cut open my back and messed around with my spine," Shane said with a weak attempt at humor. "So, pretty much as expected."

"Can I get anything? Water? Ice chips?"

"Just... stay. Please."

"I not going anywhere." Ilya pulled the chair as close to the bed as he could and took Shane's hand again. "I right here."

Shane's eyes were heavy, but he fought to keep them open. "Thank you. For being here. For everything."

"You don't have to thank me. This where I want be." Ilya brought Shane's hand to his lips. "Now sleep. You need rest."

"Will you be here when I wake up?"

"Yes. I promise."

This time, Shane let his eyes close. Within minutes, his breathing evened out into sleep.

Ilya sat back in the uncomfortable hospital chair and watched Shane sleep. The surgery was over. Now came the real challenge—recovery. But they'd face it together, just like they'd faced everything else.

— — —

The first few days after surgery were brutal. Shane was in significant pain despite the medication, and he couldn't move without help. He hated it—hated being dependent, hated being weak, hated that Ilya had to see him like this.

But Ilya was patient and gentle, helping Shane with everything from adjusting his position in bed to using the bathroom. Shane's parents were there too, but it was Ilya that Shane wanted, Ilya whose presence made everything slightly more bearable.

On the third day, physical therapy started. A therapist came to Shane's room to help him sit up and eventually stand for the first time since surgery.

"Take it slow," the therapist, Marcus, instructed. "We're just going to get you sitting on the edge of the bed today."

It took twenty minutes and left Shane sweating and nauseous, but he managed it. Ilya stood nearby, ready to help if needed, his expression tight with concern.

"Good job," Marcus said. "Tomorrow we'll try standing."

After he left, Shane lay back down, exhausted. "This is going to take forever."

"One day at a time," Ilya said, wiping Shane's forehead with a cool cloth. "You just had major surgery. You need be patient with yourself."

"I'm tired of being patient. I'm tired of being broken."

"You not broken. You're healing. There is difference."

Shane wanted to argue, but he was too tired. He closed his eyes and let Ilya's presence soothe him.

— — —

Shane was discharged from the hospital after five days. The ride home was uncomfortable despite the pain medication, every bump in the road sending jolts through his back.

Ilya had prepared Shane's apartment—setting up a hospital bed in the living room since Shane couldn't manage the stairs to his bedroom, stocking the kitchen with easy-to-prepare meals, organizing all of Shane's medications.

Shane's parents helped get him settled, but they had to return home after a few days. Shane's father had to get back to work, and his mother, though reluctant, eventually agreed to leave when Ilya assured her he would take care of Shane.

"Call me if you need anything," she said, hugging Shane carefully. "Anything at all."

"I will, Mom. I promise."

After they left, it was just Shane and Ilya. Ilya had taken a leave of absence from the team, telling his coach he had a family emergency. Shane had protested, but Ilya was immovable.

"You need help. I going help you. End of discussion."

The first week home was hard. Shane couldn't do anything by himself—couldn't shower, couldn't dress, couldn't even get out of bed without assistance. He felt like a burden, and the feeling ate at him.

"I can do it myself," Shane snapped one morning when Ilya tried to help him put on a shirt.

"Shane, you can barely lift arms above shoulders right now. Let me help."

"I don't need help. I'm not a child."

"I never say you were. But you just had major surgery, and you need assistance. No shame in that."

"There is when I can't even dress myself!" Shane's voice rose, frustration and humiliation making him lash out. "I'm useless. I can't do anything."

"You not useless. You recovering." Ilya's voice was calm, but Shane could see tension in his jaw. "Now stop being stubborn and let me help you."

Shane wanted to keep arguing, but he was too tired. He let Ilya help him into the shirt, hating every second of it.

This became a pattern. Shane would try to do things himself, fail, and then lash out at Ilya in frustration. Ilya remained patient, but Shane could see it wearing on him.

Two weeks after surgery, Shane tried to shower by himself. Ilya had set up a shower chair and grab bars, and Shane was determined to prove he could manage.

He made it into the shower and got the water running. But when he tried to wash his hair, his arms wouldn't cooperate. Pain shot through his back, and his legs started shaking.

"Fuck," Shane muttered, gripping the grab bar. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"Shane?" Ilya's voice came from outside the bathroom. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine!"

"You don't sound fine. I coming in."

"No, I said I'm—"

But Ilya was already there, pulling back the shower curtain. He took in Shane's shaking legs, his white-knuckled grip on the grab bar, and his expression hardened.

"What are you doing?" Ilya demanded.

"Showering. What does it look like?"

"It look like you about fall and hurt yourself." Ilya turned off the water and grabbed a towel. "Come on. Let's get you out."

"I can do it myself—"

"No, you can't. And you going hurt yourself trying." Ilya's voice was sharp now, his patience clearly wearing thin. "Stop being so stubborn and let me help you."

"I don't want your help! I don't want to need your help!" Shane's voice cracked. "I just want to be able to take a fucking shower by myself!"

"I know. But you can't right now. And fighting me on it not going change that." Ilya wrapped the towel around Shane and helped him out of the shower. "You going hurt yourself, Shane. And then all of this—the surgery, the recovery—will be for nothing."

Shane sat on the toilet lid, dripping wet and miserable. Ilya was right, and he hated it.

"I'm sorry," Shane said quietly. "I'm sorry for being difficult. I just... I hate this. I hate being helpless."

Ilya's expression softened. He knelt in front of Shane and took his hands. "You not helpless. You recovering from major surgery. There difference. And I know it hard. I know you frustrated. But you have let me help you. You have trust that I want help you."

"I do trust you. I just... I feel like such a burden."

"You not burden. You person I love, and you hurt, and I want take care of you. That not burden. That what people who love each other do."

Shane felt tears prick his eyes. "I don't deserve you."

“Yes, you do. Now come on. Let me help you get dried off and dressed, and then we have lunch. Okay?”

"Okay."

— — —

Three weeks post-surgery, Shane started outpatient physical therapy. It was different from before—more focused on basic mobility and core strength, building back up from zero.

Ilya came to every session, watching intently, asking questions, taking notes on the exercises so he could help Shane do them at home.

"You don't have to come to every session," Shane said one day as they drove home. "I know you're missing practice."

"I don't care about practice right now. I care about you." Ilya glanced at him. "Besides, I want know how help you. I want understand what you going through."

Shane reached over and took Ilya's hand. "Thank you. For everything. I know I haven't been easy to deal with."

"You going through something incredibly difficult. You allowed not be easy." Ilya squeezed his hand. "But Shane, you have stop fighting me on everything. When I try help you, it not because I think you weak or incapable. It because I love you and I want make this easier for you."

"I know. I'm trying. It's just hard to accept that I need help with things I used to do without thinking."

“I know it is. But you getting stronger every day. I see it, even if you can’t.”

Shane wanted to believe him. Some days were better than others. Some days he could see the progress—he could stand for longer, walk a bit farther, do more of his exercises without assistance. Other days, it felt like he was moving backward, like he'd never get back to where he was.

— — —

A month after surgery, Shane had a follow-up appointment with Dr. Reeves. She examined him, tested his strength and sensation, and reviewed his progress in physical therapy.

"How do you think you're doing?" she asked.

"Honestly? I don't know. Some days I feel like I'm getting better. Other days I feel like I'm not making any progress at all."

"That's normal. Recovery isn't linear. You're going to have good days and bad days." She made notes in his chart. "But from what I can see, you're doing well. Your incision is healing nicely, your strength is improving, and your range of motion is better than I expected at this point."

"Really?"

"Really. You're doing great, Shane. I know it doesn't feel like it, but you are."

"When can I start skating again?"

Dr. Reeves smiled. "Not for a while yet. We need to make sure your spine is fully healed and your strength is back before we even think about putting you on ice. But if you keep progressing like this, I'd say maybe four to six months."

Four to six months. It felt like an eternity, but it was also a concrete timeline. Something to work toward.

"Okay," Shane said. "I can do that."

"I know you can. Just keep doing what you're doing—physical therapy, home exercises, taking care of yourself. And Shane? Let people help you. I know you're used to being independent, but recovery is a team effort."

Shane glanced at Ilya, who was sitting in the corner of the exam room. "I'm working on it."

— — —

Six weeks post-surgery, Shane was finally starting to feel more like himself. He could shower with minimal assistance, dress himself (though buttons were still tricky), and walk around the apartment without needing to rest every few minutes.

But he was still stubborn about accepting help, and it was starting to cause tension between him and Ilya.

"I can make dinner," Shane insisted one evening, standing in the kitchen.

"Shane, you been in physical therapy all day. You exhausted. Let me make dinner."

"I'm not an invalid. I can cook."

"I never said you were invalid. I just try to help."

"I don't need help with everything!"

Ilya set down the vegetables he'd been chopping and turned to face Shane, his expression tight. "Why you fight me on this? Every time I try help you, you push back. Why?"

"Because I need to be able to do things myself! I can't rely on you for everything forever!"

"I not asking you rely on me forever. I asking you let me help you while you still recovering. There difference."

"Is there? Because it feels like you think I can't do anything by myself."

"That not—" Ilya stopped, taking a deep breath. "Shane, I don't think you incapable. I think you recovering from major surgery and you need support. That not same thing."

"It feels the same to me."

