

The Quiet Fight

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The Quiet Fight

by [thehdub](#)

Summary

After the longest season of his career, Ilya retreats to the cottage with Shane, expecting rest, recovery, and a month of stolen peace. Instead, exhaustion lingers. Small things feel wrong. And the body that has always carried him through pain begins to falter in ways he can't explain.

As concern grows and outside eyes begin to notice, the life Ilya and Shane have carefully built—careers, borders, futures—starts to feel fragile. When a medical crisis shatters their summer before answers arrive, love is no longer something they protect quietly. It becomes something they fight with.

A story about what happens when the body speaks before you're ready to listen, and the people who refuse to let you face it alone.

Notes

***Update... again. I finally made a dedicated Threads account. Find me over there @thehd_ub if you want to connect away from A03 too. :)

**Update: The outpouring of love and comments has been outstanding. I hope that all of your favorite writers are feeling the love too! I have absolutely adored seeing everybody's favorite lines and all of your questions. Please feel free to keep it going! There is nothing better than engaging with you all in the comments as you read through the chapters! THANK YOU!

I just want to take a moment to thank you all for taking the time to read these works. With all of the AI discourse and negativity online this week, I find myself holding a deeper appreciation for the writers who spend their free time creating art for us to consume. It is a true labor of love.

A reoccurring theme in my works is the value of time and who we choose to spend it with. The fact that you choose to spend even a small piece of yours here, with me, is not something I take lightly. Your comments and kudos matter. They are what keep us going. If you're someone who reads quietly, I'd gently encourage you to consider changing that (not just here). This space has been filled with accusations and negativity, and the only way that we can fight is with real, positive human connection. At the end of the day, we are extraordinarily lucky to have landed in this fandom. The opportunity to meet, even briefly, in the middle of shared stories and shared feeling should be what this is all about.

Chapter 1

SHANE

Shane had been at the cottage less than twenty-four hours, but the place already felt awake again. Windows open, beds aired out, the dock swept clear of pine needles and last year's debris. He moved through the rooms letting muscle memory guide him, keys dropped into the same chipped bowl by the door, coffee set up the way Ilya liked it without thinking. It felt good to be here early, to let the place settle before Ilya arrived. Last year they had come here together for the first time, and since then they have shared a year of memories, love, and growth. Ilya just finished what was likely to be his last season with the Boston Raiders, a decades long journey which led him to free agency and a shot at being closer to Shane this fall. Something felt different this summer, like it was the summer that they had been waiting for since their first meeting years ago.

The sound of tires on gravel pulled him to the window.

The rental car wasn't one he recognized. It probably pained Ilya to rent a car this boring, but he would have made a conscious effort to not choose anything flashy in the name of anonymity. It was silver, compact, already dusted from the drive, and when it slowed at the edge of the clearing, Shane felt relieved. He didn't wait for the engine to cut before stepping outside, sun warm on his shoulders, heart already running ahead of him. The year before, he had picked Ilya up and from the moment he got in the SUV there was still an element of fear, and a need to hide. A year ago, Ilya having access to a potential getaway car would have scared Shane. This year, it made him happy to know that Ilya was more comfortable with the area and that he craved some independence in a space that once felt like it was for Shane alone.

Ilya got out carefully.

Not stiff or dramatic. Just controlled, deliberate in the way athletes learned to be when their bodies were catalogues of pain they didn't want to be seen. Sunglasses hid his eyes, but his smile was immediate, and entirely for Shane. He shut the door with his hip, adjusted the hoodie slung over one shoulder, and for a moment just stood there, taking in the cottage, the trees, the lake flashing blue beyond it.

Then Shane was there, hands on him, pulling him in.

The hug was solid and full-bodied, pressed ribcage to ribcage, hands splayed wide like Shane was checking that Ilya was really here. Ilya let out a quiet sound against Shane's neck and melted into him without hesitation.

"You made it," Shane said, voice low, nose buried in Ilya's hair.

"Barely," Ilya replied. "Airport traffic was terrible."

Shane laughed softly and pulled back just enough to look at him, thumbs brushing the shadows under Ilya's eyes, the faint hollowing that hadn't been there the last time they were together. Nothing alarming. Nothing wrong. Just the signs of a season that had gone all the way to the end.

"You okay?" Shane asked, casual, careful.

Ilya tipped his head, smile crooked. "I played hockey until mid-June, again... and lost."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I've got."

They kissed then and Shane felt it all the way through him, the way months of holding himself tight finally loosened. When they broke apart, Shane's hands stayed at Ilya's waist, thumbs pressing lightly as if memorizing the shape again.

"You drove straight from the airport?" Shane asked as they turned toward the cottage.

"Picked up the car, grabbed the worst coffee I've ever had, drove," Ilya said. "Didn't want to stop. Figured I'd already lost enough time this year."

Something in Shane's chest softened painfully at that. He grabbed Ilya's bags, and this time he was tired enough not to argue.

Inside, the cottage was cool and familiar, wood and lake air and the faint trace of smoke embedded in the walls from summers past. Ilya paused just inside the door, scanning the space like he was reacquainting himself with an old version of himself too.

"You opened it up already," he said.

"Yesterday," Shane replied. "I wanted to have it ready for you."

Ilya nodded, shifting his weight, rolling one shoulder subtly as if it had caught on something invisible. Shane noticed. He always noticed. He didn't comment.

Bags were abandoned where they landed. Shane took Ilya's hoodie without being asked and hung it up, the domestic familiarity slipping back into place with ease. He watched the way Ilya moved. The slight caution when he bent, the careful way he eased himself onto the couch. Shane told himself it made sense. Seven games in the last round. The Final. The kind of wear that sank deep into joints and bone. The road was longer and harder this year, and it showed on his body.

"You hungry?" Shane asked.

Ilya hesitated just long enough to register. "Maybe later."

Shane nodded, filed it away, told himself not to read into it. Travel killed appetite. So did exhaustion. So did pain that lived a little too close to the surface.

“Come lie down.” Shane said instead.

“Bossy,” Ilya murmured, smiling.

They didn’t rush to the bedroom. There was no need. Shane helped Ilya out of his shoes, which he didn’t bother fighting, fingers brushing ankles still faintly sticky and marked from weeks of being taped, and when he pressed a kiss to Ilya’s knee — right where swelling had bloomed after game six — Ilya’s breath hitched despite himself.

“Still sore,” Shane said quietly, not a question.

Ilya exhaled. “Everywhere.”

The injuries weren’t dramatic. Just deep bruising that lived under the skin, ribs that ached when he breathed too deep, a hip that complained when he twisted, a spine that felt compressed, like it needed to be stretched back into alignment. The kind of pain you learned to live around.

Shane’s hands were warm and steady as they traced familiar lines, easing tension where they could, never pushing. For the first time in months, Ilya let himself go slack beneath that touch, muscles giving way, breath evening out as the noise finally dropped away.

“I know you’re tired,” Shane murmured, forehead resting against his. “You don’t have to pretend here.”

“I know,” Ilya said.

The days settled into something gentle after that. Mornings on the dock with coffee and quiet teasing. Shane stretching carefully through rehab exercises for his own healing injuries, while Ilya sat with his feet in the water, rubbing absently at his knee, rolling his shoulders like he was checking inventory. Afternoons swimming, the cold water biting just enough to be soothing, the lake carrying Ilya’s weight in a way nothing else did. Evenings cooking together, Shane under-seasoning as always, Ilya stealing bites and pretending not to notice when his appetite faded faster than usual.

“You’re going to waste away,” Shane joked one night, reaching across the counter to steal food from Ilya’s plate.

“Hey,” Ilya protested weakly. “I was saving that.”

“You weren’t eating it.”

“I was attached to it.”

Shane smiled, but his eyes lingered longer than the joke required.

When Ilya fell asleep early again later that night, head heavy on Shane’s chest, Shane lay awake listening to the cottage settle around them, the soft creak of wood, the steady rise and fall of Ilya’s breathing. He told himself it was normal. A season like that left marks. Game seven demanded payment.

They had a month.

Plenty of time to rest.

Plenty of time to heal.

Chapter 2

ILYA

By the time Ilya became truly aware of the calendar again, two weeks of the month were already gone.

The realization didn't come with panic or regret, just a quiet surprise. He woke one morning to sunlight already high on the wall, Shane still asleep beside him, and understood suddenly that they were halfway through the time they had carved out for themselves. Half a month, already lived. Not spent. Lived. That distinction mattered more than he would have expected.

At the start, he'd been braced for it to feel stolen.

That was how time together usually felt during the season, small moments and late nights squeezed between flights. Even before arriving at the cottage, Ilya had assumed this month would feel fragile, like something that could be taken away if they weren't careful.

Instead, it felt... solid.

They had slipped into a life together without meaning to. Not a vacation version of themselves, not something temporary or heightened, but a quiet, ordinary rhythm that somehow carried more weight than all the dramatic moments that had come before it. Mornings with coffee on the dock. Afternoons drifting in and out of rest. Evenings that didn't need planning. Shane moving through the space like he belonged there, like he belonged with Ilya, without effort or performance.

That was what surprised him most.

It didn't feel like borrowed time anymore.

It felt like a foundation.

The fatigue was still there, of course. Ilya noticed it most when he stopped moving. When he sat too long and had to convince his body to stand. When he woke from long naps and felt heavy instead of restored, like sleep had sunk into him rather than lifted him out. The soreness from the playoffs lingered — ribs that still complained when he breathed too deeply, a hip that needed coaxing before it loosened, shoulders that felt permanently tight no matter how often he rolled them.

Game seven had taken something out of him. That wasn't new. That wasn't alarming. He had always known there would be a crash after the adrenaline wore off.

Shane noticed anyway.

He noticed everything.

Ilya caught him watching more than once — not staring, not hovering exactly, just tracking. The way Shane's hand lifted automatically if Ilya shifted too fast. The way he paused when Ilya stayed seated a beat too long, eyes flicking up in quiet question. It wasn't fear. It was steady and impossible to resent.

"I'm okay," Ilya said more than once, smiling to soften it.

Shane always nodded, but his hand stayed warm and grounding at Ilya's back.

The conversation about Shane leaving came back around slowly, the way all real things did here. Not as an interruption, but as part of the shape of their life.

They were making dinner when Shane brought it up again, the windows open to the lake, the air warm and heavy with early summer. Shane was stirring something that didn't need stirring, posture slightly tense in a way Ilya had learned to recognize.

"So," Shane said, casual but careful, "about Chicago."

Ilya didn't look up right away. "Thursday."

"Yeah."

Ilya nodded. "I know."

There was a pause, filled only by the sound of the spoon scraping the pot.

"It would've felt different a year ago," Shane said finally. "Leaving like this."

Ilya glanced up then. "How?"

"Like we were being robbed," Shane said. "Like time was something we had to guard."

Ilya considered that. He thought about the way he would have felt even a few months ago — the way separation had always felt like loss, like an absence that needed justification.

"And now?" he asked.

Shane met his eyes. "Now it just feels like... part of our life."

The words settled deep, quiet and steady.

Ilya felt something loosen in his chest at that. "Yeah," he said softly. "It does."

That was the difference. Shane leaving didn't feel like something being taken from them anymore. It felt like movement within something stable. Temporary, expected, survivable. They weren't clinging to time anymore. They were trusting it.

"I still hate the timing," Shane added. "But it's just a few days. And it matters."

Ilya nodded. He understood that part too. The event wasn't frivolous. It was sponsor obligations, appearances tied to brands and future contracts, the kind of visibility that kept careers intact even when bodies faltered.

"You're allowed to go," Ilya said gently. "I'm okay."

Shane smiled, but there was relief in it. "My parents are close," he said, like he needed to say it out loud again. "Fifteen minutes. They know you don't have to be polite about it."

"I know," Ilya said, smiling faintly. "Your mom would show up with three casseroles if I sneezed wrong."

"Exactly."

That safety net mattered more than Ilya wanted to admit. The Hollanders weren't just nearby, they were family. After Shane had come out the season before, tense and braced for something that never came, they had simply adjusted their lives to include Ilya. No grand declarations. Just consistency. Dinners. Check-ins. The quiet kind of love that didn't ask to be acknowledged.

"They're coming over tomorrow," Shane added. "Supper."

Ilya nodded. "Good."

The visit was easy in the way real family visits were. Shane's mom arrived with food despite being told not to, kissing Ilya's cheek and immediately asking if he'd been eating properly. His dad asked about the finals, about recovery, about whether the knee was behaving itself, listening carefully to answers that Ilya had given a dozen times already.

"You look tired, Ilya" Shane's mom said gently at one point.

Ilya smiled automatically. "Long year."

She accepted it, but her eyes lingered — not worried, not yet, just observant.

Dinner stretched long and comfortable. Conversation flowed easily. Ilya laughed when expected, added stories when prompted, stayed present even as his body tugged inward with a heaviness he couldn't quite explain. When they left, promising to check in while Shane was away, the cottage felt quieter but not empty.

Shane left early Thursday morning.

Ilya stood on the porch in socks and Shane's hoodie, arms folded loosely, watching the SUV disappear down the gravel road. He told himself the hollow feeling in his chest was normal. Missing someone didn't mean something was wrong.

The first day alone passed in a haze of rest. Sleep came easily, but it didn't refresh him the way it should have. He floated in the lake until the cold chased him out, dozed on the couch with a book open on his chest, ignored the brief dizziness that flared when he stood too quickly.

That evening, his phone buzzed.

Yuna: We're back in town. Do you want us to come visit?

The message surprised him with how relieved it made him feel.

That would be really nice, he replied.

Yuna didn't knock when she arrived. She never did anymore. The door opened quietly, familiar, and the sound pulled Ilya out of the shallow half-awareness he'd been drifting in on the couch. He sat up slowly, the movement costing more than it should have, and by the time he was upright she was already inside, bags in hand, David just behind her.

"Hey," she said softly, taking him in at a glance. "We brought supper. Did we wake you?"

Ilya smiled, tired but genuine. "You didn't have to. And no, I was just resting my eyes."

David shut the door behind them. "Shane's gone. That means we absolutely did." He said, ignoring Ilya's lie.

Ilya stood, steadying himself on the arm of the couch before moving toward the kitchen. He was aware of them watching, not obviously, not unkindly, just attentive in that quiet way that meant they were noticing things without announcing it.

They settled in easily. Containers opened. Plates set. Yuna handed him a portion smaller than she might have a month ago, and Ilya noticed without comment. The cottage felt warmer with other people in it, the silence less oppressive than it had been since Shane left.

They talked around things at first. About how strange it felt to have the season truly over. About Shane's schedule, how ridiculous it was that obligations never stopped even when bodies clearly needed them to. About nothing, really. It was the kind of conversation that existed mostly to keep everyone present in the same room.

David watched him while he ate, eyes flicking up and away, respectful but observant. Ilya was aware of the effort it took to finish even half the plate, of how quickly his appetite faded despite knowing he should eat.

"You don't have to push," Yuna said gently, noticing anyway.

"I know," Ilya replied. "I just... want to."

David leaned back in his chair. "How are you actually feeling?"

Ilya hesitated, fingers tracing the edge of the table. "Slower," he said finally.

Yuna tilted her head. "Physically or...?"

"Both," he admitted. "Like everything takes an extra second to catch up."

David nodded once. "That's new."

“It’s not dramatic,” Ilya added quickly. “I’m not sick.”

No one argued with him. That, more than anything, unsettled him.

Yuna reached across the table and covered his hand with hers. “We’re not diagnosing you, honey. We’re just... noticing. We want you to feel good.”

“I don’t want Shane to worry,” Ilya said, the words slipping out before he could stop them. He wasn’t admitting anything by saying it, but it was far from a denial.

David’s expression softened. “That’s not something you can control.”

The truth of it sat heavy in the space between them.

They stayed longer than they might have otherwise, not crowding him, not hovering, just being there. When they finally stood to leave, Yuna hugged him tightly, arms warm and steady. Ilya almost sunk into it.

“Text us tomorrow,” she said. “Even if it’s just to say you’re awake.”

“I will,” Ilya promised.

After they left, the cottage felt quieter again, but not empty. Something had shifted.

Sleep didn’t come easily that night. When it did, it was shallow and restless. He missed Shane’s morning call entirely, not out of avoidance, but because he simply didn’t hear it.

When he woke, the light was wrong. Too bright. Too late. His phone showed missed notifications, guilt flaring sharp and immediate. He sat up too quickly and had to pause, hand braced against the mattress, waiting for the room to stop tilting.

He called Shane back as soon as he could steady himself.

“Hey,” Shane said immediately. Relief threaded through the word. “There you are.”

“Sorry,” Ilya said, voice rough with sleep. “I didn’t mean to sleep through it.”

“It’s okay,” Shane replied, too fast. “How do you feel?”

Ilya stared at the wall, searching for language that didn’t feel like a lie. “Heavy,” he said finally. “Like my body forgot how to do its job.”

There was a pause. “That doesn’t sound great.”

“It doesn’t sound terrible either,” Ilya said. “Just... off.”

“If you need anything—”

“I know,” Ilya interrupted gently. “Your parents. Yuna. David. I know.”

“I just wish I was there.”

“I know,” Ilya said again, softer. And he did.

After the call, he sat on the edge of the bed for a long time without moving. The thought surfaced again, more persistent now: This didn’t start after the finals. It had been easier to blame the season, the grind, the cumulative wear. Sitting still, alone, without distraction, he couldn’t ignore the sense that something had been building quietly underneath it all.

He didn’t say it out loud.

He wasn’t ready to.

Shane got David’s text later that afternoon, between obligations, phone buzzing in his hand.

Hey. I don’t want to freak you out, but he didn’t seem like himself last night. Just wanted you to know.

Shane read it twice.

When he came back two days later, the relief hit Ilya like a physical thing. He opened the door already leaning forward, already smiling, the simple fact of Shane’s presence cutting through the fog more effectively than rest ever had.

Shane dropped his bag and crossed the room in two strides, hands warm and steady on Ilya’s arms. Shane could feel the weight of Ilya and feel the change in his breathing as he hugged him, like he was about to come apart.

“Hey,” Shane said quietly. “Talk to me.” thinking that this was maybe just a reaction from being apart during their cherished time together.

Ilya hesitated — not because he didn’t know what to say, but because saying it would make it real.

“I don’t think this is just the season,” he said.

Shane didn’t interrupt. Didn’t rush him. He just pulled Ilya closer, forehead resting against his. “Okay, do you think you might be depressed? Sick?” he said. Ilya didn’t have an answer. He just pulled back, looked at the man that he loved, and tucked his head back into the crook of Shane’s shoulder.

“It’s okay,” Shane said. “We will figure out what is going on, together.”

Chapter 3

SHANE

Shane didn't ask the question right away.

That was the thing about it, he knew better than to come at it head-on, to demand answers before Ilya was ready to give them. He had learned, over years of loving him, that Ilya needed space to arrive at truth on his own terms. Pushing too hard too fast only made him retreat inward, burying discomfort under humour or minimization.

So Shane unpacked first. Let himself settle back into the cottage, into the familiar domestic quiet of them together. He cooked dinner while Ilya sat at the table, posture a little slumped, fingers idly tracing the grain of the wood. They talked about the drive, about nothing important. Shane watched the way Ilya moved, the way he stood more slowly than he used to, the way his breath seemed shallow even when he was at rest.

The unease that had followed Shane home didn't dissipate the way it usually did.

After they ate, after Ilya pushed his plate away having barely touched it, Shane finally sat across from him and folded his hands together.

"Okay," he said quietly. "We need to talk."

Ilya stiffened almost imperceptibly, then relaxed again, as if reminding himself that this wasn't an interrogation. "Okay."

Shane took a breath. "My dad texted me while I was gone."

Ilya's eyes flicked up. Just a flicker. "Yeah?"

"He asked if you were alright."

Silence stretched between them, thick and loaded.

"And?" Ilya asked.

"And I told him what I've been telling everyone," Shane said. "That you're tired. That the season was brutal. That you're resting."

Another pause.

"And is that true?" Shane asked gently.

Ilya leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms—not defensively, exactly, but protectively. "It's not... untrue."

Shane nodded. "Okay. But it's not the whole truth either."

Ilya didn't answer right away. His gaze dropped to the table, fingers worrying at a knot in the wood. When he finally spoke, his voice was quieter than before. Almost child like.

"How long has your dad known me?" he asked instead.

Shane blinked, thrown. "What?"

"How long," Ilya repeated, "has he known me well enough to notice something's wrong?". Ilya was getting defensive, putting his walls right back up.

Shane's chest tightened. "Long enough," he said honestly. "You know that my parents love you like family, so don't do that."

Ilya exhaled slowly, like something inside him was giving way. "I didn't want this conversation to start like this."

"Start like what?"

"Like a problem," Ilya said. "Like something we have to fix."... the walls were back down.

Shane leaned forward, forearms resting on the table. "Ilya. I'm not asking because you're a problem. I'm asking because I love you. This isn't a fight."

Ilya was quiet for a long time. Long enough that Shane felt the familiar urge to fill the space, to reassure, to soften. He resisted it. Let the silence do its work.

"It's been... a while," Ilya said finally.

Shane's heart kicked. "Define 'a while.'"

Ilya swallowed. "I don't know? January. Maybe earlier?"

January.

The word hit Shane harder than anything else had so far. "That's not the playoffs, Ilya" he said carefully. "That's not game seven."

"I know."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Ilya huffed a humorless laugh. "Because at first it felt normal. Everyone's tired in January. Everyone's sore. Everyone hates the grind."

"And then?"

"And then it didn't go away," Ilya said. "It got... quieter. Heavier. Like my body was always a step behind me."

Shane felt a cold thread of fear slide down his spine. "What does that mean?"

Ilya rubbed a hand over his face, dragging it down slowly. “I started sleeping more. Like, needing. Not wanting. I’d wake up already exhausted. Practices felt harder. Recovery didn’t work the way it used to.”

“Why didn’t you tell the trainers?”

“I did,” Ilya said. “Sort of. I said I was fatigued. They adjusted loads. Ice baths. Nutrition. Sleep tracking. All of it.”

“And?”

“And nothing changed.”

Shane’s jaw tightened. “What else?”

Ilya hesitated. “I get dizzy sometimes. Not spinning, just... light... light headed? Like I might tip sideways if I’m not careful. My heart races for no reason. I bruise more easily. I get these headaches that don’t feel like concussions—just pressure. And I’m cold. All the time.”

Shane felt sick.

“You thought it might be depression?” Shane said quietly, remembering the way Ilya had danced around the word earlier.

“I hoped it was,” Ilya admitted. “Because that would make sense. And I’ve been there before.”

“And does it feel like that?”

Ilya shook his head slowly. “No. Depression is... heavy in the head. This is heavy in my body. I don’t feel hopeless. I feel...”, he thought for a moment, digging for the right word. “Not good.” he said as he lowered his head.

Shane closed his eyes for a brief second, grounding himself. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to scare you,” Ilya said immediately. “And I didn’t want it to touch free agency.”

There it was.

Shane opened his eyes again. “Talk to me about that.”

Ilya’s shoulders slumped. “I’m finally where I want to be. I’m talking to Ottawa. I can be closer to you. We planned this. And if something medical shows up now, something serious, teams don’t wait. They move on.”

“And if you don’t sign?”

Ilya’s voice dropped. “Then I don’t have a team. And if I don’t have a team, I don’t have a visa. And if I don’t have a visa...”

Shane finished it quietly. "You could be deported."

"Yes."

The word sat between them like a weight neither of them could lift alone.

"I don't want my body to decide my future," Ilya said. "Not like that."

Shane stood abruptly and crossed the space between them, kneeling in front of Ilya so they were eye level. He took Ilya's hands, grounding, solid.

"You are not making this decision alone," Shane said firmly. "Not anymore."

Ilya's eyes shone, frustration and fear bleeding through the composure he'd been holding together for months. "I don't know how to do this," he admitted. "I've spent my whole life being told where to be, what to do, how to perform. I don't know how to suddenly be in charge of my own health."

Shane swallowed hard. "Neither do I," he said honestly. Shane sat in silence for a moment, thoughts racing, thinking of what he was supposed to do next. He, like his mother, was a planner. He needed a plan to feel safe and secure, and he didn't feel that in this moment. His face must have said what his mouth wasn't able to.

Ilya looked at him warily. "What?"

"I want to bring my parents into this conversation," Shane said. "With your permission, of course. Not to take over. Just to help us think. Because we've both spent our lives following instructions, not making medical decisions from scratch... or any decisions, really."

Ilya was quiet for a long moment.

Then he nodded. "Okay."

Shane exhaled, relief washing through him. "And mom," he added. "She's already in problem-solving mode. She's good at this."

Ilya gave a weak smile. "She always is."

"Good," Shane said, squeezing his hands. "Because we're not going to guess. We're going to get answers."

Ilya stood and moved to Shane, leaning forward, resting his forehead against Shane's shoulder, the tension finally cracking.

"Promise me," he said quietly, "that this doesn't cost me everything."

Shane wrapped his arms around him, holding him tight. "I promise we'll fight for you first. Everything else comes second."

Yuna didn't ease into it.

She waited until everyone was seated, David on the arm of the couch, Ilya at the table with his hands wrapped around a mug he wasn't drinking, Shane pulled up short beside him like he was afraid to move too far away — and then she took a breath and began.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m going to ask a lot of questions.”

Ilya nodded once. “Okay.”

Shane stayed quiet.

Yuna leaned forward slightly, elbows on her knees. “We don’t need the hockey version,” she said gently. “We need the human one. When did you first notice something wasn’t right?”

Ilya stared into his mug for a second, like he was lining events up in his head. “Not one moment,” he said. “More like...accumulation?” he said, uncertain if he had used the word correctly, but it was a word trainers liked.

“Start anywhere,” Yuna said.

“January,” Ilya said. “I stopped bouncing back. Recovery stopped working the way it always had. I’d sleep and wake up feeling like I hadn’t.”

Shane felt his throat tighten. January was when Shane had assumed the grind was just getting to him. When he’d told himself it would ease after the All-Star break. After playoffs. After summer.

“And after that?” Yuna asked.

“I got slower,” Ilya said. “Not skating-wise. I could still push when I had to. But everything else. Getting up. Thinking clearly. I’d forget things I’d just been told.”

David shifted slightly, attention sharpening. “That’s not normal for you?”. An unintentional dig that lightened the room for just a moment, enough for Ilya’s lips to curl subtly. He loved this family.

“No,” Ilya said. “It isn’t.”, bringing the energy right back down.

Shane stared at the floor, jaw tight. He had seen it. Missed details. Questions repeated. He’d brushed it off because Ilya always did too.

“Any pain?” Yuna asked.

“Nothing sharp,” Ilya said. “More like pressure. Headaches. Chest tight sometimes. My heart racing when I’m not anxious.”

Shane’s hands curled into fists at his sides.

Yuna nodded, fingers moving as she typed. “Fevers? Night sweats?”

Ilya hesitated. “Sometimes. I wake up soaked. I thought it was stress.”

“Weight changes?” David asked quietly.

“Lost some,” Ilya admitted. “Enough that my clothes sit differently.”

Shane’s chest felt hollow. He thought of how often he’d teased Ilya about needing new jeans. About looking “leaner.” The words turned sour in retrospect.

“And bruising?” Yuna asked.

“Yes,” Ilya said immediately. “That one bothered me. I’d find them without remembering getting hit.”

The room went still.

Shane felt like something inside him was breaking open, not loudly, not dramatically, but the way ice fractures beneath weight it can’t hold anymore. What were his parents getting at? He realized in this moment that if they had both noticed that night at supper, it is very likely that they went home to google potential causes. They were one step ahead, and the questions they were asking suddenly went from just questions, to what felt like a medical interrogation.

Yuna looked up from her phone. “Thank you for telling us this,” she said simply. “It’s important.”

Ilya nodded, shoulders slumping slightly now that he wasn’t holding everything together alone. “I didn’t want to say it all out loud.”

“I know,” she said. “That’s why we’re doing it together.”

David leaned forward, forearms resting on his knees. “You didn’t tell anyone because you were trying to protect your future.”

Ilya didn’t deny it. “Free agency is... fragile? Teams don’t wait. And I can’t afford to look risky.”

Shane closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them again, he looked at Ilya fully, not the athlete, not the partner who always powered through, but the man who had been quietly terrified of losing everything he’d built.

“And immigration,” David continued, careful but direct.

“Yes,” Ilya said. “If I don’t sign, I don’t have a team. If I don’t have a team, I don’t have a visa. And then everything becomes unstable... My career, my safety, my future..”

“With me,” Shane said quietly, unable to stop himself.

Ilya looked at him, something raw flickering across his face. “With you.”

That was the moment Shane felt it fully. The depth of what Ilya had been carrying alone. Not just fear of illness, but fear of displacement. Of being untethered. Of losing the life they'd planned.

Yuna straightened, decisiveness settling into her posture. "Okay. Here's what we're not doing."

Everyone looked at her.

"We're not guessing," she said. "We're not catastrophizing. And we're not letting timelines be dictated by fear." She had lost Ilya with that word, but he got the just of what she was saying.

She turned the phone so they could all see the notes she'd been building. "I'm booking appointments. Primary care. Bloodwork. Referrals. I'll send this summary ahead so he doesn't have to explain it from scratch again."

Shane swallowed hard. Gratitude surged so suddenly it almost knocked him over.

"I don't want this on record with teams yet," Ilya said quickly.

"And it won't be," Yuna replied without missing a beat. "Medical confidentiality exists for a reason. We're not jumping to disclosures."

David nodded. "We gather information first."

Ilya's shoulders loosened slightly, the tension easing just enough to breathe.

Shane finally spoke. "Can I ask something?"

Everyone turned to him.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" he asked, voice steady but strained. "Not because I'm mad. Because I want to understand."

Ilya met his eyes. "Because you were already hurt. And because you'd just watched me go through the longest season of my life. I didn't want to add one more thing you couldn't fix."

Shane felt his heart crack cleanly in two.

"You don't protect me by keeping this to yourself," he said quietly.

"I know," Ilya said. "I know that now."

The room fell quiet again, but this time it wasn't heavy. It was purposeful. The kind of quiet that followed decisions.

Yuna stood. "I'll stay on top of the logistics," she said. "You two just... stay together tonight."

David clapped Shane's shoulder once before following her out. "We will figure this out," he said. To both of them.

When the door closed, Shane finally let himself sit.

He pulled Ilya toward him without ceremony, arms wrapping around him like something essential had to be anchored before it drifted away.

"I'm so sorry you did this by yourself," Shane murmured.

Ilya leaned into him, tired but present. "I don't have to anymore."

Shane pressed his forehead to Ilya's temple, breathing him in, grounding himself in the simple fact that he was here.

They didn't have answers yet.

But for the first time, they had direction.

Chapter 4

ILYA

By the time everyone sat down, Ilya already felt behind. Like the world had picked up speed without telling him. Shane's parents were there, Yuna and David too, the kitchen full in a way that should have felt comforting and instead made his chest feel tight. Too many eyes. Too many people who loved him enough to notice things he hadn't been able to explain yet.

He hadn't expected it to happen this fast.

One moment it had been just him and Shane, the truth cracked open between them in the quiet. The next, it felt like a small committee had formed around his body, his future, his ability to stay where his life existed. Everyone spoke gently. No one panicked. That almost made it worse.

Yuna took charge without asking, which was a relief and also terrifying.

"Before we talk doctors," she said, sitting forward, laptop already open, "we need to talk about visibility."

Ilya nodded, even though his brain lagged half a beat behind the words. Visibility. Press. Teams.

"This is a small hockey world," Yuna continued. "And people will notice patterns. Appointments. Travel. You being seen together more than usual."

Ilya's first instinct was to minimize. To say it didn't matter. To say he could handle it. But before he could form the words, Shane spoke.

"I don't care."

The simplicity of it stunned him.

Shane didn't raise his voice. He didn't posture. He just said it, like a fact that had finally settled into place.

"I care about Ilya," Shane continued. "Everything else is negotiable."

Ilya turned to him sharply. "Shane—"

But Shane didn't back down. His expression was calm in a way that made Ilya's chest ache.

For years, Ilya had lived by careful calculations, how much truth to give, when to protect a team, when to protect himself. Hearing someone else discard all of that without

hesitation felt new.

Yuna watched them for a moment, then nodded. “Okay. Then we plan around that.”

David leaned against the counter. “Irina Foundation,” he said. “That gives you cover without lying.”

Ilya felt a strange mix of relief and grief at that. Relief that there was a solution. Grief that solutions were already necessary.

“Medical stays private,” Yuna added. “No statements. No team notifications until we know something concrete.”

Ottawa flickered in Ilya’s mind like a warning light.

“What about free agency?” he asked, hating the way his voice sounded smaller than usual.

Shane’s dad spoke then, voice steady, practiced. “That comes later. Right now, you get answers.”

Ilya wanted to believe that. He wanted to believe careers could wait, that visas and contracts and borders weren’t already looming.

Shane leaned closer. “We’ll deal with it,” he said pointing at everyone around the room. Not you. We.

That word felt heavy. Comforting. Terrifying.

Things moved quickly after that. Appointments booked. Names written down. Timelines forming without anyone saying how urgent they actually were. Ilya tried to keep up, but it felt like watching people plan around him rather than with him, and he didn’t know whether to be grateful or afraid.

Shane drove.

Ilya didn’t argue. He sat in the passenger seat, window cracked, cool air brushing his face. His body felt wrong in ways that were hard to describe, not pain exactly, just effort. Sitting upright took concentration. Existing took intention.

The clinic smelled sharp and clean and falsely calm. Ilya stood beside Shane at the desk, listening as Shane gave his name, filled in blanks. It was disorienting, being the subject of conversations he wasn’t fully participating in.

They waited.

Waiting was the worst part. Chairs too stiff. Lights too bright. Every sensation amplified by the knowledge that it mattered now.

Bloodwork came first.

Ilya hated the way the chair swallowed him, hated how small his arm looked under fluorescent light. The nurse tied the tourniquet, efficient and kind, and Ilya focused on breathing evenly.

“You doing okay?” she asked.

“Fine,” he said automatically.

Shane’s hand settled on his knee, warm and solid. Ilya hadn’t realized how badly he needed the contact until his fingers curled briefly into Shane’s sleeve, grounding himself without thinking. Ilya clocked that Shane really must not care about privacy at this point. Not with this stuff.

The vials filled one by one. Too many of them. He looked away, jaw tight, not from fear but from the strange, intrusive thought that this was evidence being collected against him.

Afterward, he felt emptied out in a way sleep never fixed. His shoulders slumped, energy draining fast.

Imaging was scheduled for later. More waiting.

Shane stayed beside him the entire time. Didn’t check his phone. Didn’t shift impatiently. Just stayed, as if proximity itself could hold things together.

Ilya watched him and felt something close to grief rise in his chest. Not because Shane was there — but because this was the first time Ilya truly understood how much he was being carried.

He wasn’t in control anymore.

And that terrified him.

By the time they called his name, Ilya already felt hollowed out.

Not scared exactly, but thinned like too much had been asked of him in too short a span. Bloodwork had taken more than it should. His limbs felt slow to respond, his thoughts lagging half a beat behind the world.

Shane stood immediately when the nurse appeared. Ilya followed a moment later, the chair resisting him just long enough to make the effort noticeable. He hated that part most, the small betrayals, the way his body made itself known when he wanted it to disappear.

