

Breaking Point

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Breaking Point

by [LeviosaWitch](#)

Summary

Shane Hollander was caught kissing his boyfriend and rival, Ilya Rozanov, in the background of a video.

He feels as if his world is crashing.

Ilya is done hiding and Shane is terrified of the fallout.

Shane chooses love but at what cost?

Notes

This is my apology to everyone after my last work.. enjoy!!

The apartment smelled like expensive cologne and nervous energy.

Shane stood in front of the full-length mirror in their bedroom, adjusting his bow tie for the third time in as many minutes. The black tuxedo fit perfectly—tailored specifically for tonight's premiere—but it felt constrictive, like it was slowly tightening around his chest. He could feel the fabric against his skin, the way the collar pressed against his throat, the weight of the jacket on his shoulders. Too much. Everything was too much.

"You look like James Bond," Ilya called from the bathroom, his voice carrying that perpetual note of amusement. "Very fancy. Very... what is word? Dapper."

Shane's reflection stared back at him, pale and drawn despite the careful grooming. His dark hair was styled with more product than he'd normally use, swept back from his face in a way that felt exposed. Vulnerable. Everyone would be looking at him tonight. Everyone would know.

"Shane?" Ilya appeared in the doorway, still buttoning his own dress shirt. He'd left the top two buttons undone, because of course he had. Even in formal wear, Ilya managed to look casually devastating, like he'd just rolled out of bed and happened to land in Armani. "You are okay?"

"Fine," Shane said automatically. The word came out too quickly, too sharp. He forced his hands to stop fidgeting with the tie and dropped them to his sides. "I'm fine."

Ilya's eyes narrowed slightly—that observant look that Shane both loved and hated, the one that said Ilya could see right through him. But instead of pushing, Ilya just grinned and crossed the room, his shirt still half-unbuttoned, revealing the defined lines of his chest and stomach.

"Is good we do this," Ilya said, reaching for his jacket where it hung on the back of a chair. "Get it over with, you know? Like ripping off... what you call? Band-Aid." He shrugged into the jacket with an easy confidence that Shane envied. "Tomorrow, everyone know. Next week, old news. Next month, nobody care."

Shane wanted to believe that. He wanted to have even a fraction of Ilya's certainty, his unshakeable conviction that everything would be fine. Ilya had been like this since they'd made the decision—completely unbothered by the prospect of going public, treating it like it was just another press conference, another interview, another day.

"You really think it'll be that simple?" Shane asked, hating how small his voice sounded.

"Da, yes." Ilya was working on his cufflinks now, silver ones that Shane had given him last Christmas. "I think people on Twitter, they lose their mind for maybe one week. Lots of rainbow flag emoji. Lots of crying face emoji. Then they find new thing to scream about." He looked up, catching Shane's eye in the mirror.

"Is not big deal, Hollander. We play hockey. We date. So what?"

So what. As if it were that easy. As if Shane hadn't spent the last three weeks barely sleeping, his mind spinning through every possible scenario, every potential disaster. The comments sections he shouldn't read but couldn't stop himself from scrolling through. The think pieces that would be written. The debates about whether gay players belonged in professional sports. The scrutiny on every aspect of their lives, their careers, their relationship.

And underneath all of that, the darker thoughts: What if this ruins everything? What if I'm not strong enough for this? What if I let everyone down?

Ilya finished with his cufflinks and turned around, leaning against the dresser with his arms crossed. He'd finally buttoned his shirt, though he still looked effortlessly disheveled in a way that would photograph beautifully. Everything about Ilya photographed beautifully.

"You know what I think?" Ilya said, his accent thickening slightly the way it always did when he was being sincere. "I think you worry too much. I think you make up problems in your head that don't exist yet."

"They're not made up," Shane said, more defensively than he intended. "This is real, Ilya. This is going to change everything."

"Yes, is real. And yes, things change." Ilya pushed off from the dresser and crossed to Shane, reaching out to straighten his already-straight bow tie. His fingers were warm against Shane's throat. "But we are still us. I am still best player in league—"

"You're not—"

"—and you are still boring Canadian boy who worry about everything." Ilya's grin was teasing, affectionate. "Nothing change that."

Shane wanted to argue, wanted to explain that Ilya didn't understand, that it was different for him. Ilya had always been larger than life, controversial, unafraid of attention. He'd built his entire brand on being bold and unapologetic. Coming out was just another headline in a career full of them.

But Shane had spent his entire life trying to be perfect. Trying to say the right things, do the right things, be the player everyone expected him to be. He'd learned early that the world didn't have much patience for people who were different, who didn't fit the mold. His autism had taught him that. Years of masking, of forcing himself to make eye contact and smile at the right times and pretend that the sensory overload of locker rooms and press conferences didn't make him want to crawl out of his skin.

And now he was about to add another layer of "different" on top of all that.

"Hey." Ilya's hand moved from Shane's tie to his face, cupping his jaw gently. "I know is scary. I know you don't like attention like I do. But we do this together, yes? You and me. And if anyone say something stupid, I tell them to fuck off."

Despite everything, Shane felt his mouth twitch into an almost-smile. "You can't tell everyone to fuck off."

"Why not? I have before." Ilya's thumb brushed across Shane's cheekbone. "Remember when that reporter ask if you sleep with women to 'fix' yourself? I tell him to fuck off. Was very satisfying."

"That was different. That was before—" Shane stopped himself. Before they'd decided to come out. Before the video had leaked. Before everything had spiraled into this inevitable moment.

The video. God, the video. Some asshole with a phone camera had caught them kissing outside a restaurant in Boston three months ago. Grainy, dark, but unmistakably them. It had spread across social media like wildfire before they'd even known it existed. Their teams' PR departments had gone into crisis mode.

Their agents had called emergency meetings. And Shane had spent two days locked in his apartment, unable to eat, unable to sleep, convinced his entire life was falling apart.

Ilya had been the one to pull him out of it. Ilya had been the one to say, "So we tell them. We make it official. We control story, not some asshole with camera phone."

And somehow, Shane had agreed. Somehow, they'd ended up here, about to walk a red carpet together as an official couple, about to face the entire world.

"Is going to be fine," Ilya said again, with that maddening confidence. "You will see. We go to premiere, we look very handsome, we smile for cameras, we go home. Easy."

Nothing about this was easy. But Shane nodded anyway, because what else could he do?

Ilya leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to his lips—careful not to mess up their styling—then stepped back with a satisfied nod. "Good. Now I need to fix hair, and then we go. Car is coming in twenty minutes."

He disappeared back into the bathroom, leaving Shane alone with his reflection again. In the mirror, he looked composed. Professional. Like someone who had everything under control.

It was a good mask. He'd had years of practice.

Shane took a deep breath, held it for four counts, released it for four counts. A grounding technique his therapist had taught him. It helped, marginally. Enough to get him through the next few minutes, at least.

From the bathroom, he could hear Ilya humming something—probably some Russian pop song that Shane wouldn't recognize. The sound was oddly comforting, a reminder that Ilya was here, that Shane wasn't doing this alone.

He could do this. He could get through one night. One premiere. One red carpet.

He had to.

— — —

A month ago, they'd sat in a conference room that smelled like expensive leather and anxiety.

The table was massive—some kind of dark wood that probably cost more than Shane's first car—and they were surrounded by people whose job it was to manage their public image. Ilya's agent, Marcus, sat at the head of the table with his tablet and his reading glasses and his perpetually concerned expression.

Shane's agent, Jennifer, was next to him, equally serious.

Representatives from both the Montreal Metros and the Boston Raiders—well, the Ottawa Centaurs now, since Ilya's trade had just been finalized—filled out the rest of the seats.

Shane felt like he was on trial.

"Let's be clear about what we're discussing here," Marcus said, his voice measured and professional. "The video is out there. It's been viewed millions of times. The speculation isn't going away. At this point, we have two options: continue to decline comment, or get ahead of the story with an official statement."

"Official statement," Ilya said, leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed. He looked completely relaxed, like they were discussing dinner plans instead of a career-defining decision.

"We tell them yes, we are together. We are in love. Very romantic. Everyone cry happy tears."

Marcus didn't smile. "It's not that simple, Ilya."

"Why not? Is true."

"Because," Jennifer interjected, her tone gentle but firm, "there are implications we need to consider. Sponsorship deals. Media obligations. The reaction from fans, from other players, from the league itself. This isn't just about confirming your relationship. It's about managing the fallout."

Shane's stomach churned. Fallout. Like their relationship was a disaster waiting to happen.

"The NHL has made strides in inclusivity," one of the team reps said—Shane couldn't remember his name, some PR director with a too-firm handshake. "But we'd be naive to pretend there won't be backlash. Especially given your profiles. Ilya, you're one of the most recognizable players in the league. Shane, you're a franchise cornerstone for Montreal. This will be major news."

"Is already major news," Ilya pointed out. "Video has five million views. People already know."