"Well, it not." Ilya's voice was sharp now. "And honestly, I getting tired of this argument. Every day, same thing. You try do something you not ready for, I try help, and you snap at me. I trying be patient, but it getting really fucking hard."

Shane flinched. Ilya rarely swore at him, rarely let his frustration show like this.

"I'm sorry," Shane said quietly. "I don't mean to snap at you. I'm just... I'm frustrated. With my body, with the recovery, with everything."

"I know you are. But taking it out on me not fair." Ilya ran a hand through his hair. "I doing my best here, Shane. I trying support you and help you and be patient. But I need you meet me halfway. I need you let me help without fighting me every step of way."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'll try to be better about it."

Ilya's expression softened slightly. "I don't need you be better. I just need you let me in. Let me help you. That all I asking."

Shane crossed the kitchen and wrapped his arms around Ilya, burying his face in his chest. "I'm sorry. I know I've been difficult. I just hate feeling weak."

"You not weak. You one of strongest people I know." Ilya's arms came around Shane, holding him close. "But even strong people need help sometimes. That okay."

They stood like that for a long moment, and Shane felt some of the tension drain from his body. Ilya was right. He needed to stop fighting and start accepting the help that was being offered.

"Okay," Shane said. "You can make dinner. And I'll try to be less stubborn about accepting help."

"Thank you." Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of Shane's head. "Now go sit down. You've been on your feet too long."

Shane wanted to argue, but he bit his tongue. Instead, he went to the couch and sat down, watching as Ilya finished making dinner. And he had to admit, it felt good to let someone else take care of things for once.

— — —

Two months post-surgery, Shane was making real progress. He could do most daily tasks by himself now, though he still tired easily and had to be careful not to overdo it. Physical therapy was going well, and his therapist was pleased with his improvement.

But there were still hard days. Days when the pain was worse, when his body didn't cooperate, when the frustration of recovery felt overwhelming.

On one particularly bad day, Shane woke up with his back in agony. The pain medication barely touched it, and even the simplest movements made him want to cry.

Ilya found him in the bathroom, gripping the sink, trying to breathe through the pain.

"Shane, what's wrong?"

"My back. It's really bad today."

"Did you take your medication?"

"Yes. It's not helping."

Ilya's expression was concerned. "Maybe we call Dr. Reeves."

"No. It's just a bad day. It'll pass."

"Shane—"

"I said it'll pass!" Shane snapped, then immediately regretted it. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm just... it hurts, and I'm frustrated."

"I know. Come on, let get you back to bed. You need to rest."

Ilya helped Shane back to the hospital bed in the living room, moving slowly and carefully. He propped pillows around Shane to support his back, then got a heating pad and placed it gently against the worst of the pain.

"Better?" Ilya asked.

"A little. Thank you."

Ilya sat on edge of bed, his hand resting on Shane's arm. "I hate see you in pain."

"I hate being in pain."

"I know. But you're doing so well, Shane. You're so much stronger than you were even a few weeks ago."

"It doesn't feel like it."

"I know. But it true. You walking better, standing longer, doing more of your exercises by yourself. You making progress, even if it not feel like it on days like this."

Shane closed his eyes, letting Ilya's words wash over him. He wanted to believe it. Some days he could. Today wasn't one of those days.

"Will you stay with me?" Shane asked. "Just for a while?"

"Of course. I not going anywhere."

Ilya lay down beside Shane, careful not to jostle him. Shane turned his head to look at him, taking in the familiar features—the dark eyes, the strong jaw, the slight stubble that Ilya hadn't shaved yet this morning.

"I love you," Shane said. "I don't think I say it enough."

"You say it plenty. But I never get tired hear it." Ilya smiled. "I love you too, Shane. So much."

They lay there together, and eventually, the pain medication and the heating pad and Ilya's presence combined to ease some of Shane's discomfort. He dozed off, and when he woke a few hours later, the pain had dulled to a manageable ache.

Ilya was still there, reading on his phone, one hand resting on Shane's shoulder.

"Hey," Ilya said softly when he noticed Shane was awake. "How you feel?"

"Better. Not great, but better."

"Good. Are you hungry? I can make you something."

"Maybe in a bit. Can we just... stay like this for a while?"

"Yeah. We can do that."

— — —

Three months post-surgery, Shane had another follow-up with Dr. Reeves. This time, the news was even better.

"Your recovery is going really well," Dr. Reeves said, reviewing his latest scans. "The nerves are healing, the inflammation is down, and your strength and sensation are improving significantly."

"Does that mean I can start skating soon?" Shane asked, trying not to sound too eager.

"Not quite yet. But soon. I'd like to see you continue with physical therapy for another month or two, and then we can talk about gradually returning to ice time." She smiled at Shane's disappointed expression. "I know you're eager to get back out there, but we need to make sure you're fully ready. The last thing we want is for you to reinjure yourself."

"I understand. I just... I miss it. I miss skating, miss playing."

"I know you do. And you will again. Just be patient a little longer."

After the appointment, Shane and Ilya went out for lunch to celebrate the good news. It was the first time they'd been out to a restaurant since before the surgery, and it felt almost normal.

"I'm proud of you," Ilya said over their meal. "You've worked so hard. You've been so strong through all of this."

"I haven't felt very strong. I've been stubborn and difficult and—"

"And human. You've been human, Shane. You're allowed to struggle. You're allowed to have hard days. That doesn't make you weak."

Shane reached across the table and took Ilya's hand. "Thank you. For everything. For staying with me, for helping me, for putting up with me when I was being impossible."

"You not impossible. Well, maybe little impossible." Ilya grinned. "But I love you anyway. Even when you being stubborn."

"I love you too. And I'm going to try to be less stubborn. I promise."

"I'll believe when I see it," Ilya teased, and Shane laughed.

It felt good to laugh. It felt good to be out in the world, to be making progress, to have hope for the future.

— — —

Four months post-surgery, Shane was back in physical therapy with a new focus—sport-specific training. His therapist, Rebecca, had cleared him to start doing more intensive exercises, building up the strength and endurance he'd need to return to hockey.

"We're going to start slow," Rebecca said. "Balance work, agility drills, core strengthening. Nothing on ice yet, but we're getting you ready for it."

Shane threw himself into the work with renewed determination. He was finally seeing real progress, finally feeling like himself again. His back still ached sometimes, and he still had to be careful, but he was so much stronger than he'd been even a month ago.

Ilya had returned to practice with the Raiders, but he still came to Shane's physical therapy sessions when he could. Shane appreciated it, even though he no longer needed the support as much. It was nice to have Ilya there, to share this part of his recovery with him.

One day, Rebecca had Shane doing single-leg balance exercises on a wobble board. It was challenging, requiring intense concentration and core strength, but Shane managed to hold the position for thirty seconds.

"Excellent!" Rebecca said. "That's huge progress, Shane. A few months ago, you couldn't stand on one leg for more than a few seconds."

Shane stepped off the wobble board, breathing hard but grinning. He looked at Ilya, who was watching from his usual spot against the wall, and saw the pride in his eyes.

"You doing amazing," Ilya said after the session as they walked to the car. "Really, Shane. You're so much stronger."

"I feel stronger. Finally." Shane flexed his hands. "I feel like maybe I can actually do this. Maybe I can actually get back to playing."

"You will. I have no doubt."

— — —

Five months post-surgery, Shane had another appointment with Dr. Reeves. This time, Ilya came with him, and they both sat nervously in the exam room, waiting for the results of Shane's latest scans and tests.

Dr. Reeves came in with a smile, which Shane took as a good sign.

"Well," she said, pulling up Shane's scans on the computer. "I have to say, I'm impressed. Your recovery has exceeded my expectations."

"Really?" Shane leaned forward.

"Really. Look here." She pointed to the scans. "The nerves are healing beautifully. The inflammation is almost completely gone. Your strength and sensation are back to about eighty-five percent of normal, which is excellent."

"Eighty-five percent," Shane repeated. "Is that enough to play hockey?"

"I think so. With continued physical therapy and training, I think you can get back to professional-level play." Dr. Reeves turned to face them. "I'm clearing you to start skating again. Gradually, with supervision, but you can start."

Shane felt like he couldn't breathe. "I can skate?"

"You can skate. Start slow—just basic skating, no contact, no intense drills. But yes, you can get back on the ice."

Shane looked at Ilya, who was grinning widely. "I can skate," Shane said again, as if he couldn't quite believe it.

"You can skate," Ilya confirmed, and then he was pulling Shane into a hug, careful of his back but tight enough to convey his joy.

"Thank you," Shane said to Dr. Reeves, his voice thick with emotion. "Thank you so much."

"You do the work, Shane. You put in effort, you follow the plan, and you recover. You make hard choices, you do the surgery, and you commit to your recovery even when it's difficult. I'm proud of you."

Shane felt tears prick at his eyes. After months of fear and pain and uncertainty, he was finally getting his life back. "When can I start?"

"Whenever you feel ready. I'd recommend starting this week if possible—the sooner you begin retraining your body for skating, the better. But listen to your body. If something hurts, stop. If you feel any numbness or weakness, stop immediately and call me."

"I will. I promise."

Dr. Reeves smiled. "I know you will. You've been an excellent patient, Shane. Much better than most professional athletes I work with." She glanced at Ilya with amusement. "I think having someone to keep you accountable helped."

"It did," Shane admitted, reaching for Ilya's hand. "I couldn't have done this without him."