Imaging was down a different hallway, farther from the windows, the air cooler and sharper. The corridors were quiet in a way that felt deliberate, designed to absorb sound and urgency. Ilya noticed details he normally wouldn’t have like the hum of fluorescent lights, the way the floor shone too cleanly, the muted shuffle of rubber soles.

They weighed him.

That shouldn't have mattered. It did.

The number flashed briefly before the tech turned the screen away, and Ilya felt something cold settle in his chest. He tried not to calculate. Tried not to remember what he'd weighed in September. Tried not to think about how loosely his jeans had been sitting lately.

"Have you had any imaging like this before?" the tech asked kindly.

"Yes," Ilya said. "Plenty."

She smiled. "Then you know the drill."

He did. Too well. But this felt different. This wasn't precautionary. This wasn't baseline. This was investigation.

Shane wasn't allowed in the room for the scan.

That was when it hit hardest.

The door closed behind him with a soft, final sound, and suddenly Ilya was alone with machines and instructions and a body that no longer felt like an ally. The tech guided him onto the table, voice calm, movements practiced.

"Let me know if you're uncomfortable," she said.

He almost laughed. Instead, he nodded.

The table was cold through the thin gown. He lay back carefully, adjusting inch by inch, aware of every joint, every place that protested being pressed flat. Above him, the machine loomed — white, circular, impersonal.

He stared at the ceiling and thought, absurdly, about how many times he'd been told to relax his shoulders in his life.

"Try not to move," the tech said. "It won't take long."

The machine started.

The sound was louder than he expected — rhythmic, mechanical, unyielding. It filled the space, left no room for thought that wasn't immediately pushed aside by noise. Ilya closed his eyes and focused on breathing evenly, counting in fours like he'd learned years ago for different kinds of panic.

This wasn't panic, he told himself.

This was procedure.

Still, his mind wandered in spite of him. To Ottawa. To contracts half-discussed, futures sketched in broad strokes that suddenly felt fragile. To borders and visas and the

unspoken rule that you were only welcome as long as you were useful. He wondered, distantly, how many decisions could be quietly made about a body without its consent.

When the machine finally stopped, relief washed through him so sharply it almost hurt.

“Good job,” the tech said, helping him sit up. “We’re all done.”

All done for now, Ilya thought.

Back in the waiting area, Shane stood the moment he saw him, crossing the space in two strides. He didn’t ask how it went. He didn’t need to. His hand found the small of Ilya’s back, steady and warm, and that was enough.

“You okay?” Shane asked quietly.

Ilya nodded, then amended it and shook his head. “Not really. I’m... tired.”

Shane didn’t argue. He just guided him to a chair and sat close, thigh pressed to thigh, grounding them both in something solid and real.

More waiting followed.

Consults that were careful and noncommittal. Questions asked and answered without reaction. Notes taken. Words like follow-up and additional testing floated through the air without context, without explanation. No one said anything definitive, and somehow that was worse than bad news would have been.

At one point, a doctor asked him to describe his fatigue.

“It’s not like soreness,” Ilya said slowly, choosing his words with care. “It’s like my energy leaks out of me faster than it should. Like there’s a hole somewhere I can’t see.”

The doctor nodded, neutral, writing something down.

Another asked about timelines. About January. About progression. About whether things came and went or stayed consistent.

“Stayed,” Ilya said. “Just... grew.”

They thanked him. Told him they’d be in touch. Told him to rest.

Rest felt like a joke.

By the time they finally left the building, the day had shifted without Ilya noticing. The sun sat lower, the air warmer, the world continuing on as if nothing had happened at all. He stood for a moment on the sidewalk, blinking against the light, overwhelmed by how normal everything looked.

Shane opened the car door for him without comment.

The drive back was quiet.

Ilya watched the trees blur past and felt an odd detachment settle over him, like he was slightly removed from his own life. He tried to catalog sensations, the ache behind his eyes, the weight in his chest, the way his hands trembled faintly when he rested them on his thighs.

None of it felt dramatic enough to justify the attention it was getting.

All of it felt wrong.

At the cottage, Shane helped him inside without making it obvious. Shoes off. Water pressed into his hands. A blanket draped over his shoulders that Ilya hadn't realized he needed.

"I hate this part," Ilya admitted quietly, staring down at the glass.

"What part?" Shane asked.

"The waiting," he said. "The not knowing what I'm allowed to plan."

Shane crouched in front of him, steady and intent. "This sucks... but I will be here no matter what."

The words landed heavy, terrifying and reassuring all at once. After years of missed communication and misunderstandings, Shane and Ilya had learned to be direct, and Ilya was grateful for that now. He didn't need Shane to be a motivational speaker, he just needed him to say what was true so they could sit in it together.

That night, sleep came in fragments. Ilya drifted in and out, mind replaying sounds from the machines, the careful neutrality of the doctors' faces, the way Shane's grip had tightened when no one was looking. At some point, he woke to find Shane watching him, hand resting lightly on his chest as if checking that he was still there.

"Hey," Ilya murmured.

"Hey," Shane replied. "Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay," Ilya said. And it was — because the fear eased slightly when he wasn't alone with it.

Lying there in the dark, listening to the familiar sounds of the cottage settling around them, Ilya felt the weight of what had shifted.

This wasn't hypothetical anymore.

Something was happening inside his body that required attention, intervention, patience. He didn't know what it was yet, only that it had already changed the shape of his life.

For the first time, the fear wasn't about outcomes. It was about time. And whether he had more of it than his body seemed willing to promise.

Chapter 5

SHANE

Shane woke up because the bed was empty.

His arm reached automatically, expecting warmth, skin, the familiar solid presence that anchored him even in sleep. Instead, his hand met cold sheets and nothing else.

“Ilya?” he murmured, voice thick.

No answer.

The cottage was quiet in the wrong way. Not peaceful. Hollow.

Shane pushed himself upright, heart already starting to race, and listened. The fan hummed. The lake moved beyond the window. Somewhere deeper in the house, there was a sound, not a crash, just... movement that didn’t resolve into anything recognizable.

“Ilya?” he called again, louder now.

Still nothing.

Shane swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood too fast, the floor cold under his feet. He moved down the hall, every sense tuned sharp, dread blooming fully formed in his chest. The bathroom door was open. The light was on.

Ilya was sitting on the floor.

For one awful second, Shane couldn’t make sense of what he was seeing. Ilya was upright but slumped, back against the tub, knees drawn loosely toward his chest. One hand was braced on the tile beside him like he’d needed it to stay vertical. His head was tilted forward, hair damp with sweat.

“Ilya,” Shane said, already crossing the room. “Hey. What’s wrong?”

Ilya looked up.

And Shane knew.

Not what it was, not yet, but that this was bad. Ilya’s eyes weren’t focused properly, pupils blown wide, skin pale to the point of grey under the bathroom light. His eyes were confused in a way he had never seen before. On anyone. There was blood at the corner of his mouth, a thin smear like he’d bitten his lip.

“I—” Ilya started, then stopped, breath hitching, head nodding as if he couldn’t hold it up. “I don’t feel... right.”

Shane dropped to his knees in front of him immediately, hands already framing his face, thumbs brushing over clammy skin. “Okay. Okay. I’m here. Tell me what’s happening.”

“I got dizzy,” Ilya said. His voice sounded wrong, like the words had to fight their way out. His accent was thicker. “Went to stand up and the room just...” He trailed off.

Shane’s heart slammed violently against his ribs. “Did you hit your head?”

“I don’t think so.” Ilya blinked slowly, like the effort cost him.

Shane pressed his forehead to Ilya’s for a brief second, grounding himself before pulling back and assessing quickly, clinically, the way years of injury protocol had taught him to. Breathing rapid but shallow. Skin cold and damp. Tremor in his hands.

Blood.

“Your mouth,” Shane said gently. “Are you bleeding?”

Ilya lifted a shaking hand and touched his lip, fingers coming away red. He stared at them with faint confusion. “I didn’t feel it.”

That was the moment fear tipped into certainty.

This wasn’t exhaustion. This wasn’t recovery lag. This was systemic. This was catastrophic.

“Okay,” Shane said, keeping his voice level with sheer force of will. “I need you to stay awake with me. Can you do that?”

Ilya nodded, then swayed slightly, eyes rolling back just enough to make Shane’s breath catch painfully.

“Nope,” Shane said firmly, wrapping one arm around him and pulling him upright against his chest. “You’re not doing that. Stay with me.”

Ilya sagged into him, heavier than he should have been, body slack like it had finally decided it was done compensating.

Shane grabbed his phone with his free hand and dialed emergency services without hesitation.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“My partner is collapsing,” Shane said, every word precise. “He’s dizzy, bleeding, confused, trouble breathing. We’re two hours from the nearest hospital.”

The operator’s tone shifted instantly. “Stay on the line. Is he conscious?”

“Yes,” Shane said, adjusting his grip as Ilya shuddered. “But barely.”

“Is he bleeding anywhere else?”

“I don’t know,” Shane said. “But he bruises easily. He’s been sick for months. We were already in testing.”

Ilya made a low sound against his chest, not pain exactly, but something closer to confusion. His breath hitched again, fast and shallow.

“Shane,” he whispered. “I’m really cold.”

Shane felt his stomach drop. He pulled Ilya tighter, wrapping his arms fully around him, trying to give warmth that suddenly felt pitifully inadequate.

“Help is coming,” Shane said, even as the operator began asking coordinates, asking about landing zones, asking questions that made the situation terrifyingly real. “I need you to keep your eyes open for me, okay?”

Ilya tried. He really did. Shane could see the effort in the tightness around his eyes, the way his jaw clenched like staying conscious was a physical task now.

“I’m scared,” Ilya said softly, the words barely audible.

Shane swallowed hard. “I know. I’ve got you.”

Ilya’s breathing hitched again, sharper this time, and then he gagged suddenly, coughing weakly. Blood flecked the tile. It was enough to make Shane wonder where the fuck it was coming from.

“Okay,” Shane said, voice tight now despite himself. “Okay, shit. That’s new.”

The operator’s voice cut through his ear. “Sir, help is en route. I need you to tell me if he becomes unresponsive.”

Ilya slumped harder, head dropping against Shane’s shoulder. His skin felt wrong, too cool, too slick. Shane pressed his hand to Ilya’s chest, feeling the frantic flutter of his heart beneath it, racing like it was trying to escape his ribs.

“This is not okay,” Shane whispered, not to the operator, not even to Ilya — just to the universe at large.

Minutes stretched impossibly long.

Shane talked constantly, not even sure what he was saying anymore. He told Ilya where he was. Told him he was safe. Told him that Yuna was going to be furious they hadn’t called her yet. Told him stupid stories. Told him he loved him, more times than he could count.

At some point, Ilya’s eyes fluttered closed.

“No,” Shane said sharply. “No, no, no. Eyes open. Look at me.”

Ilya blinked weakly, unfocused. “Shane... I don’t think I can—”

“Yes, you can,” Shane said, panic finally bleeding through. “You absolutely can.”

The sound of the helicopter reached them before the lights did, distant at first, then unmistakable, rotors tearing through the night like an answer to a prayer Shane hadn’t known how to say. He felt his knees finally start to shake as relief and terror collided violently in his chest.

“They’re here,” Shane told Ilya, voice breaking despite his effort. “You hear that? That’s for you... I need to go let them in.”

Ilya didn’t respond when Shane ran out.

“Sir,” the operator said, urgent now. “Is he conscious?” as they ran back to Ilya.

Shane returned to him and pressed his cheek to Ilya’s temple. He felt the faint warmth there. “He’s breathing,” Shane said. “He’s breathing.”

The paramedics moved fast, voices calm and authoritative, hands replacing Shane’s with practiced efficiency. Oxygen mask. Blood pressure cuff. Lights flashing across Ilya’s too-pale face.

“Low BP,” someone said.

“Heart rate’s through the roof.”

Shane backed away only when physically directed to, hands shaking, chest burning like he’d swallowed fire. He watched as they lifted Ilya onto the stretcher, straps clicking into place, oxygen hissing.

“Sir,” one of them said to Shane, voice steady. “Has he been diagnosed with anything?”

“No,” Shane said hoarsely. “But something’s wrong. We were waiting on results.”

The paramedic’s eyes flicked up sharply. “Okay. That helps.”

Helps.

The word echoed hollowly in Shane’s head as they loaded Ilya into the helicopter, lights strobing against the trees. Shane followed until he physically couldn’t anymore, until a hand stopped him gently but firmly.

“You can’t ride with us,” the medic said. “We’ll meet you at the hospital.”

Shane nodded numbly, backing away as the doors closed, as the helicopter lifted into the night carrying everything that mattered to him inside its metal shell.

As the sound faded into the distance, the cottage fell silent again.

Shane stood alone in the driveway, chest heaving, hands stained faintly red, and understood with sickening clarity that whatever this was, it was no longer something they could outrun.

The body had spoken.

And it was screaming.

Chapter 6

SHANE

Shane didn't remember deciding to call his parents. He only remembered that suddenly his phone was in his hand, his thumb moving with a certainty he didn't feel anywhere else in his body.

He stood in the driveway when it rang, staring at the dark space where the helicopter had been minutes earlier, the gravel still disturbed beneath his feet, the night unnaturally quiet now that the sound had been torn out of it. His hands were shaking hard enough that he had to brace his wrist just to keep the phone steady.

His mother answered on the first ring.

The words came out of him wrong—out of order, stripped of context. He heard himself say collapsed and blood and air ambulance, heard the way his voice sounded thin and distant, like it belonged to someone else. He didn't explain well. He didn't need to. The tone did the work for him.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Not disbelief. Not confusion. Calculation.

“Come here,” his mother said.

Shane didn't argue. He couldn't have if he tried.

It made sense immediately. If they came to the cottage, they'd lose time. Fifteen minutes there, fifteen minutes back. Half an hour they didn't have. Shane could get to them faster than they could get to him, and once they were together, they could move as one unit.

He locked the cottage without really seeing it, fingers clumsy on the deadbolt, heart slamming so hard it felt like it might split his ribs.

The drive blurred.

He didn't remember the speedometer. Didn't remember turns. Only the sensation of movement and the constant, intrusive replay of Ilya's face—too pale, eyes unfocused, blood where there should never have been blood. The sound of his breathing, shallow and wrong. The way his body had gone heavy in Shane's arms, like it had finally stopped pretending.

By the time he pulled into his parents' driveway, the porch light was already on. The door was open.

He didn't make it inside under his own power.

His mother was there immediately, hands on him, eyes sharp and assessing the way they had been his entire life. She took in the shaking, the color of his skin, the way his breath stuttered.

“Oh, Shane,” she said, and the sound of his name like that cracked something open in his chest.

“I need to get there,” he said. The words fell out of him automatically, stripped of emotion, pure instinct. “I can’t wait.”

His father appeared behind her, already moving, already thinking two steps ahead. He didn’t ask questions. He looked at Shane once and made a decision.

“You’re not driving,” he said.

Shane opened his mouth to object and realized there was nothing behind it. No energy. No fight. Just the hollow awareness that if he stayed in the driver’s seat, someone else might end up in a helicopter too.

David was suddenly there, keys in hand, jacket already on. He didn’t slow down, didn’t soften it.

“Backseat,” he said. “Now.”

Shane let himself be steered. Let himself be guided. Let himself collapse into the space someone else had decided was safest for him.

The moment the car door shut, Yuna was there beside him, arm around his shoulders, pulling him in without asking. Shane folded into her like his body had been waiting for permission to stop holding itself upright. His forehead dropped against her shoulder. His breath came apart.

“I left him,” he said, the guilt sharp and immediate, like a blade. “I wasn’t there.”

Yuna didn’t hesitate. Her grip tightened, firm and grounding. “You were there,” she said. “You stayed. You called for help. You did everything right.”

The words barely registered. Shane’s mind was already miles ahead, racing toward bright lights and doctors.

In the front seat, David drove like the law didn’t exist for tonight. Yuna sat rigid beside him, phone in hand, quietly coordinating details Shane couldn’t process right now—where to park, which entrance, who to call once they arrived.

Shane pressed his face deeper into Yuna’s shoulder, breath hitching, hands clenched uselessly in her jacket.

He didn’t pray.

He didn’t bargain.

He just held on to the fact that Ilya was still breathing somewhere in the sky, and that if Shane could get to him fast enough, maybe—just maybe—that would still be enough.

ILYA

The helicopter was loud in a way that erased thought.

Ilya lay strapped to the stretcher, oxygen mask pressed tight over his face, the world reduced to vibration and pressure and the relentless insistence of his own heart hammering too fast inside his chest. Someone spoke near his ear—calm, controlled, words designed to anchor him.

“You’re in a helicopter,” the paramedic said. “We’re taking you to the hospital. You’re safe.”

Safe didn’t feel like the right word.

His vision swam, lights smearing into each other. He felt cold despite the blankets layered over him, a deep, internal chill that didn’t respond to touch.

“Blood pressure’s dropping again,” someone said.

“I’m starting another line.”

There was pressure at his arm, then a burn that faded quickly. He tried to focus on breathing, on the steady hiss of oxygen, but his chest felt tight, constricted, like something was pressing inward from all sides.

“I’m tired,” he murmured, not entirely sure if the words made it past his lips.

“We know,” the medic said gently. “Just keep breathing for me.”

Numbers were called out. Heart rate. Saturation. Words like platelets and hemoglobin floated past him without meaning. His mind snagged briefly on Shane’s face—how close it had been, how afraid—and then even that slipped away.

“Stay with us,” someone said urgently.

He tried.

When they reached the hospital, the doors burst open with controlled violence.

“Twenty-nine-year-old male,” a voice called out, rapid and precise. “Found collapsed at home. Altered mental status, hypotensive, tachycardic. Active oral bleeding. History of months-long fatigue, bruising, recent bloodwork pending.”

Hands were everywhere at once. Monitors attached. IV lines checked. Oxygen adjusted. Someone pressed gently but firmly on his abdomen. Someone else shone a light into his eyes.

“Labs now,” a doctor said. “Type and cross. CBC, CMP, coags. Get blood ready.”

Ilya’s consciousness flickered, the room snapping in and out of focus. Bright lights overhead. Masked faces. Voices layered over each other, efficient and urgent.

“Pressure’s low.”

“Get another unit ready.”

“Has he been on anticoagulants?”

“No known meds.”

“Jesus,” someone muttered softly, looking at his arms. “Those bruises...”

“Okay,” the attending said sharply. “Let’s focus.”

Ilya tried to speak and couldn’t. Panic flared briefly, hot and sharp, before a hand squeezed his shoulder.

“You’re in the hospital,” a nurse said close to his ear. “We’ve got you.”

Something cold flowed into his vein. Another line. Another monitor. The world tilted again, then steadied just slightly.

“Possible hematologic issue,” the doctor said. “Get hematology on call.”

The words didn’t register.

SHANE

They were still running when they hit the entrance.

Shane barely felt his feet on the ground as they moved through automatic doors into a world of fluorescent light and sanitary smells. A nurse intercepted them almost immediately, already holding a clipboard.

“Name?”

“Ilya—” Shane started, voice breaking. “He came by helicopter.”

The nurse nodded, already moving. “Trauma bay. Family will need to wait here.”

“No,” Shane said, panic surging. “I need to see him.”

“I know,” she said gently. “I’ll update you as soon as I can.”

They stopped him anyway. A line he couldn’t cross yet.

Shane paced. Sat. Stood. Dragged a hand through his hair until his scalp burned. Yuna stayed close, her presence the only thing keeping him tethered to the room. His parents sat quietly, his mother’s hands clasped tight, his father staring straight ahead like focus alone might bend reality.

Minutes passed. Or hours. Shane couldn't tell.

A doctor finally approached, expression serious but controlled.

"Are you Shane?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, too fast.

"He's alive," she said first, and Shane's knees nearly gave out with relief. "But he's very sick. We're stabilizing him now."

"What's wrong with him?" Shane asked, heart pounding.

"We don't have a diagnosis yet," she said carefully. "But something is profoundly wrong with his blood. We're giving transfusions. He's in critical condition."

Critical.

The word echoed through Shane's body like a blow.

"Can I see him?" he asked.

She hesitated, then nodded. "Briefly. He's not fully conscious."

Shane followed her down the hall, every step feeling unreal. When he reached the doorway and saw Ilya—pale, surrounded by machines, chest rising and falling under assistance—something inside him broke open completely.

He took Ilya's hand, warm despite everything, and leaned close.

"I'm here," Shane whispered fiercely. "I'm not going anywhere."

The machines hummed. The night pressed on.

And somewhere between fear and hope, Shane understood with devastating clarity that this was no longer about waiting for answers.

This was about keeping Ilya alive long enough to hear them.

Chapter 7

SHANE

They didn't push him out.

That was almost worse.

It happened slowly, politely, with explanations that made sense even as they hollowed him out. The room around Ilya had shifted from emergency to controlled intensity, and from chaos to precision, and Shane could feel himself getting in the way.

A nurse touched his arm lightly. "He's stable now."

"We're moving him to the ICU," she continued. "There's still a lot of work to do."

Shane nodded, though his eyes never left Ilya. He was quieter now, sedated enough that the frantic edge of the night had smoothed into something that looked almost like rest. Machines hummed steadily around him, numbers no longer screaming for attention.

"Can I stay?" Shane asked.

"For now," she said. "But once he's settled upstairs, we'll need the room."

He swallowed. "How long?"

She hesitated. "We won't have meaningful answers until morning."

Shane felt that familiar helplessness surge. He leaned closer to Ilya, lowering his voice even though Ilya couldn't hear him.

"I'm right here," Shane said quietly. "I'll be back."

A doctor joined them then, introducing herself quickly, efficiently, already halfway into the next task. She looked at Shane, then at his parents — and then at Yuna, who stood just behind Shane's shoulder, hands clasped tight in front of her.

"Before we go any further," the doctor said, "we need to clarify something."

Shane's heart jumped. "What?"

"Medical privacy," she said. "We can share general updates, but anything detailed requires consent. Is Ilya able to tell us who he's designated?"

Shane opened his mouth, then stopped.

"I—" He faltered. "I don't know. He's visited the hospital in Canada before, can you check?"

The doctor nodded, unsurprised. “That’s okay. We’ll check his chart.”

She turned to the nurse, who tapped at a screen, then looked up.

“Emergency contact is Yuna,” she said. “Listed as next of kin for medical decision-making.”

For a second, no one spoke.

Yuna made a small, involuntary, sharp sound and brought a hand to her mouth. Tears welled instantly, spilling over before she could stop them. She turned her face away, shoulders shaking, one hand braced against the wall like she needed it to stay upright.

“Oh,” she whispered. “Oh, sweetheart.”

Shane felt something inside his chest crack open, overwhelming gratitude. Of course Ilya had chosen her. Yuna was steady. Yuna was clear-headed. Yuna could hear terrifying information and still make decisions. And beyond all of that, she loved Ilya with the fierce, uncomplicated devotion of someone who had long ago decided he was family.

Shane’s father stepped toward her without hesitation, wrapping an arm around Yuna’s shoulders, holding her close while she cried quietly against her sleeve.

“Smart boy,” Shane’s father murmured, voice low and steady. “Very smart.”

Yuna wiped at her face, breathing shakily as she steadied herself. “I’m here,” she said immediately, voice firm despite the tears. “Whatever you need. I’m here.”

“Come back in the morning,” the doctor replied. “We’ll speak with you in more detail then.”

The nurse returned, gentle but unmistakably firm. “We’re going to take him upstairs now.”

Shane leaned down one last time, pressing his forehead briefly to Ilya’s hand, breathing him in like he needed to memorize the moment.

“I’m coming back,” he whispered. “You rest.”

They walked him out once Ilya was settled and that hurt more than the panic had.

The hotel room felt wrong immediately.

Too quiet. Too ordinary. Like a place that didn’t understand what kind of night it had been dropped into. Shane sat on the edge of the bed while his parents moved around the space, doing small, unnecessary tasks because standing still felt impossible.

No one suggested sleep.

Yuna sat on the opposite bed, hands folded tightly in her lap, eyes red but resolute. When Shane looked at her, she met his gaze immediately, nodding once, I’ve got him. I’ve got this.

Shane lay back eventually, staring at the ceiling, replaying fragments he couldn't quite organize. The blood at Ilya's mouth, the way his body had gone heavy, the sound of the helicopter lifting away. Every time he closed his eyes, his heart lurched violently, convinced he'd missed a call.

His mother sat in the chair by the window, hands clasped tight. His father paced near the door, phone in hand, checking the time like morning was something he could summon now.

Sometime after three, Shane realized his hands were still faintly stained red.

He scrubbed them in the bathroom sink until the skin burned.

Dawn felt like an intrusion rather than a relief.

They were back at the hospital as soon as they were allowed to be, coffee untouched, words sparse. Yuna walked beside them, shoulders squared, grief tucked away into purpose.

A doctor met them in a small consultation room again, clipboard tucked under her arm.

"I want to walk you through the night," she said.

Shane leaned forward immediately.

"He remained stable," she began. "That was our priority."

Relief punched through Shane so hard he had to grip the edge of his chair.

"When he arrived, his blood counts were dangerously low," she continued. "We transfused red blood cells and platelets, and gave plasma to support clotting."

"Is he still bleeding?" Shane asked.

"No," she said. "That's under control."

"What about sedation?" his mother asked.

"We sedated him overnight to allow us to complete testing safely," the doctor explained. "He was briefly intubated for airway protection. He's breathing on his own now."

Shane closed his eyes briefly, chest loosening for the first time since the night before.

"We ran extensive blood work and imaging," she went on. "There are abnormalities we're concerned about, but we're not naming anything yet. We need confirmatory results."

Yuna nodded. "When will you know more?"

"Later today," the doctor said. "He's still asleep, which is appropriate."

"Can we see him?" Shane asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Briefly.”

The ICU was quieter in the daylight.

Ilya lay pale but peaceful, chest rising and falling in a slow, even rhythm. No tube. No alarms. Just oxygen and the undeniable fact that he was still alive.

Shane took his hand, warmth blooming instantly against his palm.

“You’re breathing,” Shane whispered. “You did it.”

When Ilya stirred and opened his eyes minutes later, fear flickered briefly — then relief.

“Shane?” he croaked.

“I’m here,” Shane said.

“I messed up,” Ilya whispered.

“No,” Shane said firmly. “You’re okay, we are going to figure this out.”

Ilya frowned faintly.

“Mom and dad are outside...she was listed as your emergency contact,” Shane said softly.
“She cried.”

A faint, exhausted smile touched Ilya’s mouth. “Jealous?” he murmured.

Shane laughed weakly through tears. “Only that you’re her favorite son.”

Ilya drifted back toward sleep, fingers still curled weakly around Shane’s after muttering a sweet and tired “I love you”.

Chapter 8

ILYA

Ilya was sitting up when they came in the next day, which felt important. They had given him the day and night to rest before inundating him with information that was sure to need repeating. Shane had been anxious to get back, but he felt relief after leaving the night before, knowing that Ilya at least had a shot of fighting whatever this was.

The bed had been adjusted so he wasn't staring at the ceiling anymore, pillows stacked just right behind his back. His body felt... better. Not healed, or normal, but present in a way it hadn't been for months. His head was clear. His heart wasn't racing. His hands didn't shake when he lifted the water cup. It was unsettling how dramatic the difference was, how quickly his body had responded once it was given blood again.

Like something starving had finally been fed.

Shane sat close, not touching him overtly, but close enough that Ilya could feel the heat of his leg through the mattress, the quiet gravity of him. Shane looked wrecked. His eyes rimmed red, jaw set too tight, but there was a steadiness there too. Whatever had happened overnight had rearranged him.

Yuna stood near the foot of the bed, arms folded loosely, eyes sharp and watchful. Ilya felt grateful to have the Hollanders in his corner.

When Dr. Patel knocked and stepped in, clipboard tucked under her arm, Ilya straightened slightly without meaning to.

"Good morning," she said.

"Morning," Shane answered, too fast.

Ilya smiled faintly. "I feel like a human again," he said. "Is that normal?"

Dr. Patel smiled back. "It's a good sign."

She stepped fully into the room, then paused, glancing back toward the door. "I'd like to bring someone else in."

That was when Ilya felt it.

Not fear yet—just awareness. A tightening in the room, subtle but immediate. Shane's shoulders shifted. Yuna's spine straightened. Shane's parents went still in that way people did when they sensed something important was about to be said.

Another man entered behind her.

He didn't look like how Ilya expected doctors to look in moments like this. He wasn't stiff or grave. He was tall, a little rumped, hair going gray at the edges like he didn't care enough to fight it. His white coat hung open, unbuttoned, like he wore it out of habit rather than ceremony. He had glasses pushed down his nose and a smile that seemed... practiced, but not fake.

"Hi," the man said easily. "I'm Dr. Ross. I'm an oncologist here at the hospital."

The room shifted again.

Ilya didn't know why, exactly—but he knew this mattered.

Dr. Ross didn't look at Shane first. Or Yuna. Or David. He walked straight toward the bed and met Ilya's eyes like this was a conversation between the two of them.

"You must be Ilya," he said. "I've heard a lot about you in the last twelve hours... though I will admit, I knew a little bit about you before all of this."

Ilya blinked. "Only good things, I hope." Navigating his hockey fame was always a little strange, especially in moments like this when some anonymity would be nice.

Dr. Ross smiled. "Mostly. We'll work on the rest... Let's just say, I am more of a Hollander fan.", he said nodding over to Shane.

Ilya smiled. He already felt safe and comfortable with Dr. Ross. "That makes two of us." he said confidently, no longer worried about their privacy. He registered that this conversation was a subtle acknowledgment that he was aware of the situation in front of him, and they didn't need to worry. Ilya hoped he wasn't wrong, but this man had good vibes already.

Dr. Ross pulled up a chair and sat, leaning forward slightly, forearms resting on his knees. Dr. Patel stepped back, present but clearly handing the room over to him.

"I want to talk about what we've found so far," Dr. Ross said. "Everyone here is okay to stay?"

Shane nodded immediately. Shane's parents didn't hesitate and did the same.

Ilya hesitated for half a second—just long enough to register that whatever was coming would change things—then nodded. "Yes."

"Okay," Dr. Ross said. "First thing I want you to know is that what happened to you wasn't random. And it wasn't because you didn't listen to your body well enough."

Ilya swallowed.

"Your blood work shows that your bone marrow isn't functioning the way it should," Dr. Ross continued. "Specifically, it's not making healthy blood cells."

Bone marrow.

The words felt oddly abstract, like anatomy class. Ilya nodded slowly, tracking.

“That factory,” Dr. Ross said, gesturing lightly, “is overwhelmed by cells that don’t belong there.”

Cells.

Ilya felt his chest tighten.

“That’s why I felt tired?” he said quietly, testing the idea out loud.

Dr. Ross’s eyes softened. “Yes. You were severely anemic—your red blood cells were too low to carry enough oxygen. Your platelets were dangerously low, which explains the bruising and bleeding. And your white cells weren’t doing their job properly.”

Yuna exhaled slowly.

Shane’s mother looked down at her hands.

Ilya nodded, absorbing it piece by piece. He understood most of the words. Not all of them. But he understood the shape of it. Still, something in the room felt unfinished, like everyone else was standing on the edge of a cliff he couldn’t see yet.

Dr. Ross watched him carefully.

“I want to be very clear about what we’re calling this,” he said.

That was when Ilya felt it—the moment crystallize.

“This is a blood cancer,” Dr. Ross said calmly. “Specifically, acute leukemia.”

The word oncologist finally snapped into place.

Cancer.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Not because Ilya didn’t know the word. He did. He’d heard it all his life—in fundraisers, in children’s wards, in stories that belonged to other people. It lived in a different mental category, one he’d never expected to overlap with his own body.

Shane inhaled sharply beside him.

Yuna’s hand flew to her mouth.

Shane’s father swore softly.

Ilya stared at Dr. Ross, searching his face for panic. He didn’t find any.

“Okay,” Ilya said slowly. “That... that is bad, yes?”

Dr. Ross nodded. “It’s serious. But it’s also very treatable.”

Treatable.

The word wrapped around Ilya’s spine like a hand.

“We believe this has been developing for months,” Dr. Ross continued. “That fits everything you’ve described. Your body compensated until it couldn’t anymore. The collapse happened because your counts dropped too low.”

“So what happens now?” Shane asked, voice tight.

Dr. Ross turned briefly to him, then back to Ilya. “Now we treat it. Aggressively. Carefully. As a team.”

Ilya glanced at Shane’s parents. They looked stunned—present, but dazed, like they were hearing a language they didn’t speak fluently either.

“I am going to say something,” Ilya said. “English is not my first language. But I think you just explained something very big.”

Dr. Ross smiled. “Fair.”

Ilya gestured weakly toward the others. “And it is theirs. And they also look like they do not understand.”

Shane’s mom let out a broken laugh. “That’s true.”

Dr. Ross chuckled. “Okay. Reset.”

He leaned forward again, voice shifting—not simpler, just clearer.

“Your bone marrow is supposed to make good blood,” he said. “Instead, it’s making too many immature cells. They don’t work. They crowd out the good ones. That’s leukemia.”

He paused. “The good news is this type responds very well to treatment, especially in someone young and otherwise healthy.”

Ilya blinked. “I am... still healthy?”

“In every way that matters,” Dr. Ross said immediately.

“What does treatment look like?” Yuna asked.

“Hospital first, for awhile,” Dr. Ross said. “Chemotherapy. Close monitoring. There will be hard days. There will be days he feels worse before he feels better.”

“Hair?” Ilya asked.

Dr. Ross smiled. “Likely.”

Ilya sighed dramatically. “This is devastating...I am so beautiful”

The room laughed—not because it was funny, but because it was human.

“I’ve seen worse haircuts in this building,” Dr. Ross said. “We’ll survive.”

Ilya leaned back against the pillows, the weight of the word leukemia finally settling into his bones. Fear crept in slowly, not sharp, not panicked—just vast.

But Dr. Ross didn’t rush him. No one did.

“You’re going to feel overwhelmed,” Dr. Ross said gently. “That’s normal. We’ll go one step at a time. I promise you won’t be alone in this.”

Ilya nodded, throat tight. He looked at Shane, at Yuna, at the people who had formed a circle around his bed without being asked.

“Okay,” he said quietly. “Then let’s do it.”

Chapter 9

ILYA

The first thing Ilya learned after the word leukemia was spoken out loud was that nothing happened slowly anymore.

Not in the way he expected.

There was no dramatic countdown, no pause where everyone took a breath and stared into the distance. Instead, the world narrowed and sharpened. Conversations became efficient. Paperwork appeared. Nurses moved with a calm urgency that felt rehearsed, like they'd done this a thousand times and knew exactly where fear fit into the workflow.

"You'll be staying in the hospital, for a couple weeks at least," Dr. Ross said that afternoon, perched casually on the edge of a chair like this was a long-planned meeting rather than the dismantling of Ilya's life. "At least for the first phase."

Ilya nodded. That made sense. Nothing about this felt like something that could be handled out of this space.

"We'll start with induction chemotherapy," Dr. Ross continued. "The goal is to knock the leukemia down hard and fast. We monitor you closely because your immune system will take a hit. The goal of induction therapy is remission, and quickly."

"How close?" Shane asked.

"ICU-level monitoring isn't uncommon at first," Dr. Ross said easily. "But we're not anticipating that unless something changes. Mostly it's labs, transfusions as needed, infection prevention."