"They suspect," Marcus corrected. "There's a difference between speculation and confirmation. Once you confirm, there's no taking it back."

Ilya shrugged. "Good. I don't want to take back."

Shane wished he had even a fraction of that certainty. He'd been silent for most of the meeting, letting the agents and PR people talk around him, through him, about him. It was easier that way. Easier to let other people make the decisions, to follow the script he was given.

But Jennifer was looking at him now, her expression expectant. "Shane? What do you think?"

What did he think? He thought he wanted to disappear. He thought he wanted to rewind time to before the video, before anyone knew, when he and Ilya could exist in their private bubble without the entire world watching. He thought he was terrified of what would happen when they made this official, when there was no more hiding, no more plausible deniability.

But he also thought about what Ilya had said the night after the video leaked, when Shane had been spiraling: "I am tired of hiding you. I want to tell everyone you are mine."

"I think..." Shane started, his voice rough. He cleared his throat. "I think if we're going to do this, we should do it on our terms. Not because we're forced to, but because we choose to."

Ilya's hand found his under the table, squeezing gently. Shane didn't pull away.

Marcus nodded slowly. "Alright. If we're moving forward with this, we need to be strategic. We control the narrative. We choose the timing, the venue, the message."

"The premiere," Jennifer said suddenly. "The sports documentary premiere next month. It's high-profile, but it's not a hockey event. It gives you a platform without making it seem like a publicity stunt."

"And it's black-tie," the PR director added. "Classy. Dignified. You attend together, you're photographed together, and we release a joint statement from both of you simultaneously. Clean and professional."

Shane's chest tightened. A red carpet. Cameras. Hundreds of people watching, judging, analyzing every expression, every gesture.

"Is perfect," Ilya said, grinning. "We look very handsome in tuxedos. Very James Bond."

"This isn't a joke, Ilya," Marcus said, his patience clearly wearing thin. "This is serious. Once you do this, your lives will change. The media attention will be intense. You'll be asked about your relationship in every interview. You'll become spokespeople for LGBTQ+ issues whether you want to or not. You need to be prepared for that."

"I am prepared," Ilya said simply. "I don't care what people think. I care about Shane. I care about hockey. Everything else is just noise."

If only it were that simple. If only Shane could flip a switch and stop caring what people thought, stop worrying about disappointing his family, his team, his fans. Stop imagining all the ways this could go wrong.

"We'll need to prepare statements," Jennifer said, making notes on her tablet. "Talking points for both of you. We'll do media training before the premiere, make sure you're ready for the questions you'll get."

"And we'll need to coordinate with both teams," the PR director added. "Make sure everyone's on the same page. The last thing we need is conflicting messages."

The meeting continued for another hour, covering logistics and strategy and contingency plans. By the end of it, Shane's head was pounding and his hands were shaking slightly—a tremor he hid by keeping them clasped tightly in his lap.

When they finally left the conference room, Ilya immediately pulled Shane into a side hallway, away from the agents and PR people.

"You are okay?" Ilya asked, his hands on Shane's shoulders, his eyes searching Shane's face.

"I don't know," Shane admitted. "This is really happening."

"Yes. Is happening." Ilya's thumbs rubbed small circles against Shane's shoulders. "But is good thing, Shane. Is good we don't hide anymore. Is good we can be together for real, not just in secret."

"What if it ruins everything?" The words came out before Shane could stop them. "What if the team decides I'm too much of a distraction? What if I lose sponsorships? What if—"

"What if, what if, what if," Ilya interrupted, not unkindly. "You always do this. You always think of worst thing that can happen. But what if best thing happen? What if everyone say 'good for you' and we are happy and nothing bad happen at all?"

Shane wanted to believe that. He wanted to live in Ilya's world, where confidence and charisma could smooth over any obstacle, where being yourself was always enough.

"I'm scared," Shane said quietly.

"I know." Ilya pulled him closer, wrapping his arms around him in a hug that felt like safety. "But I am here. We do this together. And if anyone give you trouble, I punch them in face."

Despite everything, Shane laughed—a short, startled sound. "You can't punch everyone."

"Why everyone say this to me?" Ilya pulled back, grinning. "I can punch at least some people. Is good compromise."

And somehow, standing in that hallway with Ilya's arms around him and Ilya's ridiculous grin making everything seem less catastrophic, Shane thought maybe—maybe—they could actually do this.

— — —

The Mercedes smelled like leather and Ilya's cologne—something expensive and woody that Shane had bought him for his birthday. Ilya drove with one hand on the wheel, the other resting on the center console, fingers drumming absently to whatever Russian hip-hop was playing through the speakers.

Shane sat in the passenger seat, watching the city lights blur past the window. His hands were folded in his lap, perfectly still, but his mind was racing. They were fifteen minutes away from the premiere. Fifteen minutes from stepping out of this safe, private space and into the glare of public scrutiny.

His chest felt tight again. The breathing exercises weren't working anymore.

"You are very quiet," Ilya observed, turning down the music. "Even for you."

"Just thinking," Shane said.

"About?"

Everything. Nothing. The way his life was about to change irrevocably. The fact that in less than an hour, their relationship would be public knowledge, confirmed, official. No more speculation. No more privacy.

"Shane." Ilya's voice was softer now, concerned. "Talk to me."

"I'm fine."

"You say this, but I don't believe." Ilya glanced over at him, then back at the road. "You have been quiet all day. You barely eat lunch. You check phone every five minutes like you expect bad news."

Because he was expecting bad news. Because his brain kept supplying him with worst-case scenarios, each one more catastrophic than the last. Because he couldn't shake the feeling that they were making a terrible mistake.

"I'm just..." Shane started, then stopped. How could he explain this to Ilya, who seemed to move through the world without fear, without the constant anxiety that something was about to go horribly wrong? "I'm not like you. I can't just... not care what people think."

"I care what people think," Ilya said, surprising him. "I just don't let it control me. Is different."

"How do you do that?"

Ilya was quiet for a moment, navigating through traffic with easy confidence. "When I was young, in Russia, I was always too much. Too loud, too confident, too... what is word? Flamboyant. My coaches, they tell me to be more serious, more professional. They say I embarrass myself, embarrass team. But I think, if I change who I am to make other people comfortable, then I am not really living. I am just performing."

Shane had never heard Ilya talk about this before. In all their time together, Ilya had always seemed so self-assured, like he'd never doubted himself for a moment.

"So I decide," Ilya continued, "I am going to be myself, and if people don't like it, is their problem, not mine. And you know what? Some people hate me. They say I am arrogant, I am too much, I am bad for hockey. But other people love me. They love that I am different. And the people who love me, they are worth more than the people who hate me."

He pulled up to a red light and turned to look at Shane fully. "You spend so much time worrying about people who will judge you, you forget about people who will support you. Your teammates, they love you. Your family, they love you. I love you. That is what matters."

Shane's throat felt tight. "What if it's not enough?"

"Then we deal with it. Together." The light turned green, and Ilya accelerated smoothly. "But I think you will be surprised. I think more people will be happy for us than you expect."

Shane wanted to believe that. He wanted to have Ilya's faith in humanity, his conviction that things would work out. But his brain didn't work that way. His brain catalogued every possible danger, every potential threat, every way things could go wrong. It was exhausting, but it was also how he'd survived this long—by being prepared, by anticipating problems, by never being caught off guard.

Except he couldn't prepare for this. He couldn't control how people would react, what they would say, how it would affect his career. He was walking into the unknown, and it terrified him.

"Hey." Ilya's hand left the center console and found Shane's, lacing their fingers together. "Look at me."

Shane turned his head, meeting Ilya's eyes. Even in the dim light of the car, they were striking—that particular shade of blue-green that Shane had never seen on anyone else.

"We are going to walk in there," Ilya said, his voice steady and sure, "and we are going to be ourselves. We are going to hold hands if we want. We are going to smile for cameras. And then we are going to go home and forget about all of it. Okay?"

"Okay," Shane said, even though nothing felt okay.

"And if you need to leave early, we leave early. If you need to take break, we take break. If you need me to tell reporters to fuck off, I will happily tell reporters to fuck off." Ilya grinned. "Is one of my favorite things to do."

Despite the anxiety clawing at his chest, Shane felt his mouth curve into a small smile. "I know."

"There. Is better. I like when you smile." Ilya squeezed his hand. "You have very nice smile. Very handsome, so pretty. Make me want to kiss you."

"You can't kiss me in the car. We're almost there."

"I can kiss you wherever I want. You are my boyfriend. Is allowed." But Ilya didn't lean over, just kept holding Shane's hand as he navigated the final few blocks to the venue.

Shane could see it now—the theater where the premiere was being held, lit up like a beacon. There were barriers set up, crowds of people, camera flashes already going off. His stomach dropped.

"Ilya—"

"I know. Is lot of people. But remember, we just have to get through red carpet, then we are inside. And inside is easy. We sit, we watch movie, we leave. Simple."

