

Hold On (I Still Want You)

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Hold On (I Still Want You)

by [velminort](#)

Summary

Shane and Ilya broke up. It was the adult, mature decision they made together and moved on from. Except Shane is still Ilya's emergency contact and Ilya's coach just called.

Ilya had a seizure. Well, seizures. Multiple. He is in the hospital, in the operation block and suddenly Shane is met with the possibility that last words Ilya Rozanov ever heard from him were "Maybe love isn't enough."

And then complications occur. And Ilya is not waking up.

They'd sat on a perfectly ordinary Wednesday afternoon in their perfectly ordinary kitchen, with coffee that had gone cold on the table between them, and calmly dismantled the life they'd built together. One sentence at a time.

"Maybe we need space." "Maybe we're just hurting each other." "Maybe love isn't enough."

He wants to go back and shove that version of himself against the wall. Shake him until his teeth rattle.

Love is the only thing that matters when someone is under general anaesthesia and a stranger is touching their brain, Shane thinks wildly. Love is literally the only currency worth anything in a room like this.

Notes

Hi everyone! Just a small warning from me!

This is a very angsty fic and I've cried while writing. If hospitals/brains/surgeries etc. freak you out, I would suggest skipping this or simply reading with caution.

It is also the very first fanfiction I've wrote for this fandom so please be nice! English is not my first language and I apologize in advance for any weird mistakes.

Have a great time, it gets better at the end, I promise!!!

EDIT: THANK YOU ALL FOR THE COMMENTS (& KUDOS)!!! I am absolutely in tears after reading them, I was so not expecting such a positive feedback!!! Thank you thank you

thank you and stay tuned for more Hollanov!!

Shane Hollander had no idea how he ended up here, on the hospital's third floor, coaches words still fresh in his head "Rozanov had a seizure on ice, you are in his emergency contacts. They are considering the surgery."

He makes it to the neurology floor in a haze, stumbles through the double doors... and the bed in which Ilya apparently was supposed to be is already gone. There's just an empty space where a rolling gurney obviously was a minute ago, rails still rattling softly, a nurse re-hanging a monitor cable with quick, practiced movements.

Shane catches a glimpse of the tail end of the procession through a set of swinging doors at the far end of the corridor - blue-scrub backs, a glimpse of messy blond curls on a pillow, an oxygen mask, a flurry of green caps.

Then the doors close and he's left staring at his own reflection in the small glass window.

He's too late.

"Sir?" the charge nurse says gently behind him. "You can wait in the family area just around the corner."

Family area.

His mouth feels full of cotton. "Where - "

"Operating theatre," she says, eyes soft with the kind of kindness people use on the suddenly bereaved. "He had another event on the way up. They don't want to wait."

Another event.

Another seizure.

His brain translates it flatly: that's more times his body locked up and tried to kill him from the inside.

"Will he - " The question lodges in his throat. *Will he be okay?* Feels childish, useless. "How long?" is even worse.

"I'm afraid I don't know yet," she says. "The neurosurgeon will speak to you when they can."

You. As if he's still the person. As if he never gave that up. As if they didn't decide to give themselves a break months ago.

He nods, numb, and lets her shepherd him to a small room with vinyl chairs and an ancient television murmuring some game show no one is watching. The moment she leaves, his legs give out. He drops into a chair and just... sits there.

The wall clock ticks.

His heart doesn't understand that time is passing; it just hammers against his ribs like every second is the same second. He pulls his phone out because he doesn't know what else to do. His hands are shaking so bad he almost drops it twice before he finds his parents' contact.

He hits call.

"Shane?" His mom picks up on the second ring, voice warm and soft from home.

"Sweetheart, how was..."

"He's in surgery," Shane blurts.

Silence. Then, sharper: "Who?"

He swallows, hard. "Ilya. He... he's in brain surgery. They think it's a bleed or... or something else, I don't know, they keep saying 'lesion' and 'mass effect' and he had seizures and I wasn't there at first and I got here and they were already wheeling him away and I..."

His voice breaks. Words splinter.

"Oh, honey," his mom breathes. "Where are you now?"

"Neuro waiting room," he manages. "They kicked the guys out. Coach Henderson called me. They're... they're cutting into his head, Mom." The last word comes out like he's ten again. "They're cutting into his head and I..."

His dad's voice comes on the line, deeper, steady. "Shane. Slow down. Tell us what happened from the beginning."

He squeezes his eyes shut. The fluorescent lights turn the inside of his eyelids red.

"Coach called me," he says. "Ilya had a seizure at the rink, after practice, when they were joking about something, and then another one in his room, and now a third on the way upstairs and... they said it might be from his concussion, or maybe a bleed, or maybe... maybe something worse. A tumor. They don't know. They just took him in. He looked..." His breath stutters. "He looked so small on that bed."

He remembers it too clearly: that quick, distant glimpse through the door window of Ilya strapped down, rails up, an oxygen mask fogging, nurses disconnecting lines as they moved.

His dad exhales slowly. "Do you know his status? Are you listed as..."

"Emergency contact." Shane laughs once, wild and short. "He never took my name off. I checked downstairs. He still had me as the person. After everything."

There's a tiny silence on the other end of the line. He can picture them both in the kitchen, his mom with her hand over her mouth, his dad pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Shane," his mom says gently. "I'm so glad you went."

“I almost didn’t,” he says, raw. “I sat in the parking lot and thought maybe I should respect the break. That his team was enough. That I’m... that I’m not his person anymore.”

He presses his knuckles to his eyes until it hurts. Sudden anger flares up before Shane can clamp it down, before anxiety takes reigns.

“That fucking breakup,” he says, voice low and vicious. “It was a mistake. It was the worst mistake I’ve ever made.”

“Shane...” his mom starts.

“No.” His voice cracks but doesn’t stop. “We thought we were doing the responsible thing, right? Work on ourselves separately. All that shit. And I just... I listened. I listened and I let go because I was scared, not because it was right. Because I didn’t want to watch him shake apart in my arms every night and feel helpless. Because I was tired and I thought... I thought maybe that meant we were wrong for each other.”

His chest feels like it’s being carved out with a spoon.

“But it wasn’t wrong,” he whispers. “It was hard. It was messy. But it wasn’t wrong. He loved me so much it scared him. I loved him so much I started building my whole life around making sure he didn’t break, and instead of figuring that out we just... cut the cord. Like that. Like we were something you could just... snip.”

His dad is quiet for a beat. Then: “Son, you both made the best choices you could with the information you had. That doesn’t make what you’re feeling now any less painful, but...”

“But I walked away.” Shane’s voice is climbing, thin and sharp. “He asked me not to... do you remember? When I first told you about it, about the fight about... about putting our relationship on hold. He begged me not to. He said we could try harder. And I - I was the one who said ‘maybe love isn’t enough.’”

He chokes on the last word.

“I said that to him, Mom. In our cottage kitchen. After everything. I looked him in the eyes and told him love wasn’t enough.”

He can’t breathe.

“And now?” he croaks. “Now they’re in there with scalpels and drills and he’s asleep and scared and he doesn’t even know I’m out here, and all I can think is I would take *every fight*, every panic attack, every screaming match and slammed door and stupid miscommunication if it meant I got to sit in our stupid too-small bathtub and wash his hair one more time.” His voice breaks completely. “If it meant I got to kiss him in the dark and feel him stop shaking. If it meant I got to hear him snore in my hoodie and complain about loons.”

His mom is crying, quietly, on the other end. He hears it in the little hitch of breath.

“Sweetheart,” she whispers. “You didn’t know this was coming.”

“I knew something was coming.” He laughs again, bitter. “He was so tired. He was burning out in front of me. But instead of holding on tighter and learning how to carry it better, I... I let go. I told myself it was noble. For his healing. For my healing. For... whatever. And now I’m just...”

He looks down at his empty hands. They’re shaking.

“Now I’m just a guy sitting in a hospital waiting room with nothing but regrets.”

There’s a long pause.

“We are driving down,” his dad says, in the tone that means it’s already decided. “We’ll be there in a few hours.”

“You don’t have to - ”

“We’re coming.” His mom’s voice is firm through her tears. “You’re not doing this alone, Shane.”

He swallows hard. “Okay.”

“Listen to me,” his dad says. “Right now, you can’t fix anything. You can’t change what happened this year, and you can’t speed up what’s happening in that OR. All you can do is be here. Breathe. Drink water. When the surgeon comes out, listen carefully. Write it down if you have to. Ask if there’s anything Ilya needs - next of kin to sign, someone to stay overnight, someone to call. That’s what you can do.”

“What if he doesn’t want me,” Shane says quietly. It’s the ugliest fear, the most honest one he has, his biggest anxiety bare and naked. “What if he wakes up and sees me and just... turns away.”

“Then you’ll survive it,” his mom says, voice breaking. “And we’ll be there to pick you up off the floor. But if he wakes up scared and you’re not there, you’ll never forgive yourself. Love is... it’s complicated and sometimes messy and sometimes it hurts like this. But it’s never a mistake to show up when someone you love is on an operating table.”

He stares at the scuffed linoleum..

He remembers Ilya pressed against the cottage window, watching snow, saying, *is weird, you know, to have somewhere that actually feels like home.*

He remembers him on the plane after their small secret getaway, drooling, in the eye mask, socks half off, limbs draped over Shane like he’s the safest thing in the world.

He remembers him in bed and the way his whole body melted when Shane finally held him right.

He remembers his laugh. His terrible English idioms. His long, elegant fingers rolling cigarettes at three in the morning. His serious little frown when he concentrated on braiding Shane’s too short hair because someone told him it would be cute.

He presses the heel of his hand hard to his sternum.

“I love him,” he says, helpless. “I love him so much, Mom. I thought... I thought I was doing the adult thing, the healthy thing, letting him go. But I don’t think I ever actually did. Let go, I mean. I think I’ve just been... pretending.”

“We know,” she says softly. “We knew the whole time.”

“That obvious?” he tries to joke, but it comes out wet. Wrong.

“Sweetheart, you send us pictures of raccoons at midnight because *he* thinks they’re cute,” she says. “You use his idioms by accident. You still talk in ‘we’ when you forget to guard yourself. We knew.”

He presses his sleeve to his eyes.

“What if he dies,” he whispers. “What if this is it? What if the last real conversation we ever had was a breakup?”

There it is. The ugliest, sharpest fear, suddenly so possible Shane wants the earth to just swallow him.

His parents don’t say “he won’t.” They’re better than that. They know how hospitals work. How life works. Shane briefly wishes they could just lie to him.

“We don’t know what will happen,” his dad says instead, steady. “But whatever it is, you’re going to survive it. And right now, he’s in the hands of people who’ve trained their whole lives for this. That has to be enough, for this minute. Then the next. And the next.”

His mom adds, “And if he wakes up, and you still love him, there will be time to figure out the rest. Maybe you get back together. Maybe you don’t. Maybe you find a way to be in each other’s lives that looks different. You don’t have to know the shape of it yet. Right now, you just have to keep breathing.”

He nods, even though they can’t see it.

“Okay,” he whispers. “Okay.”

“We’ll call when we’re close,” his dad says. “Text if there’s any update before then.”

“Yeah,” Shane says. “Yeah. I love you.”

“We love you too,” his mom says. “And... Shane?”

“Yeah?”

“You did not break his brain by breaking up with him,” she says, very gently. “You didn’t cause this. You made mistakes, sure. So did he. But this?” A pause. “This is bigger than both of you. Don’t carry what isn’t yours.”

He doesn't believe her yet. Not really.

But he says, "Okay," because he doesn't have anything else.

He ends the call.

The waiting room hums softly around him as if his whole heart is not a single second from breaking apart. TV noise, vending machine buzzing, another family murmuring in the corner.

Shane leans back in the chair, stares at the bland art on the wall, and thinks about all the things he never thought he'd lose.

Ilya's sleepy morning voice. The weight of him half on top of Shane in their bed, muttering in Russian at his own dreams. The way he'd stand in the cottage kitchen, hair a mess, hoodie sleeves over his hands, pretending not to be cold.

He thinks about every time Ilya reached for him in moments of stress. Every time he pressed his face into Shane's chest like he was the only safe place left on earth. He thinks of all their nights and all their days and secrets and jokes.

He thinks about letting go of all that.

And he knows, with a clarity that's almost violent, that whatever comes next, whatever shape their lives take, however the surgery goes, he will never make that particular choice again.

Never again mistake fear for wisdom. Never again call love "not enough" when it's the only thing that actually matters on a plastic hospital chair at three in the morning.

Outside the OR doors, a red "IN USE" light glows steadily.

Shane watches it.

He breathes.

And he waits for the surgeons to bring his biggest mistake - and the love of his life - back to him in whatever way they can...

The clock had limped forward maybe twenty minutes when the door to the OR corridor hissed open.

A nurse stepped out, mask hanging at her throat, cap still on, that particular mix of briskness and gentleness that meant *this is bad, but I can't tell you how bad*.

"Mr. Hollander?"