"And lines?" Shane's mom — Yuna — asked immediately, already thinking three steps ahead.

Dr. Ross smiled at her. "Yes. Good question."

He turned back to Ilya. "You'll need central access. A lot of blood draws, medications, transfusions. We don't do that through regular IVs if we can help it."

"Port?" Shane asked. He recalled when his aunt underwent treatment when he was a teenager and he was always intrigued by the science of the equipment under her chest.

"Not yet," Dr. Ross said gently. "Ports are great long-term, but right now your platelets are low and your infection risk is high. We'll start with a tunneled central line or a PICC line. It's safer for induction. If we can't wipe it out, we will pivot and look at a change in his treatment plan. There are options down the road if needed for bone marrow transplants if we get there."

Ilya nodded slowly. “So... tube?”

Dr. Ross chuckled. “Tube. Yes. A very useful tube.”

Shane grimaced. “He hates tubes.”

“This one’s necessary,” Dr. Ross said, unfazed. “And we’ll take good care of it.”

The line was placed the next morning.

It wasn’t dramatic — local anesthetic, sterile drapes, a calm interventional radiologist explaining each step before it happened. Ilya stared at the ceiling tiles and focused on breathing evenly while someone threaded something foreign into his body, another reminder that he was no longer fully self-contained.

When it was done, he felt oddly relieved.

Like a line had been drawn — literally and figuratively — between before and after.

Chemotherapy started that night.

It didn’t feel like poison the way he’d imagined. Not at first. The meds dripped quietly through the line, bags labeled with long names and warnings, nurses double-checking everything before it touched him. He waited for nausea, pain, some immediate sign that this was the beginning of the fight.

Instead, he felt... tired.

A deep, cellular exhaustion that felt different from the fatigue he’d lived with for months. This was heavier, slower, but it came with an odd sense of purpose, like something necessary was finally happening inside him.

“This part is boring,” Dr. Ross told him later that evening, standing at the foot of the bed. “The boring part is good.”

“I have never liked boring,” Ilya replied.

Dr. Ross smiled. “Give it time.”

The days settled into a rhythm.

Vitals. Labs. Transfusions when needed. Antibiotics before anything could even think about becoming an infection. Nurses who learned his preferences quickly — lights dimmed at night, explanations before touch, jokes tolerated but not required.

Shane was there constantly at first, sitting in the chair beside the bed, laptop untouched, phone ignored. Ilya loved him for it and resented it in equal measure. There was too much happening inside his own head to also manage Shane’s fear.

On the fourth day, when Dr. Ross appeared for afternoon rounds, Ilya spoke before anyone else could.

“Can I ask something?” he said.

“Always,” Dr. Ross replied.

“I want to talk to you alone,” Ilya said. Then, softer, “With Yuna.”

The room went still.

Shane’s eyebrows knit together immediately. “Why?”

Ilya reached for his hand. “Because I need to be able to say some things without watching your face while I do. I don’t need those grouchy eyes staring at me while I talk about something that isn’t cancer.”

Shane swallowed hard. For a moment, Ilya thought he might argue. Instead, he grinned and nodded.

“I’ll be right outside,” Shane said quietly, squeezing Ilya’s fingers before standing. He kissed Ilya’s forehead, careful around the line, then stepped out without looking back.

The door closed softly.

Yuna moved to the chair Shane had vacated, sitting closer now, her presence steady and maternal in a way that made Ilya’s chest ache.

Dr. Ross didn’t rush them.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked.

Ilya exhaled slowly. “Hockey.”

Yuna’s lips pressed together, but she didn’t interrupt.

Dr. Ross nodded like this was exactly what he’d expected. “Okay. Let’s talk hockey.”

Ilya stared at the ceiling for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “I need to understand what my next year looks like. Not motivational poster version.”

Dr. Ross leaned back slightly. “You’re talking about playing?”

“I’m talking about contracts,” Ilya said. “Visas. Teams. I’m talking about whether I can even have those conversations without lying.”

Yuna reached over and rested her hand on his forearm. “You don’t owe anyone anything right now.”

“I know,” Ilya said. “But I need this settled in my head or I won’t be able to focus on treatment. I’ve lived my whole life on timelines. I need a map.”

Dr. Ross studied him for a long moment, then nodded. “Okay. Here’s the map.”

He spoke calmly, precisely — not sugarcoating, not catastrophizing.

“Induction chemotherapy keeps you in the hospital for several weeks,” he said. “We watch your counts crash and then recover. If you respond the way we hope, you move into consolidation therapy after that.”

“And during that time?” Ilya asked.

“You won’t be playing hockey,” Dr. Ross said simply.

Ilya nodded. He hadn’t expected anything else.

“You won’t be training the way you’re used to,” Dr. Ross continued. “Your immune system will be fragile. You’ll fatigue easily. Your body will be focused on rebuilding blood, not muscle.”

“So season is gone?” Ilya said.

“Yes,” Dr. Ross said. “This season is gone.”

Yuna inhaled sharply, but didn’t speak.

“What about next year?” Ilya asked.

Dr. Ross held his gaze. “That depends on how you respond. Many people your age return to high-level athletics after treatment. But it’s not a promise, and it’s not fast.”

“How do I explain that to teams?” Ilya asked quietly.

Dr. Ross smiled — not kindly, not patronizingly, but like someone who understood exactly what that world demanded.

“You tell them you have acute leukemia,” he said. “You tell them you’re being treated aggressively. And you tell them you’re focused on survival first.”

Ilya frowned. “They won’t like that.”

“They don’t have to,” Dr. Ross said. “Any team worth signing with will respect it.”

“And visas?” Ilya asked.

Dr. Ross nodded. “We’ll work with hospital legal and immigration specialists. Medical treatment qualifies for protected status in both Canada and the U.S. You will not be deported because you’re sick.”

The tension in Ilya’s chest loosened just a fraction.

“And if a team asks timelines?” Ilya pressed.

Dr. Ross shrugged lightly. “You give ranges. Months, not weeks. Recovery, not return-to-play dates. And you let your agent do the rest.”

Ilya was quiet for a long time.

“This helps,” he said finally. “I needed someone to tell me the truth.”

Dr. Ross smiled. “Hockey will still be there. We need you there first.”

Yuna’s eyes shone. She brushed her thumb over Ilya’s arm gently. “I’m proud of you.”

Ilya swallowed. “I needed to hear this before I could fight.”

Dr. Ross stood. “Good. Because the fighting part is coming.”

He moved toward the door, then paused. “One more thing.”

Ilya looked up.

“You don’t owe the league your bravery,” Dr. Ross said. “You owe your body honesty.”

Then he left.

When Shane came back in, his eyes searched Ilya’s face immediately.

“You okay?” he asked.

Ilya nodded. “Better.”

Shane didn’t ask what they’d talked about. He just sat, took Ilya’s hand, and stayed.

Chapter 10

ILYA

The idea didn't arrive like inspiration. It arrived like an itch he couldn't stop scratching.

It started the week after diagnosis, when the ward was quiet and his mind was briefly clearer than his body deserved. The transfusions had given him a few hours of borrowed normal—enough oxygen in his blood for his thoughts to line up properly.

Hockey didn't leave you just because you were sick. That was the problem.

Contracts still existed. Visas still mattered. A future still needed an address, even if the timeline had collapsed into something smaller.

He'd told Dr. Ross he needed a map. Dr. Ross had given him one—months, not weeks; recovery, not return-to-play. But Ilya still felt the same pressure in his chest whenever he tried to rest: the sense that his life was still precariously tethered to being rostered somewhere, to being “employed” in a way governments understood.

He needed to secure one piece of ground.

Not because hockey was more important than survival, but because uncertainty was its own kind of illness. It stole sleep. It stole focus. It turned every quiet moment into bargaining.

When he called his agent, he didn't dress it up.

“I want Ottawa,” Ilya said. “Now.”

There was a pause on the other end, the kind that meant his agent was running through a dozen considerations in the space of one breath.

“Ilya,” his agent said carefully, “you don't have to do anything right now. You can put everything on hold.”

“I can't,” Ilya replied. “Not in my head. I need to know where I stand before I can fight this properly.”

His agent exhaled slowly. “Okay. What do you want?”

“I want to talk to them directly,” Ilya said. “Not emails. Not a Zoom. I want the GM to look at me and hear it from me.”

Another pause. “You want them to come to you.”

“Yes,” Ilya said. “We’re in Montreal. They’re close. Two hours. Tell them I’ll make time. Tell them it matters.”

“You want your coach there too?”

“If he’s willing,” Ilya said. “If he’s part of the plan, I want him in the room.”

His agent was quiet again, then said, “All right. I’ll call. But I want you to hear something first.”

“What.”

“They may say no,” his agent said. “Not because they don’t care. Because teams get nervous. Medical stuff spooks people.”

“I know,” Ilya said, voice even. “Call anyway.”

“Okay,” his agent replied. “And Ilya?”

“Yes.”

“We’re going to protect you in this. If you want to keep details private for now, we can. If you want to disclose, we disclose. But you don’t do this alone.”

Ilya stared at the ceiling for a moment, throat tight. “Thank you.”

The call ended. The waiting began.

It only lasted a few hours, but in a hospital room, hours stretched. Time in there behaved differently—measured in lab draws and medication times, in nurses checking vitals, in the steady, quiet insistence of machines that didn’t care about human pacing.

When his phone finally buzzed, his agent’s voice sounded different.

“They’re coming,” he said.

Ilya closed his eyes. Relief washed through him so hard he felt dizzy.

“The GM and Coach Wiebe,” his agent continued. “Tomorrow morning. They don’t have full details. They know you’re hospitalized and that it’s serious. That’s all.”

“That’s enough,” Ilya said. “I’ll tell them the rest.”

“Do you want me there?”

“No,” Ilya replied. “Not in the room. This is mine.”

His agent hesitated, then said, “Okay. We’ll prep a framework after. For the contract language, the cap structure, IR. But tomorrow is just a conversation.”

“Good,” Ilya said quietly. “I need it to feel human.”

After the call, he stared at the wall for a long time. His heart wasn't racing now. His mind wasn't fogged the way it had been before the transfusions. But he could feel the edge of fatigue creeping in, the way his body reminded him that clarity was temporary.

Dr. Ross came by later to check in and Ilya told him simply, "Ottawa is coming."

Dr. Ross's eyebrows rose. "They're coming here?"

"Yes," Ilya said. "I need to talk to them."

Dr. Ross studied him for a moment, then nodded. "All right. I'll be present for the meeting."

"Why?"

"Because you're in a hospital and they're a hockey team," Dr. Ross said, deadpan. "Someone should translate both languages."

Ilya huffed a tired laugh. "Fine."

"And," Dr. Ross added, tone shifting slightly, "because you deserve to have someone in your corner who is not negotiating. Just protecting your well-being."

Ilya swallowed. "Thank you."

Dr. Ross gave a small shrug, like gratitude wasn't necessary. "I'll be here."

That night, Ilya didn't sleep much. Not because he was afraid of Ottawa. Because he was afraid of what he might hear—even from good people. Even from reasonable people.

When morning came, he sat up early, made himself drink water, made himself look awake. He didn't want to be a picture of fragility. He wanted to be himself—clear-eyed, direct, calm.

He wanted them to see a player they could believe in, even if he wasn't playing for a while.

When there was a knock at the door, he felt his stomach drop anyway.

Dr. Ross opened it. The Ottawa GM stepped in first, then Coach Wiebe, both wearing coats like they'd come straight off the road. They paused just inside the doorway, their eyes flicking over the scene with careful professionalism.

Hospital bed. IV pole. Monitors. The quiet hum of a place that wasn't built for contract talks.

"All right," the GM said, voice even, controlled. "Before anything else—are you okay?"

Not what's wrong. Not why are you here.

Just that.

"I am," Ilya said honestly. "Better than I was."

The GM nodded once, letting that settle. Coach Wiebe stepped fully in and closed the door softly behind them, as if instinctively protecting the space.

“We weren’t sure what we were walking into,” Wiebe admitted, glancing briefly at Dr. Ross. “Your agent told us you wanted to talk in person. Hospital was... not what I expected.”

“Fair,” Ilya said. “Thank you for coming anyway.”

“Of course,” the GM replied. He looked at Dr. Ross. “And you are?”

“Dr. Ross,” Ross said easily. “I’m part of his care team.”

The GM extended his hand. “Appreciate you being here, Doctor.”

Dr. Ross shook it. “Happy to translate.”

That got a faint smile from Wiebe, who looked like he’d rather deal with a hard forecheck than the uncertainty in this room.

They sat—GM in the chair closest to the bed, Wiebe slightly to the side like he was giving Ilya space. Dr. Ross stood near the window, present but not looming.

The GM folded his hands loosely between his knees. “Okay. Tell us what’s going on.”

Ilya took a breath. Not a steadying one—just a practical one.

“I have acute leukemia,” he said. “I was diagnosed this week.”

The words sat in the air, bare and undeniable.

Coach Wiebe blinked, then his expression shifted into something quieter, more human. The GM didn’t flinch, but the muscles in his jaw tightened.

“Okay,” the GM said slowly. “Thank you for telling us directly.”

Wiebe exhaled. “Jesus.”

Dr. Ross spoke calmly. “Acute leukemia is serious, but treatable. He’s already started inpatient treatment.”

The GM nodded, absorbing. “What does that mean in terms of time?”

“In terms of hockey,” Ilya said, “I won’t play this season. Maybe not next. I don’t know yet.”

Wiebe leaned forward slightly. “But you want Ottawa.”

“Yes,” Ilya said. “If I’m going to fight, I want the rest of my life to feel stable. I want to know where I’m going to be when I’m not in this bed.”

The GM studied him. “You’re thinking about contract structure?”

“I’m thinking about my right to stay,” Ilya said honestly. “To live where my life exists.”

The GM’s expression softened—just a fraction. “Okay.”

He leaned back a little, as if making a decision out loud. “Here’s what I can offer you, without pretending we know the future.”

Ilya’s pulse quickened.

“We want you,” the GM said. “We’ve wanted you. The player, yes. But also the person. We’re not making this trip to be polite.”

Wiebe nodded. “We’ve watched you for years.”

The GM continued, “If you’re willing, we can sign you to a lower cap hit contract with the understanding you’ll be on IR for the year. We structure it properly. We protect the team. We protect you.”

Ilya stared. “You would still sign me now?”

“Yes,” the GM said simply. “If that’s something you want.”

Wiebe added, “And not just sign you. We want you around. When you’re able. You’re not going to be a ghost on a spreadsheet.”

The GM smiled slightly. “Ottawa is a good city for this. Quiet when you need it. Loyal when you don’t.”

There was a pause then — not uncomfortable, just reflective.

Coach Wiebe tilted his head slightly, studying Ilya with something like curiosity. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” Ilya said.

“Why Ottawa?” Wiebe asked. “And I don’t mean hockey-wise. You could play almost anywhere. Bigger markets. Contenders. Why us?”

The question landed gently, but it was real.

Ilya didn’t answer immediately. He stared at the edge of the blanket for a moment, choosing what to give and what to keep.

“I met someone here,” he said finally.

The GM’s expression didn’t change, but his attention sharpened.

“Canada feels like home to me now,” Ilya continued, voice steady. “Not just the hockey. The people. The pace. The way life exists outside the rink.”

Wiebe nodded slowly.

“I want to build a life here,” Ilya said. “I want to become a Canadian citizen someday. I want to retire in a place I’ve grown to love.”

He hesitated, just a beat. “With the person I love.”

The room stayed quiet.

“That makes sense,” the GM said simply.

Wiebe smiled faintly. “It does.”

The GM leaned forward again. “Then this isn’t about a losing team. This is about alignment.”

Ilya felt something in his chest loosen that he hadn’t realized was clenched.

“Okay,” the GM said. “Then let’s talk details.”

They did.

They spoke about IR, about flexibility, about privacy. Dr. Ross answered questions cleanly, redirecting when medical specifics went too far. The GM listened. Wiebe asked about timelines in ranges, not dates.

“This helps,” Ilya said quietly at one point. “I needed to know it was okay if hockey waits.”

Wiebe nodded. “Hockey will wait. We need you first.”

When they finally stood to leave, the GM stepped close to the bed again, voice low.

“You’re still part of this,” he said. “Contract or no contract. That doesn’t change.”

Wiebe added, “We’ll see you soon. Not on the ice. But in the room.”

After they left, the air in the hospital room felt lighter.

Dr. Ross watched Ilya for a moment, then said, “That went well.”

Ilya nodded slowly. “That went... right.” He was excited to tell Shane.

Chapter 11

ILYA

Ilya was relieved, and he was excited.

So when the door closed behind the Ottawa GM and Coach Wiebe and the room finally went quiet again, he lay there buzzing with it, heart thudding in his chest in a way that had nothing to do with illness. His body was wrecked, his blood was poisoned on purpose, his future had been carved into something uncertain, but Ottawa was real. It was happening. It existed beyond this room.

When Shane came back in, Ilya couldn't stop the smile.

Shane saw it immediately. He always did. "That looks dangerous," he said carefully, like he didn't trust joy to behave itself in hospitals.

"They're going to sign me," Ilya said.

Shane froze halfway into the chair. "What?"

"They're going to sign me," Ilya repeated, voice bright, breathless. "IR. Lower cap hit. They want me around. They came all the way here."

For a split second, Shane just stared. Then his face crumpled in relief so sharp it looked like pain.

"Oh my god," he whispered. "Ilya."

Yuna was there before Shane could even stand, arms wrapping around Ilya's shoulders, careful of lines and monitors but fierce all the same. "I knew they'd be good," she said, voice thick. "I just knew."

David stood back, hands on his hips, nodding slowly like he was absorbing a piece of good news that felt almost suspicious in this place. "That's huge," he said. "That's stability."

"It's... permission," Ilya said. "To stop worrying about that part."

Shane took his hand then, squeezing hard. "I'm so proud of you."

For a moment, everything felt almost normal.

That feeling didn't last.

The chemo had been working quietly for days, but it didn't stay polite. It crept up on him in layers. First nausea that settled deep in his gut, then bone-deep exhaustion that made even conversation feel difficult. His mouth developed sores that made eating painful. His skin felt too tight, too sensitive, like his nerves were exposed.

By midweek, the labs dipped the way everyone had warned him they would.

“Your counts are crashing,” Dr. Ross said one morning, scrolling through results. “This is expected. Not pleasant, but expected.”

“I hate expected,” Ilya muttered.

Dr. Ross smiled. “No one likes predictable suffering.”

The days blurred together.

Sleep came in fragments. Food became a negotiation. He was transfused again and again, his body borrowing what it couldn’t make. Nurses moved in and out with quiet competence, adjusting meds, checking vitals, offering ice chips when nothing else went down.

Shane stayed as much as he was allowed. When he had to leave, Yuna was there. When Yuna needed air, David stepped in. They rotated like this was a job they’d trained for their whole lives.

Still, the bad days stacked up.

On Friday, the nausea won.

It wasn’t dramatic. No movie-style retching. Just relentless waves that left him sweating, pale, hollowed out. Shane held the basin while Ilya dry-heaved, rubbing slow circles into his back, whispering nonsense in his ear just to keep him anchored.

“I’m sorry,” Ilya said hoarsely when it finally passed.

Shane shook his head immediately. “Stop apologizing for having cancer.”

“I’m apologizing for being miserable,” Ilya countered weakly.

“Too bad,” Shane said softly. “You’ve never apologized for that before.” He added cheekily.

By the end of the week, Ilya felt like he’d shrunk.

Not physically—though that was happening too—but internally. Everything about him was regulated. Monitored. Charted. His body no longer belonged to him in the way it used to. He wore the same hospital gowns, thin and scratchy, ties never quite sitting right. He smelled like antiseptic and plastic and something faintly medicinal that clung to his skin no matter how often he washed.

One afternoon, Dr. Ross came in mid-rounds and found him staring at the window.

“Bad day?” Ross asked.

Ilya nodded. “Bad week.”

Ross pulled up a chair. “Want optimism or sarcasm?”

“Both,” Ilya said.

“Okay,” Ross replied. “The good news is, your body is doing exactly what it’s supposed to. The bad news is, that process sucks.”

Ilya huffed a weak laugh. “You should put that on a brochure.”

“I’ve suggested it,” Ross said seriously. “Legal keeps saying no.”

That night was the worst.

His counts were at their lowest. He was dizzy just sitting up. His skin ached. His mouth hurt. He couldn’t get comfortable no matter how many pillows they rearranged. Shane lay half-curved in the chair beside him, head tipped back, eyes closed but not really asleep.

Yuna sat on the other side of the bed, knitting something she’d brought from home, hands moving automatically. David dozed in the corner, glasses perched crooked on his face.

Ilya stared at the ceiling and felt tears gather without warning.

He turned his head slightly toward Shane. “Hey.”

Shane opened his eyes immediately. “Yeah?”

“Can I ask you something?” Ilya’s voice wobbled, betraying him.

Shane sat up straighter. “Anything.”

“I don’t want to be dramatic,” Ilya said, swallowing hard. “But I can’t do this anymore.”

Shane’s heart lurched. “What—what do you mean?”

Ilya gestured weakly at himself. The bed. The gown. The room. “This. I feel like I disappeared. Like I’m just... a patient.”

Yuna looked up immediately, needles pausing mid-stitch.

“I know I’m sick,” Ilya said, tears spilling now, hot and embarrassing. “I know I need to be here. But I don’t recognize myself. I don’t feel like a person.”

Shane’s throat tightened. He reached out, brushing Ilya’s hair back gently. “Hey. Hey. I wish we could fix this.” Slow tears rolled down his own cheeks now. “I can’t take away your pain, so tell me, what can I do? What one small thing would make life a little easier right now?”

“I want clothes,” Ilya whispered, voice breaking. “Real ones. Sweatpants. A t-shirt. A hoodie. I want my socks. I want to feel like me.”

The room went quiet.

Yuna stood immediately. “Oh, sweetheart.”

David was already grabbing his keys. “I’ll go.”

Shane shook his head. “I’ll go with you.”

Dr. Ross appeared in the doorway, having clearly overheard enough. He leaned against the frame, arms crossed loosely. “For the record,” he said, “this is an entirely reasonable request.”

Ilya laughed weakly through tears. “Is it?”

“Yes,” Ross said. “Dignity is not optional. It’s part of treatment.”

Yuna kissed Ilya’s forehead gently. “We’ll be back soon.”

When they left, Ilya lay there, exhausted from crying but lighter somehow, like he’d named something important.

Dr. Ross stepped closer. “You’re allowed to want comfort,” he said quietly. “You’re allowed to hate this.”

“I hate it,” Ilya admitted.

“Good,” Ross replied. “Means you’re still you.”

When Shane came back an hour later, his arms were full. Sweatpants. Soft. Broken-in. A t-shirt that smelled like home. A hoodie that had clearly been Shane’s at some point. Socks. His own toothbrush. His own deodorant. His world, distilled into fabric.

Shane set the pile of clothes down carefully, like he was afraid the softness might spill out if he moved too fast.

“Okay,” Yuna said gently, already rising from her chair. “I’ll grab a nurse to help—”

Shane glanced up at her and grinned, tired but sure. “I think I’ve got it.”

Yuna paused, reading his face. There was no bravado there, no denial of how hard this might be—just quiet confidence.

She smiled. “All right,” she said. “I’ll be right outside.”

The door clicked shut behind her, and the room felt smaller in a good way.

Ilya stared at the clothes like they might vanish if he blinked. Sweatpants folded neatly. A t-shirt. The hoodie—Shane’s, obviously, worn thin at the cuffs, familiar even from across the room.

Shane moved closer, hands hovering for a second before he touched anything, like he was asking permission without words.

“Okay,” he said softly. “We’ll take it slow.”

Ilya nodded. “I feel ridiculous.”

Shane shook his head immediately. “You don’t.”

They both knew how this usually went. They were good at undressing each other—easy, instinctive, playful. This was different. This was careful. This was learning a new language with the same mouth.

Shane started with the gown.

He untied the knots at Ilya’s shoulders slowly, fingers brushing skin that felt warmer than usual, thinner somehow. Ilya winced slightly when he tried to sit forward, breath catching.

“Hey,” Shane murmured. “I’ve got you.”

He slipped an arm behind Ilya’s back, steady and solid, easing him upright inch by inch. Ilya’s forehead pressed briefly against Shane’s collarbone, a soft exhale ghosting through the fabric.

“You okay?” Shane asked.

“Just tired,” Ilya said. “I used to do squats for fun.”

Shane snorted. “Well that is a different kind of sickness.”

They laughed quietly together, the sound small but real.

The gown slid off slowly, bunching at Ilya’s waist. Shane folded it without thinking and set it aside like it had never mattered.

“Okay,” Shane said. “Arms first.”

The t-shirt came next.

It should have been simple. It wasn’t.

Ilya lifted one arm, then stalled halfway, muscles shaking. Shane caught his wrist gently, supporting the weight without comment.

“Sorry,” Ilya muttered.

“Stop,” Shane said immediately, voice firm but kind.

He guided Ilya’s arm through the sleeve, then the other, movements slow and deliberate. The fabric caught briefly on the IV line, and they both froze.

“Hold on,” Shane said, carefully threading the tubing through the neckline like it was delicate thread instead of medical equipment. “Okay. Got it.”

When the shirt finally settled over Ilya’s shoulders, he let out a breath that sounded like relief and grief tangled together.

“That feels... better,” he said quietly.

Shane smiled, adjusting the hem, smoothing it down like he'd done a thousand times before for entirely different reasons. “You look like you again.”

The sweatpants were harder.

Shane sat on the edge of the bed, kneeling slightly so he was level with Ilya's legs. He rolled the waistband down, holding it open.

“Lift when you can,” he said.

Ilya tried. His legs trembled, refusing to cooperate fully.

“Okay,” Shane said calmly. “We're pivoting.”

He shifted closer, one arm bracing Ilya's thigh, the other guiding fabric inch by inch. It was awkward. The pants twisted. One leg went in faster than the other.

“I feel like a toddler,” Ilya said weakly.

Shane grinned. “I've seen toddlers with better balance.”

“That's rude.”

“Accurate,” Shane countered.

They laughed again, breathless and tired.

When Shane finally eased the waistband up over Ilya's hips, his hands lingered for a moment—not possessive, not urgent—just grounding.

“You're doing really well,” he said softly.

Ilya's eyes were glassy now, exhaustion pulling at him from every direction. “This is... a lot... and it is only going to get worse”

“I know” Shane said, trying not to think about it too much.

The hoodie came last.

Shane hesitated before lifting it. “This one okay? I grabbed everything new from the store, but I had this hoodie in the car.” Shane held up a Montreal Metros hoodie, grinning ear to ear.

Ilya nodded. “I like that it smells like you.”

Shane swallowed hard. He had grabbed it as a joke, knowing he had a brand new plain black hoodie in the pile... but his reaction had him on the verge of tears.

He lifted Ilya's arms one at a time, easing the Metros hoodie on carefully, mindful of the line, the monitors, the way Ilya's body sagged a little more with every movement. When the fabric

finally settled around him, warm and familiar, Ilya slumped back against the pillows with a broken sob.

Shane climbed onto the edge of the bed without thinking, arms wrapping around Ilya as best they could manage, careful and firm all at once.

“I’m here,” Shane whispered into his hair. “I’ve got you.”

Ilya clutched the front of the hoodie weakly, fingers fisting the fabric like it was a lifeline. “Thank you,” he said, voice wrecked. “For... all of this.”

Shane pressed a kiss to his temple, lingering there. “Anytime. Every time.”

They stayed like that for a while, breathing together, the room quiet except for the steady beep of the monitor—proof of life, proof of persistence.

Eventually, Ilya shifted, wincing slightly. “I’m exhausted.”

Shane smiled softly. “Yeah. Dressing is apparently an extreme sport now.”

Ilya huffed a tired laugh. “We were better at the opposite.”

“World-class, some might say” Shane agreed.

Ilya took a deep breath, “I know you don't want me to apologize, but I am sorry you have to do all of this. I am sorry I don't have the energy to do the things I want to do to you in return”, he said looking down to Shane's crotch.

The laughter faded into something softer, something steadier.

Shane adjusted the blankets, tucking Ilya in carefully, hands lingering like he was memorizing the shape of him in this version of now.

“I have never felt closer to you, or more in love.” Shane said, voice cracking. “Are you comfortable?”

Ilya looked down at himself—real clothes, real warmth, real comfort—and nodded.

“Yeah,” he said. “Much better.”

And for the first time all week, he didn’t feel like a patient.

He felt loved as he nodded off with his boyfriend at his side.

Chapter 12

SHANE

By day thirteen, Shane understood that the hardest part wasn't the hospital or even the cancer. It was the stillness. He and Ilya had built their lives around motion for so long that being rooted to one place felt like a kind of psychological starvation. Airports, rental cars, hotels that blurred together, weeks measured in cities and obligations—movement had always been the background hum of their lives. Even rest had edges; it was temporary, something you did while waiting for the next thing. Thirteen days in one building, with no freedom to step outside, no ability to leave even for a drive together, felt unbearable in a way Shane hadn't anticipated. Even without illness, it would have been torture. With it, it felt like being trapped inside someone else's body, someone else's rules.

What made it worse was how quickly Ilya had understood that leaving wasn't an option. The first few days, he'd asked carefully, almost politely, when they thought he might get to go home. By day thirteen, that question was gone. Not because the desire had disappeared, but because understanding had taken its place. He knew how fragile his body was right now, how unsafe it would be to step outside the bubble of monitoring and IV antibiotics and constant care. That acceptance had settled into him quietly, and Shane saw it in the way Ilya no longer looked at the door like it was a possibility, only a memory.

They moved him that morning into a long-stay oncology room, the kind built for endurance. The room was larger, warmer, with softer lighting and a real window that let daylight in without glare. There was a couch that unfolded into a narrow bed, and when the nurse gestured to it and said Shane could stay as long as he wanted, something in Shane's chest tightened so hard he had to look away. He hadn't realized how much he'd been bracing for the moment he'd be told to leave every night. Ilya noticed immediately.

"Looks like you're officially moving in," he murmured, voice tired but fond.

Shane crossed the room and bent to kiss him, slow and deliberate, mouth lingering like it always had. "I already live here," he said quietly.

They would have been at the cottage right now. That thought slipped into Shane's mind constantly, uninvited and sharp. July had been theirs, a soft pocket of time before training programs and meetings and endorsements pulled them apart again. Training camp wasn't even until September. This was supposed to be long mornings and water and quiet, no one asking anything of them except to exist together. Instead, they were here. And somehow—heartbreakingly—they still had time. Just reshaped into something unfamiliar.

What undid Shane most wasn't simply how sick Ilya looked, but how surreal the timeline felt. It hadn't happened overnight, not really, but it felt like it had. Back in January, Ilya had still looked like himself. Maybe a little leaner, a little more tired, but nothing alarming. Hockey players lost weight every season. Appetites came and went. Bodies adapted. By April, the weight loss was noticeable but explainable. By June, harder to ignore, though still

not frightening. Now, with the numbers written plainly in his chart and the truth of cancer stripping away all plausible excuses, Shane could see it clearly. Thirty pounds. Not athletic leanness anymore, but absence. Collar bones sharp beneath soft clothes. Arms thinner, muscle quietly stolen away. His face hollowed just enough to make his eyes seem too large. And still, impossibly, when Ilya looked at him, it was the same person. That contradiction made Shane dizzy.

They touched constantly now.

Not urgently or possessively. But often, deliberately, like touching was a way of checking in. Shane's hands learned Ilya's new body with reverence—massaging his calves when bone pain flared, thumbs working slow circles into the arches of his feet the way he always had after games. He rubbed warmth into Ilya's hands when they went cold, traced his thumbs along knuckles that looked too prominent now. When Ilya's head ached, Shane cradled it against his chest and ran his fingers gently through thinning hair, kissing his temple, his forehead, his mouth whenever it was offered.

They kissed a lot. Soft kisses. Lingering ones. Familiar ones that said I'm still here without needing to speak. Unapologetic even with nurses passing by, because this was how they spoke to each other.

"You okay?" Shane asked quietly one afternoon, fingers pressing gently into Ilya's thigh.

Ilya hummed, eyes half-closed. "No, but better when you do that."

"I'm practically a nurse now," Shane murmured, smiling as he leaned down to kiss him again.

The days blurred into a rhythm Shane hated but learned. Some days Ilya could talk, could joke weakly, could sit up for a while with pillows propped behind him. Other days, words cost too much. Shane learned to read the smallest cues—the way Ilya's breathing changed when nausea crept in, the tension in his jaw when bone pain spiked, the glassy look in his eyes when exhaustion tipped into something heavier. Comfort became practical and physical. Holding water steady when his hands shook. Adjusting pillows until pressure eased. Massaging his legs slowly, methodically, until the pain softened enough for sleep.

At night, Shane unfolded the couch into a bed that barely deserved the name and then crawled back into Ilya's bed instead, careful of lines and monitors, wrapping himself around him the best he could. They slept like that when possible, Shane's arm heavy across Ilya's waist, Ilya's hand curled in the fabric of Shane's shirt like it anchored him to the world.

"I hate this," Ilya whispered once into the dark.

"I know," Shane murmured, kissing the crown of his head.

"I hate not moving," Ilya added, frustration bleeding through exhaustion. "I've never been still this long in my life."

Shane pressed his mouth to Ilya's hair, breathed him in. "We'll move again," he said. "Just not today."

Dr. Ross came most afternoons, steady and unflinching, never pretending this part wasn't brutal. He joked gently when Ilya could tolerate it, spoke plainly when he couldn't, and never once flinched at the sight of Shane's hands on Ilya like they belonged there.

"Touch is good medicine," Ross said once, checking labs. "Highly underrated."

Yuna came every morning, smoothing Ilya's hair back, kissing his cheek, letting Shane step out for air without worry. David came in the evenings, grounding and calm, offering presence without demand. Shane watched them sometimes and felt overwhelmed by gratitude and grief in equal measure.

On the fourteenth night, Ilya finally broke. Quietly, shoulders shaking, breath uneven. Shane was at his side instantly, pulling him close, pressing his forehead to Ilya's hair.

"I don't recognize myself," Ilya whispered. "I know it didn't happen overnight. I know it's been months. But it feels like it did."

Shane kissed him again and again, slow and certain. "You're still you," he said softly. "I see you."

Ilya clutched his shirt. "Promise?"

"Always."

They lay there a long time after, Shane's hand moving in slow circles on Ilya's back until his breathing evened out again. Eventually, Ilya shifted, thoughtful.

"Hey," he said quietly.

"Yeah?"

"When this week is over," Ilya said, voice tired but resolute, "I want a real shower."

Shane smiled, brushing his thumb across Ilya's cheek. "Real how?"

"Long," Ilya said. "Hot. No interruptions. No plastic curtains. I want to feel clean. Like a person. Not like... this."

Shane kissed him once more, firm and certain. "We'll make it happen."

Ilya closed his eyes, relief settling into his bones. And for the first time that day, Shane felt something that looked almost like hope.

Chapter 13

ILYA

The biopsy hurt more than he expected. Not sharply, not in a way that made him cry out, but in a deep achy way. The nurse talked him through it calmly, telling him when to breathe, when to stay still, when it was almost over, but none of that softened the strange, hollow feeling that followed. When it was done, when the pressure bandage was secured and they told him to lie flat, Ilya stared at the ceiling and tried to ignore the ache blooming slowly through his hips, dull and persistent, a reminder that today his body had been drilled into. Literally. The nurse said results would come tomorrow. Tomorrow had become the heaviest word in the room. His induction therapy was, in theory, coming to an end. Two long weeks of poison in an attempt to destroy the cancer cells living in his blood. Soon they would know if it was working. It didn't mean treatment would be done forever, the road ahead was a long one, but it would mean leaving these hospital walls sooner rather than later.