Nothing about this was simple. But Shane nodded anyway, because they were pulling up to the venue now, and there was no turning back.

Ilya handed the keys to the valet, then came around to Shane's side of the car. When he opened the door, the sounds of the crowd hit them immediately—shouting, camera shutters, the general chaos of a major event.

Ilya held out his hand. "Ready?"

No. Shane wasn't ready. He would never be ready.

But he took Ilya's hand anyway and stepped out of the car.

— — —

The noise was overwhelming.

Shane had been to plenty of public events before—press conferences, award ceremonies, charity galas—but this was different. This time, everyone knew. This time, he wasn't just Shane Hollander, hockey player. He was Shane Hollander, gay hockey player, half of the first openly gay couple in the NHL.

The cameras started flashing before they'd even made it past the barriers. Reporters were shouting questions, their voices overlapping into an incomprehensible wall of sound. Shane's hand tightened involuntarily around Ilya's.

"Ilya! Shane! Over here!"

"When did you two start dating?"

"Ilya, how does it feel to be out publicly?"

"Shane, can you comment on the video?"

Ilya kept walking, his stride confident and unhurried, pulling Shane along with him. He was smiling—that megawatt grin that he used for cameras, charming and unflappable. Shane tried to match it, tried to look calm and composed, but his face felt frozen.

A reporter managed to push closer to the barrier, microphone extended. "Ilya! Congratulations on the trade to Ottawa! How do you think the relationship will work with you in different cities?"

"We make it work," Ilya said smoothly, not breaking stride. "Is not so far. I can drive to Montreal in two hours. Is fine."

"Shane!" Another reporter, this one with a camera crew. "How long have you been together?"

Shane's mouth opened, but no words came out. His mind had gone blank, all his carefully prepared responses evaporating under the pressure of the moment. The lights were too bright. The noise was too loud. There were too many people, too many eyes, too much attention.

"Long enough," Ilya answered for him, squeezing his hand. "We are very happy. That is what matters, yes?"

"Ilya, there were rumors about you and Shane for years! Why come out now?"

"Because we want to," Ilya said simply. "Because we are tired of hiding. Because love is love, and we don't need to be ashamed."

He made it sound so easy. So straightforward. Shane wished he could bottle whatever confidence Ilya had and inject it directly into his veins.

They were getting closer to the actual red carpet now, where the photographers were set up. Shane could see other celebrities posing, smiling, working the cameras with practiced ease. His stomach churned.

"Is that Shane Hollander's boyfriend?" someone shouted from the crowd.

"They're so cute together!"

"I can't believe this is real!"

Not everyone was positive. Shane's ears picked out the negative comments too, the ones that cut through the general noise like knives:

"This is wrong."

"They're ruining hockey."

"Attention whores."

His breathing was getting faster. Shallower. The tightness in his chest was spreading, making it hard to think, hard to focus on anything except the overwhelming need to get away, to find somewhere quiet, somewhere safe.

"Almost there," Ilya murmured, low enough that only Shane could hear. "You are doing great."

Shane didn't feel like he was doing great. He felt like he was drowning.

Another reporter managed to intercept them, this one with a tablet and a press badge. "Shane, there's been some speculation about how your autism might affect your relationship. Do you want to comment on that?"

The question hit him like a physical blow. His autism. Of course they were going to bring that up. Of course they were going to make it part of the narrative, another thing to analyze and dissect and discuss.

"Well, I—"

"That is private," Ilya said, his voice sharp now, protective. "Next question."

"But surely—"

"I said next question." Ilya's smile had vanished, replaced by something harder. "Or maybe no questions at all. We can just walk past."

The reporter backed off, but the damage was done. Shane could feel himself spiraling, his thoughts fragmenting into panic. This was a mistake. This was all a mistake. He shouldn't be here. He couldn't do this.

"Breathe," Ilya said quietly, his hand steady in Shane's. "Just breathe. We are almost to carpet."

But the red carpet meant more cameras, more questions, more performance. Shane didn't know if he could do it. His vision was starting to tunnel, the edges going dark and fuzzy.

"Ilya, I—"

"I know. I see it. Just hold on little bit longer, okay? We get through this part, then we take break."

They reached the start of the red carpet, where a handler with a clipboard was directing traffic. She smiled at them—a professional, practiced smile—and gestured to the step-and-repeat backdrop where photographers were waiting.

"Gentlemen! Right this way! We're so excited to have you here!"

Ilya stepped onto the carpet, pulling Shane with him. The camera flashes intensified, a strobe-light effect that made Shane's head pound.

"Ilya! Shane! Look here!"

"Over here, guys!"

"Can you put your arms around each other?"

Ilya complied easily, his arm sliding around Shane's waist, pulling him close. Shane tried to smile, tried to look natural, but he felt like a mannequin—stiff and artificial.

"Beautiful! Perfect! Now one with you looking at each other!"

Ilya turned to face Shane, his expression softening into something genuine. "You are okay?" he asked, quiet enough that the photographers wouldn't hear.

Shane nodded, even though it was a lie.

"Just few more minutes," Ilya promised. "Then we go inside."

But the photographers wanted more. They always wanted more.

"Kiss for the camera!"

"Come on, guys, give us something!"

Ilya looked at Shane, a question in his eyes. Shane managed a tiny shake of his head. He couldn't. Not here, not with everyone watching.

"Maybe later," Ilya called to the photographers, grinning. "You have to buy us dinner first, yes?"

There was laughter, and then they were moving again, down the carpet toward the next cluster of reporters. These were the official press, the ones with pre-approved questions, the ones who were supposed to be safe.

Shane hoped they were safe. He didn't know how much more of this he could take.

— — —

The official press line was more organized than the chaos at the barriers, but somehow that made it worse. At least in the chaos, Shane could hide behind the noise, let Ilya do the talking, blend into the background. Here, under the bright lights with microphones pointed at them and cameras recording every word, there was nowhere to hide.

"Ilya, Shane, congratulations on going public!" The first reporter was a woman with perfectly styled hair and a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "How does it feel to finally be open about your relationship?"

"Feels good," Ilya said easily, his arm still around Shane's waist. "Feels right. We are very happy."

"Shane, you've always been known as a private person. Was it difficult to make this decision?"

The microphone swung toward him. Shane's mouth went dry. He could feel everyone watching him—the reporter, the camera operator, the people behind them waiting for their turn, the photographers still snapping pictures from the side.

"It was... it was a big decision," he managed. His voice sounded strange to his own ears, too high, too tight. "But we're... we're ready. I'm ready."

"And Ilya, you just got traded to Ottawa. How will you manage a long-distance relationship?"

Back to Ilya. Shane could breathe again. Ilya launched into an answer about commitment and making time and how distance was just a number, and Shane tried to focus on staying upright, on keeping his expression neutral, on not letting anyone see how close he was to falling apart.

They moved to the next reporter, then the next. Ilya handled most of the questions with his characteristic charm, deflecting the invasive ones with jokes, giving thoughtful answers to the genuine ones. Shane contributed when he had to, short responses that didn't require much thought.

"Shane, there's been some discussion on social media about representation in hockey. Do you feel a responsibility to be a role model for young LGBTQ+ athletes?"

The question should have been easy. It was one they'd prepared for in media training. But Shane's brain had stopped cooperating. The words he'd memorized were gone, replaced by static and panic.

"I... um..." He could feel sweat forming at his hairline, despite the cool evening air. "I think... representation is important. And if we can... if we can help people feel less alone, then..."

He trailed off. The reporter waited expectantly. The silence stretched too long.

"What Shane means," Ilya jumped in smoothly, "is that we are just living our lives. We are not trying to be heroes or role models. We are just two people who love each other. But if that help someone else feel brave enough to be themselves, then is good thing."

The reporter nodded, satisfied, and moved on to the next question. Shane felt Ilya's hand tighten on his waist—a silent check-in. Shane wanted to say he was fine, but he couldn't form the words.

The next reporter was a man with a too-loud voice and an aggressive energy that immediately set Shane on edge. "Ilya, some people are saying this is just a publicity stunt to distract from your trade. What do you say to those critics?"

"I say they are idiots," Ilya replied cheerfully. "I don't need publicity stunt. I am already very famous and very handsome. Shane and I are together because we love each other, not because we want attention."

"Shane, how do you respond to people who say that openly gay players don't belong in professional sports?"

The microphone was in his face again. Shane stared at it, his mind completely blank. How did he respond? What was he supposed to say? The prepared answer was somewhere in his head, but he couldn't access it, couldn't think past the roaring in his ears.

"I..." His chest was too tight. He couldn't get enough air. "I think..."

The reporter waited. Everyone waited. Shane could feel their eyes on him, judging, analyzing, waiting for him to say something profound or inspiring or at least coherent.