"Well, keep doing what you're doing. I want to see you back in six weeks for another check-in, and we'll assess your progress from there. But Shane?" Dr. Reeves's expression turned serious. "This is wonderful news, but don't rush it. You've come so far. Don't risk everything by pushing too hard too fast."

"I won't. I've learned my lesson about that."

They scheduled the follow-up appointment and left the office, Shane feeling lighter than he had in months. The moment they were in the car, Ilya turned to him with a grin that was pure joy.

"You can skate," Ilya said.

"I can skate," Shane repeated, and then he was laughing, the sound bubbling up from somewhere deep in his chest. "Holy shit, Ilya, I can skate again."

Ilya leaned across the console and kissed him, hard and fierce and full of relief. "I knew you would. I knew it."

"I was so scared I wouldn't. That I'd never—" Shane's voice broke, and Ilya cupped his face, thumbs brushing away the tears that had started to fall.

"But you did. You fought for this, and you won."

Shane kissed him again, pouring everything he felt into it—gratitude and love and hope for the future. When they finally pulled apart, both of them were breathing hard.

"Let's go home," Ilya said, his voice rough. "We should celebrate."

"Yeah," Shane agreed. "Let's go home."

— — —

The drive back to Shane's apartment felt both endless and too short. Shane couldn't stop smiling, couldn't stop thinking about getting back on the ice, about the possibility of playing again. Of having his career back.

But more than that, he kept thinking about Ilya. About how patient he'd been, how supportive, how he'd stayed even when Shane had tried to push him away. How he'd been there for every appointment, every therapy session, every bad day and good day alike.

Shane reached across the console and took Ilya's hand, threading their fingers together. Ilya glanced at him with a soft smile, the kind he only ever gave Shane, and squeezed his hand.

"What you thinking about?" Ilya asked.

"You," Shane said honestly. "How much I love you. How grateful I am that you didn't give up on me."

"Never," Ilya said firmly. "I never give up on you, Shane. No matter what."

When they got back to the apartment, Shane barely had the door closed before Ilya was on him, pressing him back against it and kissing him with an intensity that made Shane's knees weak. Not from pain or weakness this time, but from want.

"Ilya," Shane gasped against his mouth. "Babe—"

"I want you," Ilya said, his voice low and rough. "I want celebrate with you. Want show you how proud I am of you."

Shane's breath caught. They'd been intimate since the surgery, but carefully, always mindful of Shane's limitations and pain. But now, with the good news from Dr. Reeves, with the knowledge that Shane was truly healing, there was a different energy between them. Something hungry and desperate and full of hope.

"Yes," Shane said. "Yes, I want that too."

Ilya kissed him again, slower this time but no less intense, and Shane melted into it. Ilya's hands were everywhere—cupping Shane's face, sliding down his sides, gripping his hips. Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya's neck and held on, losing himself in the sensation.

"Bedroom," Ilya murmured against Shane's lips. "Now."

They made their way to the bedroom, stopping every few steps to kiss, to touch, to reaffirm that this was real. That Shane was okay. That they had a future together.

Ilya guided Shane to the bed, his hands gentle but purposeful. "Lie down," he said, and Shane did, watching as Ilya stood over him, his eyes dark with desire.

"You are beautiful," Ilya said, and Shane felt heat flood his face. Even after all this time, Ilya's compliments still made him blush.

"Come here," Shane said, reaching for him, and Ilya came willingly, settling over Shane with careful precision, mindful of his back even now.

They kissed for long minutes, slow and deep, relearning each other. Ilya's hands slid under Shane's shirt, pushing it up, and Shane lifted his arms to help him remove it. The movement was easier now than it had been months ago, and the realization made Shane's chest tight with emotion.

"I can do that now," Shane said softly. "I couldn't before."

Ilya's expression softened. "I know. You come so far, моя любовь."

Shane pulled Ilya down for another kiss, this one more urgent. "I want you," he said. "I want to feel you. Want to feel alive."

"You are alive," Ilya said, but he was already pulling off his own shirt, revealing the muscled expanse of his chest and abs. Shane ran his hands over Ilya's skin, marveling at the warmth and solidity of him.

Ilya made quick work of Shane's pants, sliding them down his legs along with his underwear, and Shane was suddenly naked beneath him, vulnerable and wanting. Ilya's eyes raked over him with undisguised hunger.

"Perfect," Ilya murmured. "You so perfect."

"I'm not—"

"You are." Ilya kissed him again, cutting off his protest. "You perfect to me. Always have been. Always will be."

Shane felt tears prick at his eyes again, but these were good tears. Happy tears. He pulled Ilya closer, needing to feel him, needing the connection.

Ilya kissed down Shane's neck, his chest, his stomach, taking his time, worshipping every inch of skin. When he reached Shane's cock, already hard and leaking, he looked up at Shane with a wicked smile.

"Can I?" he asked, and Shane nodded frantically.

"Please, Ilya. Please."

Ilya took him into his mouth, and Shane cried out at the sensation. It had been so long since they'd done this, since Shane had felt good enough, confident enough in his body to let Ilya take him apart like this. But now, with the knowledge that he was healing, that he was going to be okay, he could finally let go.

Ilya worked him with expert precision, knowing exactly what Shane liked, exactly how to make him fall apart. Shane's hands fisted in the sheets, his hips trying to thrust up, but Ilya held him down with one large hand on his hip.

"Ilya, I'm—I'm close—"

Ilya pulled off with an obscene pop. "Not yet," he said. "I want to be inside you when you come."

Shane whimpered at the words, at the promise in them. "Yes. God, yes."

Ilya stripped off the rest of his clothes and retrieved the lube from the nightstand. He slicked up his fingers and pressed one against Shane's entrance, watching Shane's face carefully.

"Okay?" he asked.

"More than okay," Shane said. "Please, Rozanov. I need you."

Ilya groaned at the use of his last name, the way Shane only said it when he was desperate and wanting. He worked Shane open slowly, carefully, adding a second finger and then a third, making sure Shane was ready.

"Please," Shane begged. "I'm ready. I need you inside me."

Ilya positioned himself at Shane's entrance, one hand on Shane's hip, the other braced beside his head. "Tell me if anything hurts," he said. "Promise me."

"I promise. Now please, Ilya, I need—"

Ilya pushed inside in one slow, steady thrust, and Shane's world narrowed to the feeling of being filled, of being connected to Ilya in the most intimate way possible. It was perfect. It was everything.

"Fuck," Ilya breathed. "You feel so good, Shane. So perfect."

"Move," Shane gasped. "Please move."

Ilya started to thrust, slow and deep, and Shane wrapped his legs around Ilya's waist, pulling him closer. The angle was perfect, hitting that spot inside him that made stars burst behind his eyelids.

"Harder," Shane said. "I can take it. I'm not going to break."

Ilya's eyes darkened, and he picked up the pace, thrusting harder, faster, giving Shane exactly what he needed. Shane clung to him, nails digging into Ilya's shoulders, lost in the pleasure and the connection and the overwhelming love he felt for this man.

"I love you," Shane gasped. "I love you so much."

"I love you too," Ilya said, his voice strained. "So much, моя любовь. So fucking much."

Ilya reached between them and wrapped his hand around Shane's cock, stroking in time with his thrusts, and Shane felt his orgasm building, coiling tight in his belly.

"I'm close," Shane warned. "Ilya, I'm—"

"Come for me," Ilya said. "Let me see you."

Shane came with a cry, his body arching off the bed, pleasure washing over him in waves. Ilya followed moments later, burying himself deep inside Shane with a groan, and Shane felt the warmth of him, the connection, the love.

They stayed like that for a long moment, both of them breathing hard, hearts racing. Finally, Ilya carefully pulled out and collapsed beside Shane, immediately pulling him close.

"That was..." Shane trailed off, unable to find the words.

"Perfect," Ilya finished. "That was perfect."

Shane turned in Ilya's arms, pressing his face against Ilya's chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. "I can't believe I'm going to skate again," he said softly. "I can't believe this is real."

"It's real," Ilya said, pressing a kiss to the top of Shane's head. "You did it. You fought for this, you won."

"We did it," Shane corrected. "I couldn't have done this without you."

"We make good team."

"The best team," Shane agreed. He tilted his head up to look at Ilya, at this beautiful, stubborn, wonderful man who had stood by him through everything. "Thank you. For everything. For not giving up on me. For being patient with me. For loving me even when I was being impossible."

"You're worth it," Ilya said simply. "You're worth everything, Shane. Don't ever doubt that."

Shane kissed him, soft and sweet and full of promise. "I won't. Not anymore."

They lay together in the fading afternoon light, wrapped around each other, talking about the future. About Shane getting back on the ice, about training, about the possibility of playing together again. About all the things they'd almost lost and were now getting back.

"When do you want to skate?" Ilya asked. "I can come with you. Make sure you don't overdo it."

"Tomorrow," Shane said immediately. "I want to go tomorrow. Early, before anyone else is there. Just you and me and the ice."

Ilya smiled. "I like that."

"Me too." Shane snuggled closer, feeling safe and loved and hopeful for the first time in months. "I love you, Ilya."

"I love you too, Shane. Always."

They fell asleep like that, tangled together, dreaming of ice and light and the future they were building together.