Shane didn't leave his side.

He stood there the entire time, one hand anchored at Ilya's shoulder, the other wrapped around his fingers so tightly it bordered on desperate. When it was over and they wheeled him back to the room. Ilya slept, long and hard.

When he woke, the light had shifted. Afternoon sun slanted in through the window, soft and forgiving, and Shane was still there, sitting forward in the chair, elbows on his knees, head bowed slightly like he was holding something fragile inside himself.

"Hey," Ilya said quietly.

Shane looked up instantly. "Hey. How are you feeling?"

Ilya considered it. "Like I lost a fight with a power tool."

Shane huffed a quiet laugh, relief flickering across his face before settling back into something more careful. "Well you kind of did."

They sat like that for a while, neither of them speaking much. The room hummed with the low noise of machines and distant footsteps in the hall, the hospital breathing around them. Ilya felt emptied out by the biopsy, waiting for tomorrow to tell him whether he was done or just getting started.

Later, when a nurse came in to check his vitals, Shane asked, "Is there anywhere here he could take a real shower? Not the one in the room."

The nurse paused, assessing Ilya with a practiced eye. "There is," she said. "Down the hall. Oncology has a room with a larger bathroom."

Ilya's chest tightened immediately. For a moment Shane wondered why they didn't just have that room from the get go, but he quickly stopped that line of thinking. His fame bought him many things in life, but what it didn't buy him was privacy... yet somehow that is the very thing that the staff in this hospital had afforded them. To complain about the bathroom felt unfair.

"That would be... nicer," Shane said carefully. "If it's okay."

The nurse smiled once. "It is. If he's up for it."

Ilya nodded without hesitation. "I want it."

The nurse glanced down at his chart, then back at him. "Wheelchair."

Ilya frowned. "I can walk."

She didn't argue. She didn't soften it. She just raised an eyebrow and said, "You had holes drilled into your hips today. Sit in the damn chair."

Shane bit his lip hard, shoulders shaking.

"I don't—" Ilya started.

"Nope," the nurse said pleasantly, already turning to retrieve the chair. "Not negotiating this one, Rozanov."

"I hate wheelchairs," Ilya muttered.

"You're going to love this one," she replied. "It comes with a hot shower at the end."

Shane leaned in, grinning despite himself. "She's got you there, buddy."

Ilya glared at him. "You're supposed to be on my side...buddy."

"I am," Shane said gently. "My side just includes not letting you pass out in the hallway."

The chair appeared. Solid. Unavoidable.

Ilya stared at it for a moment, jaw tight, pride flaring stupidly, irrationally. He hadn't used one yet. Hadn't needed to. Sitting in it felt like crossing a line he wasn't ready for.

"Hey," Shane murmured, kneeling in front of him. "This doesn't mean anything except you're smart enough to rest."

Ilya exhaled slowly. "I hate that you're right."

"I know."

The transfer was careful and slow. Shane narrated each movement softly. Feet down, hands here, lean forward, until Ilya was seated, the chair swallowing him more than he liked. The nurse tucked a blanket over his legs like this was the most normal thing in the world.

“There,” she said. “Luxury transport.”

The hallway felt longer from this angle.

The wheels hummed quietly as Shane pushed him, one hand steady on the handles, the other occasionally brushing Ilya’s shoulder like a reminder that he was there. Ilya hated how visible he felt, hated the way the floor seemed farther away, hated the strange vulnerability of being moved instead of moving himself.

But he didn’t ask to stop.

The shower room was different. Warmer. Softer. Tiles instead of sterile white plastic. A real curtain. Steam lingering faintly in the air like a understanding.

Shane closed the door behind them and leaned back against it for a moment, exhaling. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

Ilya nodded, throat tight.

Shane helped him undress slowly, carefully, reverently. There was no rush, no awkwardness. Ilya hadn’t worn his shoes in 2 weeks, a thought that hadn’t crossed Shane’s mind, but bothered him in the moment. Where were they even? Probably still at the cottage. Such a simple thing, the ability to be outside, needing shoes on your feet. On his legs Shane could see the faded bruises caused by what they now refer to as “Ilyas shitty blood”. It was nice to see them healing. Ilya was in a gown today from his biopsy procedure, which he knew would bother Ilya, so he text his mom knowing she would be nearby, asking if she could put clean comfortable clothes in the room while they were in the shower. He went back to undressing Ilya, careful to avoid his new incisions and old lines. He was actually enjoying it. This wasn’t the intimacy he was used to, but it was filled with so much love and affection, and a peace that came with knowing that Ilya would do the same for him. He thought Ilya did too. He sat, eyes closed, almost peaceful, soaking in the strange normalcy of this moment with just the two of them.

Then Shane undressed. He didn’t want this to feel clinical. He wanted this to feel like them. Ilya sat and just grinned at his now naked boyfriend. “I missed you.” he said with more sadness than Shane could handle. He missed him too. They had been together almost every minute of the day for the last two weeks, but it wasn’t the kind of quality time either of them craved. It was time spent out of necessity and not desire.

Shane started the water and Ilya stood up to get in, not giving a shit what his nurse would say if she saw him walking in alone. Shane was there instantly, one arm around his waist, chest warm and solid against his back. “Too hot?”

“No,” Ilya breathed. “Perfect.”

The water washed over him, and for the first time in days, he felt something loosen. The smell of antiseptic faded. The tightness in his chest softened. He closed his eyes and leaned back into Shane, letting himself be held upright.

“Okay,” Shane murmured. “I’m going to wash your hair.”

Ilya nodded.

Shane’s fingers slid gently into his hair, massaging his scalp the way he always had, slow and careful. At first, it felt normal. Comforting. Then Shane’s hands stilled slightly.

Ilya opened his eyes just enough to see it.

Hair.

More than there should be.

Dark strands tangled around Shane’s fingers, clinging to his palms, gathering in a way that was impossible to ignore. Ilya swallowed hard.

“Well,” he said lightly, forcing a smile that didn’t quite land. “At least it’s coming out all at once.”

Shane didn’t laugh.

His throat worked as he rinsed his hands slowly, gently, like he was afraid of hurting something already gone. “Hey,” he said quietly. “It’s okay.”

Ilya shrugged, trying to keep it casual. “I was never that attached to it.”

Shane leaned down and kissed his temple, lingering there. “You’re going to be beautiful without it.”

Ilya’s breath hitched anyway.

He turned his face slightly, pressing his forehead against Shane’s shoulder, and let the tears come. They mixed with the water, invisible and undeniable all at once. Shane held him tighter, one hand cradling the back of his head, the other steady at his waist.

“I know it hurts,” Shane murmured. “You don’t have to joke.”

Ilya nodded, voice gone. “I know.”

They stood under the water embracing each other for what felt like forever. “Do you want to get out now?” Shane whispered in his ear.

Ilya shook his head slowly, “no, but could you get me a chair. I am tired, but I want to be here with you”. Shane grabbed a plastic chair from the corner of the bathroom, he assumed it was for this exact purpose. He helped Ilya sit down in the chair, and sat down on the floor of the shower, at his feet, just to be close to him.

Tomorrow loomed heavy and unanswered, waiting to decide whether they would be here longer or whether life might exist outside these walls for a little while.

When they were done, Shane wrapped him in towels like it was a ritual, patting him dry slowly, carefully, never rushing even though the air was cooler outside the shower. Yuna had left the clothes in the room, and Shane could see the relief in Ilyas face when he realized the gown was gone once again. Ilya let himself be maneuvered back into the wheelchair, body heavy and loose now, exhaustion layered over relief. The walk—or roll—back down the hall felt quieter, softer, like the hospital itself had lowered its voice for them. When they were settled back in the room and the door clicked shut behind them, Ilya closed his eyes for a moment and breathed.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

Shane brushed his knuckles along Ilya’s cheek the same way Ilya had to him once upon a time in a hospital. “Anytime.”

“I mean it,” Ilya added, opening his eyes. “That was... everything.”

Shane smiled, leaned down, kissed him gently, then straightened like something had just occurred to him. “I’m going to step out for a minute.”

Ilya frowned faintly. “Where are you going?”

“Bathroom,” Shane said, already halfway to the door. Then, casually, as if he weren’t about to change the course of the afternoon, he added, “And I want to ask a nurse something.”

Ilya watched him go, a strange sense of anticipation buzzing under his skin. He leaned back against the pillows, staring at the ceiling, feeling clean in a way that went beyond skin. The ache in his hips was still there. The waiting was still there. Tomorrow was still heavy and looming. But for the first time since the biopsy, his body didn’t feel like a battleground. It felt like something he lived in again.

When Shane came back, he had that look on his face.

The one that meant he was trying to play it cool and failing.

Ilya’s eyes dropped immediately to Shane’s hands. “What did you get?”

Shane shut the door behind him and leaned against it for a second, watching Ilya carefully. “I asked if they had clippers.”

Ilya went very still.

“They do,” Shane continued, voice gentle. “Medical-grade. Clean. The nurse said we could use them if you wanted.”

The room seemed to narrow, focus tightening around that one option now sitting between them. Ilya swallowed.

Shane pushed off the door and crossed the room slowly, deliberately, like he didn’t want to startle him. “I’m not saying we have to. I just... after the shower, after what we saw, I thought maybe—”

“Is it time?” Ilya asked softly.

Shane stopped beside the bed. “I think it could be. But only if you want it to be.”

Ilya stared at him for a long moment, then nodded once. “Yeah. I don’t want to keep finding it in my hands.”

Shane’s expression softened immediately. “Okay.”

He set the clippers down on the bedside table like they were something fragile, then sat on the edge of the bed. “We can go slow.”

“I know,” Ilya said. “I trust you.”

That did something to Shane. Ilya saw it in the way his shoulders shifted, the way he exhaled like he’d just been given something heavy and precious. Shane reached up and threaded his fingers gently through Ilya’s damp hair one last time, as if memorizing it. His eyes welled for a moment and then he asked “You ready?”

“No,” Ilya said honestly. Then, after a beat, “But yes.”

Shane smiled faintly, flicked the clippers on. The low hum filled the room, steady and unthreatening. He lifted them hesitantly, then paused.

“Hey,” he said. “Before we do this...”

Ilya tilted his head. “What?”

Shane glanced toward the mirror across the room, then back at Ilya. “I was thinking I could —”

“No,” Ilya said immediately.

Shane blinked. “I haven’t even finished the sentence.”

“You were about to say you’d shave yours too,” Ilya said flatly. “And the answer is no.”

Shane laughed despite himself. “A lot of people do that.”

Ilya narrowed his eyes. “Shane.”

“What?” Shane protested lightly. “Solidarity.”

“You will look ridiculous, maybe those people have better heads... I don't know what you're hiding under there” Ilya said, deadpan.

Shane gasped. “Wow.”

“I might be beautiful bald,” Ilya continued, warming to the argument, “but you absolutely would not be.”

“Well that’s rude.”

“That’s honest,” Ilya shot back. “Your head shape is… questionable.”

Shane laughed, shaking his head. “I have a perfectly good head.”

“Do you?” Ilya asked sweetly. “Because I think if I have to look at myself in the mirror like this, I deserve to look at my hot boyfriend with his thick, annoying hair.”

Shane snorted. “So this is about aesthetics.”

“This is about fairness,” Ilya said solemnly. “One of us needs to stay hot for morale.”

Shane leaned in and kissed him, laughing softly against his mouth. “Fine. I’ll keep my hair. For morale.”

“Thank you,” Ilya said gravely. “I appreciate your sacrifice.”

Shane shook his head, still smiling, and lifted the clippers again. “Okay. Here we go.”

The first pass was the hardest.

Shane started at the back, slow and careful, guiding the clippers gently over Ilya’s scalp. Hair fell immediately, dark strands sliding down onto the towel Shane had draped around his shoulders. Ilya sucked in a breath as the cool air hit skin that hadn’t seen daylight in years.

“Oh,” he murmured.

Shane froze. “Too much?”

“No,” Ilya said quickly. “Just… different.”

Shane resumed, moving methodically, one hand steadying Ilya’s head, the other guiding the clippers. He didn’t rush. He didn’t chatter. He treated every pass like it mattered, like this was something sacred rather than practical.

Hair kept falling.

Ilya watched it out of the corner of his eye, a strange mix of grief and relief churning in his chest. Each swipe took something away, but it also took the waiting with it. No more wondering when it would fall out. No more finding it in his hands.

Shane worked around to the sides, then the top, adjusting his angle, murmuring quiet instructions. “Tilt your head a bit. Perfect. You’re doing great.”

Ilya laughed weakly. “You sound like a barber.”

Shane smiled. “I take this very seriously.”

When it was done, when the clippers fell silent, Shane set them aside and brushed the loose hair away gently, fingers reverent. He cupped Ilya’s face in both hands, thumbs tracing along

his jaw.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, without hesitation.

Ilya blinked rapidly, throat tight. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Shane said firmly. “You always were.”

Ilya leaned forward, resting his forehead against Shane’s chest, breathing him in. “Thank you for doing it. I couldn’t have.”

“I know,” Shane murmured, kissing the top of his now-bare head.

Then another kiss.

And another.

And another.

Shane kissed him everywhere—forehead, temples, crown—soft, quick kisses that turned into a hundred before Ilya could even protest, laughter bubbling up through the tears.

“Okay, okay,” Ilya said, breathless. “I get it.”

“Nope,” Shane said, smiling as he kissed him again. “I’m not done.”

Ilya laughed, fully this time, the sound shaky but real. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Hopelessly,” Shane agreed, pressing one last kiss right to the center of Ilya’s scalp. “And completely in love with you.”

Ilya closed his eyes, letting himself be held in that moment—clean, bare, scared, loved beyond measure.

Chapter 14

ILYA

Morning rounds felt different before anyone said anything.

Ilya noticed it immediately — the way the room filled more slowly than usual, the way the attending physician lingered just a fraction longer in the doorway before stepping in, the way Dr. Ross's expression stayed carefully neutral instead of openly warm. He had learned to read these micro-shifts in the last two weeks, learned that medicine spoke in posture and tone long before it spoke in words.

Shane was sitting beside him, one hand resting on Ilya's thigh, thumb moving in a small, unconscious rhythm. Yuna stood on the other side of the bed with her arms crossed, posture deceptively calm. David leaned against the counter near the sink, glasses on, jaw tight. The Hollanders had rearranged themselves instinctively — flanking him, anchoring him — the way families did when they sensed a blow was coming.

Ilya had woken up hopeful.

That was the worst part.

His counts had nudged upward, just barely. The nausea had eased overnight. He'd slept for four straight hours without waking, which felt like a miracle. He'd let himself imagine that maybe today would be the conversation about timelines, about discharge plans, about how many days until he could feel air on his face that didn't smell like disinfectant.

He watched Dr. Ross pull up a chair.

Not stand. Sit.

That hope dissolved instantly.

"Ilya," Dr. Ross said gently, folding his hands together, "how are you feeling this morning?"

Ilya swallowed. "Awful... but better than yesterday."

Shane noticed this trend in Ilya. His need to cover the truth with a sprinkle of optimism. He clocked it everytime and made a mental note to talk to Ilya about it, but he never knew if it was Ilya's way of protecting Shane from the truth, or an effort at real optimism. If it was the latter, Shane didn't want to squander any kind of hope that Ilya was manifesting.

Ross nodded. "I'm glad."

The pause that followed was deliberate. Respectful. Too careful.

"We reviewed your biopsy results," Ross continued. "They came back overnight."

Shane's thumb stopped moving.

Yuna uncrossed her arms.

Ilya felt his chest tighten, a pressure building slowly, inexorably, like his body already knew what his mind was about to hear.

"There's still active disease present," Ross said calmly. "The induction chemotherapy hasn't cleared it the way we hoped."

The words landed softly. Almost kindly.

They still hit like a collapse.

Ilya stared at him, trying to understand what that meant in real terms, in his terms. "So... not yet?" he asked quietly.

Ross met his gaze. "Not yet."

The silence stretched.

David cleared his throat once, sharply, then stopped himself.

"So I'm not..." Ilya began, then had to pause, his voice wobbling unexpectedly. "I'm not going home."

"No," Ross said gently. "Not yet."

The room seemed to tilt. The word home was a hard one to hear from Ilya, because home didn't really exist for him in this context. He had a house in Boston, a family that didn't love him in Russia, a cottage that he loved but didn't fully belong to him. Home was a construct, and Shane knew he meant he wasn't going back to his old life, to safety, to Shane's bed, to peace, to health. He felt imprisoned here after finally escaping the prison he had lived in his whole life before he had created a life with Shane. For everyone in the room, this was about the cancer. But Shane knew that for Ilya, this was just one more metaphorical closet, and one more thing he was forced to face without having the choice.

Ilya shook his head once, small and involuntary, like maybe the movement would dislodge the meaning. "But it's been over two weeks," he said, not accusing, just confused. "I thought ___"

"I know," Ross said immediately. "I know you did."

The kindness in his voice was what finally cracked something open.

Ilya's face folded in on itself, grief spilling out without warning. He covered his mouth with his hand, breath hitching sharply as tears came fast and hot, unstoppable. He hadn't planned to cry. He hadn't planned anything. It just happened, like his body had been waiting for permission to fall apart.

Shane was up instantly, arms around him, one hand cradling the back of his head, pulling him carefully against his chest. He wanted to breathe Ilyas hope he had thought about earlier back into him, but it was leaking out faster than he could handle it. Yuna moved in from the other side, her hand finding Ilya's shoulder, steady and warm. David stepped closer, resting a hand on Ilya's knee like a grounding weight.

"I wanted to go home," Ilya sobbed, the words tumbling out broken and raw. "I just wanted to go home for a little while. I can't—I can't do this anymore."

Home. The word continued to break Shane. Ilya was his home too, and he also wanted to go back. Helicopter lights flashed in his mind, the last thing he saw before home was torn down in his mind too. Shane held him tighter, murmuring his name over and over like a prayer, rocking him gently, the thought of comfort overpowering any thought of Ilyas potential nausea in that moment.

"I know," Yuna said softly, tears shining in her own eyes now. "I know, sweetheart."

Ilya cried harder, the sound torn from somewhere deep and exhausted. "I thought I could do it. I thought if I just got through this part—"

His breath hitched violently. His body curled inward, instinctively seeking protection from something that couldn't be outrun.

"I'm tired," he said hoarsely. "I'm in so fucking tired."

Shane pressed his forehead to Ilya's, voice breaking. "I know. I know."

The attending physician quietly stepped back, giving space. Dr. Ross stayed, but said nothing, understanding that this moment didn't belong to medicine.

Ilya cried until the energy drained out of him, until the sobs softened into shallow, uneven breaths. His body shook with the effort of it, every muscle trembling under the strain of weeks of fear and pain and hope deferred.

"I don't feel good," he whispered finally, so soft it almost disappeared into Shane's chest.

The room went utterly still.

Yuna closed her eyes.

Shane tightened his arms reflexively, heart breaking at the simplicity of it, at how childlike and devastating the words were. "Okay," he said quietly, grounding, steady. "Okay. I've got you."

It registered to Shane that this kind of contact might not be helping Ilya in this moment, but he would never ask him to let go. So when Shane pulled back slightly, and Ilya began to lean back, he took it as a sign to let him go. He gently guided Ilyas body back to the pillows he had been propped on. Ilya let out a sigh, he was both emotionally and physically drained.

“I feel cold”, Ilya said quietly. Shane collected the blanket from his waist and tucked it under Ilyas chin. He looked so small, all charisma and bravado erased from the man he loved. Slowly, Ilyas hand appeared from under the blanket, reaching out for Shane. They knew what the other needed, and Shane accepted the physical gesture of connection.

Eventually, Ross cleared his throat gently, almost out of necessity as if he didn’t see this everyday. “I’m going to step out for a few minutes,” he said. “I’ll come back and explain next steps when you’re ready.”

Yuna nodded. David murmured thanks. The door closed softly behind Ross, sealing them back into the room together.

Ilya felt wrung out, hollowed, like everything essential had leaked out of him onto the sheets.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered weakly, though he wasn’t sure why.

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him, eyes fierce and wet. “Don’t you dare.”

Ilya huffed a broken laugh that collapsed into another small sob.

They gave him time. No one rushed him. No one told him to be brave or strong or positive. They just existed around him, solid and unwavering, until his body stopped shaking and the ache in his chest dulled to something manageable.

When Dr. Ross returned, the air in the room had changed. Calmer. Sadder. Ready.

Ross pulled his chair close again, posture open. “Okay,” he said gently. “Let’s talk about what this means.”

Ilya nodded once, exhaustion pressing down on him like gravity.

“The induction chemo reduced the disease burden,” Ross explained. “That’s important. But it didn’t eliminate it. This tells us your leukemia is more resistant than average.”

Shane’s jaw tightened.

“That doesn’t mean we’re out of options,” Ross continued quickly. “It means we need to escalate.”

Ilya swallowed. “Harder treatment.”

“Yes,” Ross said honestly. “Second-line, or re-induction chemotherapy. Stronger drugs. Higher intensity. It also means staying inpatient.”

“How long?” Ilya asked, voice small.

“Weeks,” Ross said. “Possibly longer. We’ll monitor your response closely.”

The words settled heavily.

“This approach is still curative in intent,” Ross emphasized. “But it will be tougher on your body. The next few days especially.”

Ilya nodded numbly, the future rearranging itself in his mind.

“We’ll start preparing today,” Ross said. “I want you as strong as possible going into it.”

After Ross left, the room fell quiet again.

Ilya stared at the ceiling, eyes burning, chest aching, the thought of more days — more weeks — pressing down on him.

Then Shane’s phone buzzed softly.

He glanced at it, frowned, then looked back at Ilya with an expression caught somewhere between disbelief and relief. “Hey,” he said gently. “Your agent just texted.”

Ilya turned his head slowly. “What?”

“They finalized the Ottawa deal,” Shane said. “Signed. Quietly. Not public yet.”

Ilya blinked, stunned.

“You’re under contract,” Shane continued softly. “You’re safe.”

The relief that washed through Ilya was sharp and unexpected, cutting through the despair like sunlight through cloud cover. He laughed weakly, tears spilling again for an entirely different reason.

“At least one thing,” he whispered.

Shane squeezed his hand. “One thing.”

The buzz came again, almost immediately.

Shane’s face changed as he read the message, something softer and more complicated settling in his expression. “The Raiders have heard rumblings,” he said carefully. “They’re reaching out.”

Ilya closed his eyes briefly. “Of course they are.”

“They want to talk,” Shane said. “There’s a call request from—”

Shane hesitated, then smiled gently.

“From Marleau.”

Ilya’s chest tightened all over again, but this time with something that felt like love instead of loss.

“Can you answer?” Ilya asked quietly.

Shane nodded, already stepping aside to give him privacy as the call connected.

The phone rang once.

Then—

“Ilya,” Marleau’s voice came through, warm and steady and unmistakably real. “Hey, kid.”

Ilya closed his eyes, gripping the phone tightly. “Hey.”

“I heard you weren’t feeling great,” Marleau said gently. “Thought I’d check in myself.”

Something in Ilya finally gave way again, but this time he was smiling through it. He had been expecting this call to be about the hockey news, but instead it was out of concern. “You didn’t have to.”

“I know,” Marleau said simply. “I wanted to.”

There was a pause, heavy with things unsaid.

“I’m getting on a plane,” Marleau added after hearing the heaviness in Ilya’s voice. “I’ll see you soon.”

Ilya’s breath caught. “You don’t—”

“I do,” Marleau said firmly. “See you soon, kid.”

The line went dead.

Ilya lowered the phone slowly, heart pounding.

He wasn’t going home.

Not yet.

But he wasn’t alone.

Chapter 15

ILYA

Marleau arrived on a gray afternoon that felt heavier than the ones before it. It was as if the weather was working hard to match the mood in the room. Ilya heard him before he saw him — the familiar rhythm of someone who had spent decades moving through arenas and locker rooms. When he appeared in the doorway, he stopped short, just long enough for the truth of the room to register.

“Oh,” Marleau said softly.

It wasn’t shock exactly, not in the way strangers sometimes reacted, but it wasn’t hidden either. His eyes moved carefully over Ilya — the hospital bed, the IV lines, the way his shoulders sloped more now than they used to, the absence of hair where it had always been. He recovered quickly, stepping fully into the room, but the pause lingered between them, heavy with everything that had changed so quickly.

“Hey,” Ilya said, his voice steadier than he felt. “You came.”

Marleau crossed the room in three long strides and pulled a chair up close without asking, sitting down like this was where he’d always belonged. “Of course I came,” he said. “You didn’t think I wouldn’t.”

Ilya swallowed, throat tight. “I didn’t know if you’d—”

Marleau cut him off with a look that was half fond, half wounded. “Don’t do that,” he said quietly. “Man, not everyone’s trying to get something from you. I don’t give a shit about your contract, your name, or how we crossed paths—I just know you’re my guy. That’s it.”

Marleau really seemed frustrated. Ilya wondered how long he wanted to say that. “I heard a rumor that there was more to it and I was going to come no matter what.”

That landed harder than Ilya expected. He had a way of convincing himself that people didn’t care about him, just like his family.

They had been close — closer than teammates, closer than convenience. Late nights on the road, shared hotel rooms when flights got delayed, conversations that drifted past hockey and into the quiet, unguarded parts of life. Marleau was a friend, but Ilya didn’t know how to have friends. Even in the dressing room he was a captain, playing a role, feeling like he owed it to the team. Then, somewhere along the way, things had shifted. Not dramatically, not cruelly, just... sideways. Shane happened. Love happened. And Ilya hadn’t known how to hold both things at once without dropping one.

“I wanted you here,” Ilya said finally. “I just didn’t know how to ask without making it weird.”

They sat in silence for a moment, the hum of the hospital filling the space between them. Marleau leaned forward slightly, elbows on his knees, studying Ilya with the kind of attention that came from years of reading bodies for a living.

“How are you really?” he asked.

Ilya hesitated, then decided honesty was the only thing that made sense anymore. “Not great,” he admitted. “And not getting better yet.”

Marleau nodded slowly. “I heard bits. Not details...cancer? I assume based on that bad head of yours?” He already knew the answer, but he didn't really want to hear it.

“The chemo didn't clear it,” Ilya said, forcing himself to keep going. “There's still disease. They're keeping me here. Continuing treatment. I have to do it in hospital.”

Marleau exhaled sharply through his nose, looking away for a second like he needed to recalibrate. Ilya could tell he may be baffled by how fast things had changed for him, so he explained the treatment. It has been short, shorter than most people would think it needed to be. As he explained it out loud to a friend he did feel a tinge of guilt for being so dramatic about his situation, given that many cancer patients deal with treatment for years and not weeks. “Fuck,” Marleau said quietly. Then he looked back at Ilya, eyes sharp and present. “Okay. What do you need?”

The simplicity of the question nearly undid him.

“I needed to see you,” Ilya said. “I don't think I realized how much I missed the boys. ”

Marleau reached out and rested a hand on Ilya's forearm, firm and grounding. “I don't care what jersey you'll be wearing. You're my guy no matter what.”

As if on cue, Ilya's phone buzzed on the bedside table. Then again. And again.

He frowned, picking it up. The screen lit up with names he hadn't expected to see so soon — unfamiliar numbers, but familiar faces attached to them in his mind. Players from Ottawa. Guys he'd only met briefly, some he'd never met at all.

Heard you're coming our way. Welcome.
Can't wait to have you when you're ready.
Take care of yourself. We've got you.

Ilya stared at the screen, stunned.

“They know,” he murmured.

Marleau raised an eyebrow. “Know what?”

“The signing,” Ilya said. “It wasn't announced. But you know how it is, now it's... leaking. I'm sure some journalists got ahold of it.”

Marleau smiled faintly. "Hockey has always been terrible at secrets." The irony of that statement was not lost on Ilya.

Ilya's thumb hovered over the screen, scrolling slowly. The messages kept coming — quiet, respectful, human. No questions about timelines. No pressure. Just presence.

"It's weird," Ilya said softly. "Being welcomed somewhere I haven't even been yet."

Marleau nodded. "That's a good problem to have."

Ilya sighed, leaning back against the pillows. "The other part's coming too. The cancer part. I can feel it."

Marleau didn't flinch. "You don't have to rush it."

"I know," Ilya said. "But I don't want it to feel like a rumor. Or a secret someone else gets to tell."

They sat with that for a moment. Then Marleau said gently, "You've always done better when you own the story."

Ilya looked at him. "You think I should put it out there."

"I think," Marleau said carefully, "that hiding something this big will eat you alive. And I think people will show up for you in ways you're not expecting."

Ilya nodded slowly. The irony just continued to pile on. He already knew this. He just needed to hear it from someone who had walked the same halls, stood under the same lights.

"I'll ask my agent to draft something," he said. "Nothing dramatic. Just honest."

Marleau smiled. "That sounds like you."

After a pause, Marleau tilted his head slightly. "So," he said. "Why Ottawa?"

Ilya huffed a quiet laugh. "Everyone keeps asking that."

"Humor me," Marleau said. "You could've gone anywhere."

Ilya stared at the ceiling for a moment, then back at him. "I met someone," he said simply. "In Canada. I want a life here. I want to stay. Build something that isn't temporary."

Marleau's expression shifted, something like recognition passing through it. "Like Jane," he said slowly, almost to himself.

Ilya smiled faintly. "Like Jane."

Marleau nodded, understanding settling in fully now. "That makes sense."

The boys talked for another hour. Ilya was tired, but he wasn't going to miss out on time with Marleau when he flew all this way to be with him. They talked about non-cancer related

things, about training, about Marleaus family back home. He enjoyed having some new company. As Marleau was about to rap up the conversation and leave Ilya to rest, the door opened then, quietly.

Shane stepped in, expecting an empty room, his expression soft and unguarded — until he froze, registering the man sitting at Ilya's bedside.

"Oh," Shane said. "Hey."

Marleau stood immediately, instinctively extending a hand. "Hey," he said warmly. "Good to finally officially meet you. Off the ice I mean."

Shane shook his hand automatically, polite, friendly, completely unaware of the moment he'd just stepped into.

Ilya watched them for half a second longer than necessary.

Then he made a decision.

Ilya watched them shake hands, Shane polite and open in the way he always was with teammates, Marleau warm and instinctively respectful, both of them unaware of the gravity sitting quietly between them. For a split second, Ilya considered letting it pass—letting Shane say hello and step back out, letting this remain compartmentalized the way so much of his life had been lately. It would have been easier. Familiar. Safe.

But something in him had shifted over the last two weeks. Maybe it was the cancer. Maybe it was the way the hospital stripped life down to essentials. Maybe it was simply exhaustion with carrying things alone, or the fact that Marleau himself shared some wisdom in the last hour about buried secrets.

"Hey," Ilya said, his voice steadier than his chest felt. "Shane—don't go yet."

Shane turned back immediately, concern flickering across his face. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Ilya said. Then he looked at Marleau, really looked at him, and felt a strange mix of nerves and relief. "I want to introduce you properly."

Marleau's eyebrows lifted just slightly, curiosity replacing the casual ease he'd been carrying.

"This is Shane," Ilya said, and he didn't rush it, didn't soften it. "He's the reason I wanted to be closer to home. The reason Ottawa made sense. He's... it."

The room went quiet in a way that felt different from the hospital silences Ilya had gotten used to. This wasn't waiting or fear or grief. This was anticipation.

Marleau blinked once, then smiled.

"Oh," he said, warmth spreading easily across his face. "Well. That explains a lot."

Shane looked between them, stunned for half a second, then smiled too—wide, genuine, a little shy. “Hi,” he said again, this time with something softer behind it.

Marleau stepped back slightly, giving them both space while still staying close. “I’m really glad to finally meet you,” he said to Shane. “I’ve heard a lot. Mostly complaints.”

Ilya snorted. “That’s slander.”

Marleau laughed. “You should hear what you say when you’re tired.”

Shane relaxed visibly, tension easing out of his shoulders. “I’ll take that as a good sign.”

“It is,” Marleau said simply. Then his tone shifted, turning sincere. “I’m happy for you. Both of you. I get why you haven’t said anything but if there was ever a time, this might be it. People will always suck, but it is hard to deny that love exists when you see it in action in moments like this.”

Something in Ilya’s chest loosened at that, a knot he hadn’t even realized was there. He hadn’t been sure how this would go, hadn’t been sure whether the unspoken distance that had grown between him and Marleau would turn this moment into something awkward or painful. Instead, it felt like a door opening instead of closing. He didn’t know what he expected Marleau to say. He was a famous hockey player and a ladies man, but as Ilya sat in his thoughts briefly he realized that Marleau was always respectful to the women he surrounded himself with. Now Ilya was sure that Marleau would also enjoy finding love like he had, and it’s hard to cheer against something you also want.

“Thank you,” Ilya said quietly.

Marleau nodded, then glanced at Shane again. “You’ve been taking good care of him?”

Shane’s eyes flicked instinctively to Ilya. “He makes it easy.”

Ilya scoffed weakly. “That’s not true.”

“It is,” Shane said without hesitation. “Even now.”

“Then that is all I care about” Marleau said honestly.

They stood there for a moment, the three of them, the air in the room settling into something unexpectedly calm. Outside the window, the gray afternoon light deepened, the day slowly folding in on itself.

Marleau pulled his chair back up, sitting again like he wasn’t going anywhere. “Okay,” he said. “Now that introductions are done—tell me everything. From the beginning.”

Ilya exhaled and leaned back against the pillows, suddenly aware of how tired he was. But this was the good kind of tired, the kind that came from finally putting something down.

“It started months ago,” he said. “January, maybe earlier. I was losing weight, getting tired faster. I thought it was the season. Travel. Everything we always blame.”

Marleau nodded but interjected, “yeah yeah yeah... cancer. I get it. That's old news buddy... I want to hear how the hell the two best hockey players in the league started hooking up”.

The phone buzzed again on the bedside table, interrupting the moment gently instead of rudely. Ilya glanced at it and sighed. “More texts.”

“Centaurs?” Marleau asked.

“Yeah,” Ilya said, scrolling slowly. “Guys welcoming me. Checking in.”

Marleau smiled faintly. “That’s a good locker room.”

“I think so too.”

“And the Raiders?” Marleau asked carefully.

Ilya’s mouth twitched. “They’re circling. Hearing things.”

“They would,” Marleau said. “They don’t like not knowing.”

“No,” Ilya agreed. “But they don’t know about this yet. Not officially.”

Marleau wanted the raunchy details about Ilya and Shane, but he could tell in this moment that as one weight was lifted off his chest, another landed there, and he needed a friend now more than a gossip session. He leaned forward again, eyes steady. “When you’re ready, people will meet you where you are, Roz. They always do.”

Ilya let that sit for a moment, then reached for his phone again, this time pulling up his agent’s contact. He typed slowly, deliberately.

Can you draft something for me? Simple. Honest. I want to say it myself.

He sent it before he could second-guess himself.

“There,” he said softly. “That’s done.”

Marleau smiled. “Good.” as he reached out for Ilya’s hand.