But he couldn't. The words wouldn't come. His throat had closed up, his lungs weren't working properly, and the edges of his vision were going dark again.

"I think," Ilya said, his voice harder now, "that question is stupid and you should be ashamed for asking it. Next question."

"But surely Shane can speak for himself—"

"Next question," Ilya repeated, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Or we are done here."

The reporter backed off, but Shane barely noticed. He was too focused on trying to breathe, trying to stay present, trying not to collapse right here on the red carpet in front of everyone.

"Shane." Ilya's voice was quiet, urgent. "Look at me."

Shane couldn't. He was staring at the ground, at his perfectly polished shoes, at the red carpet beneath them. His hands were shaking. His whole body was shaking.

"Okay," Ilya said decisively. "We are done. We go inside now."

"But there are more—" someone started to protest.

"We are done," Ilya repeated firmly. He turned to Shane, both hands on his shoulders now. "Can you walk?"

Shane nodded, even though he wasn't sure. His legs felt like they might give out at any moment.

Ilya's arm went around him again, but this time it was supportive rather than performative, holding him up as much as holding him close. "Excuse us," Ilya said to the remaining reporters, his tone polite but final. "We need to go inside now. Thank you for your questions."

He steered Shane away from the press line, toward the entrance to the theater. Shane was vaguely aware of people calling after them, of camera flashes still going off, of the general murmur of confusion and speculation. But it all felt distant, like it was happening to someone else.

They made it through the doors, into the lobby. It was crowded here too—other celebrities, industry people, servers with trays of champagne. But at least it was quieter, the noise more contained.

"Where is bathroom?" Ilya asked a nearby staff member.

"Down that hallway, to the left."

Ilya guided Shane through the crowd, his body blocking Shane from view, protecting him from curious stares. They found the bathroom—single occupancy, thankfully—and Ilya ushered Shane inside, locking the door behind them.

The sudden quiet was almost as overwhelming as the noise had been.

"Sit," Ilya ordered, pointing to the closed toilet lid.

Shane sat. His hands were still shaking. He couldn't seem to stop them.

Ilya crouched in front of him, his hands on Shane's knees.

"Breathe with me, okay? In for four, hold for four, out for four. Come on, do it with me."

Shane tried. His breath came in gasps at first, too fast and too shallow, but Ilya kept counting, kept breathing with him, and gradually—slowly—Shane's lungs started to cooperate.

In for four. Hold for four. Out for four.

Again.

Again.

The panic started to recede, leaving exhaustion in its wake. Shane slumped forward, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Don't," Ilya said sharply. "Don't apologize. You have nothing to be sorry for."

But he did. He'd frozen on the red carpet. He'd made Ilya cut their press obligations short. He'd probably looked weak and pathetic on camera, and tomorrow everyone would be talking about it, analyzing it, speculating about what was wrong with him.

"I ruined everything," Shane said, his voice muffled by his hands.

"You didn't ruin anything." Ilya's hands moved from Shane's knees to his wrists, gently pulling his hands away from his face.

"You had panic attack. Is not your fault. Is not something you can control."

"I should have been able to handle it. You handled it fine."

"I am different person than you. I like attention. You don't. That doesn't make you weak. That just make you... you." Ilya's thumbs rubbed circles on the inside of Shane's wrists. "And I love you. All of you. Even the parts that have panic attacks on red carpets."

Shane's eyes were burning. He blinked hard, trying to keep the tears at bay. "I wanted to do this right. I wanted to be strong for you."

"You are strong. You are strongest person I know." Ilya's voice was fierce now, intense. "You think is easy to live in world that doesn't understand you? You think is easy to be different, to have brain that work different way, and still be best hockey player in league? You do that every day. You are so strong, Shane. So strong."

The tears came anyway, hot and unwelcome. Shane tried to wipe them away, but they kept coming.

"Hey, hey," Ilya murmured, pulling Shane forward into a hug. "Is okay. You can cry. Is just me here. Nobody else."

Shane buried his face in Ilya's shoulder, his hands fisting in the fabric of Ilya's expensive jacket. He felt like he was breaking apart, all the stress and fear and anxiety of the past weeks finally overwhelming him.

"I can't do this," he choked out. "I can't be what everyone wants me to be. I can't be the perfect role model or the inspiring story or whatever they want. I'm just... I'm just me, and I'm not enough."

"Stop." Ilya pulled back, his hands framing Shane's face, forcing Shane to look at him. "Stop saying that. You are enough. You are more than enough. You are everything."

— — —

Shane's face was wet with tears, his carefully styled hair falling into his eyes, his bow tie askew. He looked nothing like the polished, composed person who'd left their apartment an hour ago. He looked broken.

And Ilya's heart was breaking right along with him.

"Listen to me," Ilya said, his thumbs wiping away Shane's tears even as new ones fell. "I don't care about red carpet. I don't care about reporters or cameras or what people think. I only care about you. You understand? Only you."

"But I embarrassed you," Shane said, his voice thick with tears. "I made us leave early. I couldn't even answer basic questions. Everyone's going to think I'm weak, that I can't handle the pressure, that I'm not cut out for this."

"I don't care what everyone think. I care what you think. I care how you feel." Ilya moved his hands from Shane's face to his shoulders, grounding him. "And right now, you feel bad. So we fix that. We don't worry about anything else."

"How do we fix it? How do I fix... this?" Shane gestured vaguely at himself, at the mess he'd become. "I can't just turn off my brain. I can't stop being anxious or autistic or whatever the fuck is wrong with me."

"Nothing is wrong with you," Ilya said firmly. "Your brain work different. So what? My brain probably work different too. Everyone's brain work different. That doesn't mean something is wrong."

"You don't understand." Shane's hands were shaking again, trembling where they gripped Ilya's jacket. "You don't know what it's like to feel like you're constantly failing at being a normal person. To have to work twice as hard as everyone else just to appear functional. To know that people are always watching, always judging, always waiting for you to fuck up."

"You are right. I don't understand exactly what you feel." Ilya's voice was gentle but honest. "But I understand what is like to be different. To have people judge you for who you are. In Russia, being like me—being loud, being confident, being gay—is dangerous. My family, they don't talk to me anymore because I am too much, too Western, too queer. So maybe I don't understand your exact experience, but I understand feeling like you don't fit."

Shane's eyes widened slightly. Ilya rarely talked about his family, about the cost of being himself. It was easier to joke, to deflect, to pretend it didn't hurt.

"I didn't know your family..." Shane started.

"Is okay. Is old pain. I make peace with it." Ilya shrugged, trying to lighten the moment. "My point is, we all have things that make us different. Things that make life harder. But those things also make us who we are. And I love who you are, Shane. I love your careful brain that notice everything. I love how you care so much about doing things right. I love how you feel everything so deeply, even when it hurt."

"Even when I fall apart in bathrooms at movie premieres?" Shane's attempt at humor was weak, but it was there.

"Especially then. Because that mean you trust me enough to fall apart. You don't have to be perfect with me. You don't have to be strong all the time. You can just be you."

Shane closed his eyes, fresh tears leaking out. "I'm so tired, Ilya. I'm so tired of pretending. Of masking. Of trying to be what everyone expects."

"Then stop," Ilya said simply. "Stop pretending. Stop trying to be perfect. Just be Shane. Real Shane, not the version you show to cameras."

"What if real Shane isn't good enough?"

"Real Shane is best Shane. Real Shane is the one I fall in love with." Ilya leaned forward, pressing his forehead against Shane's. "Real Shane is the one who make me laugh when I am sad. Who understand me when I speak terrible English. Who make me want to be better person. That Shane is more than good enough. That Shane is everything."

They stayed like that for a long moment, foreheads pressed together, breathing the same air. Shane's trembling gradually subsided, his grip on Ilya's jacket loosening.

"I don't know how to do this," Shane finally whispered. "How to be public. How to handle all the attention."

"We figure it out together. And if we need to leave events early, we leave early. If we need to say no to interviews, we say no. If we need to take break from social media, we take break. We make our own rules, okay? We don't let other people tell us how to live our lives."

"The agents won't like that."

"Fuck the agents. They work for us, not other way around." Ilya pulled back slightly, enough to see Shane's face. "You are more important than any publicity plan or media strategy. Your health is more important. Your happiness is more important."

Shane's eyes searched Ilya's face, looking for... what? Doubt? Resentment? But all he found was sincerity, affection, and that stubborn determination that was so quintessentially Ilya.

"How are you so sure about everything?" Shane asked.

"I am not sure about everything. I am sure about you. About us. Everything else, I just pretend to be sure and hope for best." Ilya grinned. "Is good strategy. You should try it."

Despite everything, Shane felt a small smile tug at his lips. "I don't think I can pull off your level of fake confidence."

"Is not fake. Is just... optimistic." Ilya's hands moved to Shane's tie, straightening it with careful fingers. "I choose to believe things will work out. And if they don't, I deal with it then. No point worrying about problems that don't exist yet."