Chapter End Notes

For my sake and yours, we'll just say Shane's surgery and healing process was (totally realistic) a fast miracle 😊

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Happy New Years to everyone!! As promised, here is the third and final part. Drop some recommendations on what I should write next (because there is no way in hell im leaving them in 2025)

Twenty four months later, Shane stood in front of the full-length mirror in their hotel suite, adjusting his tie for the fourth time. His hands were steady—steadier than they'd been in a long time—but his heart was racing like he was about to step onto the ice for game seven of the finals.

Which, in a way, he was. Just a different kind of game.

The championship trophy sat in the venue lobby downstairs, gleaming under spotlights, waiting for tonight's ceremony. The Montreal Metros had won. Against all odds, against the Boston Raiders in a game that had gone into double overtime, they'd won. And Shane had been on the ice for it.

He still couldn't quite believe it.

"You going to strangle yourself if you keep playing with that," Ilya said from the doorway, leaning against the frame with his arms crossed. He was already dressed in his own suit—charcoal gray that made his eyes look even more intense than usual. Even after all this time, after everything they'd been through, Shane's breath still caught when he looked at him.

"I'm nervous," Shane admitted, dropping his hands.

"About the ceremony?" Ilya pushed off the doorframe and crossed to him, reaching up to fix Shane's tie with practiced ease. His fingers were warm and steady, and Shane wanted to lean into the touch, to tell him everything, but he couldn't. Not yet. "You done these before."

"Not like this." Shane watched Ilya's face, the concentration in his expression as he worked.
"Not after... everything."

That was true enough, even if it wasn't the whole truth.

Ilya's hands stilled. He looked up, meeting Shane's eyes, and Shane saw the concern there, the love that never wavered. "You earn this, Shane. You work harder than anyone I ever see to come back here. You deserve celebrate."

Shane caught Ilya's hands, holding them against his chest where his heart was hammering. "I couldn't have done it without you. You know that, right?"

"I know you think that," Ilya said softly, his thumb stroking over Shane's knuckles. "'But you did the work, моя любовь. You fight for this.'"

"We fought for this," Shane corrected. He brought one of Ilya's hands to his lips, pressing a kiss to his knuckles. "Together."

Ilya's expression softened in that way it only ever did for Shane—the cold, cocky facade melting away to reveal the warmth underneath. "Together," he agreed. Then his eyes narrowed slightly, studying Shane's face. "You sure you okay? You seem... I don't know. More nervous than usual."

Shane forced a smile, his stomach twisting. He hated keeping secrets from Ilya, but this one was important. This one needed to be a surprise. "I'm fine. Just... it's a big night, you know?"

Ilya didn't look entirely convinced, but he nodded. "Okay. But if you need anything—"

"I know. You'll be there." Shane pulled him close, wrapping his arms around Ilya's waist.
"You're always there."

"Always," Ilya murmured, pressing a kiss to Shane's temple. "Now come. We should go down soon. Your team will look for you."

Shane nodded, taking one last look at himself in the mirror. The speech was folded in his inner jacket pocket, the words he'd written and rewritten a dozen times burning against his chest like a brand.

Tonight, everything would change.

He just hoped Ilya would forgive him for not warning him first.

— — —

FLASHBACK: One Year Post-Surgery

Shane stood at the entrance to the practice rink, his gear bag heavy on his shoulder, and stared at the ice like it might swallow him whole.

It was early—barely six in the morning—and the rink was empty except for him and Ilya. They'd arranged it that way deliberately. Shane's first time back on the ice since Dr. Reeves had cleared him wasn't going to be a spectacle. It was going to be private, just the two of them, in case everything went horribly wrong.

In case Shane's body betrayed him again.

"You ready?" Ilya asked beside him, already in his skates, looking effortlessly graceful even standing still.

"No," Shane said honestly. His hands were shaking as he set down his bag, the zipper rattling. "What if I can't do it? What if I get out there and my legs give out, or I can't turn, or —"

"Then we deal with it," Ilya interrupted, his voice firm but gentle. He moved closer, his hand finding Shane's shoulder and squeezing. "But you will not know until you try. And Doctor Reeves clear you. Your spine is healed. Your strength is back. You can do this."

Shane nodded, not trusting his voice. He sat down on the bench and pulled out his skates—the same ones he'd worn before the injury, freshly sharpened and waiting. They felt foreign in his hands, like artifacts from another life, from another version of himself who'd taken skating for granted.

Ilya sat beside him, close enough that their shoulders touched. He didn't say anything, just sat there, a solid presence, and Shane was grateful for it. For him.

Shane's fingers fumbled with the laces. Six months of physical therapy, of building back his strength and coordination, of learning to trust his body again, and he still felt like a newborn deer trying to tie his own skates. The muscle memory was there, but it felt rusty, uncertain.

Ilya didn't offer to help—he knew Shane needed to do this himself—but his presence was steady and reassuring. A reminder that Shane wasn't alone in this.

Finally, skates laced, Shane stood. The familiar weight of them, the slight forward pitch they gave his stance, felt both right and terrifying. His legs held him. That was something.

"Okay," he breathed. "Okay."

They walked to the ice together, their skate guards clicking on the rubber floor. Ilya stepped onto the ice first, gliding backward with effortless grace, and held out his hand. Shane stared at it, at the ice beyond, at the future he'd thought he'd lost forever.

"I got you," Ilya said, his voice steady and sure. "I promise. I won't let you fall."

Shane took his hand and stepped onto the ice.

For a moment, everything was perfect. The familiar glide, the cold air on his face, the sound of blades on ice—it was all exactly as he remembered. The ice felt right under him, solid and real. He took one stroke, then another, Ilya skating backward in front of him, their hands clasped together.

Then his left leg wobbled.

Shane's heart lurched, panic flooding through him like ice water. His balance shifted wrong, his core not quite compensating the way it used to, and he started to tip—

Ilya caught him, strong hands gripping his arms, steadying him instantly. "I got you. You are okay. I got you."

"I can't—" Shane's voice cracked, fear clawing at his throat. "Ilya, I can't—"

"Yes, you can. Look at me." Ilya's face was inches from his, intense and focused, those dark eyes boring into Shane's. "You on the ice, Shane. You skating. Your legs working. You just need find balance again. That is all. Just balance."

"What if I can't?" The words came out small, broken.

"Then we work on it until you can. But you not give up after thirty seconds." Ilya's grip tightened, anchoring him. "Come on. Let try again. Slow. Just feel the ice under you."

They started moving again, Ilya skating backward, guiding Shane forward with infinite patience. It was clumsy and awkward, nothing like the fluid grace Shane used to have, nothing like the player he'd been before. But he was moving. He was skating.

"That's it," Ilya encouraged, his voice warm. "Feel the ice under you. Trust your edges. You know how to do this. Your body remembers."

Shane focused on the mechanics—push, glide, push, glide. His left side was weaker, the nerve damage still affecting his fine motor control, but it was working. He was doing it. He was actually doing it.

They made it to the far end of the rink, then back. By the third lap, Shane's confidence was growing, his movements becoming more natural. He released one of Ilya's hands, then the other, skating on his own.

"Ilya," he breathed, wonder filling his voice. "I'm doing it."

"I know." Ilya's smile was brilliant, proud and relieved and full of love. "I knew you would. I never doubt you."

Shane tried a crossover—just a simple one, the kind he used to do without thinking—and nearly fell. His left leg didn't quite cooperate, the timing off, and he stumbled. Ilya was there instantly, catching him again, but Shane was laughing. Actually laughing, tears streaming down his face.

"I'm skating," he said, wonder and disbelief mixing in his voice. "I'm really skating. I'm on the ice again."

"You are." Ilya pulled him close, kissing him right there in the middle of the ice, and Shane could taste the salt of his own tears mixed with Ilya's smile. "You are fucking amazing, Shane. You so... very amazing. I am so proud of you."

They stayed on the ice for two hours, Ilya patiently working with Shane on turns and stops and all the basic skills he'd taken for granted before the injury. Shane fell twice more, his legs giving out when he pushed too hard, but each time he got back up, more determined than before.

His back ached. His legs trembled with exhaustion. But he was skating.

When they finally left the rink, Shane's legs were shaking so badly he could barely walk, and his back ached in that deep, bone-tired way that meant he'd overdone it. But he felt more alive than he had in months. More like himself.

"Thank you," he said as they loaded their gear into Ilya's car, the morning sun just starting to break over the horizon. "For being here. For believing in me when I didn't believe in myself."

"Always," Ilya said simply, like it was the easiest thing in the world. "I always believe in you, Shane. Always."

— — —

The week leading up to the awards ceremony, Shane had been on a mission.

Ilya had done so much for him over the past two years—had sacrificed so much, put his own life on hold, been patient through Shane's worst moments—and Shane wanted to show him how much it meant. How much **he** meant.

On Monday, Shane surprised him with breakfast in bed—actual homemade breakfast, not just coffee and toast. Pancakes with fresh berries, perfectly crispy bacon, eggs exactly how Ilya liked them with the yolks still runny. Ilya had looked at him suspiciously over the tray.

"What did you do?" he'd asked, eyebrow raised.

"Nothing. Can't I make breakfast for my boyfriend?"

"You never make breakfast. You burn water."

"Well, I'm making it now." Shane had kissed him, syrup-sweet. "Eat before it gets cold."

Ilya had eaten, but he'd watched Shane the whole time with those perceptive eyes, like he was trying to figure out what Shane was up to. Shane had just smiled and stolen a piece of bacon off his plate.