The room fell into a comfortable quiet after that, the kind that only came when nothing urgent needed to be said. Marleau talked for a while about the flight, about the weirdness of airports now, about small, ordinary things that felt grounding in their normalcy. Shane listened, chiming in occasionally, the two of them finding an easy rhythm that surprised Ilya with how much it didn’t hurt.

At one point, Marleau stood and stretched. “I’m going to grab a coffee,” he said. “Hospital coffee is terrible, but tradition matters.”

“I’ll come with you,” Shane said automatically, glancing at Ilya. “I’ll be right back.”

Ilya nodded, watching them leave together, a strange, gentle warmth settling in his chest. When the door closed behind them, he leaned back and stared at the ceiling, letting the day wash over him.

He wasn't going home. Not yet.

The treatment was about to get harder. The next few days would be brutal. He knew that now, with a clarity that no longer frightened him as much as it had that morning.

But Marleau had come. Ottawa had welcomed him. Shane was here. Yuna and David would be back later. The world, somehow, was still reaching for him even as it asked him to stay put.

When Shane and Marleau returned, coffee in hand, the room felt fuller than it had in weeks.

Marleau set his cup down and looked at Ilya, expression open and sincere. "You look wasted, kid. Close your eyes. I am here for another day, you'll have time to tell me about you and Hollander yet."

Ilya laughed and looked at Shane, "Could you get a nurse, actually. I think I could use some pain meds to help me sleep." This is an admission Shane never thought he would hear from Ilya when they were alone, never mind in front of a teammate. Maybe telling Marleau the truth freed up space in Ilya's body and mind to be brave and vulnerable in other ways.

He closed his eyes for a moment, letting that truth settle into his bones, and for the first time since the morning rounds, the weight on his chest eased just enough to breathe.

Tomorrow would come with needles and drugs and side effects he wasn't ready for. But today—today he had the people who stayed.

And that mattered more than anything.

Chapter 16

SHANE

The gym was the only place Shane didn't feel like he was failing at something.

Here, effort had rules. You lifted the weight or you didn't. You ran until your lungs burned and then you stopped. There were no charts, no margins of error, no doctors watching a screen and deciding whether the day was good or catastrophic. Pain showed up honestly and left when you earned it. Sweat meant progress. Exhaustion meant you'd done something right.

He stayed longer than usual, cycling through sets without much thought, letting muscle memory take over while his mind finally loosened its grip. The clang of plates, the dull thud of shoes on rubber flooring, the steady rhythm of his breathing — all of it reminded him that his body still knew what to do, even if the rest of his life felt unrecognizable.

When his phone buzzed, he ignored it.

When it buzzed again, he finished the set anyway.

The third buzz pulled him out of the fog. He leaned forward, hands braced on his knees, sweat dripping down his spine as he checked the screen, already bracing himself for something to be wrong. Bad news had learned how to find him fast.

Ilya: When you get back, I want to take you on a date.

Shane stared at the message.

Then he laughed — a sharp, startled sound that earned him a look from the guy on the next treadmill. He didn't care.

A date.

He wiped his face with his towel and reread it, then read it again, just to be sure exhaustion hadn't invented it.

He typed back.

Shane: You're messing with me.

The reply came immediately.

Ilya: I'm not. I've been approved. I'm serious. Don't argue.

Approved.

The word landed heavy and electric all at once. Approved meant doctors. It meant paperwork. It meant someone had looked at Ilya's chart and decided this was safe enough to allow. It meant outside.

Shane typed again.

Shane: I'm on my way back. Do not move. Also you don't get to ask someone on a date while they're doing leg day.

Ilya: I do what I want.

Shane finished the workout in a blur after that, barely registering the rest of it. He showered fast, changed faster, and was out the door with damp hair and his heart beating too hard for someone who'd already done cardio.

When he walked into Ilya's room, the shift was immediate.

Ilya was sitting up, hoodie on, eyes bright in a way Shane hadn't seen in days — not forced, not brave, just genuinely bright. A black SnapBack sat backwards on his head, low enough that it didn't hide the baldness, just framed it. The effect hit Shane square in the chest.

"Hi," Ilya said, like he wasn't completely derailing Shane's ability to form thoughts.

Shane stopped short. "You cannot do that to me."

Ilya blinked innocently. "Do what?"

"That," Shane said, gesturing vaguely. "The hat. The look. This is supposed to be a medical outing."

Ilya grinned. "It's a date."

Shane crossed the room and leaned down, pressing their foreheads together. "You look insanely hot in a SnapBack."

Ilya laughed, the sound easy and unguarded. "That's not what the nurse said."

As if summoned, the nurse stepped in with a clipboard and an expression that suggested she'd already decided how this was going to go.

"Ah," she said. "The date."

Ilya brightened. "You said it first."

She ignored him completely and turned to Shane. "Rules."

Ilya groaned. "We know the rules."

"No, you know the rules," she said, pointing at him. "He needs to hear them too so he can enforce them when you start pretending you're invincible."

“I am invincible,” Ilya muttered.

She leveled him with a look. “You had holes drilled into your hips yesterday.”

“Allegedly...and it wasn’t yesterday.”

“Wheelchair in the vehicle,” she continued. “Mask on at all times outside. No indoor public spaces. No crowds. No heroics. If you feel dizzy, nauseous, weak, or ‘a little weird,’ you come straight back.”

Ilya crossed his arms. “You’re ruining the romance.”

“I am keeping you alive,” she shot back. “You’re welcome.”

Shane bit his lip to keep from laughing.

She turned to him. “And you — if he gives you trouble—”

“I will rat him out immediately,” Shane said without hesitation.

Ilya gasped. “Betrayal.” That word in his Russian accent, combined with the hat, had Shane’s body in overdrive.

The nurse smiled, satisfied. “Good. Enjoy your date.”

When the automatic doors slid open and real air rushed in, Shane felt it hit him almost as hard as Ilya did. Warm, unfiltered, alive. Ilya tipped his head back slightly in the wheelchair, breathing in like his lungs had forgotten this was an option.

“Outside,” Ilya murmured.

Shane swallowed. “Yeah.”

He helped him into the car carefully, checking the seatbelt twice, adjusting the line, folding the wheelchair into the back. The whole time, he was acutely aware of how thin the line was between this moment and the hospital room waiting for them.

They drove with the windows cracked, music low and familiar. Shane headed toward the lake without asking. Ilya didn’t question it.

At the park, the water stretched out wide and calm, the kind of quiet that didn’t demand anything. Shane wheeled Ilya along the path until they found a bench overlooking the lake and sat beside him, close enough that their shoulders touched. He rested his hand on Ilya’s knee without thinking. Shane realized that the day his mom sat them down to talk privacy and plans, he really had meant that he didn’t care. Having this moment with Ilya after so many hard ones this month would not be ruined by the fear of being found out. The park was quiet, and most who passed were wrapped up in their own worlds. He was able to just relax and sit with his boyfriend, enjoying the way the sun hit his beautiful eyes like it had at the cottage before their world changed.

For a while, they just sat there, watching the water move.

Then Ilya turned to him.

“Hey,” he said softly. “How are you doing?”

Shane answered automatically. “Great. This is a good day.”

Ilya didn’t smile. He studied him, head tilted slightly. “That’s not what I meant.”

Shane exhaled slowly.

“I haven’t really asked,” Ilya continued. “And I should have. So... how are you?”

The question landed heavier than Shane expected. He stared out at the lake for a moment, the honesty pressing up against his ribs.

“I’m okay,” he said finally. “Most of the time.”

“And the rest of the time?” Ilya asked gently.

Shane swallowed. “I don’t sleep great.”

Ilya’s hand tightened slightly over his. “Because of here?” He said motioning his other hand around Shane’s head.

“Because of the helicopter, that whole night” Shane said quietly.

Ilya’s breath hitched. “Oh.”

“I know you don’t remember it,” Shane went on. “Or not much of it. But I do. And sometimes when I close my eyes, I’m still there.”

Ilya turned fully toward him now, eyes shining. “I’m sorry.”

Shane shook his head. “You don’t have to be. It’s just... strange. The worst night of my life is one you barely remember. The rest has been easier on me, because you’re alive, here in front of me. But I didn’t know that it would turn out this way when it was all happening then.”

Ilya leaned into him, forehead resting against Shane’s shoulder. “I wish I could take that from you.”

“I know, I wish I could take this from you too” Shane said, kissing the top of his hat. “But today helps.”

Ilya smiled faintly. “Good.”

They sat like that until Ilya’s phone buzzed.

He frowned and glanced down at the screen.

“It’s my agent,” he said.

Shane’s chest tightened instinctively. “Okay.”

Ilya unlocked the phone, eyes scanning quickly — and then he went still.

Shane watched the shift, the moment the date gently paused, reality stepping back in.

“What is it?” Shane asked.

Ilya looked up at him, something steady and serious settling into his expression.

“He’s got the statement ready,” he said. “Ottawa approved it.”

The lake rippled quietly in front of them.

And just like that, the world began to widen again.

The phone felt heavier in Ilya’s hand than it should have.

They sat on the bench by the lake with the water moving slowly in front of them, the afternoon sun warming the backs of their shoulders, and Shane could feel the date holding its breath around them. Not ending. Not breaking. Just pausing, the way music does when someone lifts a needle and you know it’s going to drop again somewhere important.

“Do you want to read it out loud?” Shane asked quietly.

Ilya nodded, then hesitated. “You read it first.”

Shane took the phone, eyes moving slowly, carefully, the way he’d learned to read medical updates—one line at a time, no skipping ahead. The statement was longer than the first draft Shane had seen earlier, fuller now, shaped with intention. It explained the move to Ottawa in calm, steady language, thanked the Centaurs organization for their discretion and support, and acknowledged the diagnosis plainly without leaning on it for drama. It thanked the Raiders for ten years that had made Ilya who he was, ten years that had given him memories and friendships and a home he wasn’t discarding even as he stepped away from it.

And then there was the ending.

I still have cups to win. I just need to win this battle first.

Shane handed the phone back with hands that felt suddenly unsteady. “It’s strong,” he said. “It sounds like you.”

Ilya exhaled slowly. “That’s what I wanted.”

“You sure you’re ready?” Shane asked, not as doubt but as care.

Ilya looked out at the lake for a moment before answering. “I don’t think there’s ever going to be a perfect time,” he said. “But this feels honest. And I don’t want people to hear it from

somewhere else.”

Shane nodded. “Okay.”

They sat with the decision for a while, neither of them rushing it, letting the weight settle without panic. Shane was acutely aware of how rare this felt—to make a choice together in the open air, without alarms or interruptions, without someone hovering with a clipboard.

“Before we do anything,” Ilya said suddenly, turning toward him with that familiar thoughtful tilt of his head, “will you take the picture now?”

Shane blinked. “Now?”

“Yeah,” Ilya said. “Before it turns into a thing. Before I start overthinking it.”

Shane stood, stepping back a few feet, lifting his phone instinctively. “Okay. Just... stay there.”

Ilya adjusted the SnapBack slightly, still worn backwards, the brim framing his face without hiding the baldness. The breeze moved gently across the water and through the grass, and for a second Shane forgot how to breathe.

“You know,” Shane said, trying and failing to sound casual, “this look is criminal.”

Ilya smirked. “I told you.”

“You look like the guy everyone secretly hopes sits next to them on a plane,” Shane continued. “Mysterious. Dangerous.”

“Dangerous,” Ilya echoed dryly. “I’m in a wheelchair.”

Shane grinned. “Still hot.”

Ilya rolled his eyes, but his smile softened as he turned back toward the lake, shoulders relaxing. Shane didn’t ask him to pose. He didn’t ask him to smile. He just waited until Ilya looked peaceful, until the lines of pain and effort eased out of his face for a moment, and then he took the picture.

When he showed it to Ilya, the reaction was quiet.

“That’s me,” Ilya said softly. “That’s who I want people to see.”

They left the park not long after that, the energy gently draining out of Ilya in the way Shane had learned to recognize. It wasn’t dramatic. Just subtle—shoulders slumping slightly, voice going quieter, the brightness dimming at the edges.

On the drive back, Shane kept one hand on the wheel and one resting lightly on Ilya’s thigh, grounding them both. They didn’t talk much. They didn’t need to.

“I don’t feel great,” Ilya said suddenly, voice small.

Shane was already pulling over, hazard lights flashing. “Okay. I’ve got you.”

Ilya barely made it to the bag before vomiting, his body folding in on itself with the effort. Shane stayed steady, one hand braced at his back, the other holding the bag, murmuring soft nonsense that wasn’t meant to be heard so much as felt.

When it passed, Shane handed him water, wiped his mouth gently with a napkin, and waited.

“I’m sorry,” Ilya whispered.

Shane shook his head. “Don’t be.”

Ilya leaned back against the seat, exhausted. “Still worth it.”

Shane smiled, something warm and fierce rising in his chest. “Best date I’ve ever been on.”

Back at the hospital, the doors closed behind them with familiar finality, but it didn’t feel like a trap the way it usually did. It felt like a return. Shane wheeled Ilya back to the room, signed him in, answered the nurse’s questions with the easy confidence of someone who had learned the system quickly.

“How’d it go?” she asked, glancing between them.

Ilya smiled faintly. “We didn’t break any rules.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I don’t believe it.”

When they were finally alone again, Shane pulled the couch out into the narrow bed without being asked. Ilya watched him with a tired smile.

“Can we...?” Ilya asked quietly.

“Already doing it,” Shane replied.

Ilya shifted carefully from the hospital bed to the pull-out, curling into Shane’s side with a soft sigh as Shane wrapped himself around him. It felt different here—lower to the ground, less clinical, closer to something that resembled home. He wasn’t attached to anything, for one night he was able to be held without fear of bumping monitors or tubes. It felt better than anything else he had felt that day. Shane pressed his lips to Ilya’s forehead and held him, feeling the steady warmth of him, the fragile but stubborn reality of his presence.

“Okay,” Ilya murmured. “Let’s do it.”

Shane reached for the phone, opening Instagram and pulling up the photo from the park. They worked on the caption together, word by word, Shane reading aloud while Ilya adjusted phrasing, tightened sentences, softened others. It took time. They argued gently about tone, about how much to share, about where gratitude belonged.

In the end, it read like this:

I know there have been many questions about my recent, sudden signing. This summer, I was diagnosed with cancer. Treatment began immediately, and while the road is harder than I hoped, I'm surrounded by an incredible medical team and a lot of love.

I'm grateful to the Ottawa Centaurs organization for their discretion and support during this time, and for allowing me the chance to be closer to my doctors and to the life I'm building in Canada.

To the Raiders — thank you for ten unforgettable years. You shaped me as a player and as a person, and I will always be proud of what we built together.

I still have cups to win. I just need to win this battle first.

Thank you to everyone who has reached out with kindness and love. I feel it all.

Shane read it one last time, voice quiet. “You ready?”

Ilya nodded, eyes shining. “Yeah.”

Shane posted it.

They lay there afterward, phones set aside, the world reacting without them having to watch it happen. Shane kissed the top of Ilya's head, slow and lingering, and Ilya curled closer, breathing evening out as exhaustion finally claimed him.

Outside, the sun slipped lower.

Inside, they held each other and let the truth exist.

Chapter 17

ILYA

Dr. Ross arrived like he always did—without ceremony, without drama, carrying a coffee he absolutely should not have been drinking this close to patient care and wearing the same faintly amused expression that suggested he had already seen whatever today was going to throw at him and decided it wasn't winning.

"Well," he said, clapping his hands together softly as he stepped into the room, "I hear you escaped yesterday." He said it as if he hadn't been the guy to put in the approval after seeing Ilyas not so subtle meltdown.

Ilya opened one eye and looked at him. "Temporarily."

Ross grinned. "That's how I prefer my patients. Rebellious, but compliant."

Shane huffed from the chair beside the bed. "He followed every rule."

Ross looked impressed. "That's disappointing. I was hoping for at least one incident involving security."

Ilya smiled weakly. It took more effort than it should have.

Ross pulled his chair up and sat, coffee carefully placed out of kicking distance. "How are we feeling this morning?" Ilya was always grateful for the way Dr. Ross spoke to him. Ilya spoke Russian, Dr. Ross spoke doctor, but they both spoke in the same tone and humor, until a more tender approach was needed. Dr. Ross cared about him very much, and Ilya felt that in a way that didn't need words.

Ilya considered the question honestly. "Exhausted. Like my body is made of wet sand."

Ross nodded. "Ah. Classic Rozanov."

Shane shot him a look. Ross raised a finger. "I say that affectionately."

He leaned forward then, the humor settling into something steadier, more deliberate. "Okay. Jokes aside. We're at the point where we need to talk about next steps, and I want to do that before we start so nothing feels like a surprise."

Ilya nodded, bracing himself.

Ross folded his hands together. "The induction chemotherapy knocked the disease back, but not far enough. That tells us two things. One, this leukemia is stubborn. Two, it responds—but it needs more pressure."

"More aggressive," Ilya said quietly.

“Yes,” Ross replied easily. “More aggressive.”

He didn’t soften it. That was one of the reasons Ilya trusted him.

“This next round is called re-induction,” Ross continued. “Different drug combination. Higher intensity. The goal is still remission. That hasn’t changed.”

Ilya watched his face carefully, searching for cracks. There weren’t any.

“But,” Ross added, “this part is harder. Physically. You can expect deeper fatigue, more nausea, more weakness. Your counts will drop again, probably lower than last time. Infection risk goes up, so we lock things down a bit more.”

Shane shifted beside him. Ilya felt it without looking.

Ross kept going, voice calm and measured, like he was explaining a complicated play. “You may feel foggy. Sounds might feel louder. Light can get irritating. Food may become less interesting than drywall. Emotionally, things can swing. None of that means anything is wrong. It means the drugs are doing their job.”

“How soon?” Ilya asked.

Ross glanced at his watch. “We can start later today.”

Ilya exhaled slowly.

Ross smiled at him. “I won’t pretend this is going to be fun. But I will tell you this: you handled the first round with more grit than most. And you didn’t quit when it didn’t go the way you wanted. That matters.”

Ilya nodded once. It was all he had in him.

Ross stood, gathering his things. “I’ll see you later today when we start. Between now and then—eat if you can, sleep if you can, and enjoy the fact that you were outside yesterday. That counts for something.”

After he left, the room felt quieter.

Shane reached for Ilya’s hand, squeezing gently. “You okay?”

Ilya nodded again. Talking felt heavier now. Like every word had to be dragged up through his chest.

Later that afternoon, the infusion began.

The nurses moved efficiently, the choreography familiar now—lines checked, pumps programmed, labels verified out loud. The clear fluid slid into his vein without ceremony, indistinguishable from saline, from anything else that had come before. Ilya watched it drip and tried not to assign meaning to every sensation in his body.

At first, it wasn't dramatic.

A dull heaviness settled into his limbs, like gravity had been turned up slightly. His mouth tasted faintly metallic. His stomach rolled, not enough to be alarming, just enough to be uncomfortable. He closed his eyes and focused on breathing, on the sound of Shane shifting quietly nearby, on the hum of the room.

By evening, the fatigue deepened.

Not tired—heavy. Like his bones had absorbed water and were dragging him down into the bed. Lifting his arms felt like work. Keeping his eyes open felt optional. The room blurred at the edges, sound stretching and warping slightly, voices arriving a fraction of a second after lips moved.

Shane spoke less. He seemed to understand that conversation required energy Ilya no longer had. He also didn't know what to say.

That night, sleep came in fragments.

He drifted in and out, pulled under by exhaustion and yanked back up by nausea, by the need to shift his position, by the sensation that his skin no longer fit quite right. At some point, he realized he was shaking—not violently, just enough to notice—and Shane's hand was there immediately, grounding, steady.

Morning came without clarity.

The light felt too bright. The monitors too loud. The smell of disinfectant crawled into his nose and stayed there. When a nurse spoke to him, the words took too long to make sense, like they were being translated through water.

His stomach twisted sharply, warning him only seconds before it happened.

The bag appeared. Someone held it. He retched until his throat burned and there was nothing left to give.

Afterward, he lay back covered in sweat, chest heaving, eyes watering, every nerve buzzing like it had been scraped raw.

This was worse.

He knew it immediately.

His thoughts came slower now, trudging instead of running. When he tried to sit up, the room tilted violently and he had to close his eyes to keep from blacking out. His skin felt hypersensitive—sheets too rough, air too cold, touch both comforting and overwhelming all at once.

Shane's face hovered in and out of focus, worry etched deep now, no longer hidden behind jokes or optimism.

Ilya wanted to reassure him.

He couldn't find the words.

Everything hurt—not sharply, not in one place, but everywhere at once, like his body was protesting the invasion on a cellular level. The machines around him clicked and hummed and beeped, the sounds layering on top of each other until it felt like too much.

Time stretched.

Minutes felt like hours. Hours folded into something indistinct.

At some point, he realized he was crying—not from pain exactly, but from the sheer effort of existing inside a body that no longer cooperated. The tears slid sideways into his hairline, unnoticed until Shane wiped them away gently.

This was what Ross had meant.

This was the part where the fight became visible.

And it had only just begun. Time stopped behaving like time sometime after midnight.

It didn't move forward so much as it folded in on itself, moments stacking unevenly, slipping past each other without order. Ilya drifted in and out of consciousness, pulled under by exhaustion so deep it felt structural, like it lived in his bones now, like it had replaced something essential. When he surfaced, the room was never quite the same twice. Sometimes it was dim and quiet, machines breathing softly for him. Other times it was brighter, fuller, voices hovering just out of reach, as if he were listening from underwater.

He was aware, distantly, of hands on him—checking lines, adjusting blankets, wiping his mouth when nausea took over again without warning. The world came to him in fragments. A nurse's calm voice counting breaths. Shane's hand on his arm, grounding, familiar. Yuna's fingers brushing his hairline, careful where there was no hair anymore, as if muscle memory still needed somewhere to land.

At some point, someone checked his phone.

He wasn't sure who at first. He only knew because he heard names spoken softly near him, like offerings, like anchors meant to hold him in place.

"Marleau texted again," Yuna said gently. "He says he's thinking of you. Says to tell you to keep fighting."

Ilya smiled faintly, though his eyes didn't open. It took too much energy to make his face cooperate.

Coach Wiebe's name came next, read aloud carefully, the words warm and steady. Supportive without pressure. Proud without expectation. Others followed—teammates, former teammates, numbers he didn't immediately recognize but somehow knew belonged to people who mattered.

Someone read comments from his post.

Not all of them. Just the good ones. The kind ones. The ones that didn't ask questions or speculate or demand hope. The ones that simply said we're here, in a hundred different ways.

"You have no idea how many people are rooting for you," Shane murmured at one point, voice close to his ear.

Ilya wanted to answer. He wanted to say he could feel it, even here, even like this. But the effort of forming words felt insurmountable, and the moment slipped past him again.

When he woke next, the room was quieter.

The light was softer. Evening, maybe. Or morning. He couldn't be sure.

David was there.

Not hovering. Not pacing. Just sitting in the chair beside the bed, hands folded loosely in his lap, posture relaxed in a way that felt intentional. Like he was trying very hard not to take up space, even though his presence filled the room.

Yuna and Shane were gone.

Ilya noticed the absence immediately, even through the fog. It felt different when they weren't there—lighter in some ways, heavier in others. He shifted slightly, the movement sending a wave of nausea rolling through him, and David was on his feet instantly.

"Easy," David said softly, one hand hovering, careful not to overwhelm. "You're okay. They just stepped out for a bit."

Ilya nodded, throat tight. "Sorry," he whispered. His voice sounded wrong to his own ears. Thin. Fragile.

David shook his head, eyes already shining. "You never have to apologize for this."

Ilya swallowed hard. It took effort. Everything did.

"I... I feel like I broke your lives," he said quietly. The words came out before he could stop them, dragged up from somewhere deep and heavy. "Everything changed so fast. You didn't ask for this."

David sat back down, closer now, his chair angled toward the bed. "Ilya," he said gently, but firmly, "look at me."

Ilya forced his eyes open.

David's face was soft, open in a way that felt almost unbearably kind. "You didn't force anything," he said. "Life happens. This is just... the hardest part of it."

Ilya shook his head weakly. "Shane—we had plans. And now he's just here. All the time."

David smiled, a sad, proud curve of his mouth. “Do you know what you did when you came into our lives?”

Ilya blinked slowly.

“You changed our son,” David continued. “Not by asking him to give anything up. By bringing out parts of him we always hoped he’d find.”

Ilya felt tears sting behind his eyes, hot and unwelcome.

“You made him softer,” David said. “Braver in the ways that actually matter. You gave him someone he could be fully himself with. That’s not a burden. That’s a gift.”

“I don’t feel like a gift right now,” Ilya whispered.

David leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. “That’s because you’re in the middle of something terrible,” he said. “Not because you’re failing.”

Silence stretched between them, thick but not uncomfortable. The machines hummed quietly, indifferent.

“I love you,” David said then, without hesitation, without qualifiers. “Not as an extension of Shane. As you. You are another son to me.”

The words cracked something open in Ilya’s chest.

“I don’t know how to do this,” he admitted, voice breaking. “I don’t know how to be this sick and still be... me.”

David reached out, placing his hand gently over Ilya’s. His touch was warm, grounding. “You don’t have to know,” he said. “You just have to keep going. We’ll do the rest.”

Ilya’s eyes filled despite his efforts to keep them clear. “I wish my mom was here,” he whispered.

The words hung in the air, fragile.

David’s breath caught audibly.

“Oh, Ilya,” he said, voice breaking as he stood and leaned closer, his hand tightening around Ilya’s. “I know.”

Ilya turned his face slightly, tears slipping sideways into the pillow. “I just—sometimes I want her,” he said. “Not because of the cancer. Just because.”

David nodded, his own tears falling freely now. “I lost my mom young too,” he said quietly. “Not the same way you had to, but... too soon. And I can tell you this—she would be so proud of you.” What David left out, is that his mother lost her own battle to this same disease decades earlier. Memories that weighed heavily on him anytime he was in this room, but he didn’t dare let Ilya or his family carry that burden.

Ilya shook his head faintly. “I didn’t do anything.”

David smiled through tears. “Not for trophies. Not for goals or contracts or cups. She’d be proud of the man you are. The way you love. The way you fight without becoming hard.”

Ilya closed his eyes, the words washing over him like something warm.

“You’re not alone,” David whispered. “Not here. Not ever again.”

When Yuna and Shane returned later, they found David still sitting there, his hand resting gently on Ilya’s, both of them quiet, both of them breathing a little easier.

And even as the drugs worked their way deeper into Ilya’s body, even as the night stretched long and uncertain ahead of him, that truth stayed.

He was not alone.

The night didn’t end so much as it thinned.

Darkness lightened around the edges, the room shifting from deep shadow to a gray-blue that made everything feel unreal, like he was waking up inside a photograph. Ilya drifted in and out again, awareness coming in short, shallow waves. Each time he surfaced, something felt different—not dramatically, not in a way that immediately screamed danger, just off. His body had developed a language of discomfort over the last few weeks, and this was a new dialect.

He was hot.

Not feverish in the obvious way, not shaking or sweating through the sheets, just a deep, internal heat that didn’t match the coolness of the room. The blankets felt heavier than they should have, pressing him down. When he tried to shift his legs, the effort sent a sharp pulse of dizziness through his head, forcing him to stillness again.

Someone took his vitals.

He heard it more than he saw it—the familiar beep, the soft curse under a nurse’s breath that was immediately swallowed and smoothed into professionalism. A blood pressure cuff tightened around his arm, harder than usual. Fingers pressed at his wrist, then his neck. A thermometer slid under his tongue.

“Just a moment,” a voice said gently.

Ilya tried to respond, to say something coherent, but his mouth felt thick and uncooperative, his tongue heavy. He managed a nod instead, the movement making the room tilt alarmingly. He closed his eyes until it passed.

When he opened them again, Shane was there.

He hadn’t noticed him arrive, but the relief was immediate and instinctive, like his body had been waiting for him. Shane stood close to the bed, jaw tight, eyes scanning the room in a

way that told Ilya he'd already clocked that something wasn't right.

"You okay?" Shane asked quietly.

Ilya tried to answer, but the words came out wrong. Slurred. Thin. "I feel... weird."

Shane's hand was on his arm immediately, steady and warm. "Okay. You're okay. They're checking."

Another nurse entered. Then another.

The room grew busier, louder, the air filling with motion and quiet urgency. Words floated past him—temp's up, neutropenic, draw cultures—phrases that should have meant something but didn't quite connect. He felt hands on him again, more purposeful now. Another IV line. Blood drawn. The sting of a needle he barely registered.

"Ilya," someone said, close to his face. "Can you take a deep breath for me?"

He tried. It felt shallow, unsatisfying, like his lungs were only filling halfway. His chest ached with the effort.

Shane squeezed his hand. "I'm here."

The heat in his body intensified, a slow burn that made his skin feel too tight. Sweat beaded at his temples, slid down his neck. His heart seemed to be working harder than it should have been, thudding heavily against his ribs.

"I don't feel good," he murmured again, the phrase worn thin from repetition but still the truest thing he had.

"I know," Shane said softly. "I know."

Dr. Ross arrived not long after.

Ilya recognized him more by energy than sight at first—the way the room subtly reoriented around him, the way conversations tightened and focused. Ross leaned over the bed, eyes sharp now, humor tucked carefully away.

"Hey," Ross said, voice calm but serious. "I'm here."

Ilya tried to smile. He wasn't sure if his face obeyed.

Ross spoke to the nurses, to the chart, to the numbers on the monitors, his questions precise and quick. Antibiotics were ordered immediately, broad-spectrum, no waiting. Fluids followed. Oxygen. More blood work.

"This can happen," Ross said, leaning closer so Ilya could hear him. "Your immune system is basically offline right now. Any infection, even a small one, can hit harder and faster. We're on it."

Ilya nodded weakly, trusting him without question. Trust was easier than thinking.

Shane hovered, silent now, eyes never leaving Ilya's face. Yuna and David appeared in the doorway briefly, faces etched with worry, but they didn't come all the way in. There were too many people already. Too much happening.

Time fractured again after that.

The fever climbed. His thoughts scattered, slipping away before he could catch them. At some point, he became aware of being moved—bed rolling, ceiling lights passing overhead in a slow, disorienting pattern. The sounds changed. Louder. Sharper. More machines.

ICU.

The word landed distantly, like it belonged to someone else.

Hands worked efficiently around him, practiced and quick. Lines were adjusted, monitors connected, alarms silenced almost as soon as they sounded. Someone explained things to him, or maybe to Shane, or maybe to both of them, but the words blurred together.

"We're moving him for closer monitoring."

"He's stable right now."

"This is precautionary."

No visitors.

Those words cut through the fog with startling clarity.

Shane's face swam into view, closer than before, eyes bright with something that looked dangerously like fear.

"I'll be right outside," he said, voice steady in a way that felt deliberate. "I'm not going anywhere."

Ilya wanted to tell him not to worry. Wanted to apologize again. Wanted to say something meaningful, something worthy of the moment.

All he managed was a faint squeeze of Shane's fingers.

Then Shane was gone.

The room felt enormous without him.

The lights were brighter here. The air colder. The machines louder, more insistent. Every sound felt amplified, every sensation sharper. His body shook intermittently, tremors rippling through him without warning. His teeth chattered, then stopped. The fever burned, then dipped, then surged again.

Faces came and went, some familiar, some not. They spoke in calm tones, but their movements were brisk, purposeful. More medications flowed into his veins, cool and relentless. His heart raced, then slowed. His breathing grew shallow, then steadied with assistance.

At some point, exhaustion pulled him under completely.

When he surfaced again, the world felt even narrower.

He couldn't tell how much time had passed. Minutes? Hours? A day? His thoughts moved sluggishly now, like they were wading through mud. He was dimly aware of pain—diffuse, all-encompassing—but it felt far away, muted by drugs and fatigue.

He wondered, briefly, if Shane knew what was happening.

He wondered if Yuna was crying.

He wondered if David was pacing.

The thoughts drifted away before they could settle.

The last thing he registered clearly was a nurse's voice, gentle but firm, saying his name, asking him to squeeze her hand, to stay with her.

He tried.

The room faded.

And somewhere beyond the walls of the ICU, people waited for updates they weren't allowed to receive yet, clinging to fragments of information and the fragile hope that this was just another hurdle, another brutal chapter in a fight that wasn't finished.

Not yet.

Chapter 18

ILYA

The ICU was not a place you arrived so much as a place you were fed into.

Nothing about it asked permission. The lights were too bright, the sounds too sharp, and everything felt closer than it should have been. Machines didn't hum politely here—they spoke constantly, a layered language of alarms and beeps and soft mechanical breathing that never fully faded into the background. Even when he closed his eyes, Ilya could feel them watching him.

He came to in pieces.

Not waking, exactly. Surfacing. Awareness sliding back into him like something reluctant to return. His body felt wrong—too heavy and too light at the same time. Hot, but shivering. The sheets were damp against his skin, and every movement felt delayed, like his muscles were responding to instructions that had been given minutes ago.

“Ilya.”

The voice cut through the fog cleanly.

He cracked an eye open and saw Dr. Ross at the foot of the bed, coffee nowhere in sight now, sleeves rolled slightly like he'd been here long enough to stop pretending otherwise. He didn't look rushed. He didn't look worried. He looked... present.

“You're awake,” Ross said. “That's a good sign.”

Ilya tried to respond. The word stuck halfway out, his tongue thick and uncooperative.

Ross waited.

“Hi,” Ilya finally rasped.

Ross smiled. “Hi.”

Ilya squinted at him. “Why... are there so many noises?”

Ross glanced around. “Because your body is being dramatic.”

Ilya huffed weakly. “Rude.”

Ross stepped closer, resting a hand on the bed rail. “You're in the ICU. That's not because you're dying. It's because your immune system took the week off and we don't like surprises.”

Ilya closed his eyes again, absorbing that. “Shane?”

“Outside,” Ross said immediately. “Yuna and David too. They’re getting updates. They’re not allowed in yet, which I know is annoying.”

Ilya nodded faintly. Relief moved through his chest like something physical.

Ross leaned in slightly. “Okay. I’m going to explain what’s happening, and you’re going to stop me when I lose you. You can rest your eyes while I bore you.

Ilya opened one eye again. “You lost me before you started.”

Ross laughed quietly. “Fair.”

He straightened a little, slipping into doctor mode without losing the thread of humanity. “Your white blood cells are basically nonexistent right now. That’s expected with this chemo. When you don’t have an immune system, bacteria that normally live quietly inside you can get bold and cross into your bloodstream.”

Ilya frowned. “They… escaped?”

“Yes,” Ross said. “They escaped.”

“Rude,” Ilya repeated.

“Extremely,” Ross agreed. “So when you spiked a fever, we didn’t wait. We assumed infection and treated first, asked questions later.”

Ilya’s brow furrowed. “You’re talking too fast.”

Ross paused. “Am I?”

“Yes.”

Ross sighed and smiled. “Okay. Simpler.”

He held up one finger. “Your immune system is asleep.”

Two fingers. “Bacteria threw a party.”

Three fingers. “We shut it down with strong antibiotics.”

Ilya blinked slowly. “Better.”

Ross nodded. “You’re on IV antibiotics. Broad-spectrum. We took blood cultures, urine cultures, line cultures. We’re waiting to see exactly who the culprit is, but we don’t need to know that yet to treat it.”

Ilya swallowed. His throat felt thick, like it didn’t belong to him. “Am I… bad?”