"That's the opposite of how my brain works."

"I know. Is why we are good team. You worry about everything, I worry about nothing. We balance each other out."

Shane caught Ilya's hands, stilling them. "I'm sorry I'm such a mess."

"You are not mess. You are human. Is allowed." Ilya laced their fingers together. "And even if you were mess, I would still love you. I would love you if you were disaster. I would love you if you were complete catastrophe. I would love you if you were—what is word?—dumpster fire."

"A dumpster fire?" Shane's smile grew a little wider. "That's romantic."

"I am very romantic. Is one of my best qualities." Ilya brought Shane's hands to his lips, kissing his knuckles. "That and my incredible hockey skills. And my very handsome face."

"And your humility."

"Yes, also my humility. I am very humble. Most humble person in NHL." Ilya's eyes were sparkling now, pleased that he'd managed to make Shane smile. "See? You are feeling better already. My charm is very powerful."

"Your charm is very something," Shane agreed. His breathing had returned to normal, the panic attack fully subsided. He felt wrung out, exhausted, but no longer like he was drowning.

"You want to go home?" Ilya asked. "We can skip movie. We already did the important part—we showed up, we were seen together. Nobody can say we didn't try."

Shane considered it. Part of him desperately wanted to leave, to go back to their apartment and hide from the world. But another part—a smaller, braver part—didn't want to let the panic win.

"No," he said slowly. "We should stay. We came here to do this. We should... we should finish it."

"You are sure? Is okay if you want to leave. I don't mind."

"I'm sure." Shane took a deep breath, then another. "I just need a few more minutes. And maybe some water."

"I get you water. And maybe we fix your hair, because right now you look like you stick finger in electrical socket." Ilya stood up, looking around the bathroom. "Is no water in here. I go get some. You stay here, okay? Lock door behind me."

"Ilya—"

"I will be right back. Two minutes, maybe three. You will be okay for three minutes?"

Shane nodded. He would be okay. He was already feeling more stable, more grounded. The panic had passed, leaving him shaky but functional.

Ilya unlocked the door, checked that the hallway was clear, then slipped out. Shane heard the lock click behind him.

Alone in the bathroom, Shane stood up and looked at himself in the mirror. Ilya was right—his hair was a disaster, sticking up at odd angles where he'd run his hands through it. His eyes were red and puffy from crying. His bow tie was crooked. He looked exactly like someone who'd just had a panic attack.

But he also looked... real. Not polished or perfect or camera-ready. Just real.

Maybe that was okay. Maybe he didn't have to be perfect all the time.

Shane ran water over his hands, splashed some on his face. He fixed his hair as best he could, straightened his tie. By the time Ilya returned with a bottle of water and a concerned expression, Shane looked almost presentable again.

"Better?" Ilya asked, handing him the water.

"Better," Shane confirmed. He drank half the bottle in one go, his throat grateful for the relief.

"Good. Now we have decision to make. We can go into theater, watch movie, pretend everything is fine. Or we can go home, order pizza, watch movie there instead. Both are good options. You choose."

Shane thought about it. Thought about facing the crowd again, the curious stares, the whispered speculation. Thought about sitting in a dark theater for two hours, hyperaware of everyone around them.

But he also thought about what Ilya had said: We make our own rules.

"Let's stay," Shane decided. "But if I need to leave—"

"Then we leave. No questions, no judgment. We just go." Ilya held out his hand. "Deal?"

Shane took it. "Deal."

They left the bathroom together, Ilya's hand warm and steady in his. The lobby had thinned out—most people had already gone into the theater. A few stragglers remained, but no one paid them much attention.

As they walked toward the theater entrance, Ilya leaned close and murmured, "You know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think you are very brave. Braver than me, even."

"That's not true."

"Is true. I am brave about easy things—talking to reporters, being on camera, saying what I think. But you are brave about hard things. You do things that scare you even when every part of you want to run away. That is real bravery."

Shane didn't know what to say to that. So instead, he squeezed Ilya's hand and let himself be led into the theater.

They found their seats—good ones, near the middle—and settled in. The lights were already dimming, the previews starting. In the darkness, with Ilya's shoulder pressed against his and Ilya's hand still holding his, Shane felt something in his chest loosen.

They'd made it. They'd survived the red carpet, the questions, the panic. They were here, together, and that was enough. Ilya leaned over and whispered, "After movie, we go home and I make you forget all about tonight. Okay?"

There was a promise in those words, a heat that made Shane's breath catch for entirely different reasons.

"Okay," Shane whispered back.

And for the first time all night, he was actually looking forward to what came next.

— — —

They barely made it through the door.

Ilya had been touching Shane's thigh in the car the entire ride home from the screening—fingers tracing patterns through expensive fabric, grip tightening whenever Shane shifted in his seat. The premiere had been grueling. Cameras, questions, the weight of eyes that didn't yet know what they were to each other. Shane had powered through a panic attack in the

bathroom, and Ilya had found him there, steadied him, whispered promises against his temple.

The drive home had been torture of a different kind. Every red light felt like an eternity. Every block between the theater and their apartment stretched impossibly long. Ilya's hand had crept higher on Shane's thigh with each passing minute, until his fingers were brushing dangerously close to where Shane was already half-hard in his tailored pants.

"You're doing this on purpose," Shane had said, his voice strained.

Ilya had glanced at him, a wicked smile playing at his lips. "Doing what?"

"You know what."

"Maybe I want you thinking about what I do to you when we get home." Ilya's fingers had squeezed, and Shane had bitten back a moan. "Maybe I want you desperate for me."

"Mission accomplished," Shane had muttered, and Ilya's laugh had been low and dark and full of promise.

Now, finally, the door clicked shut behind them, and Ilya's control snapped.

"Ilya—" Shane started, but the word dissolved into a gasp as Ilya pressed him back against the door, one hand braced beside his head, the other already working the buttons of Shane's shirt.

"You was so brave tonight," Ilya murmured, his accent thicker than usual, roughened by want. His fingers moved with deliberate precision, exposing Shane's throat, his collarbones, the pale expanse of his chest. "So fucking brave, solnyshko. Watching you out there, smiling for cameras, answering questions, being so strong even when I see you shaking. Let me take care now."

Shane's hands found Ilya's shoulders, gripping the fabric of his jacket. He could feel his heart pounding, adrenaline from the evening still coursing through his veins, mixing with arousal until he couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. "We should—bedroom—"

"Here first." Ilya's mouth found the junction of Shane's neck and shoulder, and he bit down—not gently. Shane made a sound that was half-surprise, half-pleasure, his fingers digging into Ilya's shoulders. Ilya soothed the sting with his tongue before biting again, harder this time, sucking the skin between his teeth. "I want mark you. Want everyone see tomorrow when we do morning interviews. Want them know you're taken."

"Ilya." Shane's voice cracked. His shirt hung open now, and Ilya's hands were everywhere—sliding the fabric off his shoulders, tracing the lines of his ribs, thumbs brushing over his nipples until Shane arched into the touch. The cool air of the apartment hit his heated skin, making him shiver.

"You have no idea," Ilya said, his voice dropping even lower, "how hard was tonight. Watching other people look at you. That reporter who kept touching your arm. Photographer who asked you smile just for him." His teeth grazed Shane's earlobe. "You're mine. I want everyone know this."

Shane's breath came faster. There was something intoxicating about Ilya like this—possessive, demanding, barely restrained. "Then show me," he said, the words coming out braver than he felt. "Show me I'm yours."

Ilya pulled back just enough to meet Shane's eyes. His pupils were blown wide, nearly swallowing the blue. "Say yes," he said, his voice rough with need. "Say yes, and I cover you in marks. Everyone will know you're mine. Every person who look at you tomorrow will see what we did tonight."

Shane's breath hitched. The idea should have terrified him—visible marks, evidence of this, of them, when they were about to go public. But instead it sent heat flooding through his body, pooling low in his belly. "Yes," he whispered. "God, yes. Mark me. I want everyone to know."

Ilya's smile was predatory, triumphant. He dropped to his knees with fluid grace, hands working Shane's belt, his zipper. "Good boy," he said, and the praise sent another wave of heat through Shane's body.

Shane watched, transfixed, as Ilya pressed open-mouthed kisses to his hip bones, his lower abdomen, anywhere the expensive suit had hidden. His lips were hot against Shane's skin, his breath even hotter. Then Ilya bit down on the jut of his hip—hard enough to leave an immediate red mark and Shane's knees nearly buckled.

"Fuck," Shane gasped, one hand flying to Ilya's shoulder for balance.

"This only first one," Ilya promised, looking up at him through his lashes. His eyes were dark with want, his lips already swollen. "I going to cover you. By time I'm done, you have marks everywhere. Places only I can see, and places everyone will see."

"Bedroom," Ilya said abruptly, standing. "Now. I need more room for work."