His whole body flinched at his own last name. He pushed himself up so fast the chair scraped. "Yeah. That's me. Is he...?"

“We’re still operating,” she said quickly, already putting a hand up like she needed to hold back the question. “He’s stable *for now*, but there are some complications. I just wanted you to be aware this is going to take longer than we expected.”

Complications. Of course. *Of course.*

“What does that mean?” His voice came out sharp, too loud. “What kind of complications?”

She glanced back at the closed OR doors, then lowered her voice. “There was more swelling than the scans suggested. They’ve found active bleeding and some older clots. They’re working to control it. It’s... complex.”

More swelling. Active bleeding. The words buzzed in his head like flies.

“Is he...” He swallowed. “Is he going to be okay?”

Her expression did that softening thing again. The one that made him want to scream.

“I can’t answer that,” she said. “Not yet. But he’s young, and he’s strong, and the team there is very good at what they do. The surgeon will come talk to you as soon as they’re finished.”

As soon as they’re finished.

“How long?” he asked, even though he knew she’d already told him she didn’t know.

She hesitated. “Hours,” she said finally. “Not minutes. I’m sorry.”

He nodded, because what else could he do, and sank back into his chair when she left, the “IN USE” light above the OR doors glaring red.

Complications.

The word echoed and echoed until it stopped meaning anything. Just a shape in his throat.

He pressed the heels of his hands hard into his eye sockets.

We broke up.

Everything inside him recoiled from the fact like it was a physical object.

What a stupid, small, human thing to have done in the face of this. Of *this*.

They’d sat on a perfectly ordinary Wednesday afternoon in their perfectly ordinary kitchen, with coffee that had gone cold on the table between them, and calmly dismantled the life they’d built together. One sentence at a time.

“Maybe we need space.” “Maybe we’re just hurting each other.” “Maybe love isn’t enough.”

He wants to go back and shove that version of himself against the wall. Shake him until his teeth rattle.

Love is the only thing that matters when someone is under general anaesthesia and a stranger is touching their brain, he thinks wildly. Love is literally the only currency worth anything in a room like this.

He tips his head back against the wall. The ceiling tiles blur.

Complications.

His mind, traitor that it is, goes where it always goes when he's terrified: straight to Ilya's body. Not in the medical sense. In the sense of *every inch I've touched and known and will never forget*.

He thinks of the way Ilya used to climb into his lap after practice, still smelling like sweat and ice, curling around him and sighing like Shane's chest was the only place his lungs knew how to work properly.

He thinks of the bedroom in the cottage, with shockingly expensive sheets and Ilya on his knees, eyes blown wide, saying *tell me no if you don't want* in that rough, careful voice, even though he already knew the answer. The way he'd looked up through his lashes like he was worshipping something he didn't think he deserved to touch, like Shane was holy.

He thinks of the cottage - their toys bag, the way Ilya's hands had shaken more from emotion than arousal when he'd said *I want everything. Want to use every single thing in here to make you scream. But only if you want*. Like their sex wasn't just sex, but some wordless language they'd built together, one trust at a time.

He thinks of the morning after that, Ilya soft and sniffling in his sleep, plastered to Shane's side. How he'd texted Rose, laughing that apparently getting railed within an inch of his life was now followed by Ilya tucking himself into a ball and muttering about hockey in his dreams.

He thinks of the first time Ilya had let him take control. Whole control. The way those ridiculous eyes had gone dark and wide as Shane tied his wrists, the way his voice had actually trembled when he'd said *I trust you*. Not as a joke. Not with bravado. Just... quietly. Like handing over a knife handle.

He thinks of the smaller things, the ones that hurt the most.

The little gasp Ilya made every time Shane kissed the scar on his knee from that one ugly hit. The way he relaxed, inch by inch, when Shane washed his hair in the bath, letting his head tip back into his hands like a cat submitting to being held. The way he'd whine into Shane's mouth when he was too tired for sex but still wanted to be close, mumbling *just hold me, I don't need more now*.

He'd loved all of that. He still loves it. Loves *him*.

And they'd walked away from it. From all that beauty, all that softness, because they didn't know how to stop hurting each other in the daylight.

He wants to punch a wall. Scream. Cry.

The answer was never cutting the line and letting Ilya drift out into open water.

Especially not now. Not when his body has literally betrayed him. Not when doctors are peeling back his scalp and drilling through bone and looking for the thing trying to kill him.

The idea that he might never touch Ilya again, not hold his hand, not kiss his forehead, not feel his weight thump into the bed at 3AM. as he climbs in after a late practice and murmurs, *move over, you take whole bed*, makes bile burn at the back of his throat.

He braces his elbows on his knees and ducks his head, breathing hard.

If this goes badly, if the surgeon comes out with that expression he's seen in movies, that clinical, practiced grief, then the last time he touched Ilya will have been... what?

A handshake during the game? An awkward hug in a parking lot? A moment at some charity thing where they'd smiled for cameras and then stepped apart the second the flash was done?

Not a kiss. Not a night tangled together. Not a prayer whispered into curls or an apology breathed into the hollow of his throat.

He'd felt so sure in those moments. So *right*. Like *this* was what he was for. This was his job in the universe: be the place where Ilya could fall.

And then he'd come home and, little by little, let his own voices convince him that the job was unhealthy. That it was killing him. That stepping back was the brave, mature thing to do.

He wipes his face with the heel of his hand and finds it wet. He hadn't even noticed he was crying.

The OR light stays stubbornly red.

He thinks about every time he told Ilya *we're bad for each other*.

He thinks about lying awake in his childhood bedroom last week, staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars still on the ceiling, wondering why his chest hurt so much when they were supposed to be "healing separately."

He thinks about the way Ilya had looked when he'd handed the cottage keys back. Quiet. Pale. Not dramatic, not pleading. Just... tired. And how he'd said, *I still love you, you know. That will not go away. I just... do not know how to do this without killing us both, Hollander*.

He nodded. Agreed. Because it felt honest.

Now, with fluorescent lights buzzing and antiseptic in his nose and the phantom smell of Ilya's cologne in his head, it feels like cowardice dressed as wisdom.

He wants to tell him that. Wants to grab his hand in the recovery room - *if there's a recovery room* - and say, *I was wrong. I was so fucking wrong. We needed help, not distance. We*

needed better tools, not less love. I am so sorry.

He wants another chance.

He has no idea if he's going to get one.

"Please," he whispers, to the ceiling, to the red light, to anyone who might be listening.

"Please. Just let him be okay. I don't care what it costs me. I don't care if he never wants to see me again. Just - please, let him wake up."

He curls his fingers into his palms until his nails bite.

Inside the OR, machines beep steadily.

Out here, where he can't do anything, Shane Hollander sits with his fury and his grief and the ghost of three hundred nights of making love to the same man, and knows with absolute clarity:

Breaking up with Ilya Rozanov was the worst decision of his life.

All he can do now is pray it won't also be the last thing Ilya ever remembers him for.

Shane heard his mother before he saw her, pulled from his own head by sheer force of his parents coming over.

"Shane?"

His mom's voice cut through the low murmur of the ward. He jerked his head up so fast his neck cracked.

They were hurrying down the corridor together - his mom in her sensible boots and winter coat thrown over leggings, his dad in the same jacket he wore to every game, both of them with the same pinched, exhausted worry etched into their faces.

He stood. His legs felt like someone else's.

"Hey," he said, and his voice broke on the single syllable.

His mom reached him first and folded him in, arms around his neck, hand going straight to the back of his head like she had when he was eight and skinned his knee. He crushed his face into her shoulder and inhaled fabric softener and perfume smell and home.

"I'm here," she murmured. "We're here. How is he?"

Shane opened his mouth.

The OR doors slid open with a heavy sigh.

All three of them turned.

The surgeon walking toward them looked like something out of a nightmare. Cap, mask, gown. And on the front of that gown, on the gloves, smeared dark and drying where the heat had hit air -

Blood.

Shane's stomach lurched.

Some part of his brain, detached and hysterical, thought: *that's Ilya's*. That specific red. From the body he'd kissed all over, the veins under his skin, the heart he'd fallen asleep on a hundred times.

"Family of Mr... Rozanov?" the surgeon asked, pulling his mask down.

Shane's mouth worked. Nothing came out.

His dad stepped a bit forward. "We're... we're not technically family," he said. "We're his... our son is—"

"I'm his boyfriend," Shane blurted. The word felt jagged coming out, half a lie now and half the truest thing he'd ever said. "I'm listed as his emergency contact."

The surgeon's eyes flicked over him - sweatshirt, old team logo, the way his hands were shaking. He nodded once. "Alright. I'm Dr. Banerjee, I'm leading the neurosurgical team."

"How is he?" Shane demanded. "What's happening? Why are you...?" His voice cracked on the last word. "Why are you covered in his blood?"

His mom's hand tightened on his arm.

Dr. Banerjee exhaled. "We're still operating," he said, voice calm in that terrifyingly professional way. "I stepped out because I wanted you to have an update, and because there are some decisions we may need to prepare you for."

Shane grabbed the back of the chair to keep from swaying. "What kind of decisions?"

"There was a massive intracranial bleed," the doctor said bluntly. "The CT suggested some swelling. Once we went in, we found much more extensive bleeding than expected. It looks like there's been ongoing pressure for some time, likely related to previous head trauma."

The words crashed over Shane, cold and incomprehensible.

"Previous..." He swallowed. "You mean some hit. From the game."

"Among other things, yes." Dr. Banerjee's expression didn't change, but his eyes softened a fraction. "We've evacuated a significant amount of blood and are working to control the active source. But the brain has been under considerable strain."

His mom's hand flew to her mouth. His dad's jaw clenched.

“Is he going to wake up?” Shane heard himself ask, voice small and distant. “From this? Is he...”

“I don’t know,” Dr. Banerjee said quietly. “I wish I could tell you otherwise. Right now, we’re fighting two battles: stopping the bleed and minimizing further damage. He is young, and he was otherwise healthy, which is in his favor. But this is serious. Very serious.”

The corridor hummed. Somebody’s shoe squeaked far down the hall. A monitor beeped somewhere behind a closed door.

“It’s important,” the doctor continued carefully, “that you prepare yourselves for a range of outcomes.”

“What does that mean?” his mom whispered.

“It means he may wake up and recover fully,” Banerjee said. “He may wake up with deficits - motor, cognitive, speech. He may not wake up at all.” He let the words sit for a beat. “I’m not saying that to frighten you. I’m saying it because you deserve honesty.”

Something inside Shane splintered.

His dad cleared his throat. “Is there anything we can do? Anyone we should call?”

“At this stage, no,” the doctor said. “We will be in there for some hours yet. After surgery, he’ll be in the ICU, intubated, sedated. We’ll monitor pressure, swelling, look for seizures.” His gaze went back to Shane. “Are you aware of any advance directives he may have? A living will? Any written wishes about resuscitation or prolonged life support?”

Shane just stared at him.

Advance directives.

Living will.

As if they hadn’t spent the last five years planning vacations and tattoos and careers and what color to paint the guest room, and zero time planning what to do if one of their brains tried to kill them.

His tongue felt thick.

“Shane,” his dad said gently. “Do you know if he’s ever talked about that? About... what he’d want?”

The only thing he could see was Ilya in the bath at the cottage once, hair full of suds, saying casually, *if I die in stupid car accident, you have to burn my phone*. Laughing. The way Shane had thrown a washcloth at him and said, *shut up, you’re not dying before me*. Like they were invincible.

“No,” Shane said. It came out hoarse. “We never... no. We don’t... I don’t know.”

“Any family we can reach out to?” Dr. Banerjee asked. “Parents? Siblings?”

Shane almost laughed. It came out as a glitching sound in his throat.

“His mother’s dead,” he said. *Overdose. Twelve years old. Bathroom floor.* “His father... he had Alzheimer’s, he’s gone too. There’s a brother but he’s...” He groped for a word that wasn’t *abusive asshole*. “not in the picture. I don’t even know if he’s allowed to make decisions for Ilya. They weren’t... close.”

Dr. Banerjee nodded, filing that away. “All right. As his listed contact and long-term partner, you’re the most appropriate proxy we have right now. If we encounter a situation where we need immediate consent beyond what’s covered by emergency measures, we’ll ask you. I’m hoping we won’t have to.”

Shane heard *proxy* and *consent* and his stomach clenched.

He’d signed forms when they moved in together. Written his name on “in case of emergency” lines with a stupid little thrill, like it meant something romantic instead of, *if the worst happens, they call you first*.

He’d never thought it would actually... mean anything.

“For now,” Dr. Banerjee went on, “I wanted to see if he’d ever expressed any clear wishes. If you remember something later, you can tell the ICU team. Sometimes people mention it casually and it becomes important.”

Shane thought of Ilya muttering, *if I ever turn into vegetable, just pull plug, I don’t want you spoon-feeding me mashed potatoes* during some documentary about coma patients they watched for whatever reason. Thought of how he’d laughed and said, *you’d be the cutest vegetable in the world*, and Ilya had flicked water at him.