Ross shook his head. “You’re sick. Not unstable. That’s an important difference.”

Ilya squinted. “You promise?”

Ross met his gaze evenly. “I don’t lie to patients. Especially not the toughest ones.”

Ilya accepted that.

Time slipped again after that.

He drifted in and out, awareness thinning and thickening unpredictably. Sometimes he woke to nurses adjusting lines, speaking quietly over him like he wasn’t quite there. Other times he woke to Ross’s voice, steady and unhurried, narrating just enough to keep him grounded.

“This medication will make you sleepy, don’t fight it kid, you’ve earned the rest.”

“We’re adjusting your fluids.”

“Your oxygen looks good.”

Each sentence felt like a handhold.

At one point, the fever surged again.

It came on fast, heat flooding his body so suddenly it felt like his skin might split. Then the chills followed, violent and uncontrollable, his teeth chattering hard enough to hurt. He curled instinctively, but the movement made him dizzy, the room tilting sharply.

“Scared” Ilya managed to push out.

“Hey, I know” Ross said, suddenly closer. A firm hand settled on Ilya’s shoulder, anchoring him. “We are good here. I’ve got you, buddy.”

The nurses moved quickly, layering warmed blankets, pushing medications. Someone called out numbers. Someone else responded. The choreography was efficient, practiced.

Ilya clung to Ross’s voice.

“This is the fever spiking,” Ross said calmly. “It feels awful. It’s not dangerous. We’re treating it.”

“I feel like I’m dying,” Ilya muttered.

Ross nodded. “I know, but we won’t let that happen.”

The world blurred again.

When he surfaced next, his head felt heavy, his thoughts sluggish, like they were moving through mud. He noticed oxygen tubing at his nose now, the soft hiss accompanying each breath.

“Am I... breathing wrong?” he asked weakly.

Ross appeared at his side like he’d been summoned. “You’re breathing fine. This just makes it easier.”

Ilya frowned. “I don’t like it.”

Ross smiled. “Nobody does.”

Later—how much later, he couldn’t tell—Ross returned with a clipboard and that look that meant information had arrived.

“We have preliminary culture results,” Ross said.

Ilya squinted. “You’re doing the thing again.”

Ross paused. “What thing?”

“The words,” Ilya said. “Too many. My brain is borscht.”

Ross laughed under his breath, grateful that Ilya could still be funny. Even doctors needed doses of levity and hope. “Right. Sorry.”

He leaned in again. “We know it’s bacterial. Likely from your gut. Common with this chemo. We’re already treating it correctly.”

Ilya nodded slowly. “So... still not my fault.”

Ross smiled. “Still not your fault.”

The fever eased gradually after that—not gone, but less aggressive. The shaking stopped. The heat receded to something manageable. The room felt quieter, like the edge had dulled.

Ross leaned against the counter, arms crossed loosely. “This part is boring,” he said. “And boring is very good.”

Ilya exhaled. “I like boring.”

“You once told me the opposite” Ross said. “But I won’t fight you on it today. Today you rest.”

Ilya closed his eyes, exhaustion deep but no longer panicked.

“Ilya, You’re doing exactly what you’re supposed to be doing,” Ross added softly. “Nothing more. Nothing less.”

Ilya managed a faint smile. “Good. Because I don’t have extra energy to give.”

”I know” Ross said empathetically. Ilya could feel Ross’ gloved hand on his now, gently rubbing his thumb soothingly over his. Ilya wondered if Dr. Ross had kids, because this felt more paternal than medical in a way that Ilya hadn’t seen from him before.

At some point, his words stopped working.

Not all at once. Not dramatically. They just... fell away. Language became something that existed around him instead of inside him, voices arriving without the ability to shape a

response. He could still hear. He could still feel. But the effort it took to translate thought into sound felt impossible, like trying to shout through water with no air left in his lungs. He wasn't sure he could even do it in Russian at this point.

The fever climbed again.

This time it didn't announce itself politely. It surged, fast and consuming, heat flooding his body so thoroughly that it felt like he'd been wrapped in fire and ice at the same time. Sweat soaked the sheets beneath him, then chills ripped through hard enough to make his muscles seize. His teeth chattered violently, jaw aching with the effort of it, his body shaking despite the layers of blankets pressed down on him.

He knew, dimly, that people were moving faster now.

Shoes squeaked. Machines beeped sharper, more insistent. Numbers were called out—heart rate, blood pressure, oxygen saturation—but they didn't mean anything to him anymore. They were just sounds. Everything was just sound.

He focused on breathing.

In. Out.

The oxygen hissed softly at his nose, cool and steady, a small mercy in the chaos. His chest felt tight, like it didn't quite want to expand fully, but the air still came. That mattered.

A hand pressed firmly to his chest.

“Ilya.”

Dr. Ross.

The voice cut through the noise more clearly than anything else, steady and anchored. Ilya couldn't open his eyes. He didn't trust them not to roll back or blur into something frightening. But he could hear Ross, and that was enough.

“I know you're tired,” Ross said close to his ear. “You don't have to answer me. Just listen.”

Ilya listened.

“This is the peak,” Ross continued. “This is the hardest part of the infection. Your body is under a lot of stress right now, but you're still here. You're still fighting, even if it doesn't feel like it.”

The shaking worsened briefly, a wave of chills tearing through him so hard it knocked the breath from his lungs. Someone adjusted the blankets. Another IV line was flushed. Medication burned cold through his vein, spreading outward like frost.

“I know it feels like too much,” Ross said, his voice unwavering. “But you're doing exactly what you need to do. You're letting us carry you through this.”

Ilya wanted to nod. Wanted to acknowledge that he heard him. His body refused.

That was okay. Ross didn't need proof.

"Fuck," Dr. Ross said in a tone Ilya had never heard, "let's increase his pain meds and sedate him, he doesn't need to feel anymore of this". Ilya couldn't tell if it was him that had enough, or Dr. Ross.

The world narrowed further after that. His awareness shrank to sensation alone—heat, pressure, the dull ache everywhere at once. The bed felt enormous, then impossibly small. His skin felt wrong, hypersensitive, every touch amplified, every sound arriving a half-second too late.

Time fractured completely.

He didn't know how long he lay there with Ross's hand anchoring him to the present, with nurses coming and going, with medications pushed and adjusted and rechecked. He didn't know if it was hours or minutes or something in between. He only knew that the effort of staying conscious felt monumental, like standing upright in a storm with no shelter.

At some point, Ross spoke again, softer now.

"You're doing great Rozanov. I'm going to give you a bit of a sedative to help you rest again. I'll make sure you're good, you just close your eyes."

The words settled into Ilya slowly, sinking deeper than the rest.

Rest.

He focused on that. Not on tomorrow. Not on remission. Not on contracts or seasons or promises. Just staying. Just making it through the next breath, and then the next one after that.

The fever broke in fits and starts, dipping just enough to give him false hope before surging again. His heart raced, then slowed. His breathing grew shallow, then steadied. The machines adjusted around him, relentless and precise.

Ross never left, and Ilya wondered if he did this with all of his patients.

Even when he stepped away briefly, his presence lingered in the room, a certainty that someone competent was still watching, still steering. When he returned, he spoke quietly to the nurses, checked the monitors himself, adjusted plans with the kind of confidence that didn't need to be loud.

"I'm right here," he told Ilya again, sensing the way his body tensed even in semi-consciousness. "You're not alone."

Ilya drifted again, awareness thinning to a thread.

In one of the last clear moments he had, he became acutely aware of how quiet his own thoughts had become. There was no panic now. No fear sharp enough to cut. Just exhaustion so deep it felt like it might pull him under for good if he let it.

The night stretched long and uncertain, the outcome unwritten, the edge of it still sharp. There were no reassurances offered now, no promises about morning. Just careful monitoring, relentless treatment, and the quiet understanding that this was the line he had to hold.

Ross leaned close one last time, voice low and steady.

“Keep fighting, Roz” he said. “Get through tonight. We are working hard, I need you to work hard too.”

Ilya couldn’t answer.

But somewhere deep inside, beneath the fever and the drugs and the bone-deep fatigue, something stubborn and familiar held on.

The machines continued their watch.

The night did not yet release him.

And no one knew—not even Dr. Ross—how he would make it through to morning.

Chapter 19

SHANE

Shane learned the sound of his own breathing sometime around four in the morning. Sitting in a hard plastic chair outside the ICU, legs stretched out in front of him, hands clasped so tightly his fingers ached, it became the only thing he could reliably track. In. Out. Slow it down. Don't let it run away from you.

The night had been a series of half-formed updates delivered through closed doors.

Fever still high.

Blood pressure holding.

Antibiotics on board.

Still critical, but stable.

Each phrase landed like a weight, heavy but survivable, until the next one came along. Shane hadn't slept. He hadn't even come close. Every time his eyes drifted shut, his brain replayed fragments of the worst moments—the helicopter lights reflected in glass, Ilya's voice slurring his name, the way his body had gone frighteningly still when the fever spiked. He'd learned quickly that sleep was not an option tonight. He's not sure he's had a full night's sleep since the cottage.

Yuna sat beside him, her hand wrapped around his forearm, thumb moving in slow, repetitive strokes the way she used to do when he was a kid and couldn't settle. David paced the hallway in short loops, stopping every few minutes to check the clock or glance toward the nurses' station like the doors might suddenly open if he watched hard enough.

No one spoke much. There was nothing left to say.

When Dr. Ross finally appeared, it was just after dawn.

Shane saw him before he heard him—recognized the purposeful stride, the familiar posture that somehow always conveyed both urgency and control. Ross stopped in front of them, hands on his hips for a brief moment, and Shane stood so quickly his chair scraped loudly against the floor.

Ross smiled faintly. It wasn't wide. It wasn't celebratory. But it was real.

"He made it through the night," Ross said. Shane could see that Ross was exhausted too.

He felt the words hit him physically, like a release valve opening somewhere deep in his chest. His knees went weak enough that he had to grab the back of the chair to steady himself.

Yuna let out a soft, broken sound that might have been a laugh or a sob. David closed his eyes and pressed his fingers briefly to his forehead, shoulders sagging.

“It was a long one,” Ross continued, tone measured. “It got a little touch and go, but we threw a lot at him and he handled it like a champ. Multiple antibiotics, fluids, medications to control the fever. It took time, but the fever finally broke early this morning.”

Shane swallowed hard. “Is he—”

“He’s stable,” Ross said. “Exhausted. But stable.”

The word felt like oxygen.

“We’re going to move him to a different section of the ICU,” Ross went on. “One that allows limited visitation. One person at a time. Full gowning. Mask, gloves—the whole deal. His immune system is still essentially nonexistent, so we’re careful. If I’m being completely honest, I’m not sure he survives this twice.”

Shane nodded, terrified, already agreeing to anything.

“When his counts recover and we’re confident the infection is under control,” Ross added, “we’ll move him back to the oncology ward to finish treatment.”

“When?” Yuna asked quietly. It felt unfair that after all of this, the job wasn’t done.

Ross didn’t rush the answer. “Days. Weeks maybe. Not today. But we’re moving in the right direction.”

That was enough.

A nurse appeared to escort Shane first. Ross caught his arm lightly before he followed.

“Shane—” Ross said, lowering his voice, “he’s been fighting really hard, and he was scared in there. What you see might be more difficult this time. Don’t let that scare you.”

Shane nodded. “I won’t.” he lied.

He followed the nurse through a series of doors, each one opening only after another closed, the air changing subtly with each threshold. He scrubbed his hands until they burned, pulled on the gown, adjusted the mask. He tried to slide gloves over shaking hands, and a nurse stepped in when she saw him struggle. “Thank you” he said tenderly as a tear that had been sneaking up on him rolled down his face. The nameless, maternal looking nurse swept the tear away gently, hand lingering a little longer on his face as if she was proactively comforting him before he even stepped in the room. By the time he was ready, his heart was pounding so hard he could hear it in his ears.

The nurse opened the door and stepped aside.

Shane went in alone.

Ilya was asleep.

That was the first thing Shane noticed—not the machines, not the wires, not the unfamiliar room—but the fact that he was sleeping deeply enough that he didn't stir when Shane entered. His face looked slack with exhaustion, lashes resting against pale skin, mouth slightly open. It was the kind of sleep that came only after something had taken everything you had to give.

Then Shane took in the rest of him.

The lines. The monitors. The soft, relentless chirp of machines that never slept. Oxygen tubing curved over his ears and disappeared beneath his nose, fogging faintly with every shallow breath. IV pumps stood in a tight cluster beside the bed, tall and watchful, their screens glowing steadily, each one quietly measuring time, dosage, survival. There were so many. Clear lines traced pale paths into his arms, taped down with practiced precision, as if even his veins needed supervision now.

His arms hands looked thinner, bones more pronounced beneath skin that no longer seemed to fit right. His shoulders, once broader and instinctively protective, sloped inward, as though cancer had finally convinced them to give up. He still had muscle, though Shane knew they wouldn't work right now. His chest rose and fell, but not with ease; it looked like work, like every breath had to be negotiated for and then carefully spent.

His skin carried a grayish pallor Shane hadn't seen before, not quite lifeless—just drained, sickly. As if color itself had been pulled out of him slowly, day by day, by exhaustion so deep it had reached the bones. Even the warmth Shane associated with him seemed muted, dulled by fluorescent light and sterile air.

He looked smaller in the bed, swallowed by white sheets and plastic rails, reduced by the space around him. Familiar features were still there, unmistakably his—but quieter somehow, worn thin at the edges.

He looked like a shell of himself. Whatever had once filled it so effortlessly now felt fragile, flickering, as though it might vanish if Shane looked away for even a second.

Shane stood there for a long moment, just breathing, just orienting himself to the reality that Ilya was alive, that his chest rose and fell steadily beneath the blankets, that the worst of the night had passed. The relief was sharp enough to hurt. He cried.

He moved closer, careful not to disturb anything, and took the chair beside the bed. He didn't touch Ilya at first. He just sat there, letting his eyes trace familiar features now rearranged by illness and exhaustion.

"You scared the shit out of me," Shane whispered, voice muffled by the mask.

Ilya didn't respond. He slept on.

Shane finally reached out, resting his gloved hand lightly on Ilya's forearm. The contact grounded him immediately, tethered him to the moment in a way nothing else could.

"You did it," he murmured. "You made it through."

He leaned back in the chair, exhaustion crashing into him now that there was room for it. His body ached in places he didn't remember injuring. His eyes burned. But he didn't look away. He couldn't.

This moment was the proof he'd been holding out for all night.

Alive. Still here.

And Shane loved him so fiercely in that instant that it felt almost unbearable, like his chest might split open under the weight of it.

Shane stayed quiet when the door closed behind the nurse.

The room felt different now that the crisis had passed, even if the evidence of it still surrounded them. The alarms were less insistent, the movement less urgent. Everything had shifted from reaction to vigilance. That alone felt like a victory, though a fragile one.

Ilya slept on.

It wasn't the restless, half-conscious sleep Shane had seen over the last few days, where pain and medication tugged him back to the surface every few minutes. This was deeper. Earned. The kind of sleep that came after a body had spent every available resource just to keep going and finally, mercifully, shut down to recover.

Shane let himself look properly now.

Not cataloguing lines or monitors this time. Not bracing for the next alarm. Just looking at him.

Ilya's face was thinner, yes, but there was something peaceful there that hadn't been present before. The tightness around his mouth was gone. The constant furrow between his brows had smoothed out. Even the way his thinner hands rested on the sheets—loose, unguarded—felt like a small miracle. Whatever battle had raged through the night had left him emptied, but still here.

Shane leaned back in the chair, finally allowing the exhaustion to reach him. It settled into his bones slowly, heavily, like something that had been waiting its turn. His body ached from holding itself together for too long, from being alert every second, from never letting his guard drop even when there was nowhere left to direct it.

He didn't mind the pain.

It meant he was still standing.

His gaze drifted back to Ilya, and the thoughts came unbidden, softer now, less frantic than they had been all night.

There had been a moment—just one—when Shane had wondered if this was the price of loving someone like this. If choosing a life that mattered this much meant accepting the

possibility that it could all be taken away without warning. He hadn't liked the thought, but it had lodged itself anyway, sharp and uncomfortable.

Sitting here now, watching Ilya breathe, the answer felt clearer.

It was worth it. He was worth it. They were worth it.

Shane shifted forward slightly, lowering his voice even though no one else was there to hear him.

"You don't know how close I came to breaking last night," he murmured. "Not because I don't trust you. Because I love you."

He paused, letting the words exist without explanation.

"I've spent most of my life believing that if I trained harder, prepared better, stayed disciplined, I could control the outcome. That effort was the answer to everything. And then you get sick, and none of that matters."

His eyes burned, but he didn't look away.

"I can't fix this for you. I can't take a shift. I can't bargain or muscle my way through it. All I can do is stay."

He stayed silent for a moment, listening to the quiet rhythm of the room.

"And I will," he added. "Every time."

Shane thought about the future in smaller pieces now. Not seasons or years or milestones. Just moments stacked carefully on top of each other. A walk down the hall without a nurse. A meal that stayed down. A night where sleep didn't come with fear attached to it. Each one felt precious in a way it never had before.

He let himself imagine Ilya waking up later, groggy and confused, annoyed by the machines and the rules and the fact that his body refused to cooperate. He could already hear the complaints, dry and familiar, and the image brought a faint smile to his face.

"That's how I'll know you're really okay," Shane said quietly. "When you start giving everyone a hard time again."

The chair creaked softly as he adjusted his position, careful not to make noise. He reached out, resting his hand on the edge of the mattress—not touching, just close enough to feel grounded by the proximity.

"You're still you," he said. "Even like this. Especially like this."

The room held steady around them. No alarms. No footsteps rushing past the door. Just the quiet work of recovery beginning, slow and unremarkable in the way all the most important things seemed to be.

Shane didn't know how long he sat there after that.

Long enough for the tension in his shoulders to ease. Long enough for the future to feel possible again—not easy, not guaranteed, but reachable. Long enough to believe that the worst of this chapter might actually be behind them.

When Ilya stirred slightly in his sleep, a small sound escaping him, Shane leaned forward instinctively, ready to be whatever was needed next.

Chapter 20

Shane

A week later, the ward felt like a victory.

Not a loud one. Not the kind with banners or speeches or relief that made you dizzy. This was a quiet, earned victory—the kind that came with IV poles and yellow gowns and nurses who smiled a little wider when they saw him back where he belonged.

Shane noticed it the moment the doors opened.

The oncology floor smelled different than the ICU. Less clinical. The beeping was softer here, more polite. Machines still existed, still mattered, but they didn't dominate the air the same way. There were windows. Actual daylight. A sense that time still moved forward instead of circling endlessly in place.

Ilya lay in the bed as they wheeled him in, thinner than he had been a month ago, paler, unmistakably worn—but alive in a way that felt sturdier now. Not fragile. Just... spent. Like someone who had gone ten rounds with something much bigger than him and was still standing, even if his legs were shaking.

“Well look who decided to rejoin the land of the living,” a nurse called from the desk as they passed.

Ilya turned his head slightly, eyes half-lidded but sharp enough to catch the voice. “You missed me,” he said hoarsely.

“We absolutely did not,” she shot back, already walking toward them with a grin. “You’re a terrible patient.” She said reaching out for his hand.

Shane smiled despite himself.

That had been missing upstairs. The banter. The normalcy. The feeling that Ilya wasn't just a crisis to manage but a person people had opinions about.

Another nurse leaned into the room not five minutes later, hands on her hips. “You know,” she said, “the ICU nurses were very proud of themselves. Took all the credit, as if we haven't been keeping your stubborn ass alive for a month.”

Ilya squinted at her. “Yeah, how'd that work out for you?”

“Ha. We have ways to end you if we wanted to. This one wasn't on us!” she said cheerfully.

Shane laughed out loud, the sound surprising even him.

Ilya huffed weakly. “Keeping me alive is the bare minimum... do better.” He was joking of course. These nurses were starting to feel like a Hollander-grade family to him.

The energy here was different. Still serious. Still careful. But lighter. The staff checked lines, adjusted monitors, reviewed medications with the quiet efficiency of people who had been doing this for years—and who had clearly noticed his absence.

“Back in your usual spot,” someone said. “Try not to redecorate with bodily fluids this time.”

“No promises,” Ilya replied.

Shane leaned against the wall, watching it all with a strange mix of relief and disbelief. A month. Over a month since they’d walked into this hospital thinking it would be a few weeks at most. A month of rooms blurring together, of days measured in labs and fevers and waiting. And now—this.

Not freedom. Not yet.

But ground.

Ilya slept a lot that day.

Not the unconscious, medicated sleep of the ICU, but real sleep—the kind that came and went in waves, punctuated by brief, groggy conversations and sips of water. Shane stayed with him, stretched out on the pull-out bed with his shoes kicked off, one eye always on Ilya even when exhaustion tugged at him too.

Coach Wiebe arrived that afternoon with a knock that felt almost polite for a hospital room.

He stepped inside with the same careful confidence Shane had seen a thousand times behind the bench — aware of the space, respectful of it, but not afraid of it. His eyes went immediately to Ilya, taking him in without flinching, without pity.

“Hey,” Wiebe said. “Good to see you back upstairs.”

Ilya cracked one eye open. “I hear that’s a good sign.”

“It is,” Wiebe replied. “Means you scared the ICU nurses enough.”

Ilya huffed a weak laugh.

Wiebe pulled a chair up and sat, elbows resting loosely on his knees. “I won’t stay long. Just wanted to see you with my own eyes.”

Shane hovered instinctively near the window, half-present, half-invisible in the way he’d learned to be when hockey people were around. He was used to it by now — the quiet recalibration of where he stood in rooms like this.

Wiebe noticed him anyway.

Not with surprise. Not with suspicion. Just a brief, acknowledging glance, the kind that said I see you, and then nothing more.

“We’re excited to have you when you’re ready,” Wiebe said, eyes back on Ilya. “No rush. No expectations. You show up however you can.”

Ilya nodded slowly. “I will.”

There was a pause. Ilya glanced toward Shane, then back to Wiebe, something thoughtful crossing his face.

“I should probably say—” Ilya began.

Wiebe held up a hand, stopping him gently.

“Not my business,” he said. “And I don’t care.”

He said it easily. Not dismissively. Not dramatically. Just... fact.

The room seemed to exhale.

Ilya blinked, then smiled. “Okay.”

Wiebe stood, satisfied. “Get better. That’s the job right now.”

He nodded once to Shane on his way out — not a warning, not a question, just a quiet acknowledgment — and then he was gone.

The door closed softly behind him. He had driven two hours to check in for two minutes. Ilya felt safe with him in more ways than one already.

Shane turned toward Ilya slowly, something fragile and surprised blooming in his chest. “That... went well.”

Ilya nodded, eyes thoughtful. “Maybe more people will be like that.”

“Maybe,” Shane said.

For the first time in a long while, it didn’t feel like wishful thinking.

The afternoon passed quietly. Nurses in and out. Medication schedules reviewed. Shane helped Ilya sit up for a few minutes at a time, steadying him when the dizziness hit, easing him back down when his energy ran out. It was slow work. Careful. Intimate in a way neither of them commented on.

This was what fighting looked like now.

Not heroics. Not bravado.

Just staying.

Late in the day, Dr. Ross appeared in the doorway without fanfare, hands in his pockets, expression relaxed in a way Shane hadn’t seen before.

“Thought I’d check in now that you’re back upstairs,” Ross said.

Ilya was awake, propped up slightly against the pillows, eyes clearer than they’d been in days. “You stalking me now?”

Ross smiled. “Occupational hazard.”

Shane took the hint and stood, stretching. “I’m going to grab a coffee. I’ll be right back.”

Ilya glanced at him, then nodded. “Okay.”

Shane left quietly, closing the door behind him.

Ross pulled the chair closer and sat.

“You did well,” he said simply.

Ilya swallowed. “I don’t remember most of it.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Ross replied.

They sat in silence for a moment, the kind that didn’t need filling.

“Was it scary for you?” Ilya asked quietly.

Dr Ross took a deep breath, “it’s not your job to take care of me Rozanov”. Ilya gave him a look that told him that answer wasn’t going to be accepted. So he continued, “There are a lot of scary nights doing this job, but they are worth it for a happy ending.”

Then Ilya spoke, voice softer. “Thank you.”

Ross looked at him.

“For staying,” Ilya continued. “It helps. A lot.”

Ross hesitated, then reached out and took Ilya’s hand in his—firm, steady, undeniably human. It was a rare thing. Intentional.

“You don’t get through nights like that alone,” Ross said quietly. “Even if it feels like it. And I’ve gotta tell you, it’s an honor being in your corner with this family of yours.”

Ilya nodded, eyes stinging unexpectedly.

Ross cleared his throat, withdrawing his hand and standing. “You’ve grown on me, Rozanov.”

Ilya smiled faintly. “That’s very unfortunate.”

“Yeah,” Ross said, lips twitching. “I might even tolerate being a Centaurs fan when this is all over.”

Ilya laughed—a weak sound, but real. “I’ll probably owe you season tickets by then.” “Hmmm,” Ross began, “do you think you could get Shane to give me Metros tickets instead?” They laughed. Real laughs.

When Shane came back, coffee in hand, he found Ilya smiling in a way he hadn’t seen in weeks.

“What did I miss?” he asked.

Ilya looked at him, tired and pale and unmistakably still fighting—but trying. “Nothing important”. Today had been a good day.

Chapter 21

ILYA

The second week back on the ward didn't stay easy, but it stopped feeling like every day might end in catastrophe.

Treatment continued without mercy. The chemo still carved through him methodically, stripping energy, appetite, and patience in equal measure. The nausea lingered like a low-grade threat, never fully gone, always waiting to see if he'd misjudge a meal or a sip of water. His muscles felt hollowed out, strength replaced with something softer and less reliable. Sleep helped, but it didn't restore. Nothing did. Bone pain was something he read on a paper, but couldn't understand until he felt it in his body. He had bone bruises and breaks through his career, but this was different. It felt like a deep, relentless ache buried inside the bone, as if pressure were slowly building from the inside out, never sharp enough to escape but awful enough to be impossible to ignore.

Still, this was different.

The worst part was behind him. He knew that in his bones.

The infection had taken something out of him that he wasn't sure he'd ever fully get back, but it had also shifted the terrain. Everything since then felt quieter. Less frantic. Like the world had stopped screaming and settled into a hard, relentless whisper instead.

The days found a rhythm again.

Morning vitals. Bloodwork. Rounds. Dr. Ross appearing with his clipboard and his steady voice, checking labs and asking questions that assumed Ilya would still be here tomorrow. Nurses rotated through with a familiarity that felt earned now, some of them openly admitting they'd been watching his chart when he was upstairs.

"Don't scare us like that again," one of them said as she adjusted his IV.

"I wasn't planning on it," Ilya replied. He realized now that he had had some kind of impact on the people who had gotten to know him.

She smiled. "Good. You're exhausting."

Shane was there through most of it.

Always close, even when he wasn't directly beside the bed. Sitting on the pull-out scrolling absently through his phone. Standing by the window pretending to stretch while watching Ilya's reflection in the glass. Moving without being asked—handing him water, adjusting pillows, grounding him when the dizziness hit too hard.

Shane had changed. There was a steadiness to him that Ilya had only ever seen on the ice. It showed in the way Shane stayed still instead of scrambling, listened instead of fixing, carried the weight without needing to be told how. Ilya realized he had almost watched him grow up, watched a boyfriend who once loved urgently become a partner who loved deliberately.

For the first time, Ilya felt himself loosen his grip. He didn't have to lead or protect or hold everything together for them. He could surrender a piece of control and simply be supportive, trusting it would be safe in Shane's hands.

He had loved Shane before. But this version—steady, capable, fully present—this was deeper.

And he really fucking loved him even more now.

It anchored him more than any medication ever could.

Yuna's birthday had been circled on the calendar weeks ago.

Ilya had insisted.

He'd noticed the date during one of the endless afternoons where time slowed enough for details to matter. He'd asked Shane casually at first, pretending it was nothing. When Shane answered too quickly, Ilya knew he hadn't forgotten either.

They'd planned it quietly.

Nothing flashy. Nothing public. Just something that acknowledged that Yuna had shown up every single day without hesitation, without complaint, loving him as fiercely as she loved her own son. She never made it about herself. Never asked for recognition. Never left. Most importantly, she supported Shane, who needed it as much as Ilya did. Maybe more. Ilya had thought many times throughout this journey that the only thing worse than battling cancer would be having to watch Shane do it.

Ilya wanted to give her a gift that meant something.

That was when Shane had disappeared for a day.

He'd told everyone he was working with a trainer. A long session. Conditioning. Nothing unusual. Ilya hadn't questioned it—he trusted Shane implicitly by now—but something about the way he avoided eye contact before leaving had stuck with him.

When Shane came back that night, exhausted in a way that had nothing to do with training, Ilya knew.

"You went to Boston," Ilya said quietly.

Shane froze mid-step.

"...Maybe."

Ilya stared at him. “You flew to Boston.”

Shane sighed. “Okay. Yes. I flew to Boston.”

Ilya blinked. “You flew across the country. In the middle of chemo. While I was in the hospital.”

“I was gone for less than twenty-four hours,” Shane said defensively. “And you were asleep for most of it.”

“You went to my house,” Ilya said.

Shane nodded. “The one you’re going to sell anyway. I figured... if I didn’t do it now, I might not get another chance.”

Ilya felt something press hard against his ribs.

He didn’t ask what Shane had taken. He already knew. Shane was like this. He was a great active listener, and months ago Ilya recalled telling him about a gift he would love to give to Yuna one day. He knew he had made that happen for her when he was not able to.

The day of Yuna’s birthday arrived quietly.

No announcements. No fanfare. Just a cake from the hospital café—slightly crooked, too sweet, iced in pale yellow. Shane stuck candles into it unevenly, and one of the nurses pretended not to notice while humming a quiet version of “Happy Birthday.”

Ilya managed a few bites.

The cake tasted artificial and perfect. Shane watched him like he was witnessing a magic trick.

Later, when the room had cleared and the energy softened, Shane pulled a small velvet box from his pocket and handed it to Ilya to explain.

His eyes welled up just holding the box again, and the words evaded him, so instead he simply said “this is for you.” and handed it to her.

Yuna frowned, confused, as she opened it. She hadn’t expected to receive anything from anyone today, especially not Ilya.

Inside was a delicate gold bracelet.

Simple. Fine. Almost fragile-looking at first glance. A thin chain with a small, worn charm attached—barely noticeable unless you knew to look for it.

Ilya swallowed.

“My mom wore that every day,” he said quietly. “She never took it off. Not once.”

Yuna's breath caught audibly.

"I remember playing with it as a child. It was always there, with her, when things felt out of control at home. I don't have much of her left. But that—" His voice faltered slightly. "That always felt like home."

Yuna stared at the bracelet like it might disappear if she breathed wrong.

"Oh," she whispered.

"I wanted you to have it," Ilya said. "You've brought me that comfort. And I know you do the same for Shane. I couldn't think of anyone else it belonged with."

Tears spilled freely then.

Yuna crossed the room without hesitation and wrapped her arms around him carefully, minding lines and soreness, holding him with the kind of fierce gentleness that came only from being a mother. She cried openly, shoulders shaking, one hand pressed over the bracelet clutched to her chest.

"This—" she tried, then stopped. "This is too much."

"No," Ilya said softly. "It's exactly right."

She pulled back just enough to cup his face, eyes shining. "You have no idea what this means to me."

"I think I do," Ilya replied. And then he said something that meant more to Yuna than any gift, even this one. "Happy birthday, Yuna. I love you". It was said through happy tears.

Yuna was too emotional to speak, but he always knew she loved him too, and the next hug said everything she couldn't in that moment.

That night, after the lights dimmed and the ward settled into its familiar hush, the weight of what came next returned quietly.

The biopsy had gone smoothly. As smoothly as it ever did. The soreness lingered, deep and dull, but manageable. The samples were already gone, already being examined, already deciding things without his input.

Tomorrow, they would have results.

Tomorrow, the path ahead would either widen—or narrow again.

Ilya lay back against the pillows, Shane's hand warm and steady in his, and let himself exist in the present without trying to outrun it.

Chapter 22

ILYA

The waiting was worse than the biopsy.

That still surprised him. He had thought the pain would be the hardest part—the deep, aching soreness in his hips afterward, the way it lingered when he shifted or tried to sit up too quickly. Pain, at least, was something he understood. Pain had edges. Pain obeyed rules. It showed up, demanded attention, and eventually faded into something tolerable.

Waiting just sat there.

The morning stretched on in a way that felt intentional, like the hospital itself knew what they were waiting for and had decided to be cruel about it. The room was quiet except for the low hum of machines and the occasional shuffle of feet in the hallway. Ilya lay propped up against the pillows, blanket pulled up to his waist, his body still tired in a way that felt permanent now, even on a good day.

Shane sat on one side of the bed, close enough that their arms touched. Yuna stood on the other, her hand warm and steady in Ilya's. She had put the bracelet on that morning without comment, the thin gold chain resting against her wrist like it had always belonged there.

Ilya's thumb found it instinctively.

He didn't think about doing it. He just did. The small, familiar motion—rolling the charm back and forth, feeling the smoothness worn into the metal over decades. It was the same way he used to fidget with it as a kid, sitting beside his mom on the couch, half-listening to her talk about her day. Back then, it had been unconscious too. Comfort coded into muscle memory.

Yuna noticed.

Her grip tightened slightly, just enough to let him know she felt it too.

Shane noticed a second later, his free hand coming up to rest on Ilya's forearm, grounding him from the other side. The contact boxed him in gently, held him in place when his thoughts wanted to scatter.

When Dr. Ross knocked, all three of them startled anyway.

"Come in," Shane said, voice too quick.

Ross stepped inside with his usual clipboard tucked under one arm, coffee in hand—real coffee this time, not the sad hospital kind. That alone felt like a sign. He didn't look tense. He didn't look careful. He looked... amused.

Ilya clocked it immediately.

Ross closed the door behind him and leaned back against it instead of coming straight to the bed.

“Well,” he said, dragging the word out a little. “I was hoping all three of you would be here.”

Yuna inhaled sharply.

Shane’s fingers tightened.

Ilya’s thumb stilled against the bracelet.

Ross grinned. “Relax. If this were bad news, I’d already be sitting down.”

There was a beat of silence.

Then Shane laughed—one sharp, disbelieving sound that came out before he could stop it. Yuna let out a shaky breath that sounded suspiciously like a sob. Ilya just stared at Ross, heart suddenly pounding too hard, too fast.

“Okay,” Ilya said hoarsely. “Say the words. Use small ones.”

Ross laughed, pushing off the door and finally stepping forward. “I can do that. I’ve had a lot of practice with you.”

He flipped the clipboard open, but he didn’t look at it right away. He met Ilya’s eyes instead.

“The biopsy shows a significant response,” Ross said. “Not complete remission yet—but enough reduction that we’re moving in the right direction. The marrow is recovering. The blasts are down. The treatment is working.”

The words landed slowly, like snow instead of hail.

Working.

Yuna made a sound that broke straight through whatever composure she’d been holding onto and leaned forward, pressing her forehead briefly to Ilya’s shoulder. Shane covered his mouth with his hand, eyes bright and disbelieving.

Ilya felt lightheaded.

“Say it again,” he said. “But slower.”

Ross smiled. “The cancer is responding. You did not go through all of this for nothing.”