They stumbled down the hallway, shedding clothes as they went. Ilya's jacket hit the floor first, followed by Shane's shoes. Shane's hands were clumsy with want as he tried to help Ilya with his shirt, but Ilya caught his wrists.

"Let me," Ilya said. He pulled his shirt over his head in one smooth motion, revealing the broad expanse of his chest, the tattoos Shane had traced with his fingers and tongue countless times. The ink looked darker in the dim hallway light, shadows playing across the defined muscles of his abdomen.

Shane reached out to touch, but Ilya caught his hand again. "Not yet. Tonight is about you. About me taking care of you."

"But I want—"

"I know what you want." Ilya's smile was knowing, almost smug. "And you get it. But first, I going to make you fall apart. Going to make you forget about red carpets and cameras and everything except how good I make you feel."

By the time they reached the bedroom, Shane was down to his boxer briefs and Ilya had lost his belt. The bedroom was dark except for the ambient light from the city filtering through the curtains, casting everything in shades of blue and shadow.

Ilya guided Shane backward until his legs hit the mattress, then pushed him down. Shane went willingly, eagerly, his body already thrumming with anticipation. Ilya followed him down, covering Shane's body with his own. The weight of him was grounding, overwhelming in the best way. Shane could feel every point of contact—Ilya's chest against his, Ilya's thigh between his legs, Ilya's hands framing his face.

"I need—" Shane started, but Ilya caught his wrists, pinning them above his head with one large hand.

"I know what you need." Ilya's free hand traced down Shane's side, mapping the architecture of his ribs, the dip of his waist. His touch was firm, possessive, claiming. "You need me take control. Make you forget everything except this. Except us. You been so strong all night, holding together, being brave. Now you can let go. I got you."

Shane nodded, unable to form words. His throat felt tight with emotion and want. Ilya's grip on his wrists tightened—not painful, but firm, unyielding. A reminder that Shane was exactly where Ilya wanted him, that he was safe here, that he could surrender control.

"That's my good boy," Ilya murmured, and Shane felt the praise like a physical touch. "So beautiful like this. So perfect for me."

Ilya's mouth found Shane's neck again, and this time he was methodical. He sucked a mark just below Shane's jaw—high enough that no collar would hide it—and Shane moaned, trying to arch up, but Ilya's body weight kept him pinned to the mattress.

"Stay still," Ilya commanded, his voice a low rumble against Shane's skin. "Let me mark you properly. Let me show you who you belong to."

He worked his way down Shane's throat, leaving a trail of bruises. Each one was deliberate, placed with possessive intent. He'd suck until Shane whimpered, then soothe the sting with his tongue before moving to the next spot. When he reached Shane's collarbone, he bit down hard enough to make Shane cry out.

"Too much?" Ilya asked, but there was satisfaction in his voice. He knew it wasn't too much. He knew exactly how much Shane could take.

"No," Shane gasped. "More. Please, more."

"Greedy," Ilya said, but he sounded pleased. He released Shane's wrists only to brace himself on his forearms, looking down at his handiwork. Shane's neck was already blooming with marks—red and purple bruises that would darken overnight. "Everyone going to see these tomorrow," Ilya said, satisfaction evident in his tone. "When we do morning interviews. When we walk red carpet for daytime shows. They see these marks and know you're taken. Know you're mine."

"Yours," Shane agreed breathlessly. His hands, finally free, tangled in Ilya's hair. The strands were soft between his fingers, and he tugged gently, making Ilya groan. "Always yours. Only yours."

"Damn right," Ilya said, and captured his mouth in a bruising kiss. It was all teeth and tongue and barely restrained hunger. Shane opened for him immediately, letting Ilya take what he wanted, giving everything he had. When Ilya pulled back, Shane's lips were swollen, his eyes glazed with want.

"I going to make you come," Ilya said, shifting down Shane's body. His hands traced paths over Shane's chest, his stomach, mapping territory he'd claimed a thousand times before but somehow it felt new tonight, more intense. "And then I going to make you come again. And every time you see these marks over next week, you remember this. Remember who you belong to. Remember how good I made you feel."

He hooked his fingers in the waistband of Shane's boxer briefs and pulled them off in one smooth motion. Shane was already hard, had been since the car, and Ilya took a moment just to look at him—spread out on the bed, chest already blooming with marks, cock flushed and leaking against his stomach.

"Beautiful," Ilya murmured, his voice almost reverent. "So fucking beautiful. How I get so lucky?"

"Ilya, please—" Shane's hips shifted restlessly, seeking friction, seeking anything.

"Please what?" Ilya's hand wrapped around Shane's cock, stroking once, slowly. "Tell me what you want."

"You. I want you. Your mouth, your hands, anything. Everything."

"Everything," Ilya repeated, like he was tasting the word. "I can do everything." Then he lowered his head and took Shane into his mouth.

Shane's back arched off the bed, a broken sound escaping his throat. Ilya's mouth was hot and wet and perfect, and he worked Shane with the same focused intensity he brought to everything. One hand wrapped around the base of Shane's cock, the other pressed down on his hip, keeping him in place.

"Fuck, Ilya—" Shane's hands fisted in the sheets, his whole body trembling with the effort of staying still. Ilya's tongue did something incredible, and Shane's hips jerked involuntarily. Ilya's hand on his hip pressed down harder, a silent command to stay still.

Ilya pulled off for a moment, his lips shiny and swollen. "I said stay still," he reminded Shane, his voice stern but his eyes warm. "Be good for me."

"I'm trying," Shane gasped. "You're making it really fucking hard."

"Is the point." Ilya's smile was wicked. Then he took Shane deep, swallowing around him, and Shane thought he might actually die from the pleasure of it.

"Ilya, I—fuck—I can't—I'm going to—"

Ilya pulled off just long enough to say, "Yes, you can. Come for me, solnyshko. Let me taste you."

Then he took Shane deep again, one hand moving to cup Shane's balls, rolling them gently, and Shane shattered. His orgasm hit like a wave, pleasure rolling through him in pulses as Ilya worked him through it, swallowing everything Shane gave him, not stopping until Shane was trembling, oversensitive, pushing weakly at his shoulders.

"Too much," Shane panted. "Ilya, too much."

Ilya released him with a final, obscene kiss to the tip of his cock, then moved back up Shane's body. But instead of kissing him, he detoured to Shane's chest, sucking a mark over his left pectoral, then his right. He moved to Shane's ribs, his stomach, leaving a constellation of bruises. Each one was placed with care, with intention, with possessive pride.

"Ilya," Shane gasped, his body still trembling from his orgasm. "Too much—I can't—"

"You can." Ilya's hands gripped Shane's thighs, spreading them wider, and he bit down on the sensitive skin of Shane's inner thigh. Shane jerked, a whimper escaping him. The sensation was almost too intense, pleasure and pain blurring together. "One more. Give me one more, and then I let you rest."

"I don't think I can," Shane said, but even as he spoke, he could feel his body responding. He was already half-hard again, his cock filling out despite having just come. Ilya's touch, his mouth, his possessive attention—it was too much and not enough all at once.

"You can," Ilya said with absolute certainty. He marked Shane's other thigh, then moved back to his cock, which was hardening rapidly under his attention. "Look at you. So responsive for me. So perfect. Your body know who it belong to."

He took Shane into his mouth again, and this time it was slower, more deliberate. He built Shane up gradually, reading every hitch in his breath, every tremor in his thighs. His hands were everywhere—stroking Shane's thighs, his hips, his stomach. Grounding him and overwhelming him at the same time.

"That's it," Ilya murmured, pulling off to stroke Shane with his hand, his grip firm and perfect. "So good for me. So beautiful when you like this. I could watch forever."

Shane's head thrashed on the pillow, his hands reaching for Ilya, needing to touch him, to ground himself. Ilya caught one of his hands, threading their fingers together and pinning it to the bed beside Shane's hip.

"I got you," Ilya said, his voice rough with want and affection. "Always got you, solnyshko. Let go for me. Show me how good I make you feel."

He took Shane deep again, and this time when Shane came, it was slower, deeper, rolling through him in waves rather than crashing over him. Ilya swallowed around him, taking everything Shane had to give, and Shane felt tears prick at his eyes from the intensity of it.

Ilya crawled back up his body, kissing him deeply, and Shane could taste himself on Ilya's tongue. It should have been weird, but instead it was intimate, grounding.

"Your turn," Shane said when they broke apart. His voice was wrecked, but his hands were already reaching for Ilya's belt. "Definitely your turn now."

"Mm, yes please." Ilya rolled onto his back, pulling Shane with him, but kept his hands on Shane's hips, guiding him. "But I want you on top. Want to see you."

Shane straddled Ilya's hips, his hands braced on Ilya's chest. He could feel the rapid beat of Ilya's heart under his palm, the heat of his skin. Ilya was still wearing his pants, and Shane made quick work of the belt, the button, the zipper. Ilya lifted his hips to help Shane push the pants and boxer briefs down, and then he was bare beneath Shane, his cock hard and flushed against his stomach.