Was that a wish? A joke? A coping mechanism from a guy who joked about everything that scared him?

“I...” He shook his head helplessly. “He says shit all the time. I don’t know what was serious and what wasn’t.”

“That’s okay,” the surgeon said. “It’s okay not to know. We will proceed based on our best medical judgment and the principle of doing everything reasonable to save his life. If that changes, if we reach a point where quality of life becomes the central question, we will sit down and talk again.”

Shane’s vision blurred.

He was dimly aware of his mom’s hand moving up and down his back, his dad standing solid and quiet at his side like the world’s most devastated bodyguard.

“I am sorry,” Dr. Banerjee added, and this time it sounded like he meant it personally, not as a script. “We will keep fighting for him. I’ll update you as soon as we’re out.”

He turned and disappeared back through the OR doors, the bloody gown vanishing with him.

The red “IN USE” light glowed on.

For a second, none of them spoke.

Then Shane let out a sound that was half laugh, half sob.

“Advance directives,” he choked. “Like we’re... like we ever thought we’d need that. We were busy figuring out who took the trash out and how many stray cats he was feeding under the porch and whether we wanted to go to fucking Greece next summer, and now they want to know if I can sign off on pulling the plug.”

“Shane” his mom started.

He rounded on the empty corridor instead, words spilling out hot and ragged.

“This is such bullshit,” he rasped. “Everyone, all those people saying, ‘maybe you’re too wrapped up in each other, maybe you need space, maybe breaking up is the healthy decision’ and now he’s in there with his skull open and his blood all over some stranger’s gloves and they want *me* to decide if he lives or dies? When I’m not even..” His chest hitched. “We’re not even together anymore.”

His dad’s eyes were wet now too. “You love him,” he said quietly. “That counts for a hell of a lot more than a status on paper.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that we *left*,” Shane shot back, voice low and shaking. “We left each other. I let him walk out of our house with his plants and his hoodies and that stupid team hoodie he wears when he’s sick, and I told myself it was for the best. That we were killing each other slowly. That space would fix us.”

He barked out a humorless laugh.

“Newsflash,” he said. “Space did not fucking fix us. Space just meant he was alone when his brain started bleeding.”

His mom moved closer, putting both hands on his face, forcing him to look at her.

“You don’t know that,” she said. “You don’t know when it started, or what...”

“He’s been tired for *months*,” Shane cut in. “Headaches. Nausea. He texted me his vision went weird a couple times and I told him it was stress. You know what I told him? ‘Maybe you should talk to your coach about that.’” His voice twisted around the word. His breathing was getting fast and shallow. His mom’s thumbs kept moving over his cheeks, grounding, even as her own eyes shone.

“And now they’re asking me if I know his *last will*,” he whispered. “Last will, Mom. Like he’s some old man with a lawyer and a trust fund. He’s twenty-eight. He still eats cereal out of the box. He still gets drunk and does plays with kids in pools. He..”

His voice broke completely. He clamped his mouth shut, jaw trembling.

His dad stepped in, putting a hand on his shoulder, steady and firm.

“Hey,” he said, voice low. “Listen to me. This is not on therapy. Or on breaking up. Or on you. This is on a shitty hit and a brain that bled and a universe that doesn’t play fair. That’s it. That’s the list.”

Shane shook his head violently. “If we hadn’t broken up, I would have seen it sooner. I would have...”

“You don’t know that,” his dad said. “You’ve saved him from depression, from a multiple plane assholes, from his own panic a hundred times. You are not God, Shane. You can’t catch *everything*.”

He wanted to argue. To cling to his guilt because at least it gave him something to do. Something that felt like action instead of waiting while strangers played chess with Ilya’s neurons.

But his mom’s hands were warm on his face, and his dad’s grip steady on his shoulder, and all he could manage was a ragged inhale.

“If he dies,” he whispered, “it’s going to be like this. We’re going to be broken up. We’re going to be... *wrong* when he goes. And I don’t... I can’t...”

“Then you make it right if you get the chance,” his mom said, fierce now. “If he wakes up, you tell him everything you just told us. Every word. If he wakes up, you fight for that boy the way you always have, but smarter. With better help. With better boundaries. But you do not spend the rest of your life rewriting the past into some punishment you deserve.”

“And if he doesn’t wake up?” Shane asked, hollow. “What then?”

His dad’s hand tightened once. “Then you remember him as he was,” he said. “Not as this. Not as a chart or a diagnosis. As the man who fed strays and wore our stupid hoodie and talked a big game about being a menace and then cried over your mother’s cake at two in the morning.”

A sob punched out of Shane’s chest.

He sank back into the chair, head in his hands, and let his parents bracket him on either side.

Somewhere behind that red light, they were still inside Ilya’s skull, mopping up blood and clipping vessels and rearranging reality.

Out here, under fluorescent lights that hummed too loudly, Shane Hollander sat with the people who loved him and shook with the ferocity of his regret.

Sitting here being asked about last wills and resuscitation orders while his not-anymore fiancé’s blood dried on a stranger’s gown?

That felt like the bill coming due...

They almost didn't register the second time the OR doors opened.

Hours had blurred into a smear of bad coffee and fluorescent hum and the rhythmic squeak of nurses' shoes. Shane had gone from pacing to sitting to standing to pacing again until his mom made him eat half a granola bar and drink water like he was a patient too.

When the red light over the OR finally flicked off, it took his brain a full second to process it.

"Shane," his dad said quietly.

He looked up.

Dr. Banerjee was walking toward them again.

More blood this time.

The gown was darker in some places where it had soaked in layers. His gloves were gone, cap still on, mask dangling around his neck. There were faint grooves on his nose and cheeks where the mask had sat for hours.

He looked tired.

Not exhausted, not defeated, but like someone who'd just spent a long time wrestling death and wasn't sure yet who'd won.

Shane stood so fast the chair skidded back.

"How" His voice cracked. "How is he?"

The doctor stopped in front of them, took a breath, and did that tiny eyebrow-softening thing again.

"We're done," he said first. "The immediate danger from the bleeding has been addressed. We've stopped the active hemorrhage, and relieved the pressure. He is in the ICU now."

For half a heartbeat, hope flared so bright it hurt.

"We were able to preserve his hair," Dr. Banerjee said. "We used a hair-sparing incision. He'll have a scar, but we did not need to fully shave his head."

Shane's vision did a weird flicker thing.

Ilya with his curls.

Ilya with his head shaved like all those medical dramas, except not. The ridiculous, irrelevant relief that washed through him at the thought of Ilya not waking up bald felt obscene against the blood on the surgeon's gown.

“It was... complicated surgery,” Banerjee went on. “ We had to transfuse several units of blood. His blood pressure was very unstable at times.”

Shane’s fingers curled into his palms. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” the doctor said carefully, “that his heart stopped twice.”

Shane’s stomach dropped clean out of his body.

“What...”

“Once early on, when we were first decompressing and relieving pressure. There was a sudden shift. We performed CPR, administered medication, and got him back.” The doctor paused, like he was letting them breathe. “The second time was near the end, related to blood loss and stress on his system. Again, we got him back.”

His mom made a tiny noise, hand flying to her throat. His dad’s jaw clenched hard enough that a muscle jumped.

“So he... died,” Shane said. The word came out flat and wrong. “Twice.”

“Clinically,” Banerjee said. “For very brief periods. We intervened immediately. But yes, his body has been through an enormous trauma. Heart, brain, everything.”

Shane’s fingers were numb.

“He’s alive right now,” the doctor added. “His heart is beating on its own with some medication support. He is on a ventilator. We have intracranial pressure monitors in place. We are cooling him slightly to protect the brain.”

“Is he going to wake up?” Shane asked, because that was really the only question that mattered, the only one his brain could cling to. “At all.”

Dr. Banerjee didn’t sugarcoat it.

“The chances are... very slim,” he said quietly. “We have to be honest about that. There was prolonged swelling, repeated seizures, and multiple arrests. All of those increase the likelihood of severe brain damage.”

His mom’s eyes filled. His dad stared straight ahead at some point on the far wall.

“Define ‘slim,’” Shane managed. “Like, what does that mean? Ten percent? Five? One?”

The doctor considered. “In my professional opinion? I would say it is less likely than not that he will regain meaningful consciousness. Perhaps twenty percent chance he wakes up at all. Less that he wakes up as the person you knew.”

The words punched through Shane’s chest like ice.

“Meaningful,” he repeated. “You mean...?”

“I mean being able to interact, to recognize people, to make decisions,” Banerjee said. “There is a spectrum. He may not wake at all. He may open his eyes but not respond. He may have some response but very limited function. Or, less likely, he may surprise us.”

He let that hang there for a second. The tiniest lifeline.

Shane grabbed it with both hands and still felt like he was falling.

“You have to prepare yourselves,” the doctor continued, gentler now. “We will know more over the next 24 to 72 hours. The next CT, his pressure trends, his reflexes when we assess. But right now, I would be remiss if I gave you false hope.”

“So you’re saying...” Shane’s throat felt raw, flayed. “We should expect him not to wake up.”

“I’m saying,” Banerjee replied, “that you should hope for the best while understanding the worst is very possible. It is a very fragile situation.”

Shane inhaled sharply through his nose.

“Can I see him?” he asked, and the words wobbled at the edges. “Please.”

“Yes,” the doctor said. “We’re getting him settled in the ICU now. Give us fifteen minutes and then the nurse will bring you back. I’ll come by again once I’ve spoken with the intensivist and the rest of the team.”

He hesitated, then added, quieter, “Talk to him. Even if he doesn’t respond, hearing is often one of the last senses to go. If he has any awareness, your voice may reach him.”

Shane nodded because he couldn’t do anything else. He could barely feel his feet.

Banerjee gave them a final, brief, almost apologetic nod and walked away, the blood on his gown a dark smear against the pastel blue of the ICU doors.

For a while, they sat in silence.

Shane stared at the pattern in the linoleum. Little specks of darker gray in the lighter gray, random and meaningless. Everything but Ilya felt meaningless now.

“Twenty percent,” he said eventually, voice hollow. “That’s... not zero.”

“It’s not zero,” his dad agreed quietly.

“It’s not... *good*,” Shane added, almost laughing. “But it’s not zero.”

His mom slid her hand into his. “He’s stubborn,” she said, with a fierce, wet little smile. “He survived a childhood that would have broken a lot of people.” Her voice wobbled. “If anyone can claw his way back from this, it’s Ilya.”

“But if he doesn’t,” Shane said, staring straight ahead, “I walked away from him. We broke up and he... and we...” His jaw trembled. “He died twice and I wasn’t there either time.”

“You’re here now,” his dad said. “That matters.”

Shane didn’t answer. The idea of “mattering” felt flimsy against what the doctor had just said.

Less than likely. Slim. Not the person you knew.

The nurse found them exactly twelve minutes later.

“Mr. Hollander?” she asked gently. “We can take you back now. Just you at first, and then your parents.”

Shane got to his feet on legs that didn’t feel entirely connected to the rest of him and followed her down the hall.

The ICU was dimmer. Machines beeped softly, screens glowed green and blue and red. There was that sterile-cleaner smell, undercut by something warmer—plastic, warmed fluids, human skin.

“This way,” the nurse murmured.

She stopped at a glass-walled room and pushed the door open.

For a moment, Shane couldn’t make his body cross the threshold. Then he did.

The first thing he saw was the ventilator. The tube in Ilya’s mouth, taped to his face. Then the IV lines. The arterial line monitor with its jagged little waveform, numbers updating every second. Then the bandage.

They hadn’t shaved him, just like the doctor said.

His curls were still there, though flattened and matted with dried saline and sweat. A strip of white dressing ran along the side of his head, disappearing into the hairline. The skin around it was puffy, faintly bruised.

His face...

His face was wrong.

Too still, for one. No smirk, no twitch of irritation, no rolling eyes. Just pale skin, lashes resting dark on his cheeks, mouth slack around the tube.

There was a faint swelling at his temple. A tiny bit of dried blood in his ear. The monitors beeped steadily. Shane’s heart felt so loud in his ears he barely heard them.

“We had to sedate him,” the nurse said quietly from the doorway. “And we’re keeping him on medication to prevent further seizures. He’s not... aware right now. But like Dr. Banerjee said, hearing is one of the last things to go. Talk to him if you’d like.”

Shane nodded without looking at her.

He took a step closer. Then another. Then he was at the bed, fingers hovering, afraid to touch.

Up close, he could see little things. The tiny freckle near Ilya's right eye. The faint scar on his chin from that time he'd tripped on the dock. The way his lashes clumped slightly from moisture.

His chest rose and fell in time with the ventilator. Mechanical. Unnatural. But movement.

Shane reached out with a hand that shook and laid his fingers very gently on Ilya's forearm, avoiding the IV lines.

His skin was warm.

Not dead.

Not cold.

Warm.

"Hey," Shane said, and his voice broke on the single syllable. He cleared his throat. "Hey, Ilya."

Nothing.