That was the moment it hit.

Shane’s hand slid fully into Ilya’s, fingers lacing tight. Yuna was crying openly now, one hand clutching the bracelet, the other resting on Ilya’s chest like she needed to feel him breathing.

Ilya laughed weakly, a sound that turned into something dangerously close to a sob. “Holy shit.”

Ross nodded. “That’s an appropriate medical reaction.”

They cried like that for a while.

Not neatly. Not quietly. Just relief spilling out in messy, unguarded ways. Shane bent forward, pressing his forehead briefly to the mattress, shoulders shaking. Yuna kissed Ilya’s hair, then his temple, then his cheek, murmuring things he couldn’t quite make out.

When the room finally settled again, Ross cleared his throat gently.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s talk next steps before you all pass out.”

Ilya wiped at his face, already exhausted from the emotional swing. “Hit me.”

“First,” Ross said, “you are not leaving today.”

Ilya groaned. “I knew there’d be a catch.”

Ross raised an eyebrow. “You just survived an ICU stay, a major infection, and aggressive chemo. We don’t just kick people out the door with a balloon and a sticker.”

Shane smiled faintly.

“We’ll keep you inpatient for now,” Ross continued. “We want to see sustained marrow recovery. Your counts need to come up and stay up. We also want to make sure the infection is fully resolved before we even think about discharge.”

“How long?” Yuna asked.

Ross shrugged lightly. “If things keep trending the way they are? Days. Maybe a week. Not months.”

That felt like another gift.

“Once you’re discharged,” Ross went on, “you’ll still be coming back frequently. Outpatient chemo. Monitoring. Labs. This isn’t the end—it’s the beginning of a longer, steadier phase.”

Ilya nodded. “I can do steady.”

“I know,” Ross said. “You’ve already proven that.”

There was a pause, then Ilya squinted at him. “You’re being very... human today.”

Ross laughed. “I contain multitudes.”

“No,” Ilya said seriously. “You’re explaining things like I’m not a medical textbook. Or you were until that word... mul-ti-tudes?”

Ross tapped the clipboard. “After several weeks of watching your face go completely blank every time I spoke, I adjusted.”

Yuna smiled through her tears. Shane snorted.

“You know,” Ilya added, “English is my second language. And hospital English is... like a third one.”

Ross nodded solemnly. “I’m proud of myself for learning how to speak to normal people.”

Ilya smirked. “Normal is generous.”

Ross closed the chart and stepped closer, resting a hand briefly on the bed rail. “You did something very hard,” he said quietly. “And you’re still doing it. Today’s news doesn’t mean we stop being careful—but it does mean you get to breathe a little.”

Ilya exhaled, long and slow, realizing he hadn’t fully done that in weeks.

Yuna squeezed his hand again, the bracelet cool beneath his thumb.

Shane leaned in, pressing a kiss to his knuckles without thinking.

For the first time in a long while, the future didn’t feel like a threat.

It felt like something waiting.

Chapter 23

SHANE

Shane loved rules.

Not in a rigid, joyless way. Not because he needed control for its own sake. He loved them because rules meant clarity. Boundaries. A known path forward when everything else felt uncertain. Rules told you what mattered, what was dangerous, what was allowed. They took chaos and gave it shape.

So when the nurse handed him the discharge packet, thick and neatly stapled, Shane felt something close to comfort.

“Okay,” he said, flipping through it immediately. “Let’s see what we’re working with.”

Ilya lay back against the pillows, watching him with an expression that hovered somewhere between amusement and exhaustion. He was dressed already—real clothes instead of a gown. Sweatpants, a soft hoodie, socks that didn’t belong to the hospital. He looked thinner than he had a month ago, paler, still undeniably tired. But he was upright. Awake. Smiling.

“Do not lift more than ten pounds,” Shane read aloud. “Avoid crowds. No raw food. Mask in public. Temperature twice daily.”

Ilya sighed dramatically. “I feel like a fragile Victorian child.”

Shane didn’t look up. “Fragile Victorian children didn’t survive infections and aggressive chemo.”

“They also didn’t have you reading their rules like bedtime stories.”

Shane glanced up then, smiling. “Lucky them.”

The nurse laughed softly from the doorway. “He’s not wrong. But he’s also not kidding. These matter.”

“I know,” Shane said immediately. “I’ve got it.”

And he did. He’d been tracking every medication, every schedule change, every warning sign for weeks now. He knew what a fever meant. He knew when nausea crossed into something worse. He knew which symptoms earned a phone call and which earned a drive straight back to the hospital.

Rules made it possible to leave.

The word leave still felt unreal.

When the paperwork was done and the final vitals were taken, the door opened wider than it had in weeks. Not for another nurse. Not for labs. For movement. Forward movement.

“Ready?” someone asked.

Ilya nodded slowly, emotion flickering across his face before he smoothed it out. “Yeah.”

The wheelchair felt symbolic more than necessary at this point—precautionary, they’d said—but Shane didn’t argue. He helped Ilya into it carefully, hands steady, movements practiced now. When he stepped back and looked at him, really looked, something tightened in his chest.

They were leaving.

The hallway was fuller than Shane expected.

Nurses stood near doorways. A few leaned against counters, pretending to check charts. Others made no effort to hide it at all. Smiles broke out as they rolled past. One clapped quietly. Another wiped at her eyes.

“Don’t be strangers,” someone called.

“As if,” Ilya said, voice rough. “You’re stuck with me.”

Shane pushed the chair slowly, deliberately, wanting to take it all in. These were the people who had carried them through the worst days. Who had learned Ilya’s rhythms, his sarcasm, his tells. Who had watched Shane hover and adapt and refuse to leave.

It felt important to acknowledge that.

At the end of the hall, Dr. Ross waited.

No clipboard this time. No charts. Just him, hands tucked into his coat pockets, expression softer than Shane had ever seen it.

“Well,” Ross said. “You look better in street clothes.”

Ilya smirked. “Low bar.”

Ross laughed. “Fair.”

Shane stopped the chair and stepped forward without thinking. He wrapped his arms around Ross and hugged him hard, sudden and unfiltered.

Ross stiffened for half a second.

Then sighed and hugged him back.

“Thank you,” Shane said quietly. “For everything. But especially... for letting us just be us.”

Ross pulled back, studying him for a moment. “You didn’t make that difficult.”

Shane swallowed. “You could have.”

“Yes,” Ross agreed. “I could have.”

There was a pause, then Ross tilted his head slightly. “Can I give you some unsolicited advice?”

Shane blinked, surprised. “Yeah. Of course.”

Ross’s expression turned serious—not clinical, but intentional.

“People who run from their own happiness,” he said, “who hide behind lies because they think it’s safer—those lies don’t disappear. They rot. They fester. They become a cancer of their own.”

Shane felt the words land heavy and unexpected.

“I watched what you two have in that room,” Ross continued. “Love. Care. Presence. That kind of thing is rare. You deserve it. Whenever you’re ready to stop hiding.”

Shane nodded slowly, throat tight. “Thank you.”

Ross smiled faintly. “Go home.”

And just like that, they did.

The drive through Montreal felt unreal. They couldn’t return to the cottage yet, too far from the hospital, but Shane’s home felt like a great consolation prize.

Shane kept both hands on the wheel, posture careful, deliberate, as if the city itself might shatter if he moved too quickly. Traffic rolled by in a familiar rhythm—buses sighing at stops, cyclists threading through gaps, pedestrians stepping confidently into crosswalks like the world had never paused for hospitals or infections or nights that nearly took everything from them.

Ilya watched it all quietly from the passenger seat.

He’d insisted on sitting up instead of reclining, even though Shane had adjusted the seat a dozen times to make sure he was comfortable. The hoodie hung looser on him now, sleeves pushed up slightly, hands folded in his lap. He looked smaller, yes, but lighter somehow too—like something heavy had finally been set down.

“You okay?” Shane asked for the third time in ten minutes.

Ilya smiled faintly. “I’m almost home. That’s pretty okay.”

Shane exhaled slowly, easing the car through a turn he’d driven a hundred times before. His neighborhood came into view—quiet streets, trees just beginning to thicken with summer leaves, balconies with doors thrown open to let the air in. It felt absurd that this place had existed unchanged while their world had been reduced to rooms and rules and waiting.

When he pulled into the driveway, neither of them moved right away.

Shane cut the engine. Silence settled around them, thick and strange.

“We don’t have to rush,” Shane said.

Ilya nodded. “I know.”

Still, he reached for the door.

Shane was out of the car in an instant, already around to help him, movements instinctive now. He steadied Ilya as he stood, arm firm around his waist, letting him lean as much as he needed without comment.

Inside, the apartment smelled the same.

Coffee. Clean laundry. Shane’s soap. The faint, comforting proof that life had been waiting for them.

Ilya stepped inside and stopped.

He just stood there for a second, eyes closing, breathing deeply like he was committing the moment to memory. Shane watched him quietly, heart lodged somewhere high in his throat.

“I forgot how quiet it is,” Ilya murmured.

“No monitors,” Shane said gently. “No alarms.”

Ilya nodded. “I like it.”

Shane helped him down the hall, past the kitchen they hadn’t used together in months, past the couch where they’d once sprawled lazily after late games and long flights. When they reached the bedroom, Ilya’s steps slowed.

Shane pulled back the covers.

Ilya sat on the edge of the bed, then lay back, sinking into the mattress like it was something sacred. He laughed suddenly—a soft, disbelieving sound—and then his face crumpled without warning.

“Oh,” he breathed.

Shane was there immediately, shoes forgotten, climbing onto the bed beside him, pulling him gently into his arms.

Ilya clutched at him like he’d been waiting to do that for weeks. Pressed his face into Shane’s chest. Breathed him in. His body shook, not with fear this time, but release.

“I can touch you,” Ilya said, voice breaking. “I don’t have to ask. Or check. Or worry.”

Shane wrapped both arms around him, holding him firmly, unapologetically. “You always could.”

“I know,” Ilya whispered. “But this is different.”

They lay there tangled together, limbs awkward at first as Shane adjusted carefully around sore spots, around lingering weakness. He learned the new contours of Ilya’s body gently, reverently, as if reacquainting himself with something precious.

Ilya tucked his head under Shane’s chin, fingers curling into his shirt. “I missed this,” he said simply.

Shane pressed a kiss into his hair. “Me too.”

They stayed like that for a long time.

No schedules. No interruptions. No one watching the clock.

When Ilya finally shifted, stretching slightly, Shane tensed automatically.

“I’m okay,” Ilya said quickly, smiling. “Just... happy.”

Shane laughed quietly, brushing his thumb along Ilya’s cheek. “You’re allowed to be.”

Ilya looked up at him then, eyes bright and tired and full of something fierce. “We made it.”

Shane nodded. “We did.”

Outside, the city went on living. Inside, wrapped in quiet and warmth, Shane held the man he loved in his own bed and let himself believe—really believe—that this was the beginning of something gentler.

Not easy.

But theirs.

Chapter 24

ILYA

A month after leaving the hospital, Ilya no longer felt like he was constantly on the verge of disappearing.

That alone felt like a miracle.

His body was still far from right. Weak in ways that embarrassed him when he thought about the man he had been before. Slow. Heavy with medication that dulled the sharp edges of pain but softened everything else along with it. He tired easily, sometimes just from standing too long at the counter or showering without sitting down. His muscles had not forgiven him yet. His lungs still reminded him that breathing had once been something he'd had to consciously fight for.

But he was alive in a way that felt sturdier now.

His cheeks had filled out slightly. Not much, but enough that Shane had noticed, had pressed his thumb there one morning with a quiet smile like he was checking something off a list he'd been keeping in his head. His appetite was unreliable, but improving. He could manage real meals some days, not just the careful assembly of calories disguised as snacks. He'd started adding weight back slowly, deliberately, like rebuilding something fragile from the inside out.

His hair was trying.

That part made him laugh sometimes. He'd catch his reflection in the bathroom mirror and tilt his head, examining the soft fuzz that had begun to emerge, dark against pale scalp. Not enough to style. Not enough to hide what had happened. But proof that his body, stubborn bastard that it was, still wanted to grow.

Shane had gone back to training camp.

That had been harder than Ilya expected.

He'd known it was coming, of course. Shane's life didn't pause just because his own had detonated and reassembled itself in a hospital room. The season loomed. Conditioning, meetings, skating, early mornings and long days. Shane had been gentle about it, apologetic even, like leaving the apartment for more than a few hours required permission.

Ilya had waved him off every time.

"Go," he'd said. "Please. I don't want to be the reason you stop being who you are."

Shane had kissed his forehead like he didn't believe him, like he needed to store the reassurance somewhere safe before walking out the door.

The quiet had come after.

At first, Ilya thought he would love it.

He had fantasized about quiet for weeks while lying in hospital beds, surrounded by beeping machines and footsteps and voices that never stopped moving. He'd imagined silence like a reward. Something earned. A soft place to land after surviving something brutal.

But quiet, he learned quickly, was not the same as peace.

Quiet gave his brain too much room.

The apartment during the day felt cavernous in a way it never had before. Sounds carried oddly. The refrigerator hummed too loudly. The clock on the wall ticked with a persistence that made him irrationally angry. Even the city noise outside—traffic, voices, construction somewhere down the block—felt distant and unreachable, like life was happening just beyond a pane of glass he couldn't quite touch.

He found himself pacing.

Not restlessly, exactly. Carefully. One room to the next. Living room to kitchen. Kitchen to bedroom. Checking the same surfaces, the same windows, like something might have changed if he looked again. He would sit, then stand, then sit again, unable to settle into the stillness he had craved so fiercely.

The thoughts came when his body finally slowed.

Cancer thoughts first. Always first.

They weren't loud anymore. Not panicked. Just persistent. A quiet internal inventory of symptoms and sensations, cataloguing every ache and twinge and odd feeling. Was that new? Was that normal? Had Dr. Ross mentioned that one? He hated how reflexive it had become, how his mind had learned to scan his body like a threat map.

Then hockey thoughts.

Those hurt more now.

Watching games had been impossible so far. He tried once, a preseason scrimmage on his phone, and turned it off less than five minutes in, chest tightening with something sharp and disorienting. The sounds alone—the blades, the boards, the whistle—made his body react like it was supposed to be there. Like it had somewhere to go and couldn't.

He missed it in a way that felt physical.

Not just playing. The rooms. The routines. The locker room smells he used to complain about. The mindless repetition of drills. The way his world had narrowed to something simple and brutal and familiar.

He missed Boston too.

That surprised him.

He had loved Montreal quickly and deeply, but Boston had been home in a way that wasn't easy to replace. His house there—recently listed, painfully photographed for strangers—still lived in his mind fully intact. The light through the kitchen windows in the morning. The creak of the stairs he always meant to fix. The couch where he'd slept after bad losses, too wired to rest properly.

He wondered sometimes if he was mourning it properly, or if he was just stacking losses until they became too heavy to sort through individually.

And then there was Shane.

Shane, who felt like home and future and risk all at once.

The quiet made that complicated too.

When Shane was there, everything else receded. His presence grounded Ilya in the present, kept his thoughts from spiraling outward into every possible future at once. Without him, the questions crept closer. How long could they keep this quiet? How much longer would they have to live in halves and omissions? What did it look like to build a life together when so much of it still had to be hidden?

He hated that those questions existed at all.

Yuna and David helped.

They came over most days when Shane was gone, arriving with groceries or soup or some excuse that let them pretend they weren't there to make sure he wasn't alone. They never hovered. Never treated him like he might break if they touched him. Yuna folded laundry like she always had, chatting about nothing and everything. David sat at the table with his laptop, muttering under his breath about emails and sports scores, a quiet presence that filled the space without demanding anything from him.

Ilya was grateful in a way he didn't know how to articulate.

He hadn't realized how much he needed the noise of other people just existing nearby until it was gone.

Still, it wasn't the same.

When Shane came home, the apartment changed shape.

The quiet softened instead of pressing in. The space felt occupied in the right way, like it was doing what it was meant to do. Shane's bag hit the floor. His shoes were kicked off carelessly. He smelled like sweat and soap and cold air from the rink.

"How was today?" Shane asked one evening, voice already gentler than the words.

Ilya shrugged. "Long."

Shane nodded, understanding without asking for details. He crossed the room in two steps and pulled Ilya into him carefully, one hand warm and solid at his lower back.

Ilya breathed him in and felt something unclench.

They ended up in bed without talking about it.

Not sleeping. Just lying there at first, bodies aligned in a way that felt familiar and new all at once. Shane's hand traced slow, absent paths along Ilya's arm, over skin that still bore faint bruises and scars and reminders of what had happened. There was no urgency in it. Just curiosity. Relearning.

Ilya turned his face into Shane's neck and kissed him there, soft at first, testing. Shane responded immediately, mouth finding his, the kiss deepening with a hunger that had been waiting patiently beneath weeks of restraint.

It wasn't explicit. It wasn't desperate.

It was recognition.

Mouths learning each other again. Breaths syncing. Shane's thumb brushing along Ilya's jaw like he was grounding them both. Ilya's fingers curling into Shane's shirt, anchoring himself to the present moment where he was alive and wanted and wanted back.

They broke apart eventually, foreheads touching, both of them breathing harder than before.

"I missed you," Shane said quietly.

Ilya smiled, tired but real. "I'm right here."

And for the first time all day, the quiet didn't feel so loud.

Shane's presence changed the air in the apartment in a way Ilya hadn't fully understood until it was gone.

It wasn't that the quiet disappeared when Shane came home. The rooms didn't suddenly fill with noise or activity. The city outside didn't get louder. But the silence lost its sharpness. It stopped pressing inward, stopped demanding attention. It became something soft, something that could be shared instead of endured.

They stayed in bed longer than they should have that night.

Not because either of them had the energy for more than kissing and touching and the slow, careful exploration of mouths and hands that remembered each other instinctively. It was because neither of them wanted to be the one to break the moment. The world outside the bedroom—training schedules, medications, appointments, the relentless math of recovery—could wait a few more minutes.

Shane traced idle shapes along Ilya's ribs, stopping now and then as if committing them to memory. Ilya felt the weight of his own body differently lately, the slight hollows where

muscle used to live, the way bones pressed closer to the surface. Instead of shrinking from it, Shane treated every change like a new thing to learn, not a loss to mourn.

“You okay?” Shane murmured at one point, breath warm against Ilya’s cheek.

Ilya nodded, pressing a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth. “Yeah. Just... thinking.”

Shane smiled. “Dangerous hobby.”

Ilya laughed quietly, the sound easing something tight in his chest.

They didn’t talk about hockey that night. Or cancer. Or what came next. They let themselves exist in the present—two bodies reacquainting themselves with being close without wires or masks or rules dictating distance. Shane kissed Ilya’s temple, then his jaw, then lingered at his mouth again, slow and deliberate, like he was reminding them both that this was still allowed.

When they finally drifted toward sleep, Ilya stayed awake longer than Shane did, listening to his breathing deepen, steady and sure. The contrast between their bodies struck him suddenly—Shane strong and warm and vibrating faintly with unused energy, Ilya thinner, slower, wrapped in layers of medication and healing that dulled everything slightly around the edges.

For the first time, the difference didn’t scare him.

The next weeks settled into a fragile kind of balance.

Shane left early most mornings, careful not to wake Ilya unless he had to. Some days he slipped back in during breaks, sweaty and flushed, dropping a kiss to Ilya’s forehead before heading back out. Other days he was gone until late afternoon, training camps stretching long as the season crept closer.

Yuna and David kept coming.

Sometimes they brought food. Sometimes they brought nothing at all and just sat with him, filling the apartment with the low, comforting noise of everyday life. Yuna insisted on tidying things that didn’t need tidying. David read headlines aloud and muttered commentary under his breath like he’d always done.

Ilya learned to let them.

He learned, slowly, that independence didn’t mean isolation. That accepting company didn’t make him weaker. That quiet was something he had to re-negotiate, not reclaim all at once.

There were hard days still.

Days when his body felt heavy and unresponsive, when the medications made his thoughts feel slightly out of focus, like everything was happening half a second behind reality. Days when nausea lurked persistently, when food tasted wrong or not at all. Days when the mirror felt like an enemy again, his reflection a reminder of everything he was still rebuilding.

On those days, Shane grounded him.

Sometimes it was as simple as sitting beside him on the couch, one hand resting on Ilya's thigh, thumb moving slowly back and forth like a metronome. Other times it was Shane pulling him close in the kitchen, pressing his forehead to Ilya's and breathing with him until the dizziness passed.

"You're doing great," Shane told him often.

Ilya didn't always believe it. But he believed Shane.

The thoughts still came when the apartment went quiet again.

They came late at night or mid-afternoon when the sun hit the walls just right and there was nothing urgent to distract him. Thoughts about Boston and the house that would soon belong to someone else. Thoughts about the locker room, the smell of tape and sweat, the familiar chaos of a place where he'd always known exactly who he was supposed to be.

Thoughts about secrecy.

That one lingered the longest.

Living half a life had been manageable when it felt temporary, when it felt like something they were waiting out rather than building around. Now, with Shane back on the ice and Ilya back in the world—tentatively, carefully—the shape of that secrecy felt heavier.

They talked about it in fragments.

"I don't want to hide forever," Ilya said one evening, voice low.

Shane nodded. "We won't."

"Soon?" Ilya asked.

Shane didn't rush the answer. "When you're ready. When it doesn't feel like another thing being taken from you."

Ilya appreciated that more than he could say.

Some nights, they kissed like they were making up for lost time—slow and searching, mouths relearning each other with a tenderness that bordered on reverent. Other nights, they simply held each other, bodies aligned in the dark, Shane's arm heavy across Ilya's waist like a promise.

Each version mattered.

Each one reminded Ilya that he was still capable of wanting, of being wanted, of feeling something beyond fear and recovery.

One afternoon, a few weeks into this new version of life, Ilya stood at the bathroom mirror again, towel draped loosely around his shoulders. He leaned closer this time, studying the hair that had finally committed to growing back in earnest. Still short. Still uneven. But undeniably there.

When Shane came up behind him, wrapping his arms around Ilya's waist and resting his chin on his shoulder, Ilya smiled.

"It's coming back," Shane said softly.

"Yeah," Ilya replied. "So am I."

Shane kissed the side of his head, careful and warm. "Good."

That night, as they lay tangled together once more, Ilya let himself think about the future without immediately bracing for disappointment. He imagined training again. Not tomorrow. Not next month. But someday. He imagined walking into a locker room without the weight of silence pressing against his ribs. He imagined a life where the quiet didn't feel so loud because it wasn't hiding anything anymore.

He didn't say all of it out loud.

He didn't need to.

Shane's presence was answer enough.

For the first time since the hospital, since the infection, since the moment everything had nearly gone wrong, Ilya fell asleep without scanning his body for danger, without cataloguing fears for the morning.

The quiet held.

And it didn't hurt.

Chapter 25

SHANE

Shane knew something was wrong the second he walked into the bedroom.

Not in the sharp, alarming way he'd learned to recognize over the last few months—no pale skin, no dizziness, no tightness around Ilya's eyes that meant pain or nausea was creeping in. This was quieter than that. Smaller. The kind of wrong that lived in instinct instead of symptoms.

Ilya stood near the dresser, back half-turned, pulling a T-shirt down over his head with more urgency than necessary. The movement was quick, defensive. Automatic.

Too automatic.

Shane stopped just inside the doorway.

He didn't say anything at first. Just watched. Took in the way Ilya's shoulders hunched slightly as the shirt slid into place, the way his gaze dropped immediately to the floor instead of lifting to meet Shane's.

That—that—was new.

"I thought you were in the shower," Shane said gently, mostly to give Ilya time to breathe.

Ilya shrugged, tugging at the hem of the shirt like it wasn't sitting right. "I was. I just—" He stopped, exhaled. "Forgot my phone."

Shane nodded, but his body stayed still.

He waited.

Ilya moved past him toward the bed, careful not to brush too close. He sat, then lay back quickly, pulling the blankets up like a reflex.

Shane's chest tightened.

"Hey," he said quietly. "Can I ask you something?"

Ilya stiffened just a fraction. "Okay."

"Why do you do that?"

Ilya didn't answer.

Shane crossed the room slowly and sat on the edge of the bed, close enough that their knees touched. He didn't reach for him yet. Didn't push.

“When I walk in,” Shane continued softly, “you pull your shirt on. Like you’re trying to beat me to it.”

Ilya stared at the wall for a long moment.

“I don’t,” he said, but the protest lacked conviction.

Shane waited.

Finally, Ilya sighed, shoulders slumping. “I don’t look the same.”

Shane swallowed.

“I know that sounds stupid,” Ilya added quickly. “I know you’ve seen everything. I just—” He gestured vaguely at himself. “It’s different. And it’s not... good different.”

Shane felt something twist painfully in his chest.

“You don’t want me to see you,” Shane said, not accusing. Just naming it.

Ilya shook his head. “I don’t want you to see this.”

He finally looked at Shane then, eyes tired and vulnerable in a way that had nothing to do with treatment.

“I don’t recognize myself yet,” he admitted. “I feel... smaller. Softer. Like I disappeared and came back in the wrong body.”

Shane didn’t respond right away.

He stood.

Ilya’s eyes tracked him warily. “What are you doing?”

Shane stepped closer, stopping right in front of him. He reached out—not to touch skin, not yet—but to gently pinch the fabric of the T-shirt at Ilya’s shoulder.

“I’m taking this off,” Shane said quietly.

Ilya’s jaw tightened. “Shane—”

“I know,” Shane interrupted softly. “Just stay with me.”

He pulled the shirt upward slowly, giving Ilya every chance to stop him.

Ilya didn’t.

But he didn’t help either.

When the shirt slid free, Ilya immediately crossed his arms over his chest and turned his face away.

“I said I don’t—”

Shane leaned down and kissed him.

Not his mouth. His shoulder. Soft. Reverent. Like an apology and a promise wrapped into one.

“I know,” Shane murmured against his skin. “I hear you.”

He kissed again. The other shoulder this time. Then the curve where shoulder met collarbone, lips lingering.

Ilya’s breath hitched despite himself.

Shane moved slowly, deliberately, letting his mouth travel where his hands didn’t yet dare. Down the line of Ilya’s collarbone. Across his chest, where scars and faint shadows told the story of weeks spent fighting to stay alive.

“I love this,” Shane said quietly.

Ilya scoffed weakly. “You don’t have to—”

“I do,” Shane said firmly, lifting his head to meet Ilya’s eyes. “And I’m not going to rush you past it.”

He kissed lower.

Across skin that was softer than it used to be. Warmer. Real.

When he reached Ilya’s stomach, he paused, resting his forehead there for a moment like he was grounding himself.

“This,” Shane continued, voice low, “is the body that carried you through hell.”

Ilya’s hands trembled where they rested uselessly at his sides.

Shane’s fingers found the waistband of his pants.

Ilya tensed immediately. “Shane, I—”

Shane looked up. “Hey.”

He waited.

“I don’t want to stop you,” Ilya admitted, voice barely audible. “I just don’t know how to let you.”

Shane smiled softly. “Then don’t do anything. Just stay.”

He eased the waistband down slowly, pausing when Ilya’s breath stuttered, waiting until it steadied again before continuing. No rush. No pressure. Just patience.

By the time the pants slid free, Ilya lay back against the pillows, naked and exposed and breathing like he was bracing for impact.

Shane kissed him everywhere.

His thighs. His hips. The places that felt unfamiliar now. Each kiss a quiet affirmation, a wordless refusal to let shame take up space between them.

“I love your legs,” Shane murmured. “I love your waist. I love the way you feel under my hands.”

Ilya squeezed his eyes shut.

Shane climbed up beside him, gathering him gently, skin to skin. He pressed his mouth to Ilya’s again, slow and deep, letting the kiss speak for him.

When they finally broke apart, Shane rested his forehead against Ilya’s.

“We don’t have to have sex,” he said softly. “I don’t need anything from you.”

Ilya opened his eyes. “Then why—?”

“Because I want you to see what I see,” Shane replied. “And because I miss you.”

He kissed him once more, brief and tender.

“Come take a shower with me,” Shane said. “No mirrors. Just water. And me.”

Ilya hesitated.

Then nodded.

They stood together slowly, Shane steadying him without comment, without making it a thing. As they walked toward the bathroom, naked and unguarded, Ilya leaned into him just slightly.

And for the first time in weeks, Shane felt the spark between them settle into something warm and certain again.

Not fragile.

Just real.

Chapter 26

ILYA

Two months out of the hospital, Ilya's body no longer felt like an emergency.

That didn't mean it felt like his old body.

It meant it felt like something he was still learning how to live inside.

His hair had grown back enough that strangers didn't immediately clock him as sick anymore. Short, uneven, still thin at the temples, but undeniably present. He no longer avoided mirrors the way he once had. Some days he even forgot, for a moment, what it had looked like when it was gone entirely. His weight had crept back slowly too — a few pounds at a time, hard-won and stubborn. His cheeks were fuller. His collarbones less sharp. His jeans fit again without sliding.

Most importantly, he was upright.

He walked more now. Around the block. Down the street and back. Sometimes further, if the day was good and his energy didn't evaporate without warning. His bones still ached sometimes in a way that demanded rest, sometimes for days at a time. He learned the limits of his new stamina the same way he'd learned his old one — by listening, by backing off before his body demanded it, by forgiving himself when he misjudged.

Vertical felt like progress.

The season had started. For Shane. That was hard. But after all that they had endured, he could never resent him for it.

Still, it hurt more than he expected to not be able to do the job he loved.

Shane's schedule returned with a vengeance: early mornings, late nights, flights stacked back to back, hotel rooms that all looked the same. His recent experiences made him an even better leader in the dressing room. Sometimes the thought of Shane's teammates having no idea what he had been through that summer haunted him. They were benefiting from his growth without having to process any of the trauma that came along with it. He wondered if Shane resented him, or at the very least the experience, for that. It must feel lonely. But the rhythm of hockey reclaimed him quickly, the way it always did, and Ilya loved him for it even as it made the apartment feel hollow again.

Ilya couldn't travel with him. Not yet. Not safely.

He couldn't even go to home games.

Between the infection risk and the secrecy — the need to stay invisible in public spaces where people watched too closely — it wasn't worth the gamble. Not for his health. Not for

Shane's career. Not yet.

So he stayed home.

Alone, more often than not.

The quiet returned, but it was different now. Less sharp than before. Less hostile. Still heavy sometimes, but familiar enough that he could sit with it without spiraling.

He filled his days deliberately.

Walks. Stretching. Physical therapy exercises that felt laughably simple compared to what his body used to be capable of, but left him sweating anyway. Cooking when he could tolerate the smells. Reading. Answering messages from teammates he hadn't seen in months. Letting himself feel connected without pretending he wasn't still on the outside looking in.

Watching hockey continued to be hard, so it was reserved only for Montreal Metros and the Ottawa Centaurs games. David never missed an opportunity to support Ilya, and he knew he'd never have to watch those games alone. He never questioned Ilya if he felt the need to leave the room, change the channel, or even cry.

Sometimes his emotions caught him off guard. A swell in his chest. A sudden burn behind his eyes. There were nights he'd tear up for no clear reason, and a few where it hit harder, the kind of quiet breakdown that came out of nowhere and left him embarrassed and exhausted afterward. It didn't make sense in the moment. The game would be on, the room calm, David beside him—safe, familiar—and still something would crack.

But of course there was a reason.

Hockey had always been his escape. He had heard people say that it didn't seem like he actually cared about hockey, that he was there because he was good. That wasn't the case at all. When family life had been chaotic or disappointing, the rink had been somewhere he could breathe. When things with Shane were complicated, unspoken, tangled in timing and fear, hockey had been the place where everything narrowed down to something simple and clean. Ice. Motion. Purpose. It had held him together when other parts of his life couldn't.

And now, watching it from the outside, sick and sidelined, he was grieving more than the game itself. He was grieving the loss of the place he used to run to. Cancer had taken that escape from him, taken the one thing that had always been there when everything else felt unsteady.

David never tried to fix it. He just stayed, a quiet weight at Ilya's side, letting the tears come when they came, letting the silence stretch when it needed to. With him there, the grief didn't feel overwhelming. Something Ilya could finally let himself feel, even when it broke him a little.

Coach Wiebe checked in regularly.

Not hovering. Just present.

One afternoon, a few weeks into the season, Wiebe texted him directly.

Wiebe:

How are you holding up? You doing okay out there?

Ilya stared at the message longer than necessary.

The answer was complicated. He was doing better. He was doing worse. He was doing both at once, depending on the hour.

Ilya:

Getting there. Slowly.

The reply came quickly.

Wiebe:

Any chance you'd want to come up to Ottawa for a game sometime? No pressure. Just thought I'd ask.

Ilya's heart thudded.

He hadn't realized how badly he wanted that until the possibility existed.

He didn't answer right away.

Instead, he called Dr. Ross.

Ross answered on the second ring, sounding mildly amused. "This better not be about ignoring the rules I gave you."

"I want to go to Ottawa," Ilya said.

There was a pause.

"Define go."

"Drive," Ilya clarified quickly. "No flights. No crowds. I'd be masked. In and out. I just... I haven't even met my team."

Ross sighed, the sound fond rather than annoyed. "I was wondering when you'd ask."

"I'm cleared?" Ilya pressed.

Ross didn't say yes immediately.

"You'd need to do it carefully," he said. "No public dining. No lingering in common areas. Dressing room exposure limited. And you leave if you feel even a little off."

"I will," Ilya said instantly.

Another pause.

“Take someone with you,” Ross added. “Someone who will override your judgment if necessary.”

Ilya smiled. “I already know who.”

David didn’t hesitate.

“I’ll drive,” he said. “You sit and supervise.”

The drive to Ottawa took a few hours, long enough that the city gave way to stretches of quiet highway and open sky. Ilya sat in the passenger seat, hoodie zipped up, mask resting in his lap, watching the scenery slide past like something borrowed.

David drove the way he did everything — attentively, thoughtfully, without rushing.

They talked about small things at first. Shane’s early-season schedule. How the team looked. The absurdity of preseason hype. It was easy conversation, comfortable in its familiarity.

Eventually, David asked the question he always asked — the one that mattered most.

“How are you actually feeling about this?”

Ilya exhaled slowly.

“I’m excited,” he said. “And terrified. And grateful. And scared I won’t belong.”

David nodded, absorbing it without interrupting.

“I feel like I’ve been paused,” Ilya continued. “Like the world kept moving and I stayed still. I don’t know how to step back in without feeling... behind.”

David glanced over briefly, then back to the road. “You survived something that would have flattened most people.”

Ilya shrugged. “That doesn’t make it easier.”

“No,” David agreed. “But it does mean you’ve earned as many years as you need to figure out who you are now.”

Ilya’s throat tightened unexpectedly.

He turned toward the window, pretending to focus on the passing trees.

David didn’t call him on it. He just let the silence stretch until it felt safe again. When they were in the hospital, David was always a quiet presence, but outside of it he had become an important sound board and pillar in Ilya’s recovery. Ilya’s memories from the hospital were cloudy at best, but he did recall the night he learned about David’s own mother. Ilya had worked up the courage to ask him about his mother one night as they watched a game together. When he learned how she had passed, Ilya realized that the hospital probably

opened some deep wounds for him. Now that he was recovering at home, David found some peace too. He was so grateful to have him in moments like this.

By the time they reached Ottawa, Ilya's nerves had settled into something steadier. Not confidence. Not calm. But readiness.