On Tuesday, Shane had arranged for them to have the practice rink to themselves for two hours in the afternoon. They'd skated together, just the two of them, no pressure or expectations. Shane had even managed to keep up with Ilya through most of the drills, though his stamina still wasn't what it used to be. His left side still lagged sometimes, his turns not quite as sharp, but he was there. He was playing.

Afterward, in the locker room, Ilya had pressed him against the wall and kissed him breathless, his hands fisted in Shane's practice jersey.

"What got into you this week?" Ilya had murmured against his lips, his breath hot.

"Just want to show you I appreciate you," Shane had said, sliding his hands under Ilya's shirt, feeling the warm skin and hard muscle underneath. "That okay?"

"Very okay," Ilya had breathed, and then they'd been kissing again, deep and hungry, until Shane's knees went weak.

Wednesday, Shane had made reservations at Ilya's favorite restaurant—the fancy Russian place downtown that was impossible to get into, the one with the private rooms and the menu entirely in Cyrillic. He'd called in a favor from a teammate whose cousin knew the owner. They'd had a private table in the back, and Shane had ordered in Russian, stumbling over the pronunciation but trying.

Ilya had looked at him with such soft affection that Shane's chest had ached.

"You be learning," Ilya had said, his voice warm with surprise.

"I wanted to surprise you." Shane had reached across the table, taking Ilya's hand. "You do so much for me. I want to do things for you too. I want to be better for you."

"You do, моя любовь. Every day." Ilya had squeezed his hand. "You don not have to prove anything to me."

But Shane did. He had to prove that Ilya's faith in him, his patience, his love—all of it had been worth it.

Thursday, Shane had drawn Ilya a bath when he got home from practice—the fancy kind with bath salts and candles and everything. Ilya had laughed, surprised and delighted, but he'd gotten in, and Shane had sat on the edge of the tub, washing Ilya's hair and massaging his shoulders, working out the knots from practice.

"You be very attentive this week," Ilya had observed, eyes closed, head tilted back in the water. "Should I be suspicious?"

"No. Just grateful." Shane had pressed a kiss to Ilya's temple, breathing in the scent of him—soap and chlorine and something uniquely Ilya. "You take care of me all the time. Let me take care of you for once."

"I like take care of you."

"I know. But I like taking care of you too."

Now, Friday night, standing backstage at the ceremony venue, Shane's heart was pounding so hard he thought it might break through his ribs. The week of gestures had been leading up to this—the biggest gesture of all. The one that would change everything.

"You okay?" Ilya asked, straightening Shane's collar one more time, his fingers gentle. "You are pale."

"I'm fine. Just nervous."

"You going to be great." Ilya's hand lingered on Shane's chest, right over his racing heart. "I'm proud of you. No matter what happens up there."

Shane covered Ilya's hand with his own, memorizing the moment. The last moment before everything changed. "I love you."

"I love you too, Hollander." Ilya smiled, that private smile that was just for Shane, the one that made him look younger and softer. "Now go. Your team waiting."

Shane nodded, his throat tight. He wanted to tell Ilya everything, to warn him, but he couldn't. This needed to be a surprise. Ilya deserved to be surprised, to know that Shane was finally ready to stop hiding, to stop being afraid.

He just hoped Ilya would understand.

FLASHBACK: Three Years Ago, Before the Injury

The bar is loud in the way that crawls under your skin. Shane hates it. Too many people, too many eyes, music pounding like it's trying to knock something loose in his chest.

He's halfway through a drink he didn't order when someone bumps into him and doesn't move away.

“Sorry,” the guy says, smiling too much. He stays close anyway.

Shane shifts. The guy mirrors him.

“I’m actually here with—”

A hand lands on Shane’s shoulder.

Heavy. Certain.

The guy freezes.

Ilya doesn’t say anything at first. He just stands there behind Shane, chest to Shane’s back, fingers curling slightly like he’s checking something is still where he left it.

Then, calmly: “You in my way.”

The guy laughs, unsure. “Didn’t realize he was—”

“He is.” Ilya’s hand tightens once. Not painful. Definitive. “Move.”

The word isn’t loud. It doesn’t need to be.

The guy mutters something and disappears into the crowd like he was never brave enough to exist in the first place.

Shane turns. “Ilya—”

Ilya's eyes are dark, unreadable. He looks Shane over like he's checking for damage no one else can see.

"You don't notice when people look at you," Ilya says.

"That's not—"

"They look," Ilya continues, voice low, controlled. "They think they can try. I do not like that."

Shane exhales. "You don't own me."

Ilya tilts his head, considering. Then he steps closer, invading Shane's space until the noise of the bar feels far away.

"No," Ilya agrees. "I protect what mine."

"That sounds the same." He secretly loves when Ilya gets possessive over him.

"It not." Ilya's thumb brushes the edge of Shane's jaw, just once, in public, daring anyone to see. "You can walk away anytime."

Shane doesn't.

— — —

The ceremony was in full swing. Shane sat at the Montreal table, surrounded by his teammates—Dubois, Moreau, Chen, all of them in high spirits, celebrating their victory. The room was packed with players, coaches, executives, media. The air buzzed with conversation and laughter.

Shane was only half-listening to the speeches, his mind elsewhere. His prepared speech was folded in his inner jacket pocket, and he kept touching it, making sure it was still there. His palms were sweating.

Across the room, at the Boston table, Ilya sat with his team. They'd come in second, losing in that brutal double-overtime game, but Ilya had played brilliantly. Three assists, countless blocked shots, playing through obvious exhaustion. Shane caught his eye and Ilya gave him a small smile, reassuring and steady, completely unaware of what was about to happen.

Shane's stomach twisted with nerves and anticipation.

"You good, Cap?" Dubois asked beside him, nudging his shoulder. "You look like you're gonna puke."

"I'm fine," Shane lied. "Just nervous about the speech."

"You'll be great. Just thank the team, thank the fans, don't cry. Easy."

If only it were that easy.

"And now," the announcer said, his voice booming through the speakers, "to present the championship trophy to the Montreal Metros—team captain Shane Hollander!"

The room erupted in applause. Shane stood on shaky legs, his heart hammering, and made his way to the stage. The trophy was there, massive and gleaming under the lights, and for a moment he just stared at it.

He'd dreamed of this moment for years. Had thought he'd lost his chance at it forever when he'd woken up in that hospital bed unable to feel his legs. And now here he was.

The applause died down. Shane stepped up to the microphone, pulling out his speech with trembling hands. He unfolded it, the paper crinkling too loud in the sudden quiet, then looked out at the crowd.

Hundreds of faces stared back at him. Teammates, coaches, executives, media. His parents in the third row, beaming with pride. And Ilya, watching him with those intense eyes, believing in him like he always had, completely unsuspecting.

Shane took a breath and began.

"Twenty four months ago," his voice cracked slightly, and he cleared his throat, "two years ago, I didn't think I'd ever stand on a stage like this again."

The room went quiet, everyone leaning forward.

"Two years ago, I was lying in a hospital bed, unable to feel my legs, being told that I might never play hockey again. That the career I'd worked my entire life for might be over at twenty-eight years old." Shane's hands tightened on the paper. "I haven't talked about this publicly before. My team and I kept it quiet, said I was out with a back injury, which was technically true. But the truth is, I had a spinal cord injury. I had emergency surgery, then another surgery six months later to try to repair the damage. And for a long time, I didn't know if I'd ever skate again."

He could see the shock rippling through the crowd, people whispering to each other. At the Boston table, Ilya had gone very still, his eyes locked on Shane.

"I was terrified," Shane continued, his voice stronger now. "I was angry. I was so fucking scared that everything I'd worked for was gone. And I was not... I was not a good person to

be around during that time. I was negative. I was bitter. I pushed people away. I said things I didn't mean. I was, to put it bluntly, a piece of shit."

A few nervous laughs from the crowd.

"But I had someone who refused to give up on me. Someone who was there for every doctor's appointment, every physical therapy session, every bad day and every small victory. Someone who put his own career on hold to take care of me when I couldn't take care of myself. Someone who believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself."

Shane's eyes found Ilya's across the room. Ilya was staring at him, his expression unreadable, but Shane could see the tension in his shoulders.

"I wouldn't be standing here today without him. I wouldn't have made it through the surgery, through the recovery, through learning to walk again, learning to skate again. I definitely wouldn't have made it back to professional hockey. And I sure as hell wouldn't be holding this trophy right now."

Shane paused, his heart racing. This was it. The moment everything changed.

"When we won on Tuesday, I was shocked. I'm still shocked. I didn't play my best this season. I'm not the player I was before the injury. I'm slower. My stamina isn't what it used to be. I have limitations I didn't have before. But my team believed in me anyway. They trusted me anyway. And somehow, we won."

He looked down at the trophy, then back at the crowd.

"But the real victory for me isn't this trophy. The real victory is that I'm here at all. That I can stand on my own two legs. That I can skate. That I can play the game I love. And I owe all of that to one person."

Shane's voice softened, became more intimate, like he was talking to just one person even though hundreds were listening.

"Ilya Rozanov has been my partner for four years. Not just my rival, not just my friend. My partner. My boyfriend. The person I love more than anything in this world."

The room exploded.