No twitch. No flinch. Just the machine-breath and the beeping and the soft whir of something behind the bed.

"They..." He swallowed. "They didn't shave your head. You'll be happy about that. You still look... you still look like you."

His throat burned.

He dragged the chair closer with his foot and sat down, never taking his hand off Ilya's arm.

"So," he said, because the nurse had told him to talk, because the surgeon had told him to talk, because *what else was there to do*. "I, uh. I'm supposed to be prepared for you not waking up." His laugh came out shredded. "Which is bullshit, by the way. I refuse. I refuse to prepare for that."

The monitors kept their indifferent rhythm.

"I know we're not together," he went on quietly. "On paper. In, like, the technical sense. I know we said space was good. That we were... hurting each other more than helping. But they keep asking me about your last wishes and your next of kin and do I have the right to make decisions, and Ilya, I swear to god, if you think for one second that any of that matters more than the fact that I love you, you are dumber than every stupid stray cat you've ever fed."

His vision blurred. He blinked hard.

“I’m so mad at us,” he whispered. “I’m so mad that we thought walking away was the solution. That we thought not being each other’s first call would fix something. Because you know what? When your brain started bleeding, you weren’t calling your coach. You weren’t calling the team. You weren’t calling your idiot brother. You weren’t calling *me* either, because we weren’t... there. We weren’t what we were supposed to be.”

He wiped at his eyes with his free hand, rough.

“I’m not mad at you,” he added quickly. “Just so we’re clear. I am mad at myself. At every ‘maybe we should take a break’ and every ‘maybe this is for the best’ and every time I let someone who doesn’t know you half as well as I do tell me what love is supposed to look like.”

He leaned forward, careful of the lines, the tube, until he could rest his forehead very gently against Ilya’s hand, his own fingers wrapping around it.

The tape crinkled faintly against his cheek.

“I don’t know if you can hear me,” he murmured. “I don’t know if any of this is getting through. But on the microscopic chance that it is... I need you to know I take it back. All of it. Every second of that break-up. Worst fucking decision of my life.”

His shoulders shook.

“I still want the cottage,” he said. “And the cats. And your stupid team hoodie. And arguing about whose turn it is to do dishes. And you being obnoxious in the locker room and sending me photos of your dick on planes and in the showers.” A wet laugh. “I still want you. All of you. The panic attacks and the nightmares and the fighting and the ridiculous sex and the way you cry over animals in movies when you think I can’t see. I want you.”

The ventilator sighed. The heart monitor beeped steadily on.

“And if you’re listening to this from somewhere inside there,” he whispered, squeezing Ilya’s hand as gently as he could, “if there’s any part of you that can still choose... Please choose me. Choose coming back. Even if it’s messy. Even if it’s hard. Even if you never play again, I have to feed you mashed potatoes and remind you who I am every hour.”

His voice cracked. “I will still be there. Do you hear me? I will still be there. Boyfriend, ex, whatever label we’re using when you wake up, I don’t care. I am yours. You are mine.”

He lifted Ilya’s taped hand and pressed a trembling kiss to his knuckles, just above the band.

“You do not get to check out like this,” he added, softer but fierce. “You don’t get to die twice on a table and then just... slip away. That’s not the deal. The deal is we grow old and gross together and argue about whether the Metroes will ever win the Cup. So you fight. You hear me? You fucking fight.”

Behind him, through the glass, he could see his parents standing in the corridor, his mom with a tissue pressed to her mouth, his dad’s hand on her shoulder.

Shane laid Ilya's hand back down carefully and rested his forehead against it again, eyes closed.

Outside the machines and the monitors and the numbers and the percentages, all he could do now was exactly what he'd promised in a hotel room in Moscow and a cottage by the lake and a thousand nights in between.

Stay.

Talk.

Love him, even when he couldn't feel it.

And cling, with white-knuckled, irrational stubbornness, to that slim, fragile twenty percent.

72 hours. He could do it. He would do it for the rest of his life if it meant Ilya would open his eyes and look at Shane again.

By the third day, the ICU had its own gravity.

Time didn't move in hours anymore. It moved in rounds.

Neurological checks every hour. Vitals every fifteen minutes. Labs at six. CT at ten. Doctor at eleven. Visiting hours. Night shift. Morning shift. Repeat.

Shane learned the rhythm without wanting to. He knew the sound of the pumps when the IV ran low. He knew the soft chime when some brain wave crept up and the nurse came in to tweak the meds. He knew the hiss of the ventilator.

He also knew what it meant that nobody was saying *good* anymore.

"Stable," they said.

"Holding."

"Not worse."

On day one, the neurologist had said, "We're still in the very acute phase. The brain is irritated. We need to give it time."

On day two, she'd said, "There's no meaningful change in his exam yet. That doesn't mean we give up. We keep supporting him. We see what the next twenty-four hours bring."

On day three, she closed the door before she spoke.

Shane was sitting in the same chair he always sat in, Ilya's hand held carefully in his, thumb running over the bit of knuckle not hidden by tape or IV line.

His parents were in the two visitor chairs against the wall. His mom's knitting lay untouched in her lap. His dad had a book open, but he hadn't turned a page in an hour.

Dr. Banerjee stood at the foot of the bed. Beside him, the neurologist, Dr. Sharma, tiny and serious, dark hair in a bun so tight it looked painful. The ICU attending, Dr. Lewis, hovered in the doorway.

The room felt too small.

"How is he?" Shane asked, even though he knew. *Miracle* didn't give this much warning.

Dr. Sharma's eyes softened. "We repeated his CT scan this morning. The swelling has gone down a bit compared to day one, which is what we would expect at this stage. The bleeding has not reaccumulated. From a purely surgical perspective" she nodded to Banerjee "things look as good as they can."

Shane's heart did a stupid little hopeful flutter.

"But," she added gently, "what we worry about now is function."

There it was. Function. As if Ilya wasn't the most active, most energetic, most alive person Shane has ever known before all of it.

She stepped a little closer to the head of the bed, glancing at Ilya as she spoke.

"Over the past seventy-two hours," she said, "we've been checking his brainstem reflexes regularly. Pupils. Cough and gag. Response to pain. Reflexive movements."

Shane swallowed. He'd watched some of those. The cotton wisp near the eye did nothing. The bright penlight. The knuckles pressed hard into Ilya's sternum while his face stayed slack and still.

"Has anything changed?" his dad asked quietly.

Dr. Sharma shook her head once.

"No. We are not seeing purposeful movement. His pupils react only sluggishly. His cough reflex is minimal. When we lighten the sedation, his scan does not show the kind of activity we would hope for."

"So he's..." Shane's tongue felt too big in his mouth. "He's not... there."

"I can't say there is *no* brain activity," Sharma said. "He does have some basic responses. This is not brain death. But we are not seeing signs of higher function. And given the amount of time that has passed since his injuries and seizures, the chances of meaningful recovery are... extremely low."

The words "brain death" lodged like ice in his gut.

“But he’s not brain dead,” Shane pushed, grasping at technicality. “So there’s still... What did you say before... twenty percent?”

Her expression made it very clear those had been generous numbers.

“I would revise that downward now,” she said softly. “If you want a number, and I hesitate to give one... I would say less than five percent that he regains consciousness in a way that allows him to interact, to recognize people, to live anything resembling the life he had.”

His mom made a faint, broken sound and covered her mouth.

“And if we keep him like this?” his dad asked, voice tight. “If we say no decisions now, no pulling anything... what does that look like?”

“Medically? We can continue to support his breathing with the ventilator. We can keep his blood pressure stable with medications. We can feed him through a tube.” Dr. Lewis stepped in, taking over gently. “We can do that for a long time. But if there is no improvement neurologically, he will remain in what we call a persistent vegetative state. He would be bedbound. Dependent for all care. At high risk for infections, skin breakdown, complications from being immobile.”

“But alive,” Shane said, because the alternative felt like swallowing glass. “He’d be alive.”

“His body would be,” Lewis said carefully. “Whether he is *there*... we don’t know. And based on what we’re seeing, it is unlikely he would be aware in any meaningful way.”

Silence pressed in.

Banerjee cleared his throat. “We need to start a different kind of conversation now,” he said. “About goals of care. About what Ilya would have wanted in a situation like this.”

Shane let out a short, hysterical laugh that sounded nothing like him.

“He wanted to win the Cup,” he said. “He wanted to buy way too many shoes and feed cats and hit people on ice and send me nudes on the road. We didn’t talk about ‘hey if my brain is bleeding and I die twice, please do x.’”

“Has he ever said anything,” Dr. Sharma asked gently, “about being kept alive by machines? About quality of life? About... not wanting to be a burden?”

Shane’s throat clenched.

If I ever end like my dad, just... just pull the plug, okie? I don’t want to be ghost in my own body.

Ilya, on the dock, last summer. Cigarette glowing in the dark. Voice quiet. After they said their “I love you” and made love and laughed about the loons.

Shane squeezed his eyes shut.

“He... he said once he didn’t want to end up like his father,” he managed. “In bed. Not knowing anyone. Not recognizing. He said if it ever... if it was like that, he didn’t want to keep going just because we were too scared to let him go.”

His mom’s hand found his knee, squeezing.

“That’s important,” Dr. Lewis said. “We try to honor our patients’ values. Their wishes, even if they’re not written down.”

“We understand this is... a lot,” Dr. Sharma added. “We’re not asking you to make any decisions right this second. But we also have to be honest about what we’re seeing. Medically, if there is no significant change in his exam in the next day or so, we will need to talk about whether continuing aggressive support aligns with what he would have wanted.”

Shane stared at Ilya’s face.

Still. So still.

“If we... if we decide...” He couldn’t even make himself say *to withdraw support*. “What happens?”

“We would stop the medications supporting his blood pressure,” Lewis said gently. “We would remove the breathing tube and keep him comfortable with pain medication and sedatives. Most patients in this situation pass within minutes to hours. We would ensure he is not in distress.”

“And you’re telling us...” His dad’s voice finally broke. “You’re telling us we should be thinking about that.”

“I’m telling you,” Dr. Sharma said quietly, “that based on every piece of data we have, meaning his scans, his exams, that if he wakes at all, it is unlikely he will be the Ilya you knew. And he may not wake. At all.”

The room swam for a second.

Dr. Banerjee handed Shane a laminated sheet of paper.

“There are support services,” he said. “Social work. Spiritual care. Counseling. They can walk you through this process. And... There are also practical things. If you want to start thinking about funeral homes, or moving him to Russia, or organ donation, our team can help coordinate. We have a list.”

Shane stared at the paper.

The words blurred into meaningless blocks.

Funeral home. Services. Cremation. Burial. International arrangements.

It felt obscene, seeing that language with Ilya’s heart still beating, Ilya’s chest still rising and falling with the ventilator.

His parents were both crying now, quietly. His mom had given up on tissues and just pressed her palms to her face. His dad's eyes shone behind his glasses, his mouth tight and trembling.

"We'll give you time," Dr. Lewis said. "There's no need to rush. But... we wanted you to have the full picture."

"Can I..." Shane swallowed. "Can I still talk to him? I mean, is that... does it even..."

"It doesn't hurt," Dr. Sharma said. "And if there is any part of him that can hear you, it may help. Even if it's only to know he's not alone."

They filed out one by one, leaving the three of them with the machines and the too-quiet body in the bed.

For a while, no one spoke.

Shane stared at the list in his hand like it might catch fire.

His mom finally broke the silence with a choked little whisper.

"I don't want to plan a funeral for him," she said. "I don't. He's... he's supposed to be..." Her breath hitched. "He's supposed to be at our table complaining about Canadian coffee. He's supposed to be yelling at the TV when the refs make a bad call. He's supposed to be..."

"I know," Shane said, and his voice sounded strange even to himself. "I know, Mom."

His dad wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand.

"You don't have to decide tonight," he said. "You hear me? You do not have to decide tonight."

"They said if there was no change in a day," Shane replied dully. "It's already been three. Nothing's changed."

He looked at the paper again.

Funeral homes. Organ donation. Russia.

"What do I even..." His voice cracked. "Do I call Alexei? Does he get a say? What if he wants him shipped back to Moscow to be buried next to their father? What if he..."

"Shane." His dad's tone gentled. "One thing at a time."

Shane made a small, raw sound.

"I never thought..." He shook his head. "I thought the worst thing I could do to him was break up. Turns out I was wrong. This is worse. This is so much worse. I'm sitting here thinking about coffin colors and paperwork and whether his jersey gets retired while he's still..." His shoulders shook. "He's still here. He's right fucking there."

His hand tightened around Ilya's, mindful of the tape.

"I was supposed to protect him," he whispered. "Not decide if we unplug him."

His mom moved to his side, slipping an arm around his shoulders. His dad came to stand on his other side, hand resting between his shoulder blades.

"You don't have to do this alone," his mom said, voice thick. "We're here. We'll help you. Whatever happens, we will carry it with you."

"I want *him* to carry it," Shane burst out. "I want him to wake up and be a stubborn asshole about it and yell at me for crying in the ICU and insist he's fine and then go score a hat trick out of spite."