Shane wrapped his hand around Ilya's length, the nine inches he took often, stroking slowly, and watched Ilya's face transform with pleasure. His jaw went slack, his eyes fluttering closed, his head pressing back into the pillow.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya groaned, his hips thrusting up into Shane's grip. His hands found Shane's hips, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise. "Yes, like that. Just like that."

Shane loved this—loved having Ilya at his mercy, loved watching him come apart. Ilya was always so confident, so in control, but here, like this, he was vulnerable. Open. His.

Shane leaned down and kissed him, still stroking, and Ilya's hips thrust up into his hand. He was close already, had been holding back while he took care of Shane, and now he was chasing his release with single-minded focus.

"Come on," Shane murmured against his lips. "Let go. I've got you."

"Shane," Ilya gasped, his accent thicker than ever, his words tumbling out in a mix of English and Russian. "*Bozhe*, yes, just—*fuck*—"

His grip on Shane's hips tightened to the point of pain, and then he was coming, spilling over Shane's hand and his own stomach with a groan that Shane felt in his bones. Shane worked him through it, the same way Ilya had done for him, until Ilya was pushing at his hand with a breathless laugh.

Ilya's chest was still heaving, his body trembling with aftershocks as Shane withdrew his hand. The Russian's eyes were dark with hunger, pupils blown wide as he brought his fingers to his mouth, maintaining eye contact while he tasted what was left of Shane. The gesture

was obscene and possessive, and it sent a fresh wave of heat through Shane's oversensitized body.

"You taste like mine," Ilya murmured, his accent thicker now, roughened by arousal. He leaned down to capture Shane's mouth in a deep kiss, letting him taste himself on Ilya's tongue. "All mine, solnyshko. Every part of you."

Shane whimpered into the kiss, his hands coming up to clutch at Ilya's shoulders. He could feel Ilya's erection pressing insistently against his hip, hard again and demanding attention.

"Ilya," Shane breathed when they broke apart. "I want—I need you inside me."

Ilya's eyes flashed, something primal and arousing crossing his features. "You sure? After premiere, after anxiety—I don't want to push."

"You're not pushing." Shane reached up to cup Ilya's face, thumbs stroking over his sharp cheekbones. "You're exactly what I need. You always are."

The confession seemed to undo something in Ilya. He surged forward to kiss Shane again, this time with barely restrained hunger. His hands roamed Shane's body, relearning every curve and plane, pausing to press against the marks he'd already left on Shane's throat and collarbone.

"Going to make you feel so good," Ilya promised against Shane's lips. "Going to take care of you, solnyshko. Always take care of what's mine."

He reached over to the nightstand, fumbling briefly before producing a bottle of lube. Shane watched through heavy-lidded eyes as Ilya sat back on his heels, finally pushing his boxer briefs down and off. Shane's breath caught at the sight of him—nine thick inches, flushed and leaking, curving slightly upward. No matter how many times he saw Ilya like this, it always sent a thrill of anticipation and slight nervousness through him.

Ilya noticed his gaze and smirked, wrapping one large hand around himself and stroking slowly. "Like what you see?"

"Always," Shane admitted, his voice rough. "You're—God, Ilya, you're perfect."

"No, you are perfect." Ilya released himself and moved to position Shane more comfortably, sliding a pillow under his hips. "I am just lucky man who gets to have you."

The tenderness in his voice, the careful way he arranged Shane's body, made Shane's throat tight with emotion. This was what he'd needed after the premiere—not just the physical release, but this. Ilya's complete attention, his care, the way he made Shane feel cherished and safe and wanted.

Ilya warmed the lube between his hands before touching Shane, always considerate of these small details. His fingers traced down Shane's perineum, circling his entrance with gentle pressure. Shane let his legs fall open wider, giving Ilya better access, trusting him completely.

"Relax for me," Ilya murmured, leaning down to press kisses along Shane's inner thigh, adding a few more marks to his collection. "Let me in."

The first finger breached him slowly, and Shane breathed through the initial stretch. Ilya was patient, working him open with careful attention, watching Shane's face for any sign of discomfort. He crooked his finger, searching, and Shane gasped when he found that spot inside him that made stars burst behind his eyelids.

"There," Ilya said with satisfaction. "There is what I want."

He worked that spot mercilessly, adding a second finger when Shane was ready, scissoring and stretching while Shane writhed beneath him. The pleasure was building again, different from before—deeper, more intense, radiating from his core. Ilya's free hand pressed down on Shane's lower abdomen, increasing the pressure, and Shane cried out.

"Ilya, please—I'm ready, I need—"

"Not yet." Ilya's voice was firm but not unkind. "Need to make sure you can take me. Don't want to hurt you."

A third finger joined the others, and Shane felt the burn of the stretch. Ilya paused, letting him adjust, pressing soothing kisses to his knee, his thigh, his hip. "Breathe, solnyshko. You're doing so well. Taking my fingers so good."

The praise washed over Shane like a balm, helping him relax into the stretch. Ilya worked him open with infinite patience, his fingers moving in a steady rhythm that had Shane panting and pushing back for more. By the time Ilya finally withdrew his fingers, Shane felt empty and desperate, his body clenching around nothing.

"Please," Shane begged, past the point of pride. "Ilya, please, I need you."

Ilya made a rough sound in his throat, something between a groan and a growl. He slicked himself up generously, then positioned himself at Shane's entrance. "Look at me," he commanded softly. "Want to see your eyes."

Shane forced his eyes open, meeting Ilya's intense gaze. The connection between them felt electric, charged with more than just physical desire. This was intimacy in its truest form—vulnerable and raw and real.

Ilya pushed forward slowly, breaching Shane's body with careful control. The stretch was intense, bordering on too much despite the preparation, and Shane's breath hitched. Ilya paused immediately.

"Okay?" he asked, his voice strained with the effort of holding still.

"Yeah," Shane managed. "Just—give me a second."

Ilya leaned down to kiss him, soft and sweet, a contrast to the overwhelming fullness where they were joined. His hands stroked soothingly over Shane's sides, his thighs, gentling him. "Take all the time you need. I have you."

Shane breathed through the stretch, willing his body to relax and accept the intrusion. Gradually, the burn faded to a pleasant fullness, and he shifted his hips experimentally. The movement sent sparks of pleasure through him, and he moaned.

"More," he whispered against Ilya's lips. "I can take more."

Ilya pushed deeper, inch by careful inch, until finally he was fully seated inside Shane. They both groaned at the sensation—Ilya at the tight heat surrounding him, Shane at the overwhelming fullness, the way Ilya seemed to fill every empty space inside him.

"So tight," Ilya gritted out, his forehead pressed to Shane's. "So perfect. Made for me, moya lyubov. Only for me."

"Only for you," Shane agreed breathlessly. The possessiveness in Ilya's words should have bothered him, but instead it made him feel secure, wanted, claimed in the best possible way.

Ilya began to move, shallow thrusts at first, letting Shane adjust to the sensation. His hands gripped Shane's hips, holding him steady, and Shane wrapped his legs around Ilya's waist, changing the angle. The next thrust hit that spot inside him perfectly, and Shane cried out.

"There," he gasped. "Right there, Ilya, please—"

Ilya adjusted his angle, making sure to hit that spot with every thrust. His pace increased gradually, building from slow and deep to something more urgent. The sound of skin against skin filled the room, punctuated by their harsh breathing and Shane's increasingly desperate moans.

"Touch yourself," Ilya commanded, his voice rough. "Want to feel you come around me."

Shane's hand flew to his cock, already half-hard again despite his earlier orgasm. He stroked himself in time with Ilya's thrusts, the dual stimulation almost too much. Ilya's eyes were fixed on him, watching every expression that crossed his face, drinking in the sight of Shane falling apart beneath him.

"So beautiful like this," Ilya murmured, his accent thick. "All flushed and desperate. Covered in my marks. Everyone will know tomorrow. Will see my marks on you and know you're taken."

The thought should have embarrassed Shane, but instead it sent a thrill through him. Let people see. Let them know he belonged to someone, that he was wanted and claimed and cherished.

"Yours," Shane gasped out. "All yours, Ilya."

Something fierce and triumphant flashed in Ilya's eyes. His thrusts became harder, more demanding, and Shane could feel the careful control beginning to fray. Ilya's hands tightened on his hips, hard enough to leave bruises, and Shane welcomed it. More marks, more proof of this connection between them.

Ilya shifted, hooking Shane's legs over his shoulders, and the new angle let him thrust even deeper. Shane's hand faltered on his cock as pleasure overwhelmed him, and Ilya batted it away, replacing it with his own larger hand. He stroked Shane in time with his thrusts, his grip firm and sure.

"Come for me," Ilya demanded. "Want to feel you, solnyshko. Want to feel you squeeze my cock."