Gasps, shocked exclamations, the sudden roar of conversation. Camera flashes went off like lightning. Shane could see reporters scrambling for their phones, his teammates' shocked faces, his mother's hand over her mouth.

But he only had eyes for Ilya.

Ilya had gone pale, his eyes wide with shock. His mouth was open slightly, like he couldn't quite process what he was hearing. Shane saw the exact moment it hit him, saw the tears start to well up in those dark eyes.

"We wanted us to be public years ago," Shane continued, his own voice thick with emotion now. "He wanted to be able to hold my hand in public, to not have to hide who we were to each other. And I was too scared. I was worried about what people would think, what it would mean for my career, for his career. I was a coward."

Shane's hands were shaking now, the paper trembling.

"But after everything we've been through, after he stood by me through the worst time of my life, after he loved me even when I was unlovable—I'm not scared anymore. Or maybe I am, but I don't care. Because he deserves better than being hidden. He deserves to be celebrated. He deserves for the world to know how incredible he is."

Tears were streaming down Shane's face now, but he didn't care.

"Ilya, I'm sorry it took me so long. I'm sorry I made you wait. I'm sorry for every time I was cruel to you during my recovery, every time I pushed you away, every time I made you feel like you weren't enough. You were always enough. You were always more than enough. You're everything."

Across the room, Ilya was crying openly now, tears streaming down his face, his hand pressed to his mouth. The cold, cocky facade was completely gone, leaving only raw emotion.

"I love you," Shane said, his voice breaking. "I love you so much. And I want everyone to know it. I want the world to know that you're mine and I'm yours, and I'm not ashamed of that. I'm proud of it. I'm proud of you. I'm proud of us."

The room was in chaos now, but Shane didn't care. He looked directly at Ilya.

"Thank you for saving my life. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for being patient with me. Thank you for never giving up on me, even when I gave you every reason to. This trophy, this moment, this second chance—it's all because of you. You're the reason I'm here. You're the reason I'm still standing. And I will spend the rest of my life trying to be worthy of you."

Shane's voice dropped to almost a whisper, but the microphone picked it up.

"Я люблю тебя, моя любовь."

I love you, my love.

The Russian was clumsy, his pronunciation probably terrible, but Ilya's face crumpled. He stood abruptly, his chair scraping back, and Shane saw him push through the crowd, heading for the exit. Not running away—Shane could see it in his body language—but needing air, needing space to process.

Shane looked back at the crowd, at the sea of shocked faces and flashing cameras.

"I know this isn't the speech anyone expected tonight," he said, trying for a smile through his tears. "But I needed to say it. I needed him to know. And I needed all of you to know too. Because I'm done hiding. I'm done being afraid. Life's too short, and I almost lost mine. I'm not wasting any more time."

He touched the trophy, feeling the cold metal under his fingers.

"Thank you to my team for believing in me. Thank you to the medical staff who put me back together. Thank you to my family for their support. And thank you to Ilya Rozanov for being my everything."

Shane stepped back from the microphone to thunderous applause—some of it shocked, some of it supportive, all of it deafening. His teammates were on their feet, Dubois whooping and clapping, Moreau grinning like a maniac. His mother was crying. His father looked stunned but was clapping.

But Shane didn't care about any of that. He needed to find Ilya.

He practically ran off the stage, ignoring the reporters trying to stop him, pushing through the crowd. He found Ilya in the hallway outside the ballroom, leaning against the wall, his face in his hands.

"Ilya," Shane said, breathless.

Ilya looked up, and Shane's heart clenched at the sight of him—tears streaming down his face, his expression a mixture of shock and disbelief and overwhelming emotion.

"You—" Ilya's voice broke. "You just—Shane, you just come out. On national television. In front of everyone?"

"I know."

"You told everyone about us. About me."

"I know."

"Why not you tell me?" Ilya's voice was thick with tears. "Why you not warn me?"

"Because I wanted it to be a surprise. Because you've been waiting for this for so long, and I wanted to give it to you. I wanted you to know that I'm ready. That I'm not afraid anymore. That I'm proud to be with you."

Ilya made a sound that was half-laugh, half-sob. "You insane. You completely insane."

"Probably." Shane stepped closer, cupping Ilya's face in his hands, wiping away his tears with his thumbs. "Are you mad?"

"Mad?" Ilya laughed, the sound watery. "Shane, you just throw away your privacy, probably start media shitstorm, and definitely make your life more complicated. For me."

"Worth it."

"You not know yet. You not know how people will react, what it mean for your career—"

"I don't care." Shane pressed their foreheads together. "I don't care about any of that. I only care about you. About us. I'm done hiding you. I'm done pretending you're not the most

important person in my life."

Ilya's hands came up to grip Shane's wrists, holding on tight. "I can't believe you do that. I can't believe you actually do that."

"I should have done it years ago. I'm sorry it took me so long."

"Shane—" Ilya's voice broke again, and then he was kissing Shane, desperate and messy and perfect. Shane kissed him back, pouring everything he felt into it—all his love, his gratitude, his commitment.

When they broke apart, both breathing hard, Ilya was smiling through his tears.

"I love you," Ilya said. "I love you so much. You the bravest person I know."

"I'm not brave. I'm just tired of being scared." Shane kissed him again, softer this time. "And I wanted everyone to know that you're mine."

"Possessive," Ilya said, but he was smiling.

"Always."

They stood there in the hallway, wrapped around each other, while chaos erupted inside the ballroom. Shane could hear his phone buzzing in his pocket—probably a million texts and calls—but he ignored it. This moment was just for them.

"We probably go back in," Ilya said eventually, though he made no move to let go of Shane.

"Probably. Are you ready for the media circus?"

"Are you?"

Shane thought about it, about what he'd just done, about how his life was about to change. Then he looked at Ilya—at this beautiful, stubborn, wonderful man who'd stood by him through everything—and smiled.

"Yeah. I'm ready. As long as you're with me."

"Always," Ilya promised. "I always with you."

FLASHBACK: Three Years Ago, Before the Injury

Shane woke to the feeling of Ilya's mouth on his neck, hot and insistent. He made a sleepy sound of pleasure, his body already responding even though his brain was still foggy with sleep.

"Ilya," he mumbled. "What time is it?"

"Early," Ilya murmured against his skin. "Don't care. Want you."

Shane's eyes fluttered open. The room was still dark, just the faintest hint of dawn light creeping through the curtains. "We have practice in three hours."

"Then we make this quick." Ilya's hand slid down Shane's stomach, under the waistband of his boxers, and Shane gasped.

"Fuck," Shane breathed as Ilya's hand wrapped around him, stroking slowly. "You're insatiable."

"Only for you." Ilya bit down gently on Shane's shoulder, making him arch. "Only ever for you."

They'd been together for two years at this point, and Shane still couldn't get enough of him. Still wanted him constantly, still felt that thrill every time Ilya touched him.

"Come here," Shane said, pulling Ilya up for a kiss. It was deep and filthy, all tongue and heat, and Shane could feel Ilya hard against his hip.

"Want to be inside you," Ilya breathed against his lips. "Can I?"

"Yes. God, yes."

They'd done this enough times that they had a rhythm now. Ilya reached for the lube in the nightstand while Shane pushed his boxers off, already aching for it. Ilya's fingers were slick and sure as he opened Shane up, finding that spot inside him that made Shane see stars.

"Please," Shane gasped, his hands fisting in the sheets. "I'm ready. Please, Ilya."

Ilya pushed into him slowly, both of them groaning at the sensation. Shane wrapped his legs around Ilya's waist, pulling him deeper, needing more.

"Fuck, you feel so good," Ilya breathed, his forehead pressed to Shane's. "So perfect. Always so perfect for me."

They moved together, finding their rhythm, the room filling with the sounds of their breathing and the slide of skin on skin. Ilya knew exactly how Shane liked it—hard and deep, hitting that spot inside him that made Shane's whole body light up.

"I love you," Shane gasped, his hands sliding up Ilya's back, feeling the flex of muscle under his fingers. "I love you so much."

"I love you too," Ilya said, his voice rough. "My Shane. Mine."

"Yours," Shane agreed. "Always yours."

Ilya's hand wrapped around Shane's cock, stroking in time with his thrusts, and Shane felt his orgasm building, that familiar heat coiling in his belly.

"Close," he warned. "I'm close."

"Come for me," Ilya urged. "Want to feel you."

Shane came with a cry, his body clenching around Ilya, pleasure washing through him in waves. Ilya followed moments later, burying his face in Shane's neck as he came, Shane's name on his lips.

They lay there afterward, tangled together, both breathing hard. Ilya was still inside him, neither of them wanting to move yet.

"We're going to be late for practice," Shane said eventually, running his fingers through Ilya's hair.

"Worth it," Ilya mumbled against his neck.

Shane laughed, feeling warm and sated and loved. "Yeah. Worth it."

— — —

The aftermath of the speech was chaos.

When Shane and Ilya finally made it back into the ballroom, they were immediately swarmed by reporters. Cameras flashed, microphones were shoved in their faces, everyone shouting questions at once.

"Shane, when did you and Ilya start dating?"

"How long have you been hiding your relationship?"

"Ilya, did you know Shane was going to come out tonight?"

"Shane, are you worried about backlash from the league?"

"What does this mean for both your careers?"

Shane's hand found Ilya's, their fingers lacing together, and he held on tight. Ilya squeezed back, his presence steady and grounding.