His throat closed up.

"But instead I'm supposed to pick a funeral home," he finished, broken.

No one had an answer.

Eventually, his parents stepped back to give him space. His mom kissed his hair. His dad squeezed his shoulder.

"We're going to go get some coffee," his dad said quietly. "Do you want anything?"

Ilya. He wanted Ilya alive and breathing and laughing at him.

Instead Shane shook his head.

"Okay. We'll be right outside if you need us."

The door clicked shut again, glass muting the corridor noise to a dull hum.

It was just him and Ilya and the machines.

He stared at the list in his hand for a long time.

At the bullet points and the tidy little explanations. At how unbelievably calm the font looked when everything inside him felt like screaming.

Finally, with a harsh exhale, he folded the paper in half. Then in half again. Then again, until it was a small, dense square. He shoved it into his pocket like it offended him.

"Not yet," he said hoarsely. "You hear me? Not yet."

He dragged the chair closer to the bed again and sat, leaning forward until his elbows rested on the rail.

Up close, Ilya looked almost peaceful. If you ignored the tube, the dressing, the subtle sag of his mouth from muscle slackness.

No reaction.

The ventilator sighed.

Nothing.

He stroked his thumb over Ilya's knuckles, tracing the edge of the tape ring.

"I was supposed to marry you," he said, voice barely above a whisper now. "Did you know that? Not just propose on a beach and take cute photos for Instagram or something. Actually marry you. My mom already picked out three different cookie recipes for the reception when I first told her. You were supposed to pretend not to cry and then cry anyway when you saw me in a suit."

A hot tear slipped down his face, landing on Ilya's wrist.

"I don't know how to do any of this without you," he admitted. "I don't know how to go back to the cottage and not see your shoes by the door. I don't know how to sleep in that bed without you hogging the blankets."

He squeezed his eyes shut.

"I don't know how to live in a world with a funeral list that has your name on it."

For a while, the only sound was his breathing and the machinery. Somewhere down the hall, a phone rang. A monitor alarm chirped and then silenced.

Shane pressed his forehead lightly to the back of Ilya's hand again, just like the first night.

"I am not ready to let you go," he whispered. "I don't care what the numbers say. I don't care what the scan shows. I am not ready."

His chest hurt.

This was worse than any breakup conversation, any therapy session, any fight. Those had all had the underlying assumption of *he's still there*. Angry or distant or stubborn, but there.

This was a void.

A nurse poked her head in to check the lines, murmured something about adjusting the sedation, then slipped out again.

Shane didn't move.

He wasn't sure how long he sat like that before he felt it.

The tiniest *something* against his palm.

He froze.

His breath stalled in his chest. He lifted his head and looked at Ilya's face.

Still.

He might have imagined it.

He almost convinced himself he *had* imagined it when it happened again.

Not a squeeze. Not a clear, purposeful movement.

Just the barest flutter of fingers inside his grip, like a muscle twitch.

His heart hammered.

“Ilya?” His voice came out too loud. He swallowed. “Ilya, hey. Can you... can you do that again for me? Can you move your hand?”

Nothing.

The monitors went on.

Shane let out a shaky breath somewhere between a sob and a laugh.

“Okay,” he said, forcing himself back down out of that jagged spike of hope. “Okay. It’s fine. Could be nothing. Could be... whatever. Nerves. Spasm. Doesn’t matter. You’ve always been twitchy, right? Nothing new.”

He knew what the doctors would say if he mentioned it.

Reflex. Not purposeful.

He knew he should probably mention it anyway.

He didn’t.

Not yet.

Instead, he tightened his hold just a fraction, careful not to disturb any IVs, and bent low over Ilya’s hand again.

“On the off chance that *was* you,” he whispered, voice cracking, “I’m still here. I’m not calling any funeral homes tonight. So if you’re trying to come back... keep going. Keep fighting. I’ll wait.”

The machines hummed. The list in his pocket crinkled when he shifted.

They might be talking about pulling the plug tomorrow.

They might be telling him his boyfriend had less than five percent chance of ever coming back.

But for now, for this terrible moment, Shane had one warm hand in his, one barely-there twitch, and one very simple job.

Stay.

Hours passed.

At some point in the night, the ICU stopped being a place and turned into a soundscape.

Beep. Hiss. Soft slipped footsteps outside the glass. Paper being turned at the nurses' station. Someone coughing in another room.

Shane had cried himself hoarse already, the tears coming in quiet, stubborn waves that left his face tight and his eyes burning. His parents were both slumped in the visitor chairs now, his mom with her head tipped back, mouth slightly open, a cardigan bunched under her neck as a makeshift pillow; his dad folded over his own chest, glasses gone, hand still loosely wrapped around a cold paper cup.

The fluorescent lights had been dimmed for "night mode," leaving everything washed in bluish-gray. The monitors glowed soft green and amber. Outside, the sky was just a darker shade of black.

Shane sat as close as he could without setting off the alarms, their hands laced together on top of the blanket. Ilya's fingers were warm. But then, bodies stayed warm long after brains gave up.

He'd felt that tiny twitch earlier and told no one.

Now his thumb traced slow circles over those long, familiar knuckles. Over the tape anchoring an IV line. Over the faint scars from years of hockey.

"I don't know if you can hear me," he whispered, voice rough. "But if you can... I'm sorry."

The ventilator sighed in, out, in, out, parody of Ilya's breathing Shane used to fall asleep to.

"I'm sorry I didn't fight harder for us. I'm sorry I let anyone talk me into breaking us so we could fix ourselves and instead just... broke us." His throat clenched. "I'm sorry for every time I snapped at you when you were not the one to blame. For all the times I made you feel like you were too much when really you were..."

He broke off, sucking in a shuddery breath.

"You were exactly right. You were hurting and I kept acting like the goal was to be less messy instead of... less alone."

Tears slid hot and salty down his cheeks. He didn't bother wiping them away. What was the point?

"I should've been here," he went on, quieter. "At practice. At the game. On the bench. If we hadn't broken up, maybe I'd have noticed you wobbling sooner. Maybe I'd have dragged you

off the ice. Maybe the hit would've been different or the seizure wouldn't have been as bad or..."

His voice cracked.

"Or maybe nothing would've changed," he admitted. "Maybe your brain was a ticking time bomb from the first concussion and this was always going to happen. But I'll never know and that's the part I can't stand. Knowing that the last few months you were alive-alive, we were sleeping in different beds. We were strangers when you should have been everything."

The heart monitor beeped on mercilessly steady. 78, 79, 80.

Shane leaned forward and pressed his forehead to the back of Ilya's hand, like he'd done a hundred times in the last three days.

"I love you," he whispered into skin that smelled faintly of antiseptic and hospital soap. "I thought walking away was the brave thing. Turns out, staying when it's awful, that's the brave thing. You were always better at bravery than me."

His shoulders shook.

"If you wake up," he choked, "I swear to god I'll spend the rest of my life learning how to do that. With you. If you don't..." The words were strangled in Shane's throat. "I don't know how I'm supposed to unplug you, Ilya. I don't know how I'm supposed to... pick a *funeral home* and sign papers and go back to the cottage and just... keep existing."

A hot tear fell, landing on their joined hands.

Shane felt the wetness soak into Ilya's skin.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

And then...

Ilya's fingers squeezed.

Not a twitch. Not a little flutter he could dismiss as reflex.

A *squeeze*. Sudden and hard, all four fingers clamping down around Shane's hand with startling strength.

Shane jerked like he'd been shocked, head snapping up.

"Ilya?" His voice came out too loud, cracking up at the end.

For a heartbeat, everything else seemed to hush.

The monitors, the ventilator, even the hall noises faded to a distant smear as Shane stared at Ilya's face.

His eyelids fluttered.

Once. Twice. Like someone struggling up from the bottom of a too-deep sleep.

“Ilya,” Shane whispered, heart trying to pound its way out of his chest. “Ilya, hey. Hey, I’m here, it’s me, Ilya...”

Ilya’s lashes trembled again, then slowly, *slowly*, his eyes cracked open.

They didn’t open all the way. Just a narrow, blinking slit at first. The pupils were huge, swallowing most of the hazel, unfocused and glassy in the dim light. He stared straight ahead for a second, expression slack.

Then his gaze shifted, searching, jerky as if the muscles weren’t quite remembering how to coordinate.

“Come on,” Shane begged, leaning into his line of sight. “Right here, baby. Right here, look at me, Ilya, just look.”

Ilya’s eyes tracked, sluggish but real, finally landing on Shane’s face.

Shane almost blacked out. Right there and then.

“Ilya,” he said again, and now his voice was definitely shaking. “If you can hear me, squeeze my hand again, okay? Once for yes.”

For a terrifying moment, nothing happened.

Then Shane felt it, the pressure tightening around his fingers. Once. Twice. Like Ilya was trying to overachieve even lying flat in an ICU bed.

“All right,” Shane babbled, a wild, hysterical laugh bubbling out of him, loud and obnoxious in the place where there was silence just minutes ago. “Okay, two is fine, we can work with two, overachiever, holy *shit*, Ilya.”

The heart monitor started to speed up.

Ilya’s brows knit together, a tiny line forming between them. His chest hitched in an odd, shallow stutter. Then everything happened at once. Ilya’s whole body jerked as he tried to inhale against the tube in his throat. A wet, panicked choking sound exploded around the ventilator. His hand spasmed in Shane’s grip, nails digging in this time, not controlled at all, just raw, terrified clutching.

The ventilator alarm went off in a shrill, urgent beep. Another monitor joined in, screaming about irregular breathing patterns. A red light flashed on the wall.

“Ilya, hey, hey!” Shane scrambled to his feet, one hand still holding on as he reached for the call button with the other, slamming it over and over, hard. “It’s okay, you’re okay, don’t fight the tube, *breathe with it*, it’s helping you.”

Ilya's eyes were wide now, whites showing all around the blown pupils. He tried to sit up, instincts screaming *get this out, get up, get away*, but his arms were weak and tangled in lines and soft restraints he hadn't noticed before. The effort made him gag around the plastic, a horrible wet retching that didn't go anywhere.

"Help!" Shane shouted, not caring if he woke his parents, the nurses, the doctors, the patients, the whole fucking block. "He's awake... he's choking! *Help!*"

The door banged open almost instantly.

A nurse rushed in, followed by another, and then Dr. Lewis, hair mussed like she'd just been lying down.

"What's happening?" Lewis asked sharply even as her eyes took in the scene, her hands already going to the vent tubing.

"He squeezed my hand and then his eyes opened and now he's..." Shane broke off as Ilya made another desperate, awful sound, chest heaving against the ventilator.

"Okay, okay," the nurse soothed, moving to Ilya's left side. "Mr. Rozanov, can you hear me? You're in the ICU. You've got a breathing tube helping you right now. Try not to fight it, okay? Just breathe with the machine. That's it. In, out. We've got you."

It did absolutely nothing. Ilya's eyes were wild, darting from face to face, clearly not processing most of the words, just the fact that he couldn't move, couldn't talk, couldn't *breathe* right.

His hand clenched convulsively around Shane's again, hard enough that it hurt.

Shane squeezed back.

"I'm here," he kept repeating, voice high and thin. "I'm here, Ilya, you're okay, they're helping."

"Is he following commands?" Lewis barked.

The nurse leaned in close. "Ilya, can you look at me?" He waved a hand gently in front of Ilya's face. "Just with your eyes. Look this way."

Ilya's gaze flicked to him.

"Good," the nurse said, tone going warm with thinly controlled excitement. "Okay, that's good. Can you squeeze my hand?" He slid his free hand into Ilya's other one. "Tight as you can."

There it was again—a firm, unmistakable squeeze.

Shane could hear his parents stirring behind him, chairs scraping, his mom's shocked, broken, "Oh my god..."

Lewis's expression changed.

"Okay," she said, already reaching for Ilya's sedation drip, turning the rate down. "He's clearly more awake than we thought. Let's switch him to different support, see what he does."

"What does that mean?" Shane demanded, dizziness creeping in at the edges of his vision. "Is he... he's..."

"He's waking up," Lewis said, blunt and calm and a little breathless. "That's what it means."

The words hit like a physical blow. Shane had to grab the bed rail with his free hand to stay upright.

Dr. Sharma appeared in the doorway, dark hair now slightly loose from her bun, eyes wide. "I heard the alarms."

"He's following commands," Lewis said, not looking away from the monitors. "We may have a..." he caught himself before he said *miracle* out loud, but the word hung there anyway "We may have a significant change in neurological status."

Ilya coughed, a harsh, ugly sound around the tube. Tears leaked from the corners of his eyes, part fear, part strain, part subconsciousness.

"Easy," the nurse said again, one hand on his shoulder, anchoring. "You're doing good, big guy. Keep breathing with the machine. In, out. That's it."

"Illy." Shane moved closer, old nickname slipping out right there, so Ilya could hear him without turning his head. "Breathe with it, okay? Like waves. In..." he exaggerated a slow inhale "... and out."