The combination of Ilya's hand on him, the relentless pressure against his prostate, and the commanding tone of Ilya's voice pushed Shane over the edge. His orgasm hit him like a wave, less intense than the first but deeper somehow, radiating through his entire body. He clenched around Ilya, his back arching off the bed as he spilled over Ilya's hand.

Ilya groaned, his rhythm faltering as Shane's body gripped him tight. "Shane—lyubov—I—"

"Inside me," Shane managed to gasp out. "Want to feel you."

That was all it took. Ilya thrust deep one final time and came with a guttural moan, his body shuddering as he emptied himself inside Shane. He collapsed forward, catching himself on his forearms to avoid crushing Shane, his face buried in Shane's neck as aftershocks rolled through him.

They lay like that for long moments, both breathing hard, their bodies still joined. Shane's hands stroked slowly up and down Ilya's back, feeling the muscles trembling with exertion. Ilya pressed soft kisses to Shane's neck, his shoulder, anywhere he could reach, gentle now in the aftermath.

"Love you," Ilya murmured against Shane's skin. "Love you so much, solnyshko."

"Love you too," Shane whispered back, his voice thick with emotion.

Eventually, Ilya carefully withdrew, and they both winced at the sensitivity. Ilya disappeared into the bathroom and returned with a warm washcloth, cleaning Shane with gentle efficiency. Shane watched him through heavy-lidded eyes, feeling boneless and sated and utterly content.

"How you feel?" Ilya asked as he finished cleaning them both up. "Was okay? Not too much?"

"It was perfect," Shane assured him. "You're always perfect."

Ilya's expression softened. He tossed the washcloth in the general direction of the hamper and climbed back into bed, pulling Shane into his arms. Shane went willingly, tucking himself

against Ilya's side with his head on Ilya's chest. He could hear the steady thump of Ilya's heartbeat beneath his ear, gradually slowing to a normal rhythm.

"Okay, okay, enough. I am dead. You killed me."

"You're not dead," Shane said, but he gentled his touch, his hand moving to Ilya's chest instead, feeling his racing heartbeat slowly calm.

"I am dead. This is heaven. You are angel." Ilya's eyes opened, finding Shane's, and the look in them was so full of love and satisfaction that Shane's chest felt tight. "My angel."

"I'm not an angel."

"You are to me." Ilya pulled Shane down for another kiss, this one slow and sweet. "You are everything to me."

Shane's throat felt tight, but this time it was from emotion rather than panic. "I love you," he said, the words feeling inadequate for the depth of what he felt.

"I love you too. So much." Ilya's hands moved to Shane's face, his thumbs brushing across Shane's cheekbones. His touch was gentle now, tender, such a contrast to the possessive claiming from earlier. "We going to be okay, you know. All of this—coming out, media, everything—we going to be okay."

"How do you know?"

"Because we have each other. And that is enough. That is more than enough." Ilya smiled, soft and genuine. "We are team, you and me. Best team in world."

Shane believed him. In this moment, with Ilya's hands on his face and Ilya's love surrounding him like a blanket, he actually believed him.

They cleaned up eventually, stumbling to the bathroom and back. Shane caught sight of himself in the mirror and stopped, staring. His neck was covered in marks—dark bruises that stood out starkly against his pale skin. There were more on his chest, his ribs, his hips. Evidence of Ilya's possession, his claim.

"You like?" Ilya asked, coming up behind him, wrapping his arms around Shane's waist. His chin rested on Shane's shoulder as they both looked at Shane's reflection.

"Yeah," Shane said, surprised to find it was true. "Yeah, I do."

"Good. Because tomorrow, everyone see. Everyone know you're mine." Ilya pressed a kiss to one of the marks on Shane's neck, gentle this time. "You are so beautiful, solnyshko. So brave. I am so proud of you."

They collapsed into bed together, and Ilya pulled Shane against his chest, his arms wrapped around him. Shane felt safe in a way he hadn't all day, cocooned in Ilya's warmth and strength.

"Premiere was hard for you," Ilya said after a moment, his fingers carding through Shane's hair. "I could tell. You were anxious."

Shane tensed slightly, but Ilya's arms tightened around him, keeping him close. "I'm sorry," Shane said quietly. "I tried not to let it show."

"Don't apologize." Ilya's voice was firm. "Never apologize for feeling things. I just—I worry. Want to help, but don't always know how."

"You helped tonight," Shane said, tilting his head to look up at Ilya. "This—being with you like this—it helps more than you know. You make me feel safe."

Ilya's expression was tender as he looked down at Shane. "You are safe. Always safe with me. I protect what's mine."

Ilya's arms tightened around him, and Shane could feel the pleased rumble in his chest. "My solnyshko," Ilya murmured. "My sunshine."

They lay in comfortable silence for a while, Shane's fingers tracing idle patterns on Ilya's chest while Ilya's hand stroked up and down his back. The anxiety from earlier felt distant now, manageable, put into perspective by Ilya's presence and care.

"You want to talk about premiere?" Ilya asked eventually. "About what made you anxious?"

Shane considered deflecting, but Ilya deserved honesty. "It's just—it's a lot sometimes. Everyone wanting something from me, everyone watching. And I kept thinking about all the ways I could mess up, all the wrong things I could say. My brain just spirals sometimes."

"I know," Ilya said gently. "I see it happen. See you go somewhere else in your head."

"I'm sorry—"

"Stop apologizing." Ilya's voice was firm but kind. "You don't need to apologize for being human, for having feelings. I just want to help. Want to know how to bring you back when you spiral."

Shane thought about it, about what actually helped when his anxiety took over. "This," he said finally. "What you did tonight. Taking control, making me focus on you, on us. It grounds me. Reminds me what's real and what's just my brain being mean to me."

Ilya nodded slowly. "Okay. I can do that. Anytime you need, you tell me. I take care of you."

"You always do," Shane said, his voice soft with affection.

"Is my job," Ilya said simply. "You're mine to take care of. To protect. To love."

Shane felt his throat tighten with emotion. He'd never had this before Ilya—someone who saw his anxiety, his vulnerability, and didn't run from it. Someone who met his needs without making him feel weak or broken.

"I don't know what I did to deserve you," Shane whispered.

"You existed," Ilya said, as if it were that simple. "You were yourself, and I fell in love. Nothing to deserve. Just—we fit. You and me, solnyshko. We fit."

They did fit, Shane thought. Despite their differences—Ilya's intensity and Shane's anxiety, Ilya's possessiveness and Shane's need for security—they balanced each other. Ilya gave Shane the stability and protection he craved, and Shane gave Ilya someone to care for, to channel all that fierce devotion toward.

"We should sleep," Ilya said eventually, though he made no move to let Shane go. "You need rest after premiere, after this."

"In a minute," Shane said, not ready to give up this closeness yet. "Just—let me stay like this a little longer."

"As long as you want," Ilya promised. "Always as long as you want."

Shane closed his eyes, letting himself sink into the warmth and security of Ilya's embrace. Tomorrow he'd face the world again, deal with the aftermath of the premiere and whatever came next in his career. But tonight, he was exactly where he needed to be—safe in Ilya's arms, marked and claimed and loved.

"Thank you," Shane said quietly. "For tonight. For everything."

"You don't have to thank me. Is what you do when you love someone. You take care of them." Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of Shane's head. "And I will always take care of you. Always."

Shane closed his eyes, letting himself relax fully for the first time in weeks. Tomorrow they would wake up to headlines and social media reactions and whatever came next. But tonight, they had this. They had each other.

And maybe, just maybe, that really was enough.

"Ilya?" Shane said, already half-asleep.

"Mm?"

"We're going to be okay."

He felt Ilya smile against his hair. "Yes. We going to be okay. I promise you this."

Ilya's hand traced lazy patterns on Shane's back, soothing and possessive all at once. His other hand found Shane's hip, thumb brushing over one of the bruises he'd left there. Shane shivered at the touch, at the reminder of what they'd done, what they'd shared.

"You feel them?" Ilya asked softly. "The marks?"

"Yeah," Shane whispered. "I feel them."

"Good. Tomorrow, when you sit in interview chair, when you smile for cameras, you feel them. You remember this. Remember you are mine, and I am yours. Remember we are together, no matter what anyone say."

"I'll remember," Shane promised.

"Sleep now, solnyshko. I watch over you."

And wrapped in Ilya's arms, covered in his marks, Shane finally let himself drift off. The last thing he felt was Ilya's lips against his forehead, and the warm, solid weight of his arm around Shane's waist—holding him close, keeping him safe, claiming him even in sleep.

Tomorrow would bring challenges. Tomorrow would bring scrutiny and questions and judgment. But tonight, Shane was exactly where he belonged. In Ilya's bed, in Ilya's arms, wearing Ilya's marks like a badge of honor.

He was claimed. He was loved. He was home.

And that was everything.

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