"We're not answering questions tonight," Shane said firmly. "This is a celebration. We'll release a statement tomorrow."

But the reporters kept pushing, kept shouting, until Shane's teammates formed a protective barrier around them. Dubois, big and intimidating, physically moved reporters out of the way.

"You heard the man," Dubois said. "Back off."

They made it back to the Montreal table, where Shane's teammates erupted in cheers and congratulations. Moreau pulled Shane into a hug, clapping him on the back.

"Holy shit, Cap," Comeau said, grinning. "That was the most romantic thing I've ever seen. I think I'm in love with you now too."

"Get in line," Ilya said, his arm sliding possessively around Shane's waist.

The team laughed, and Shane felt some of the tension ease from his shoulders. His teammates were okay with it. They were happy for him.

Across the room, the Boston table was in similar chaos. Shane could see Ilya's teammates looking over, some shocked, some supportive. One of them—Petrov, Shane thought—gave Ilya a thumbs up.

Shane's parents made their way over, his mother crying again, pulling both Shane and Ilya into a hug.

"I'm so proud of you," she said to Shane. "That took so much courage."

"Thanks, Mom."

His father shook Ilya's hand, his expression serious. "You take care of my son."

"Always," Ilya promised. "He everything to me."

The rest of the ceremony was a blur. Shane barely remembered accepting the trophy, barely remembered the photos and the champagne. All he could focus on was Ilya beside him, their hands linked, no longer hiding.

Finally, hours later, they made it back to their hotel room. Shane shut the door behind them and leaned against it, suddenly exhausted.

"That was insane," he said.

"That was the understatement of the century." Ilya crossed to him, cupping his face. "Are you okay? Really okay?"

"Yeah. I'm good. Better than good." Shane pulled Ilya close, wrapping his arms around him. "I'm free. We're free."

"We are." Ilya kissed him, slow and deep. "Thank you. For do that. For choose us."

"I'll always choose us," Shane promised. "Always."

They kissed again, and this time it turned heated. Shane's hands found the buttons of Ilya's shirt, fumbling with them, needing to feel skin. Ilya helped him, shrugging out of the shirt, then working on Shane's tie.

"Bed," Shane breathed between kisses. "Need you."

They stumbled to the bed, shedding clothes as they went. By the time they fell onto the mattress, they were both down to their boxers, hands roaming, mouths hungry.

"I love you," Ilya said, his voice rough with emotion and desire. "I love you so much, Shane."

"Show me," Shane said, pulling Ilya down for another kiss. "Show me how much."

FLASHBACK: Nine Months Post-Surgery

Shane stood in the physical therapy room, staring at the parallel bars with a mixture of determination and dread. It had been three months since Dr. Reeves had cleared him to start more intensive training, and he was making progress. Real progress. But some days were harder than others.

Today was a hard day.

His back ached, a deep, persistent pain that the medication barely touched. His left leg was being stubborn, not responding the way he wanted it to. And he was tired. So fucking tired of fighting his own body.

"You ready?" Rebecca, his physical therapist, asked.

"Yeah," Shane lied.

Ilya was there, sitting in his usual chair against the wall, watching. He came to every session, had been coming for months now, and Shane didn't know what he'd do without him.

"Let's start with some walking," Rebecca said. "Ten laps between the bars, then we'll move on to balance work."

Shane gripped the bars and started walking. His left leg dragged slightly, the nerve damage still affecting his gait. He focused on each step, on lifting his leg, on placing his foot correctly. It was exhausting, both physically and mentally.

By the fifth lap, he was sweating. By the eighth, his hands were shaking. By the tenth, he wanted to quit.

"Good," Rebecca said. "Now let's work on balance. I want you to stand on your left leg for thirty seconds."

Shane's left leg. His weak leg. The one that still didn't quite work right.

He tried. He really tried. But after fifteen seconds, his leg gave out and he had to grab the bars to keep from falling.

"It's okay," Rebecca said. "Try again."

He tried again. And again. And again. Each time, he couldn't make it past twenty seconds.

"I can't do this," Shane said finally, his voice tight with frustration. "I can't fucking do this."

"You can. You just need more practice."

"I've been practicing for months! It's not getting better!"

"Shane—"

"No!" Shane slammed his hand against the bar, the sound echoing in the room. "I'm done for today. I can't do this anymore."

He saw Rebecca exchange a look with Ilya, and something in him snapped.

"Don't look at him like that. Don't act like I'm some fragile thing that needs to be handled carefully. I'm not broken!"

"No one thinks you broken," Ilya said quietly, standing up.

"Yes, you do. You all do. You all look at me like I'm going to shatter at any moment."

"Shane, that not—"

"Just leave me alone!" Shane's voice cracked. "Both of you. Just leave me alone."

Rebecca nodded and quietly left the room. But Ilya didn't move.

"I said leave me alone."

"No," Ilya said simply.

"Ilya—"

"No. I not leave you. Not when you like this." Ilya crossed to him, his expression gentle but firm. "You frustrated. I understand. But you not get to push me away."

"I can't do this," Shane said, and he hated how his voice broke, hated the tears that were threatening to fall. "I can't do this, Ilya. I'm trying so hard and it's not enough. I'm not getting better fast enough."

"You are get better. You are walking. You are standing. Three months ago, you could not do either of those things without help."

"But I can't balance on my left leg. I can't—"

"Yet," Ilya interrupted. "You not do it yet. But you will. You just need more time."

"What if I don't have more time? What if this is as good as it gets?"

"Then we deal with it. But I do not believe that. And neither do you, not really." Ilya took Shane's hands, pulling them away from the bars. "Come here."

He pulled Shane into a hug, and Shane finally let himself break. He buried his face in Ilya's shoulder and cried—for everything he'd lost, for everything he was fighting to get back, for the fear that he'd never be the same again.

"I got you," Ilya murmured, his hand rubbing soothing circles on Shane's back. "I got you, моя любовь. You not alone in this."

"I'm sorry," Shane said when he finally got himself under control. "I'm sorry for yelling at you."

"I know. It's okay."

"It's not okay. You don't deserve that."

"Shane, look at me." Ilya pulled back, cupping Shane's face in his hands. "You go through something very hard. You allowed have bad days. You allowed be frustrated, angry, scared. Just don't push me away. Let me stay with you."

"I don't know how to do this," Shane admitted. "I don't know how to be patient. I don't know how to accept that my body doesn't work the way it used to."

"Then we figure it out together. But you have to trying. You have to keep fighting."

Shane nodded, exhausted but feeling a little lighter. "Okay. I'll keep fighting."

"Good." Ilya kissed his forehead. "Now, do you want to try the balance exercise one more time? I spot you."

Shane took a breath. "Yeah. Okay. One more time."

— — —

Later that night, back in their hotel room after the ceremony, Shane and Ilya lay tangled together in bed, both sated and exhausted. Shane's phone was on the nightstand, buzzing constantly with notifications, but he ignored it.

"You know your phone been going off for past hour, yes?" Ilya said, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on Shane's chest.

"Don't care."

"It probably important. Your agent, your team, the media—"

"Still don't care." Shane caught Ilya's hand, bringing it to his lips. "Right now, the only thing I care about is you."

Ilya smiled, soft and genuine. "You have to deal with it eventually. You just came out on national television. There going to be a lot of attention."

"I know. Tomorrow. We'll deal with it tomorrow." Shane pulled Ilya closer, pressing a kiss to his temple. "Tonight, I just want to be with you. Just us."

"Just us," Ilya agreed, settling more comfortably against Shane's side. "I still cannot believe you do that. I keep thinking I wake up and it was dream."

"It's real. I promise."

"You really not scared? Not even a little?"

Shane thought about it. "I was terrified. But I was more scared of losing you. Of you thinking I was ashamed of you, of us. You've waited so long for me to be ready, and I didn't want you to wait anymore."

"I would have wait," Ilya said softly. "I would have wait forever if that what you need."

"I know. But you shouldn't have to. You deserve better than that. You deserve to be loved openly, proudly. And I want to be the one to do that."

Ilya was quiet for a moment, and when Shane looked down, he saw tears in his eyes again.

"Hey," Shane said, concerned. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing wrong. I just—" Ilya's voice broke. "I just so happy. I never thought I have this. Someone who loves me enough to risk everything for me."

"You're worth the risk, babe. You're worth everything."

They kissed, slow and sweet, and Shane felt something settle in his chest. A sense of rightness, of finally being exactly where he was supposed to be.

"What do you think will happen?" Ilya asked when they broke apart. "With the league, with the media, with everything?"

"I don't know," Shane admitted. "There'll probably be some backlash. Some people won't be happy about it. But I think most people will be okay with it. The world's changing. And if they're not okay with it, fuck them."

Ilya laughed. "Very eloquent."

"I'm serious. I'm done caring what other people think. I'm done hiding. I'm done being afraid." Shane tightened his arms around Ilya. "I almost died, Ilya. I almost lost everything. And the only thing I regret is not doing this sooner. Not telling the world about you sooner."

"You doing it now. That what matters."

"Yeah." Shane pressed a kiss to Ilya's hair. "I'm doing it now."

They lay there in comfortable silence, listening to the sounds of the city outside their window. Shane's phone finally stopped buzzing, and the room fell quiet.

"Do you remember," Ilya said eventually, "When we first get together? You were so paranoid about anyone find out. You not even hold my hand in private sometimes."