Ilya's gaze locked on him, desperate and clinging.

He tried. Shane could see it, the fierce concentration in his eyes as he fought against instinct and panic to sync his chest with the mechanical in-out. Soon, the monitor numbers started to settle, heart rate dropping out of the danger zone. The alarm quieted to a softer tone.

"That's better," Lewis said. "Good job. Let's give him a minute in this setting, see how he does."

Shane's mom edged up beside him, hand covering her mouth, tears streaming unashamedly down her face.

"Oh, sweetheart," she whispered, voice shaking. "Oh, look at you..."

Ilya's eyes flicked to her, recognition not quite there but curiosity, at least. Then back to Shane, like he was tethering himself there.

Shane squeezed his hand, hard.

“You scared the shit out of me,” he said, because the alternative was sobbing incoherently. “You know that? You absolute menace. You pick *now* to be stubborn and wake up after they hand me a funeral brochure. Drama queen.”

One corner of Ilya’s mouth twitched around the tape.

Just a tiny, crooked ghost of a smirk.

It undid Shane completely.

He laughed and cried at the same time, the sounds tangling in his throat, messy and ugly and real.

“So,” he said wetly, leaning in so his forehead almost touched Ilya’s, careful of the lines. “Listen up, because you probably won’t remember this part. You don’t get to leave me. Okay? Break-up was apparently the fucking dress rehearsal or whatever. You are stuck with me. You hear?”

Ilya’s fingers shifted against his again.

Another squeeze.

Sharma had moved to the head of the bed now, shining her penlight into Ilya’s eyes one at a time.

“Pupils reactive,” she murmured, voice just this side of awed. “Tracking to voice. Following commands. This is... this is not what I expected.”

“Is that good?” Shane’s dad asked, sounding a little breathless.

“It’s very good,” Sharma said, and there was no measured calm in her tone this time. “We’re not out of the woods by any means. He’s been through major brain trauma and surgery. We’ll have to see what deficits there are when the dust settles. But this? This changes the conversation entirely.”

She looked down at Ilya, and for the first time since he’d met her, Shane saw something like wonder in her face.

“Welcome back, Mr. Rozanov,” she said softly. “You gave us quite a scare.”

Ilya’s lashes fluttered again. He tried to say something around the tube, a muffled, frustrated sound.

“I know,” Shane said quickly. “I know, you hate it, we’re working on it. If you keep breathing like this and your numbers stay good, they’ll talk about taking it out. Okay? Just... give them a little time. No trying to yank it yourself, please, I can’t handle you pulling out your own intubation like some horror movie.”

His parents both let out watery laughs.

Ilya's eyes closed for a second, then reopened, heavy but undeniably *there*.

Shane could see the confusion. The fear. The exhaustion.

But beneath all of that, undeniable and so, so bright Shane could see something else.

Life.

He bowed his head over their joined hands again, shoulders shaking with relief.

"Okay," he whispered, as if they were back on some stormy night at the cottage instead of surrounded by machines. "Okay. We can fix everything else later. We can talk about us and love and all the shit we messed up. We can do the hard work. Just... stay. That's all you have to do right now. Just stay."

Ilya squeezed his hand again.

Hard.

Like a promise.

Like staying.

They didn't take the tube out right away.

First there were tests. Commands. Breathing trials. A whole blur of careful, measured things that made sense to the medical staff and absolutely did not to Shane, whose entire brain had been replaced by one static scream of *he's awake, he's awake, he's awake*.

But eventually, after what felt like hours but was probably just one, Lewis looked at the numbers, at Ilya, then at Sharma.

"I'm comfortable extubating," she said.

Sharma nodded, just once. "Me too."

Shane's heart tried to climb into his throat.

"Wait, is that..." He swallowed, suddenly dumb. "That's taking the tube out, right? Not putting a... bigger one in or something?"

The nurse with the kind eyes huffed a tiny laugh. "Yes, that's the good kind of tube talk."

He moved closer to Ilya's head, voice going professional, gentle. "Okay, big guy, we're going to take this out now. I need you to listen very carefully, yeah?"

Ilya's eyes tracked to him, heavy-lidded but focused.

“When I say, ‘deep breath,’ you’re going to take as big a breath in as you can. Then I’ll pull the tube and you’ll cough. It’ll feel weird, maybe a little burn-y, but it’ll pass. We’ll put some oxygen under your nose after. Can you handle that, Rozanov?”

Ilya blinked once, slow.

“Okay,” the nurse said, satisfied. “On three. One... two... deep breath in for me.”

Shane watched Ilya inhale as much as his battered chest would allow.

The nurse’s hands were quick and sure. There was an awful, wet sound as the tube slid free, a ragged cough that made Shane’s own throat hurt in sympathy, Ilya’s face scrunching in reflex.

And then it was out. Just like that.

A second nurse was there instantly clearing his mouth, another tucking oxygen prongs gently under his nose.

“Easy breaths,” Sharma coached. “In through your nose, out through your mouth. Your throat is going to feel scratchy. That’s normal. You’re doing really well.”

Ilya coughed again, automatically reaching up to touch his neck, then his mouth, feeling the absence of plastic.

Shane realized he was white-knuckling the bed rail.

“Ilya?” he tried, voice thin. “Can you... can you talk?”

It took a second.

When it came, the voice was rough and low and wrecked, like someone had taken sandpaper to his vocal cords.

“Feels,” Ilya rasped, then broke into another cough. He swallowed hard, grimacing. “Feels like I smoke twenty packs.”

Shane made a noise that was half laugh, half sob.

His mom choked outright, covering her face. His dad turned away, shoulders shaking.

“You sound awful,” Shane croaked, tears spilling over again. “You sound like a dying frog -”

“Sexy frog,” Ilya corrected, barely audible, lips quivering. “Very masculine.”

Shane lost it.

The tears he’d been barely holding back tore free in ugly, gasping sobs. He pressed the heel of his free hand over his mouth as if he could physically push them down, but it was useless.

Ilya’s hand shifted in his, weak but insistent.

“Hey,” he rasped. “No crying, yes.”

That just made it worse.

“Fuck you, Rozanov.” Shane managed, voice destroyed. “You’ve been *out* for three days, they were about to talk to me about funeral homes.” His voice broke on the word “And you wake up and the first thing you do is make a cigarette joke? Of course it’s your job, you asshole, you do everything dramatic...”

He realized he was yelling and crying and tried to dial it down, but his chest kept hitching.

Ilya blinked slowly, looking at him like he was the most fascinating thing in the room.

“Looks bad,” he croaked, nodding vaguely toward Shane’s face. “Snot. Red eyes. Very tragic, Hollander.”

Shane let out a wet, hysterical laugh.

“Of course you’re roasting me,” he said thickly. “Of *course*. You almost die and you come back just to be a bitch about my crying form.”

Ilya’s mouth twitched again. “You like when I’m bitch.”

“Yeah,” Shane sniffed. “Unfortunately.”

A small, broken noise came from Shane’s left.

He turned to see his mother fully sobbing now, both hands pressed to her cheeks, tears streaming. His dad had abandoned stoicism completely and was wiping his face on the back of his hand like a little kid.

Ilya’s unfocused gaze slid toward them, brows knitting.

“Parents?” he asked harshly.

Shane nodded, swiping at his own face. “Yeah. They’ve been here the whole time. They love you almost as much as me, so you scared *three* Hollander hearts half to death, congratulations.”

His mom let out a watery laugh and stepped closer, stopping when she reached the invisible line where it looked like she was afraid to crowd him.

“Hi, honey,” she said, voice shaking. “You... you really gave us a fright.”

Ilya blinked at her, trying to focus. “Sorry,” he rasped automatically, accent thicker with every word. “Was... busy. Dying.”

Shane actually wheezed.

Sharma made a sound that was either a cough or a suppressed snort behind her hand.

“Okay, we’re going to let you visit for a minute,” she said gently, moving back to the monitors. “But keep it short. His brain and body have been through a lot. We’ll need to run more scans and exams, but for now, simple is best. Short sentences, nothing complicated.”

“Don’t ask him to do math,” Shane said weakly. “Got it.”

The nurse slid a small cup of water with a straw into Shane’s free hand. “Little sips,” he reminded Shane. “If he coughs, pull it back.”

Shane guided the straw to Ilya’s lips with reverent care.

“Hey,” he murmured. “Slow. Tiny sips. No chugging. We are not reenacting the Pepsi commercial right now.”

Ilya glared faintly, but obeyed, closing his lips around the straw.

He took the smallest sip in history, then another, eyes closing as the water hit his raw throat.

“Good?” Shane asked.

“Best water,” Ilya whispered. “Five stars.”

Shane’s dad actually laughed out loud, voice breaking halfway through.

“Oh my god,” Shane muttered, pressing his face briefly into their joined hands. “I hate you. I love you so much, I hate you.”

Ilya’s fingers curled, clumsy but sure, around Shane’s.

“Love you too,” he said. It came out mangled, more like “luff you do” but the meaning was unmistakable.

Shane made a strangled sound and dropped his head to the mattress, shoulders shaking. His mom’s hand landed gently between his shoulder blades, rubbing up and down like she used to when he was sick as a kid.

“I know,” she murmured thickly. “I know, sweetheart. Let it out.”

He did All the fear, the guilt, the three days of white, numb waiting, the echo of doctors saying *no reflexes* and *very slim chance* - it poured out in messy, gasping sobs.

“I thought you were gone,” he choked against the blanket. “I thought... I thought the last real thing I ever said to you was ‘maybe this was a mistake’ and I wanted to crawl out of my own skin, Ilya, I was so fucking stupid, holy shit.”

A weak thumb nudged at his hand.

“Hey,” Ilya rasped. “No... no calling my boyfriend stupid. Only I do this.”

Shane looked up, face blotchy and wet, and saw Ilya watching him with a tired, lopsided attempt at a smirk and eyes that were soft, so soft, beneath the drugs and pain and confusion.

It broke him all over again, but in a different way.

“I don’t deserve you,” he hiccupped.

“Probably not,” Ilya agreed faintly. “Too late. Stuck with me now.”

Shane laughed helplessly through his tears.

“Yeah,” he whispered, squeezing his hand like a lifeline. “Yeah. I am. And you’re stuck with me too, you understand? We are *never* listening to anyone who suggests breaking up again. We’re getting the attachment style handout and we’re copying the answers off each other like a high school exam.”

“Cheating,” Ilya mumbled. “Very romantic.”

Sharma cleared her throat gently. “I hate to break up the lovefest, but we really do need to let him rest now. This is... far more than we dared hope for tonight. Let’s not push his brain too hard right out of the gate.”

Shane nodded automatically, wiping at his face again.

“Okay,” he said. His voice still shook, but he could feel something solid under the shaking now. Hope, sharp and terrifying and bright and there. “Okay. We’ll... we’ll be quiet. We’re not leaving, though.”

“You don’t have to,” she said softly. “Just... keep talking like this. Simple. Familiar. Let him sleep when he needs to.”

She and the nurses filtered out, the room dimming again, leaving just the three of them and the quiet hum of the machines.

Shane’s mom leaned in, brushing a careful hand through Ilya’s curls, away from the bandage and dried antiseptic at his hairline.

“You rest, baby,” she whispered, voice thick. “We’ve got Shane. You focus on getting better.”

Ilya blinked slowly at her, then at Shane.

“Stay?” he rasped.

Shane’s answer came out immediately, fierce.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m not going anywhere. Not this time.”

Ilya’s eyelids drooped, too heavy to fight. His fingers slackened slightly in Shane’s, but didn’t let go.

Within a minute, he was asleep again, breathing shallow but steady, mouth parted, oxygen cannula resting like a fragile tether across his face.

Shane sat back down, still holding on.

He looked at his parents, at his mom's blotchy face, his dad's red-rimmed eyes and let out a long, shuddering breath.

"I got him back," he whispered, more to himself than anyone. "We got him back."

His mom squeezed his shoulder.

"Now," she said softly, "the hard part starts."

Shane nodded, eyes fixed on Ilya's sleeping face.

"I know," he said. "And this time... we do it together."

He brought Ilya's hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to his knuckles, the way Ilya had done to him in a hundred other beds, on a hundred other nights.

"Stay," he murmured against his skin. "That's all you have to do. I'll be here when you wake up."

For once in his life, he didn't doubt it.

Morning came with bad lighting and worse possibilities.

Shane sat on the awful plastic chair, spine aching, Ilya's hand cupped in both of his. Ilya was half-dozing, lashes fanned dark on his cheeks, the white bandage at his hairline stark against his skin.

Dr. Lewis came in with a small team and a tablet. She looked like she hadn't slept either.

"Mr. Hollander," she said quietly. "Can we talk for a moment?"

Shane's stomach squeezed. He carefully unwound his fingers from Ilya's and stood, following the doctor just outside the door. He could still *see* Ilya's bed through the gap. He held onto that.

Dr. Lewis folded her arms, then unfolded them again, like she didn't quite know what to do with her hands.