Wiebe met them at the arena and walked him in quietly, avoiding the main entrances. Mask on. Hoodie up. Rules followed to the letter.

The dressing room was already alive with pregame energy when Wiebe brought him in early. This was his first time in his new dressing room, so he was looking around taking it in, when it finally registered—they were all masked up. Not only were his teammates masked, but they were beautifully designed custom masks with the Centaurs logo and the players numbers. There had been forethought and planning before they even knew he could come. This alone was enough to make Ilya emotional, but he held it in this time.

“Alright,” Wiebe said, putting his own mask on then clapping his hands once to get attention. “Quick reminder — wash your hands, keep your distance if you're sick, and if you even think you might be contagious, you're out.”

A few guys laughed. One raised his hands. “Coach, that should be the rule anyway.”

Wiebe gestured toward Ilya. “This is Ilya. You all know who he is. He's here to say hi, not to shake hands.”

Ilya nodded, suddenly aware of every eye on him.

What he found wasn't pity.

It was curiosity. Respect. Warmth.

“Good to finally meet you,” someone said.

“Welcome,” another added. “About time.”

They talked about hockey. Only hockey.

Systems. Travel. Cities. The weirdness of road trips. Nothing about hospitals. Nothing about cancer. Nothing about survival.

Ilya hadn't realized how badly he needed that until it was happening.

Hours later, sitting in a quiet section near the tunnel as the game began, Ilya felt something settle in his chest that hadn't been there in a long time.

Belonging.

The arena sounded different from the inside.

That surprised Ilya most.

He had expected the noise to hit him the way it always had—sharp and electric, something that settled into his bones and woke up parts of him that had been sleeping too long. Instead, it arrived softened, filtered through layers of mask and distance and time. Still loud. Still alive. But gentler somehow, like his body had decided it would take this in on its own terms.

He sat near the tunnel, far enough back to keep space, close enough to feel connected. The mask stayed on. He didn't touch anyone. He didn't need to. Just being there was enough.

The boys filtered past him in warmups, sticks in hand, shoulders loose, focused in that familiar pregame way that had nothing to do with the scoreboard and everything to do with routine. A few nodded in his direction. One gave him a quick thumbs-up. Another tapped the glass lightly as he skated past, eyes bright.

"Good to have you here," someone mouthed.

Ilya smiled behind the mask.

For the first time since the diagnosis, hockey didn't feel like something that had been taken from him. It felt like something he was circling back toward. Slowly. Carefully. But intentionally.

The game unfolded the way games always did—momentum swinging, benches rising and falling with each shift, the crowd responding as one organism. Ilya tracked it easily, mind slipping back into patterns that had been etched there over years. He noticed details he hadn't had space for before. Line changes. Small adjustments. The way a defenseman compensated when a winger cheated high.

He missed it, yes.

But he didn't ache the way he thought he would.

At intermission, Wiebe stopped by briefly, crouching beside him.

"You good?" he asked.

Ilya nodded. "Better than I thought."

Wiebe smiled. "That's how it starts."

David sat quietly beside him, hands folded, observing everything the way he always did—absorbing context, reading the room.

"You look... lighter," David said quietly.

Ilya considered that. "I feel like myself again. Or close enough that I recognize the outline."

"That counts," David replied.

By the time the final horn sounded, Ilya was tired in a way that felt earned, not alarming. His legs buzzed with fatigue from sitting upright so long, his head heavy from stimulation he

hadn't realized he'd been craving. When Wiebe walked him out the same quiet way they'd come in, Ilya felt something like completion settle in his chest.

This mattered.

Shane sitting on the edge of a hotel bed in Florida, still in his workout gear, sweat cooling on his skin as the broadcast flickered on the TV.

He hadn't known exactly when Ilya would be on. He'd just turned it on anyway, remote clutched loosely in his hand, attention split between the screen and the buzzing phone beside him.

Then the camera cut.

A quick pan of the bench. The tunnel. And then—

There he was.

Masked... a Centaurs mask, no less. What a nice touch. Hoodie on. Hair short but unmistakably there. Thinner than he used to be, yes—but upright. Present. Alive.

The commentator's voice shifted, respectful.

“And that's Ilya Rozanov, in the building tonight. Great to see him back around the game after everything he's been through.”

Shane stopped breathing for a second.

Bravery. Battle. Recovery. The words washed over him distantly as the camera moved on, but Shane barely heard them. All he could see was Ilya's posture. The way he leaned forward slightly, engaged. The way his eyes tracked the ice like they always had.

He swallowed hard.

When the phone buzzed, he didn't even look at the screen before picking it up.

Shane:

Great to see a man as hot as you back on my TV. I love you.

Ilya's reply came while Shane was still staring at the screen.

Ilya:

You always did like watching me work.

Shane laughed, breath shaky but real.

Back in the car later that night, heading home with David, Ilya watched the city lights blur past and felt something unfamiliar but welcome settle into place.

He wasn't back.

Not yet.

But he was no longer gone.

And for the first time since the season had started, the distance between who he had been and who he was becoming felt bridgeable.

Chapter 27

SHANE

The next six months didn't move in a straight line.

Shane learned that quickly.

They moved in waves instead—good stretches followed by days that felt like setbacks even when they weren't, moments of relief interrupted by reminders that cancer did not vanish just because it had been pushed into the background. There were outpatient treatment rounds scheduled with clinical precision, spaced carefully to keep the disease suppressed rather than annihilated. Maintenance, Dr. Ross called it. A long game. The kind you didn't win by sprinting.

At first, that idea terrified Shane.

Years. Possibly a lifetime. Checkups and scans and bloodwork woven permanently into the fabric of their lives. A calendar that would never again be free of medical appointments, even when everything else looked normal.

But Ilya adjusted faster than Shane did.

Not because he was naïve about it—never that—but because something in him had shifted during those months in and out of hospitals. The fear that once consumed him had burned itself down to something smaller, quieter, easier to live alongside.

"This is just... part of it now," Ilya said one evening, scrolling through his phone while Shane sat beside him on the couch. "Like training. Or recovery days. It doesn't mean I'm not living."

Shane had nodded, even though it took longer for the truth of that to settle into him.

Dr. Ross became a constant.

Not looming. Not intrusive. Just there. A presence they planned around, joked about, complained about when appointment times ran late. He saw Ilya every few weeks, then every month. He knew their schedules, knew Shane's road trips, knew when Ilya had been pushing too hard in the gym and when he'd been sulking instead.

"You look like yourself again," Ross said during one visit, leaning back in his chair and studying Ilya critically. "That's dangerous."

Ilya smirked. "Why?... am I took handsome?"

"No. Because people start forgetting what you went through," Ross replied. "Including you."

Shane watched that exchange closely. Appreciated the honesty, but also had mixed feelings about that statement. Somedays all Shane wanted to do was forget what had happened. “Would that be so bad?” Shane asked seriously. Dr. Ross looked at them both, questioning how he wanted to approach that question. Then, with a crooked smile, he said, “It’s kind of like a bad injury. You don’t obsess over it forever, but you also don’t pretend it didn’t happen. You don’t walk back into your life like nothing changed. You warm up. You pay attention when something feels off. You don’t go full hero on day one.” His tone shifted, quieter now. “Cancer leaves marks you can’t always see. Physically, emotionally. Forgetting might feel like relief, but it’s usually just avoidance in a nicer outfit. And avoidance is how people miss early signs, push too hard, or convince themselves they’re fine when they’re not.” Shane let it sink in. Maybe that’s how they got here in the first place. He could agree with one thing though—Ilya really did look like himself again. In the most stunning way.

His hair grew in fully, golden and thick, the way Shane remembered it, though he kept it shorter now. His weight returned slowly but steadily, muscle rebuilding in a way that was humbling to watch. He worked harder than Shane had ever seen him work, not out of desperation but determination. Short sessions at first. Careful loads. Plenty of rest days.

Then more.

Shane loved being there for it. Loved spotting him, handing him water, watching the quiet satisfaction settle into Ilya’s face when he finished a workout without feeling wrecked. It felt like witnessing something sacred—reclamation in real time.

Their sex life came back the same way everything else did.

Not all at once. Not recklessly.

But intentionally.

They had learned a new language together in those months—one that valued communication over momentum, presence over performance. They talked more. Checked in more. Laughed when things didn’t work the way they used to. Took breaks without shame.

And when it did work—when their bodies lined up and responded the way memory said they should—it felt deeper than before. Less frantic. More anchored.

Shane realized, slowly, that intimacy had stopped being about proving anything.

It was about choosing each other. Again and again.

The idea of coming out together drifted quietly to the backburner.

Not because it mattered less—but because life, finally, was giving them room to breathe. Ilya’s health stabilized. His presence around the team increased. He visited practices. Sat in on meetings. Became a familiar figure again without fanfare or pressure.

Letting the world in could wait.

For now, they were building something steadier behind closed doors.

One night, six months almost to the day after Ilya had walked out of the hospital, Shane found himself watching him stretch in the living room, music playing softly from a speaker on the counter. Ilya moved easily now, fluid and confident in a way that had been absent for too long.

The thought arrived fully formed.

“Do you want to skate?” Shane asked.

Ilya looked up, surprised. “Skate?”

“Not play,” Shane clarified quickly. “Just... skate. No drills. No pressure.”

Ilya hesitated, something flickering across his face—fear, longing, disbelief.

Then he nodded apprehensively. “Yeah. I think I do.”

And in that moment, Shane knew.

This wasn't the end of the story.

It was the beginning of a new chapter for Ilya.

Chapter 28

ILYA

Ilya had been thinking about the rink constantly. There came a day when watching the games with David went from being painful to being a motivator. Instead of feeling sad, he started to get the same itch he would get towards the end of his summers in Russia as he prepared to go back to work. It was something he didn't want to rush into and have ruined by a body that couldn't cooperate, but he thought he might be ready. He was grateful that Shane had put it out there. It meant the idea wasn't something Ilya had to steal for himself or justify wanting. It had been offered to him, carefully, like something fragile but allowed.

Do you want to skate?
Not play. Just skate.

Ilya had said yes before he could talk himself out of it, before the familiar reflexes could kick in and remind him of everything that might go wrong. He'd nodded, voice steady even as something deep in his chest twisted open.

"Yes. I do."

That night, long after Shane had fallen asleep beside him, Ilya lay awake staring at the ceiling, heart thudding too loudly in the quiet apartment. He let himself imagine it—not the speed or the competition or the expectation, but the feeling. The cold air. The glide. The sound of blades cutting cleanly into ice.

The next morning, he reached out to Marleau.

He didn't write a long message. Didn't soften it. Didn't explain himself.

He just asked.

Ilya:
Do you still have my hockey gear?

The reply came so fast it startled him.

Marleau:
Of course I do. All of it.
Why?

Ilya stared at the screen, thumb hovering.

Ilya:
I want to skate.

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Reappeared.

Marleau:
When?

Ilya swallowed.

Ilya:
Before I chicken out... but I can wait for the equipment.

The response didn't come immediately this time. Seconds stretched, long enough for doubt to creep in, long enough for Ilya to wonder if he'd asked for too much, too suddenly.

Then his phone buzzed.

Marleau:
Good.
We've got a two-day break. I'll bring it myself. Tomorrow.

Ilya sat there for a long moment after, phone resting loosely in his hand, pulse racing in a way that had nothing to do with fear. He hadn't realized how much of his life had been packed into those skates, that stick, those pads—objects that had followed him through cities and seasons and versions of himself until suddenly they hadn't.

Boston was gone now.

The house had sold quietly, efficiently. Another necessary step forward that had still felt like a small mourning. He hadn't been there to pack it himself. Hadn't walked through the rooms one last time. Marleau had stepped in without ceremony, storing everything without making it a thing.

Including this.

When Ilya told Shane that Marleau was coming, Shane's face softened immediately.

"Of course he is," Shane said. "I'll book the rink."

They didn't talk much after that.

They didn't need to.

The next day arrived faster than Ilya expected.

The small local rink Shane rented sat tucked away from anything important, the kind of place where kids learned to skate and beer leagues played late at night. No banners. No history. No pressure baked into the walls. Just ice and quiet and the faint smell of cold metal.

Marleau's SUV pulled into the lot with zero subtlety.

He climbed out grinning, sunglasses on, a massive hockey bag slung over his shoulder like nothing had ever changed.

“The things I do for you,” Marleau announced.

Ilya laughed, but the sound caught halfway in his chest when Marleau crossed the distance and pulled him into a hug—careful, firm, real.

“Jesus,” Marleau muttered into his hair. “You scared the shit out of me.”

Ilya closed his eyes briefly. “Sorry.”

Marleau pulled back, hands still gripping his shoulders, eyes sharp and searching. “You look good,” he said finally. “Not bullshit good. Real good.”

Ilya smiled faintly. “I feel... closer.”

Marleau nodded like he understood exactly what that meant.

Inside the locker room, Marleau dropped the bag onto the bench with a heavy thud.

Ilya stared.

The bag was unmistakable.

Raiders logo. Scuffed. Familiar.

“Oh no,” Ilya said immediately. “Absolutely not.”

Marleau grinned. “I wondered how long it would take you to notice.”

“That thing is cursed,” Ilya said. “We are not bringing that on the ice.”

Shane smirked. “We’ll exorcise it first.”

Marleau reached under the bench and pulled out another bag—plain black, clean, neutral. “Relax. I’m not heartless.”

As Ilya opened it, piece by piece, something ancient woke up in his hands. Skates. Gloves. Stick. The smell alone hit him—leather and sweat and memory. His fingers knew what to do before his brain caught up.

“This is surreal,” Ilya said quietly.

Marleau nodded. “Yeah. But it’s the good kind.”

Ilya hesitated, then looked up at him. “You skating?”

Marleau raised an eyebrow. “I was gonna let you two have your moment.”

Ilya shook his head. “No. Come on.”

Marleau smiled slowly. “Alright.”

And just like that, the day tipped forward into something Ilya hadn't felt in a long time.

Anticipation without fear.

The ice was empty when they stepped out.

That stopped Ilya in his tracks for a moment—not because he was afraid, but because the quiet was so complete it felt ceremonial. No pucks rattling. No whistles. No music thumping from tinny speakers. Just the low hum of refrigeration and the faint scrape of blades as Shane tested the edge near the boards.

Marleau skated out first, easy and loose, the way he always had. It was strange how normal that looked. How some bodies remembered themselves without effort.

Ilya followed more carefully.

The first push was tentative. He felt the blade bite and his ankle wobble just slightly, the way it had the first time he'd ever stepped onto ice as a kid. His balance corrected instinctively, muscles firing with a delay that surprised him. Not wrong. Just slower.

He let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

"Okay," he murmured. "Okay."

Shane stayed close without crowding him, skating a half-step behind like a shadow that knew when to step forward and when to let him be. Marleau circled once, then drifted back, eyes bright and sharp.

"Take your time," Marleau said. "No one's grading you."

Ilya smiled faintly behind the cage he'd insisted on wearing—overkill, maybe, but comforting. He pushed again, longer this time, letting the glide stretch. The sound of his skates slicing cleanly through the ice sent a jolt straight through his chest.

There it was.

The feeling.

Not speed. Not power. Familiarity.

He laughed—out loud, unguarded—and pushed again, legs burning lightly in a way that felt earned. He skated a wide arc, then another, finding his edges cautiously, then with more confidence. The ice met him halfway, forgiving but honest.

Shane skated up beside him. "How's it feel?"

Ilya didn't answer right away. He was too busy absorbing the sensation of being upright and moving, of sweating under his gear, of breath coming hard for a reason that had nothing to do with fear or medicine.

“Like I came back to myself,” he said finally.

Marleau nodded once, satisfied. “You look great, Roz.” Marleau would never admit it, but he felt both emotional and honoured to be witnessing this.

They skated together then. Not drills. Not laps. Just movement. Shane matched Ilya’s pace instinctively, letting him set the rhythm. Marleau darted ahead, then doubled back, chirping lightly when Shane missed a turn or Ilya cut too shallow.

“You always had terrible edges,” Marleau called.

Ilya shot him a look. “You’re here on borrowed time.”

Marleau laughed, skating backward easily. “Still fragile, huh?”

“Emotionally,” Ilya said. “Physically, give me a week.”

The exertion built gradually. Sweat gathered at Ilya’s temples, dampening his hair, soaking into his base layer. His legs trembled—not with weakness, but with honest fatigue. The good kind. The kind that meant his body was responding, not retreating.

He skated to center ice and stopped, chest heaving lightly. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes, letting the cold air fill his lungs, letting his heartbeat thunder without fear.

This was the first time since the hospital that he didn’t feel like he was negotiating with his body.

Shane skated over and bumped his shoulder gently. “You’re glowing.”

“I’m disgusting,” Ilya corrected, grinning. “I love it.”

They stayed out longer than planned, pushing just until the edge of fatigue, not past it. They hadn’t even brought pucks out, but when the boys turned around Ilya had found one. Shane and Marleau parked themselves against the boards, watching Ilya in awe as he skated around, handling the puck at a speed that was shocking and inspiring. He wasn’t the same guy he was before cancer, but you could see that his hands never forgot their job through it all. He operated with a smoothness and finesse that isn’t learned, but rather apart of you from birth.

Shane let tears well up in his eyes, not wanting to cry in front of Marleau, but as he glanced over he saw his giant opponent letting the tears fly, wiping them away as quickly as he could. He caught Shane’s glance.

“Fuck off Hollander” he said, breaking into laughter with Shane.

Shane watched Ilya closely as minutes passed by, stepping in when Ilya’s posture shifted, when the tremor in his legs went from effort to warning.

When they finally left the ice, Marleau pulled him into a hug right there by the bench, skates clacking awkwardly.

“I’m proud of you,” Marleau said quietly, eyes still red rimmed. “I love you my guy”.

Ilya swallowed. “Thanks for coming, Marley”

“Always,” Marleau replied. He glanced at his watch, then sighed. “I’ve got a plane to catch.”

Shane nodded. “Thanks for everything.”

Marleau smirked. “You two behave.”

He squeezed Ilya’s shoulder one last time, then disappeared down the hall, leaving the locker room quiet again.

Different quiet this time.

The showers were already running when Ilya stepped under the spray with Shane.

Steam rose immediately, curling around them, blurring the edges of the world down to tile and breath and warmth. Ilya leaned his forehead against Shane’s shoulder and closed his eyes, letting the water pound against his back, washing away the cold and the sweat and the weight he’d been carrying all day.

Shane’s hands were steady on him, familiar and sure.

“You did great,” Shane said softly.

Ilya lifted his head and kissed him—slow, deliberate, tasting salt and soap and something deeper. Shane responded immediately, the kiss deepening without urgency, without expectation. Just connection.

They lingered there, bodies pressed together under the spray, letting the moment stretch. It wasn’t frantic. It wasn’t about reclaiming anything.

Later—after towels and laughter and the quiet hum of the empty rink around them—they stood close again, skin warm and flushed, the echoes of the day settling into something intimate and private.

This time, when Ilya caught his reflection in the fogged mirror, he didn’t look away.

He looked like himself.

Tired. Alive. Wanting.

Shane kissed him again, gentle and certain, and for the first time in a long while, Ilya didn’t feel like he was reaching back toward his life.

“This locker room brings me back... it was much more fun going all the way today than it was all those years ago when you wouldn’t touch me in a shower.” Ilya said cheekily, remembering their first encounter and how far they had come since then.

Chapter 29

SHANE

The next summer arrives quietly.

No announcements. No countdown. Just the slow realization one morning that the air has shifted and the lake smells different and the days stretch longer without asking permission. Shane notices it the way he notices most things now—not as something to chase, but something to settle into.

They are back at the cottage.

That alone feels unreal.

The first time they returned after the hospital, the fall before, everything had felt tentative. Borrowed. Like the place itself might remember how close they'd come to losing all of this and demand something from them in return. They had only stayed one night and decided that they weren't ready to be there yet. At least Shane wasn't, and Ilya could understand why. It was a sacrifice he was willing to make after all of the sacrificing Shane had done for him that year. But this summer is different. This summer belongs to them again.

Ilya moves through the space like someone who knows he's allowed to be here.

He's stronger now. Not invincible—Shane doesn't think either of them will ever believe in that again—but solid. His body has filled back in where it once receded. His hair is thick and dark gold again, curling slightly at the nape of his neck the way it always used to. He skates regularly now, not at NHL pace, not yet, but enough that sweat and exhaustion feel familiar instead of frightening.

He laughs more.

He sleeps better.

He knows his teammates now—not just names and numbers, but rhythms, jokes, habits. Ottawa has been good to him in a way Shane didn't expect but is deeply grateful for. They protected him when he needed it, and not just in terms of privacy, or contracts. They operated like a well oiled machine, being hyper vigilant when it came to washing their hands, being upfront when they were sick, and even going as far as enjoying a team trip for flu shots that fall. Nobody complained or fought against it. They seemed to all share an awareness that something as small as a virus could be detrimental to their teammate, and they treated him like part of their future instead of a burden.

Shane is a free agent.

That word used to mean chaos. Uncertainty. Pressure. Now it feels... lighter. Like a door instead of a cliff. Teams have called. Conversations have happened. But none of it feels

urgent in the way it once did, because the center of his life no longer lives inside a rink schedule.

It lives here.

At the cottage, mornings are slow.

Shane wakes before Ilya most days, slipping out of bed quietly to make coffee and stand on the deck while the lake wakes up too. He watches the mist burn off the water, listens to loons call from somewhere too far away to pinpoint, lets himself breathe in a way that used to feel indulgent and now feels necessary.

He thinks a lot out here.

About the last few years. About who he was before everything broke open. About how close he came to losing the man sleeping inside, wrapped in sheets that smell like sunscreen and lake water and home.

About how much he doesn't want to imagine a future that doesn't include him.

The idea of proposing doesn't arrive suddenly.

It's been there, hovering quietly for months, growing clearer every time Shane watches Ilya do something ordinary—stretching after a run, humming to himself while making breakfast, falling asleep halfway through a movie with his head on Shane's shoulder.

It's there every time Shane realizes he's no longer bracing for disaster.

He's planning.

The ring sits in the bottom of his duffel bag for three weeks before Shane can bring himself to move it.

He didn't make a big production of buying it. No entourage. No advice panels. Just a quiet afternoon in a small jewelry shop in Montreal, where the woman behind the counter listened carefully while Shane stumbled his way through explaining what he wanted.

"Something simple," he'd said. "Not flashy. He's not—" He'd stopped, searching for the word. "He's not that kind of guy anymore."

She'd smiled gently. "Then let's find something that feels like him."

The ring is perfect.

Not big. Not dramatic. Just a solid, but elegant gold band, understated and right. Something that looks like it belongs, like it won't need explaining.

Shane waits.

Not because he's unsure.

But because he wants the moment to feel like an extension of their life, not an interruption.

Ilya doesn't know.

At least, Shane doesn't think he does. There are moments where Ilya looks at him a little too long, or smiles in that knowing way that makes Shane's chest tighten, but if he suspects anything, he hasn't said a word.

They spend their days at the cottage doing very little.

Swimming. Walking. Reading on the dock. Cooking dinners that stretch late into the evening because neither of them feels like being the one to go inside. Shane helps Ilya with his workouts, timing him, spotting him, reminding him—gently—when to stop.

Sometimes they talk about the future.

Not in sweeping declarations. Just small, practical things. Where they might live. How long they'll stay in Canada. What it would be like to not hide forever.

One night, after a long day on the water, they sit wrapped in towels on the deck, skin still warm from the sun. Ilya leans into Shane, head resting against his shoulder, fingers idly tracing patterns on Shane's thigh.

"I don't feel like I'm waiting anymore," Ilya says quietly.

Shane looks down at him. "For what?"

"For my life to start again," Ilya replies. "It already has."

Something settles in Shane's chest.

That night, he decides.

The next day is unremarkable in every way that matters.

They wake up late. Make breakfast. Ilya insists on pancakes even though Shane reminds him they'll regret it later. They swim. They nap. They exist in the kind of easy intimacy that only comes from surviving something together.

As the sun begins to dip, Shane feels the weight of the ring in his pocket like a heartbeat.

He doesn't panic.

He doesn't rehearse.

He just knows.

"I want to take a walk," Shane says casually, like his life isn't about to tilt permanently into something new.

Ilya smiles. "You always want to take a walk."

“Humor me.”

They head down the path that curves around the lake, the one they’ve walked a hundred times. The light is soft and gold, filtering through the trees, dappling the ground in a way that feels almost staged.

They stop at the old dock—the smaller one, a little crooked, less used. The one where they once sat in silence after everything had gone wrong, neither of them ready to speak.

Shane’s heart starts to pound.

Not with fear.

With certainty.

He turns to Ilya.

“I need to say something,” Shane says.

Ilya’s smile fades into something more serious. “Okay.”

Shane takes a breath.

And finally lets himself step forward.

Shane doesn’t drop to one knee right away.

He stands there for a moment, the lake behind them gone glassy with evening light, the air soft and still, as if the world itself is holding its breath. He looks at Ilya the way he has learned to do over the last year—slowly, deliberately, taking in the whole of him. The familiar slope of his shoulders. The way his hair curls at the nape of his neck again. The steadiness in his stance that still surprises Shane sometimes.

“I’m not good at speeches,” Shane says finally, voice quiet.

Ilya smiles, small and knowing. “You’ve never been.”

That steadies him.

Shane exhales and keeps going. “I used to think love was loud. Big moments. Big promises. The kind you make when everything feels easy. I was frustrated and annoyed that we couldn’t have that.”

Ilya’s expression shifts, attention sharpening.

“And then things stopped being easy,” Shane continues. “And you showed me that love is just staying. It’s learning new rules. It’s sitting on a bathroom floor at three in the morning and deciding you’re not going anywhere.”

Ilya's hand finds Shane's without looking. His thumb brushes Shane's knuckles, grounding them both.

"I watched you fight for your life," Shane says, the words rough but true. "Not for hockey. Not for anyone else. Just for being here. For mornings. For quiet. For you and I."

He reaches into his pocket then. The movement is small, but Ilya notices immediately.

"I don't want a future without you," Shane says. "I don't want a version of my life that doesn't have your laugh in it, or your stubbornness, or the way you pretend you're not soft when you're the softest person I know."

Ilya's eyes fill. He doesn't look away.

"I want to choose you," Shane says. "Every day. Even when it's hard. Especially when it's hard."

Shane drops to one knee—not for tradition, not for show, but because the moment asks for gravity.

"Ilya Rozanov," he says, voice breaking openly now, "will you marry me?"

For a heartbeat, nothing exists but the space between them.

Ilya stares at him like the world has tilted, like something impossibly good has just landed and he doesn't trust it yet. His mouth opens once, then closes. Tears spill freely, unchecked.

"You idiot," Ilya whispers, laughing through it.

Shane smiles, breathless. "That's not a no."

Ilya shakes his head, hands coming up to his face like he needs a second to gather himself. When he looks back down, his expression is raw and radiant all at once.

"Yes," he says. "Yes. Of course it's yes."

Shane is on his feet in an instant, arms around Ilya, holding him like he's real and here and never leaving again. They kiss—slow and deep and certain, the kind of kiss that doesn't need urgency to feel powerful.

Shane slips the ring onto Ilya's finger with hands that aren't quite steady. It fits perfectly.

"I love you," Shane says against his mouth.

"I love you," Ilya answers, like it's the simplest truth he's ever known.

They stay there for a while, wrapped around each other, letting the weight of it settle. The lake darkens. The air cools. The day exhales.

When they finally turn back toward the cottage, they walk hand in hand, quieter now—not because there’s nothing left to say, but because everything important has already been said.

At the door, Shane fumbles with the key, laughing softly at himself.

“Wait,” Ilya says.

Shane turns.

Ilya’s smiling in that way that means he’s decided something.

“Come here.”

Before Shane can protest, Ilya scoops him up—clean and easy and sure—lifting him off the ground like it’s nothing at all.

“Ilya—” Shane laughs, instinctively grabbing onto him.

“Let me,” Ilya says simply.

And Shane does.

Ilya carries him across the threshold, strong and steady, and Shane feels his chest crack open at the meaning of it. A year ago, this would have terrified him. A year ago, it wouldn’t have been possible.

Now it feels inevitable.

When Ilya sets him down inside, Shane kisses him again—slow and reverent and grateful.

“We’re really doing this,” Shane murmurs.

“We already did,” Ilya replies. “I’ve been yours since the first time I saw you fold your fucking clothes.”

Outside, the lake settles into night. Inside, the cottage holds their laughter, their tears, their future.

And for the first time in a very long time, nothing feels uncertain at all.

Chapter 30: Epilogue

Ilya Rozanov wakes up on game day without pain for the first time in a year.

Not the managed kind. Not the careful quiet kind he learned to live inside. Just absence. His body feels solid and responsive, humming with nerves that have nothing to do with fear and everything to do with anticipation.

He knows life won't be without pain, but he likes to think that his body gave him a break today knowing how important it is.

The morning unfolds on instinct. Stretching. Shower. Coffee he can actually taste. His hair is back, thick, curling slightly at the ends. His weight has settled where it belongs. His lungs work without negotiation. The scars don't ache. They simply exist, quiet proof of distance traveled.

The ring on his finger catches the light as he pulls on his hoodie.

They didn't hide the engagement.

After everything, secrecy felt small. When the news surfaced, Montreal reacted the way Montreal always does—opinions, volume, nostalgia sharpened into judgment. Ilya didn't read much of it. He didn't need to.

Other places responded differently. Shane was never going to be out of work.

The arena hums long before puck drop. Even outside, the building feels alive—voices layered over music, the distant echo of skates somewhere deep inside. Ilya breathes it in as he walks through the doors, bag over his shoulder, heart steady and strong.

The locker room smells right.

Tape. Rubber. Familiar chaos.

His stall waits for him, name stitched clean and new above it. Different colors. Same ritual. He dresses slowly, deliberately. Base layers. Pads. Pants. The jersey stays folded until the end. His hands don't shake as he tapes his stick. He notices that—and lets himself appreciate it.

This body answers him now.

Teammates drift in around him, nodding, joking, clapping his shoulder as they pass. Nothing careful. Nothing tentative. No one treats him like something fragile.

Just one of the boys.

When he pulls on his gloves, they creak softly—a sound so familiar it almost stops him. He stands, helmet tucked under his arm, heart beating strong and even.

Before heading out, he pauses.

He knows where to look.

Up in the stands, a few rows back from the glass, Yuna and David sit side by side. Yuna's hands are clasped tightly in her lap, knuckles white, eyes shining. David's arm is around her shoulders, steady and grounding, his expression calm but proud in that quiet, unmistakable way of his.

They've aged this year—not in years, but in experience. In worry survived. In love proven.

When Ilya catches Yuna's eye, she presses her hand to her mouth, tears spilling freely now. David nods once, deliberate and full, like he's saying we're here. Like he always has.

Family, in every way that counts.

The tunnel stretches ahead.

That narrow passage between preparation and exposure. Between private and public. He walks it slowly, savoring the click of his blades against rubber, the echo of it inside his chest.

Just before stepping into the light—before the noise and the ice and the eyes—he turns.

Shane stands there.

Just... there. Fully geared. Centaurs jersey on his shoulders like it has always belonged. Helmet tucked under one arm. Calm, steady, familiar in a way that feels like home. It turns out when your big ticket center takes a pay cut to battle cancer, it frees up some cap space to snag a second. Ilya certainly didn't mind seeing Shane be the breadwinner of their household. He just hoped to outscore him.

Ilya meets his gaze and smiles. He takes a moment to take a deep breath, walks over to fill the void between them, and steals a kiss.

No words. No dramatics. Just a quick kiss that says we did it.

Before he steps on to the ice he hears Shane say, "soak it in, they are all cheering for you."

The roar hits immediately—loud and full and real. He takes his first lap slow, letting the moment settle—the lights, the sound, the impossible truth of being here.

Still here.

Still skating.

Warmups end. The Zamboni clears. Ilya takes his place with the starting lineup on the blue line. He knows he's not ready for first line minutes, but no one was going to rob him of the

opportunity tonight on his first night back. The lights dimmed slightly, and the announcer begins.

“Just over a year ago, Ilya Rozanov stepped away from this game to face the toughest opponent of his life. Away from the ice, he was diagnosed with acute leukemia—a battle no one prepares for, and one that demanded extraordinary strength.”

A ripple of applause begins, then grows.

“In the months that followed, Ilya fought with the same determination, discipline, and heart that have always defined him as a player—but this time, far from the spotlight, with everything on the line.”

The crowd listens intently.

“Tonight, we have the honor and privilege of announcing that just last week, Ilya Rozanov was officially deemed cancer-free.”

The arena erupts, cheers rolling through the building. Ilya lets tears flow down his cheeks and makes no attempt to stop them. His teammates on the blue line with him gravitate towards him to offer comfort at any moment.

“Ilya asked that this moment also be about gratitude. He wants to thank the fans who never stopped believing, the nurses who stood beside him every step of the way, his chosen family, his fiancé, and the medical team who made this return possible.”

A brief pause, deliberate.

“And lastly, the physician who guided him through this fight from beginning to end.”

The lights shift as a figure steps forward.

“Please welcome to center ice for the ceremonial puck drop... Dr. Andrew Ross.”

The applause surges again—louder, warmer—as Ross steps onto the ice, careful but smiling, pride shining unmistakably in his eyes as he looks toward Ilya.

Ilya’s chest tightens the tears constant. He imagines that Shane’s might be doing the same from the bench.

He skates to center ice as the crowd stands in applause. He is overwhelmed by the acknowledgment of a fight that happened far from this rink.

Ross smiles when he sees him, eyes bright with something that looks suspiciously like pride.

“Look at you,” Ross says warmly. “Told you I’d see you back here.”

Ilya pulls him into a hug without thinking—careful but fierce. The crowd erupts. Ross laughs into his shoulder, but the hug continues. This crowd will never know of the nights in the ICU where this man was his only tether to life. And they will never know the peace he brought

Shane and him when they needed privacy and faith that the people forced into their lives by cancer would keep their secrets.

Ilya is struggling to speak, but he gets out a whispered “thank you”.

“You did the work,” Ross says quietly. “I just kept you honest.” When he pulled back to look at Ilya, tears formed in his own eyes, he gave him one last piece of medical advice. “Breathe, Rozanov. Just breathe, and do your job. You earned this”.

Ilya took the advice and drew in a deep breath and exhaled.

“You don’t look like an Andrew.” He joked, realizing he never even bothered to learn his real name.

They both laughed, breaking the bittersweet tension and Ilya moved to center ice to shake hands with the opposing centerman.

Once Ross drops the ceremonial puck and they share one last tender moment, another set of skates glide in.

Shane joins them at center ice, wrapping an arm around Ilya quickly, and then giving Dr. Ross a hug. The three of them standing together for a brief moment that feels like a circle closing. From the stands, Yuna clutches David’s arm and lets herself cry openly now. David presses a kiss to her temple, eyes never leaving the ice.

When Ross steps off, the lights reset. Officials take their places.

This one counts. Breathe. Do your job.

Ilya lines up at center, knees bent, stick steady on the ice. Across from him, another center settles in. The referee looks between them, then raises his arm.

The crowd holds its breath.

A whistle blows. The puck drops.

Ilya snaps his stick back on instinct, muscle memory clean and sharp, and wins the draw.

The game begins.

And with it, the life he fought to return to—earned, claimed, and finally his again.

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