Shane winced. "I was an idiot."

"You were scared. It different."

"I wasted so much time being scared."

"You not wasting time anymore." Ilya propped himself up on his elbow, looking down at Shane. "You the bravest person I know, Shane Hollander. What you do tonight—that take more courage than anything I ever see."

"I just told the truth."

"You tell the truth when easier to lie. When you know it make life more complicated. When you know there will be consequences. That is bravery."

Shane pulled Ilya down for another kiss. "I love you. So fucking much."

"I love you too." Ilya settled back against Shane's chest. "So what happen now?"

"Now? Now we sleep. Tomorrow we deal with the fallout. But tonight, we just enjoy this. Enjoy being us, out in the open."

"I like sound of that."

"Me too."

— — —

FLASHBACK: Four Years Ago, When They First Got Together

Shane pushed Ilya against the wall of the hotel room, kissing him desperately. They'd just won against Boston, and the adrenaline was still pumping through Shane's veins. Ilya kissed him back just as fiercely, his hands fisting in Shane's shirt.

"We shouldn't be doing this," Shane gasped between kisses. "If anyone finds out—"

"Then we let anyone find out," Ilya said, pulling Shane back in. "I do not care. I want you."

They'd been dancing around this for months—the tension, the attraction, the way they couldn't seem to stay away from each other even though they played for rival teams. Tonight, after the game, after too many drinks at the bar, Shane had finally given in.

*"This is crazy," Shane said, even as his hands found the hem of Ilya's shirt, pulling it up.
"This is so fucking crazy."*

"I know." Ilya's hands were working on Shane's belt. "Don't care."

They stumbled to the bed, shedding clothes as they went. Shane had been with men before, but never like this. Never with someone who made him feel like he was on fire, like he couldn't breathe without touching them.

"I want you," Ilya said, his voice rough. "I want you for so long."

"How long?"

"Since the first time we play against each other. You check me into the boards and I thought, 'I want to fuck him.'"

Shane laughed, surprised. "That was three years ago."

"I know. I'm patient." Ilya pulled Shane down for another kiss. "But I'm done being patient."

They came together in a tangle of limbs and heat, learning each other's bodies, finding what made the other gasp and moan. It was intense and overwhelming and perfect.

Afterward, lying in the dark, Shane felt panic start to creep in.

"We can't tell anyone about this," he said. "No one can know."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. "Okay."

"I'm serious, Ilya. If this gets out—"

"I said okay." Ilya rolled over to face him. "I understand. You not ready for people to know. I get it."

"Do you? Because you seem—"

"I'm fine with keeping it private for now," Ilya interrupted. "I cannot let Russia know. But Shane, one day I want more. I want hold your hand in public. Kiss you, not worry who watching. Tell people you mine."

"I know. I just—I need time."

"Then I give you time." Ilya reached out, taking Shane's hand in the darkness. "But I not wait forever."

"I know," Shane said quietly. "I'm sorry."

"Do not be sorry. Just promise me you think about it. About us. About what we could have if you not so scared."

"I promise."

They fell asleep like that, hands linked, and Shane tried not to think about how he was already falling in love with someone he couldn't have publicly.

— — —

The next morning, Shane woke to his phone ringing. He groaned, reaching for it without opening his eyes, and saw his agent's name on the screen.

"Hello?" he answered, his voice rough with sleep.

"Shane, we need to talk," his agent said, and he sounded stressed. "Have you seen the news?"

"No, I just woke up."

"You're everywhere. Every sports network, every news site, social media is exploding. The video of your speech has millions of views already."

Shane sat up, careful not to wake Ilya beside him. "And?"

"And... it's mostly positive. There's some negative reaction, of course, but the overwhelming response has been supportive. People are calling you brave, a trailblazer. The league released a statement supporting you. Your team released a statement. Even some of the more conservative players have come out in support."

Shane felt something loosen in his chest. "Really?"

"Really. There are a few assholes, of course, but they're being drowned out by the positive response. Shane, you might have just changed the game. Literally."

"I just wanted to tell the truth about Ilya."

"Well, you did. And people are responding to it. Your endorsement deals are probably going to be fine—some might even increase. The league is talking about making you a spokesperson for their diversity initiatives. This could be really good for your career."

"I don't care about my career," Shane said honestly. "I just care about Ilya."

His agent laughed. "I know. That came through loud and clear in your speech. Listen, we need to set up some interviews, get ahead of this. Can you and Ilya come to my office this afternoon?"

"I'll talk to him and let you know."

"Okay. And Shane? I'm proud of you. That took guts."

"Thanks."

Shane hung up and looked down at Ilya, who was still sleeping peacefully. He looked younger like this, softer, without the cocky facade he wore for the world. Shane's heart clenched with love.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to Ilya's forehead. Ilya stirred, his eyes fluttering open.

"Morning," Ilya mumbled, his voice rough with sleep.

"Morning, babe."

"What time is it?"

"Early. But my agent called. We're all over the news."

That woke Ilya up. He sat up quickly, his hair sticking up in all directions. "And?"

"And it's mostly positive. People are being supportive."

Ilya stared at him for a moment, then a slow smile spread across his face. "Really?"

"Really."

"Shane—" Ilya's voice broke, and he pulled Shane into a fierce hug. "I can not believe is real. I can not believe we no have to hide anymore."

"We don't," Shane said, holding him tight. "No more hiding. No more pretending. Just us."

"Just us," Ilya repeated, and Shane could hear the smile in his voice.

They stayed like that for a long moment, just holding each other, letting the reality of it sink in. Then Ilya pulled back, his eyes bright.

"So what now?"

"Now we get up, face the world, and show them that we're not going anywhere." Shane kissed him, soft and sweet. "Together."

"Together," Ilya agreed.

— — —

Three days later, Shane and Ilya did their first joint interview. They sat on a couch in a studio, their hands linked between them, facing a sympathetic interviewer who asked gentle questions about their relationship, about Shane's injury and recovery, about what it meant to be out in professional hockey.

"I know this is a big step," the interviewer said. "Coming out publicly, especially in a sport that hasn't always been welcoming to LGBTQ+ athletes. What made you decide to do it now?"

Shane looked at Ilya, then back at the interviewer. "I almost died. I almost lost everything—my career, my ability to walk, everything. And when I was lying in that hospital bed, the only thing I could think about was Ilya. About how much time I'd wasted being scared, being ashamed of something I should have been proud of."

He squeezed Ilya's hand.

"Ilya stood by me through the worst time of my life. He put his own career on hold to take care of me. He was patient with me even when I was being impossible. And I realized that I didn't want to hide him anymore. I didn't want to hide us. He deserved better than that. We deserved better than that."

"Ilya, what was it like for you, hearing Shane come out during his speech? Did you know he was going to do it?"

Ilya shook his head, a small smile on his face. "No, I have no idea. He completely surprise me. I think he just going to give normal acceptance speech."

"What was going through your mind when he started talking about you?"

"Honestly? Shock. Not believe. And then... very strong love." Ilya's voice was soft. "Shane and I talk about being public years ago, when we first together. I want it, but he not ready. And I understand that. I willing wait as long as he need. But I never expect him do it like that, in front of everyone, so public."

"Were you scared?"

"Terrified," Ilya admitted. "For both of us, I know how cruel people can be. I worry how it affect his career, his life. But also... I so proud of him. So very proud."

The interviewer turned back to Shane. "You mentioned in your speech that you had a spinal cord injury. Can you talk about that? About what the recovery process was like?"

Shane took a breath. "It was the hardest thing I've ever been through. I had emergency surgery after a hit during a game, and then another surgery six months later to try to repair the damage. For a while, I couldn't walk. I had to relearn everything—how to stand, how to walk, how to skate. It was terrifying and frustrating and there were days I wanted to give up."

"But you didn't."

"No. Because Ilya wouldn't let me." Shane looked at Ilya, his eyes soft. "He was there for every doctor's appointment, every physical therapy session. He pushed me when I needed to be pushed and held me when I needed to be held. He believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself. I wouldn't be here without him."

"That's beautiful," the interviewer said, and Shane could see she was getting emotional. "What do you want people to know about your relationship?"

"That it's real," Shane said simply. "That we love each other. That we're not going anywhere. And that we're not ashamed of who we are."

"We just two people who love each other," Ilya added. "Who happen to play professional hockey. That's it."

The interview continued for another twenty minutes, covering everything from how they met to their plans for the future. By the end, Shane felt lighter than he had in years.

As they left the studio, Ilya took his hand, right there in public where anyone could see. Shane looked down at their linked hands, then up at Ilya's face.

"This is real," he said, wonder in his voice. "This is really happening."

"It is," Ilya said, smiling. "We're free, Shane. Finally free."

Shane pulled him close and kissed him, right there on the street, not caring who saw. When they broke apart, both smiling, Shane felt like he could breathe properly for the first time in years.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you too," Ilya replied. "Now come. Let go home."

Home. Together. Out in the open.

It was everything Shane had been too scared to dream of, and now it was real.

As they walked down the street, hands linked, Shane thought about everything they'd been through—the injury, the recovery, the fear, the hiding. All of it had led to this moment, to this freedom.

And he wouldn't change a thing.

Because it had brought him here, to Ilya, to this life they were building together. A life without secrets, without shame, without fear.

Just love.

And that was more than enough.

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