"I want to be very honest with you," she started. "You deserve that."

Shane's throat went dry. "Okay."

"With the amount of bleeding we saw," Dr. Lewis said gently, "we would usually expect... consequences. Significant ones. The fact that he woke at all is already unexpected. But we

don't yet know what, if any, deficits he may have."

Shane swallowed. "What kind of deficits?"

The doctor's gaze softened. "Worst-case scenarios? Weakness or paralysis in his limbs. Difficulty speaking. Memory loss. Changes in personality. Seizures. Inability to walk independently. In some cases... needing a wheelchair."

Every word felt like a physical hit. Shane's fingers dug into his own palms.

"So you're saying even though he woke up...?"

"I'm saying," Dr. Lewis cut in gently, "we don't *know* yet. Today we'll be running a full battery: imaging, neurological exam, cognitive testing, physio assessment. We need to see what his brain can do now that the swelling is receding."

Shane looked back through the curtain at Ilya's sleeping form. "And if he... can't?"

"Then we adapt," Dr. Lewis said. "Rehab, support, planning. You won't be alone in that. But I need you to prepare yourself for the possibility that the Ilya you get back might not be exactly the same as the one you brought in."

Shane's chest hurt. "He'll hate that."

"He might," Lewis agreed. "And he'll need support if that's the case."

I'm the one who left him, Shane thought, dizzy. I'm the one who walked away and now I might be the one pushing his wheelchair. What the fuck, life?

Out loud, he just said, "Okay. What do you need us to do?"

"For now? Let him rest," Dr. Lewis said. "They'll come for him soon to start scans."

They wheeled Ilya off mid-morning, an orderly apologizing as he navigated cords and IV poles.

"Back soon," Ilya rasped, trying for a grin as they rolled him past Shane. "Don't let anyone steal my socks."

Shane forced himself to smile. "I'll guard them with my life."

Then he was alone with the empty bed and the flattened pillow and the echo of wheels disappearing down the corridor.

It felt like hours.

He paced. Sat. Stood. Poured coffee, didn't drink it. Answered three texts from his mom ("Any update?" "We're on our way back in a bit, sweetheart." "Breathe.") and one from Rose

("If any doctor says 'we'll see' again I'll fight them personally for you, Shane").

Eventually, the bed came back.

Ilya looked exhausted, but awake. His eyes were clearer, hair messier, the hospital gown slightly skewed like he'd argued about something.

"How did it go?" Shane asked, hovering.

Ilya gave a raspy snort. "Crushed them all."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"Later," Ilya muttered, already letting his eyes droop again as the nurse reconnected things. "So many stupid questions. 'Do you know where you are?' 'Can you count backwards by seven?' 'Who is president?' Please, give me challenge."

Shane's heart stuttered. Counting backwards by seven meant they'd done proper cognitive stuff, that much he knew. Orientation. Executive functions. All the things Dr. Lewis had been worried about.

"You rest now," the nurse said kindly. "The doctor will be back with the results."

Ilya grumbled something in Russian and shifted, automatically feeling along the bed until his fingers found Shane's. His grip settled there, instinctive.

Shane stayed standing, hand anchored in Ilya's, until Dr. Lewis reappeared.

She looked different this time.

Still tired. But her eyes were bright in a way Shane hadn't seen yet, like someone had flipped on a light behind them.

"Can we talk?" she asked, and then, "Actually, no, stay right there. I want you both to hear this."

Ilya's eyes blinked open again, catching the harsh fluorescent light. "Am I dying again?" he croaked. "Because if so, very rude, not good customer service."

Dr. Lewis actually huffed a laugh, a startled sound. "No. Quite the opposite."

She stepped closer to the bed, tablet hugged against her chest.

"Let me start with the scans," she said. "The MRI shows changes exactly where we'd expect from the surgery. The swelling is already going down faster than we anticipated. No new bleeding. In plain language: the structural picture looks... remarkably good."

Shane exhaled a breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

"Okay," he said faintly. "That's... good."

“That’s just the first part,” Lewis said. She glanced at Ilya. “Do you remember the questions we asked you this morning?”

“Yes,” Ilya said. “You wanted to know my name, where I live, who is prime minister, how old I am, what day it is, what city we are in. Also you kept asking what ‘apple, table, penny’ was and I kept telling you it is very boring grocery list.”

Dr. Lewis’ mouth twitched. “Those were part of a memory test.”

“Yes, very easy memory test,” Ilya muttered.

“We ran you through a full cognitive battery,” Lewis continued, switching into doctor voice. “Orientation, short-term memory, delayed recall, attention, language, visuospatial skills, executive functioning. We tested your strength, coordination, reflexes, fine motor control. We had you stand, with support, and we assessed your balance.”

She looked up from the tablet, straight at Shane.

“He aced everything.”

For a heartbeat, the words didn’t land, didn’t register.

Then they hit all at once.

“Acad?” Shane repeated stupidly.

“Acad,” Lewis confirmed. “His scores were at or above expected levels for his age and education. No aphasia, no clear deficits in attention or processing speed. His walk is wobbly because of bed rest and his blood pressure drops a bit when he stands, but that’s temporary. Neurologically?” He took a breath. “I have no explanation for how intact he is given what we saw in the OR.”

Shane’s legs went weak. He gripped the rail of the bed.

“You said wheelchair,” he managed. “You said he might not be able to talk, or move his hands, or...”

“I know what I said,” Dr. Lewis cut in, voice softer now. “And clinically, those were reasonable expectations. They were the *most likely* outcomes. But bodies are not math problems.” She looked at Ilya again, her expression openly moved. “Sometimes they surprise us.”

Ilya frowned faintly. “Surprise is good?”

“In this case?” Lewis smiled, small and incredulous. “In this case, it’s about as good as it gets.”

She hesitated, then added, almost under her breath, “In twenty years of doing this, I’ve never seen a brain take that much damage, that much blood loss, and come out this clean on testing.

I'm not supposed to use words like this as a scientist, but... Mr. Rozanov, this is as close to a miracle as I've seen in my career."

Shane's vision blurred. He swiped at his face, tried to speak, failed completely.

Ilya was staring at the doctor with a wide, stunned gaze, as if he'd expected to hear anything *but* that.

"Wait," he rasped. "So you are saying... I'm not..." he gestured weakly at his legs, his hands "broken?"

Dr. Lewis shook his head. "You're injured. You're going to be exhausted. You'll have headaches, and your stamina will be awful for a while. You'll need physiotherapy. You'll need seizure monitoring. You're going to be bored and frustrated and angry at how long recovery takes. But your *brain*?" He tapped the side of his head lightly. "Your brain is still you."

Something in Ilya's face crumpled for a second, too quick, too small for anyone who didn't know him to catch. Shane saw it like a hit to the solar plexus.

Dr. Lewis cleared his throat. "We'll keep watching you closely, of course. Things can still evolve. But right now? You are functioning at a level we... frankly did not dare hope for."

Shane found his voice. It came out shredded. "Thank you."

"I didn't do this alone," Lewis said quietly. "The team, the timing, your physical activity going in... that all helped. And sometimes, for reasons we don't understand, people decide to stick around when by all rights they shouldn't."

She looked between the two of them.

"I'd recommend celebrating," she added. "In whatever quiet way you can manage in a hospital."

She left before Shane could start sobbing again. Silence folded around the bed. Ilya stared at the ceiling for a long beat, then turned his head very slowly to look at Shane.

"Miracle, yes?" he croaked.

Shane let out a soaked laugh. "Yeah," he said, voice cracking. "Guess so."

"Maybe is just... Russian stubbornness," Ilya muttered. "Brain heard 'wheelchair' and said '*nyet*.'"

Shane choked on a wet, helpless sound that was half laugh, half sob again, and reached for him, carefully, so carefully, folding himself over Ilya's chest without jostling tubes or lines.

Ilya's hand came up, shaky but sure, to rest on the back of his head.

"Hey," he whispered, soft and raspy. "Don't cry, Hollander. Is okay. I'm okay."

Shane pressed his face harder into the thin hospital gown, tears soaking into the fabric. “You have *no idea*,” he breathed. “You have no idea how okay ‘okay’ is right now.”

Ilya huffed a ghost of a laugh and stroked his hair with slow, clumsy fingers.

“Is miracle, they say,” he murmured. “But also... is us. You and me. Not finished yet.”

And for the first time since the concussions, since the break-up, since the surgery and the three days of waiting for death, Shane believed him.

Hours later, Shane had his head tipped back against the wall, eyes closed, thumb tracing circles over Ilya’s knuckles, when the fingers in his hand twitched.

“...Hollander.”

Shane’s eyes snapped open at once.

Ilya was awake. Properly awake, not just surfacing for a second. His eyes were open and bleary, pupils a little blown from pain meds, lashes clumped together.

“Hollander,” he repeated, voice rough and sleep-heavy. “Lay down with me.”

Shane’s heart did something violent in his chest.

“I... they said...” His voice came out hoarse. “I’m not supposed to disturb you.”

Ilya’s brow creased, a faint little line between his eyes. “You are not disturbing me,” he said, like it was obvious. “You are my boyfriend. I am asking. Lay down with me. Please.”

All the arguments Shane had, chairs, rules, nurses, evaporated.

Shane was moving before he was really aware of it, toeing off his shoes, carefully climbing up onto the narrow hospital bed. The rail dug into his hip a little, but he didn’t care. He shifted slowly, mindful of wires and tubes and the thick bandage wrapped around Ilya’s head.

Ilya made it easier, lifting his arm just enough for Shane to slot in beside him, chest to side. As soon as Shane was within reach, Ilya hooked an arm across his torso and *pulled*, tucking Shane in against him like he had a hundred times before. Except this time there was a heart monitor beeping in the background and a faint antiseptic sting in the air.

Shane settled on his side, one arm around Ilya’s waist, the other carefully between pillow and curls. Up close, he could see the shadows under Ilya’s eyes, the faint tremor in his fingers, the white plastic of the IV taped to the back of his hand.

It was late. The kind of late where the ward lights were dimmed and voices were hushed. Dr Lewis’ words from earlier echoed in his head: *If you want to celebrate, do. He’s earned it. So have you.*

Shane pressed his face into the crook of Ilya's neck and breathed in the smell of him - hospital on top, but underneath, still Ilya: skin and sweat and something warm and familiar.

"I was sure I was never going to be allowed to do this again," he whispered, voice breaking on the last word.

Ilya's fingers tightened on the back of his t-shirt. "Idiot," he muttered, without heat. "Of course you can. Is best medicine."

Shane huffed out a wet laugh that turned immediately into a sob. "You *died*," he said, uselessly. "They told me... they told me to call funeral homes, Ilya, and now you're... you're asking me to..."

"To cuddle," Ilya supplied. "Yes. Very scandalous. Will ruin my reputation."

Shane made an awful, choked sound that was half laugh, half cry. His shoulders shook. Ilya's grip didn't loosen. If anything, he pulled him closer, his fingers carding clumsily through Shane's hair.

"Hey," he murmured. "Stop crying. Is okay now. I am here."

"That's *why* I'm crying," Shane said, a little hysterical. "You're here."

"Then cry quieter," Ilya said, but his voice was soft. "Or nurse will think I broke you."

Shane tried to muffle his tears into Ilya's hospital gown. It didn't really work.

They lay like that for a while, pressed together in a tangle of limbs and blankets and wires, the monitor ticking along in time with the frantic pounding of Shane's heart. Gradually, his breathing evened out, sobs tapering into hiccupy little breaths.

Ilya stroked his hair, slow and clumsy but intent.

"So," he said after a bit, conversational, like this was any other night in their own bed in the cottage, not this, whatever it was supposed to be. "I asked them when sex can be back."

Shane let out a wet, incredulous laugh into his chest. "Jesus, Ilya."

"What?" Ilya shifted slightly so he could look down at him. His curls were flattened on one side, bandage stark against his temple, eyes still glassy with fatigue. "Is important question."

"You..." Shane pulled back just enough to see his face. "You woke up from brain surgery, they only just told us your *miracle brain* works, and your first thought is...?"

"Second or third thought," Ilya corrected. "First was 'I did not die, nice.' Second was 'head hurts.' Third was 'when can I fuck my boyfriend again.' Very reasonable hierarchy."

Shane stared at him, helpless, and then the laugh tore out of him, broken and disbelieving. Tears spilled over again anyway because the only thing Shane seemed to be capable of anymore was crying.

“Oh my god,” he said, swiping at his face. “Of course you did. Of *course* you did. You absolute menace.”

Ilya shrugged one shoulder, the movement small against the pillow. “Is valid concern. They say no hockey for long time. No drinking. No driving. I had to make sure sex was not also on banned list. That would be, as you say, human rights violation.”

“What did they say?” Shane managed, still sniffing.

“That I am not allowed to do... vigorous activity for some weeks.” Ilya’s mouth twisted. “Whatever that means.”

Shane snorted. “It means not trying to reenact your Greatest Hits on me while your brain is still recovering, genius.”

“Hmm.” Ilya considered this, then tipped his head just enough to nuzzle Shane’s hairline. “We can be creative. Slow. Gentle.” His voice dropped, rough even through the meds. “Is fine. I just... I did not come properly in months. Since break up.”

Shane’s breath caught.

He knew. Of course he knew. They’d been apart for months. He’d been miserable and alone and...

He hadn’t let himself think too hard about what Ilya had or hadn’t done without him. It hurt too much.

Now, hearing it like that, simple, blunt, very Ilya, it lodged somewhere under his ribs.

“You... didn’t?” he asked, voice small.

Ilya huffed, the sound almost dismissive. “Hook up sex is not same. Is... mechanical. Get off, go home. No stupid Hollander hands on me, no stupid Hollander voice in my ear, no stupid Hollander face when he comes.” His fingers curled in Shane’s shirt, like he could anchor himself there. “Body works, but head does not. So no, not properly.”

Shane’s eyes flooded again. “You’re going to make me ruin your gown,” he muttered helplessly.

“I already ruined my brain, is fine,” Ilya said dryly, then softened. “Hey. Look at me.”

Shane did. Up close, he could see the fine tremor in Ilya’s lashes from exhaustion, the faint redness at the corners of his eyes. There was a bruise blooming along his cheekbone he hadn’t noticed yet, yellow and purple under the harsh hospital light.

“I asked about sex,” Ilya said gently, “because I want to live. You understand? I want normal things again. Stupid things.” His mouth twitched. “I want to stand on skates and shout at boys and come home and argue with you about who does dishes and then fuck you into mattress *very* carefully so my head does not explode.”

Shane let out another broken laugh.

“I wanted to know if there is a future where that happens,” Ilya continued, quieter. “Not just... hospital bed. Pain. Fear.” His thumb brushed a tear off Shane’s cheek. “If I was going to die, I did not need to know rules. But now I am not dead. So I need to know when I can have you again. All of you.”

Shane’s chest hurt so much he pressed his hand flat against it, like that could keep all the feeling inside somehow.

“You are ridiculous,” he whispered. “And disgusting. And completely... completely yourself.”

“*Da*,” Ilya said simply. “I am still me. Miracle brain and all.” His fingers slid into Shane’s hair again, slow and soothing. “Is that not what matters the most?”

“Yeah,” Shane said, voice breaking. “Yeah. That’s exactly what matters most.”

He shuffled even closer, if that was possible in the cramped bed, tucking himself under Ilya’s chin. Ilya’s arm tightened around him immediately, instinctive, protective.

“Okay,” Shane said, after a while. “We’ll... we’ll talk about sex when your head isn’t held together with stitches, okay?”

“Okay,” Ilya agreed easily. “But for now, we can practice.”

Shane stiffened. “Practice what?”

“Cuddling,” Ilya said, like it was obvious. “I am very out of shape. Need to build up endurance.”

Shane let out a watery laugh that shook his whole body. “You’re impossible.”

“Still here, though,” Ilya murmured into his hair. “Still yours. If you want me.”

Shane closed his eyes, let the tears spill and didn’t bother to wipe them away.

He tightened his arms around Ilya, careful of IV lines and bruises, and whispered, hoarse and fierce:

“I never stopped.”

For a long time they just breathed.

The ward hummed quietly around them—distant footsteps, a muffled monitor alarm somewhere down the hall, the soft *beep...beep...beep* of Ilya’s heart and the drip of the IV. Shane’s tears had slowed to the occasional shivery inhale, damp patch on Ilya’s hospital gown spreading cool against his chest. Ilya’s hand kept moving in his hair, slow and clumsy and stubborn, like stopping would mean admitting any of this was real.

After a while, Ilya said, very softly, “Shane?”

“Yeah?” Shane’s voice was rough from crying and exhaustion.

“Can I... tell you something weird?” Ilya’s fingers stilled, then resumed. “Like, very weird. You cannot laugh.”

Shane sniffed, pulled back just enough to look at him. “Have we met? I have literally seen you hold a meeting with stray cats at 3 AM in the cottage, my bar for ‘weird’ is gone.”

“Not that kind of weird,” Ilya said. His mouth tugged, but he didn’t quite smile. “Serious weird.”

Shane sobered immediately. “Okay. Yeah. Tell me.”

Ilya swallowed. Up this close, Shane could see his throat work around it, the way his gaze flickered away to the ceiling for a second like he was bracing himself.

“When I was... gone,” he said quietly. “Before I woke up. I saw my mama.”

Shane’s breath caught. “You... dreamed about her?”

“Not dream.” Ilya shook his head, slow against the pillow. “Or... maybe it was dream, I don’t know. But it was not like normal dream. Was... very clear.” His brows drew together, searching for the words. “Felt real. Like I could touch her.”

Shane’s chest squeezed. “What... what happened?”

Ilya’s eyes went distant, focused on something far away Shane couldn’t see.

“First it was just... dark,” he said. “Not scary dark. Just... nothing. No sounds. No pain. I was very tired.” His fingers tightened briefly in Shane’s shirt. “I thought, okay. This is it. This is... over.”

Shane’s stomach lurched. “Illy...”

“Is okay,” Ilya murmured, thumb stroking his side. “Listen. Let me finish.”

Shane shut his mouth and nodded.

“Then there was... light.” Ilya huffed a tiny, disbelieving laugh. “Very cliché, I know. Maybe my brain watched too many movies. But there was. Like sun through curtains in the morning. Warm.” He blinked slowly. “And she was there.”

He said it so simply that Shane’s eyes burned.

“She looked...” Ilya frowned, concentrating. “Not like when she died. Not... thin and grey. She looked like...” His face softened, just for a second. “Like when I was small. Hair still long. Laugh lines. She was wearing this stupid blue dress she loved. With little white flowers.” He glanced at Shane. “You would have hated it.”

Shane let out a wet laugh, hand reflexively tightening on Ilya's hip. "Probably."

"She said my name," Ilya went on, voice softer now. "Not 'Rozanov.' Not 'Ilya.' Just... 'Ilyusha.'" The nickname came out like something fragile he'd been keeping under his tongue for years. "Like when I fell asleep on couch and she carried me to bed."

Shane had to bite his lip hard to stop another sob.

"She smiled," Ilya said. "And she said, '*Nu, synok, ty ustal.*' You are tired. Come with me. Rest." His jaw worked. "And I was. I was so tired, Shane. Everything hurt. Brain, body, heart. All of it. For second I thought... maybe I go. Maybe I am done."

Shane's fingers curled in the thin blanket, knuckles white. "But you didn't."

"*Nyet.*" Ilya's eyes flicked back to him, sharp even through the haze of meds. "I told her no."

His voice had that stubborn edge Shane knew too well - the one he used when he lined up for a shootout or squared off at a faceoff like he could kill the puck with will alone.

"What did you say?" Shane whispered.

"I said... I love you, Mama." His throat tightened around the word, the *Mama* rusty but sure. "I love you so much. But I cannot go with you. Not yet." His eyes shone, unspilled tears catching infrared in the dim light. "I told her I have team. I have stupid strays. I have... life. I told her I have you."

Shane's breath stuttered. "Ilya."

"I said..." He swallowed. "This is where it got weird. I said, 'I love you. But I love him more.'"

Silence punched the air out of the room.

Shane actually felt dizzy for a second, like the floor had dropped. "You..." His voice cracked. "You told your mom that?"

"*Da.*" Ilya didn't flinch. "I told her I love my Hollander more than anything. That I cannot leave you. That you still need me." His hand came up, thumb brushing another tear off Shane's cheek like he could stop them falling. "I told her I wanted to marry you. I haven't done this yet."

Shane made a broken noise, somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "We're... we're not even together right now, Illy, we..."

"Do not care." Ilya cut him off gently. "I promised. Does not matter if we were fighting. Does not matter if break up was... smart or not." His mouth twisted briefly around the word. "Promise is promise. I was not finished with you."

Shane stared at him, throat working, tears spilling hot and constant now.

“And she... she did not get mad,” Ilya said, voice almost wondering. “I thought maybe she would. You know? Russian mama. I tell her I love some Canadian boy more than I love her, maybe she throws shoe.” A tiny smile ghosted across his lips. “But she just... smiled. That stupid little half smile. Like she always did when I said something too big.”

“What did she say?” Shane’s voice was barely audible.

“She said, ‘Good.’” Ilya’s eyes went unfocused again, looking through Shane and the wall and the whole hospital. “‘Good, Ilyusha. I raised you to love like this.’” He blinked quickly. “She said she was proud. That she was glad somebody finally loved me right back. That she waited a long time for that.”

Shane’s hand flew up to his mouth. He bit down on his knuckles to stop himself from sobbing out loud and waking his parents in the chairs.

“She said...” His voice wobbled. “She said she would always be there when I needed. But that right now, I belong with you. That my place is with you. On our stupid couch with ugly blanket. At your parents’ table. In bed, snoring in your ear.” His fingers slid up into Shane’s hair again, carding through it slowly. “She told me to go home.”

Shane’s tears were full-on, silent and shaking now.

“So I did,” Ilya finished simply. “I told her I love her one more time. I kissed her hand. And then... I woke up. With tube in my throat and your ugly crying face above me.”

Shane let out a helpless, hysterical noise. “You’re such an asshole,” he choked, burying his face back in Ilya’s chest. “You... you saw your mom in some... some afterlife limbo thing and told her you love me more, what is *wrong* with you...”

“Many things,” Ilya agreed. “But not this.” He curled around Shane as much as the bed and tubes allowed, chin resting in his hair. “I chose you. You understand? I had... I don’t know, chance, I guess. To stop being tired. To stop hurting. And I still chose to come back to you.”

Shane clutched at him, fingers digging into the thin fabric of the gown.

“That is why I cannot be mad they cut open my head,” Ilya went on, quieter. “Why I cannot be scared every time I close my eyes.” He breathed in slowly, let it out. “Because I know I already decided. I want to be here. Even when it hurts. Even when we are stupid and break each other a little. I still want *this*.”

“This being what?” Shane muttered wetly. “Hospital beds and panic attacks and cat cults?”

“This being *you*,” Ilya said simply. “Your stupid face. Your stupid heart. The way you look at me like I am... like I am worth all this.” His voice went softer, almost shy. “I told my mama I love you more. That is... cannot take that back now.” He huffed. “Is very Russian guilt. She will definitely haunt me if I break your heart again.”

Shane laughed through his tears, shoulders shaking. “She should,” he whispered. “She absolutely should.”

There was a long, quiet moment.

Shane pulled back again, eyes wrecked, nose red, cheeks blotchy. Ilya lifted his hand, the one without the IV, and cupped his face, thumb sweeping under one eye.

“You know what the worst part is?” Shane said hoarsely. “The absolute worst part?”

“What?”

“I believe you.” He let out a breath that was almost a sob. “I believe you saw her. I believe she told you that. I believe you chose to come back because of me and it makes me feel like, I don’t know, like my heart is too big for my chest and I want to throw up and also like I just got hit by the truck.”

Ilya’s mouth tugged up at the corner. “Is very dramatic.”

“You *died*, Ilya,” Shane said, voice breaking. “You died and saw your mom and told her you love me more. I think I’m allowed to be dramatic.”

“Okay,” Ilya conceded. “I let you be dramatic. For once.”

Shane let out a shaky breath, pressing their foreheads together, noses almost bumping. Up close, he could see the tiny lines of the sutures disappearing into Ilya’s hairline, the faint yellow bruise on his temple.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“For what?” Ilya’s brows furrowed slightly.

“For choosing me,” Shane said. “For... for coming back. For telling me.” His voice went even smaller. “For loving me more.”

Ilya’s eyes softened in a way that had nothing to do with pain meds.

“*Ya tebya lyublyu*,” he murmured. “More than hockey. More than cats. More than Russian swear words. Maybe even more than vodka.”

Shane let out a wet laugh that turned into another half-sob. “That’s... that’s huge.”

“Is very huge.” Ilya’s thumb stroked his cheek one more time, then he tugged Shane back down, tucking him under his chin again. “Now sleep. I already did my big emotional monologue. Very exhausting. Miracle brains need rest.”

Shane huffed against his chest. “Bossy.”

“Yes.” Ilya’s hand resumed its slow path through his hair. “Is why you love me.”

Shane closed his eyes, letting the sound of Ilya’s heartbeat and the quiet, stubborn warmth of his body wrap around him.

There would be hard conversations later. About doctors and breakups and what the hell they were now. About futures and mistakes and how to do this without breaking each other all over again. But right now, in a dim hospital room that suddenly felt a lot less cold, Shane held the man who had literally chosen him over whatever waited on the other side and thought:

Okay. Whatever comes next. We start here.

Ilya's fingers stroked his hair, slow and sure.

"Still here," he murmured, half-asleep. "Not going anywhere. Not leaving you. Not yet."

Shane clung tighter.

"Good," he whispered.

And for the first time in days, weeks, months, he actually believed it.

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