a nothing play

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Summary

On good days it was a low pressure system, dull and manageable.

On bad days it rolled in without notice, sharp enough to steal his breath for a second, but never long enough to justify leaving the ice. He felt the creeping increase like the buzz of static in the air before a thunderstorm, the way you could detect rain in the air long before it fell.

There was a quiet pride in that, even if he didn't like to admit it.

//
5 times Shane hides a chronic flare-up, and the 1 time he lets himself get looked after.

Notes

me?? writing in canon universe?? more likely than you think

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

i.

Hockey reaches you early that there is pain that people want to hear about, and pain they don't.

There are injuries you're allowed to talk about, the dramatic ones. Broken bones, blood, the ones that leave scars or bruises you can point to and say, I got this one here, on this night, in front of witnesses. Those get you sympathy, headlines, and a timeline on recovery.

Then there's everything else.

Aches that do not have a clean origin, where you cannot remember a clear time where it onset but there was no defining injury. The pain that creeps up on you in your twenties and never quite leave. The stiffness that greets you like a debt collector, making you pay off the debt of straints and hits you've surmised on the ice. The twinges that don't stop you from skating, but make everything a little more sensitive than they should be.

It is those kinds of pains that must be learnt to live around.

And Shane has been living around his back for years. Taking too many checks, too many compressions on his spine, the potential for hairline fractures or disc sprains. A common injury for hockey players; nothing to gawk at. It had started as the kind of pain everyone complains about after a particularly vicious check — one you hope one of your teammates replies to with a sock to the jaw for your honour.

Then it became something he noticed during warmups, a tightness that didn't shake loose until the second period.

Then, somewhere after those things, it never fully went away at all.

Shane can't tell you when it crossed the line from temporary to permanent, only that one day he couldn't remember the last time the pain hadn't been there.

Shane learned quickly what happened when you tried to give that kind of pain a name. Trainers would poke and press and ask him to rate it on a scale that never seemed built for something so diffuse. Physios would frown at his descriptions — nothing they haven't heard before — and tell him to keep an eye on it when scans and screens come back clear. Back pain was background noise in the league. Everyone had it. Everyone played through it. No one else *complained.*

So neither did Shane.

He adjusted, he always does, without any kind of pity party or announcement. He just gets up and gets on with it. Shortens his stride by a fraction, learns which angles of contact sent a flare straight up his spine and which ones stay tolerable. He lingered a little longer after games, waiting for the trainers to finish taping ankles and wrapping wrists so he could claim a corner of the room and lie flat on the cold floor. Sometimes he would lie on a tennis ball, and that hurt, but the round dig of it into the tense locked muscle of his back was the closest he could get to relief.

He stopped tying his skates the way he always had and started bracing his core like he'd been taught in some half-forgotten offseason seminar. None of it was dramatic enough to feel like a concession. It was just *maintenance.* Like his body was a machine with a faulty cog that had no replacement, with no other option than to grin and bear it.

What unsettled him wasn't the pain itself so much as how ordinary it became. Pain, once constant, stopped feeling like a warning and started feeling like the weather: something you checked in the morning and planned around.

On good days it was a low pressure system, dull and manageable.

On bad days it rolled in without notice, sharp enough to steal his breath for a second, but never long enough to justify leaving the ice. He felt the creeping increase like the buzz of static in the air before a thunderstorm, the way you could detect rain in the air long before it fell.

There was a quiet pride in that, even if he didn't like to admit it. Hockey rewarded endurance far more reliably than it rewarded honesty. You could be hurting as long as you were productive. You could be compromised as long as you were invisible about it. Shane was good at being invisible. He wasn't loud: he didn't grunt or grimace or limp. He shook off questions when they were thrown at him.

And yet, sometimes, usually late at night when the adrenaline wore off and the apartment went still, he would lie awake and think about how strange it was to be this young and already negotiating with his own body. Not bargaining for greatness or longevity. All he wanted was neutrality, for his body to be able to support his mind and career.

He longed for a version of himself that did not constantly register discomfort as the baseline state of being. He wondered, without letting the thought finish, how many years a person could live like this before it stopped feeling temporary at all.

Morning skates are supposed to help. They've got a game against the Admirals later, and the arena is quiet aside from the scrape of blades and the hollow echo of pucks being sent skittering over the ice.

There's no crowd to perform for here, no adrenaline to help dampen things. Shane steps out onto the ice and immediately feels it, his back stiff and knotted, like someone had twisted a rope tight along his spine and had forgotten to unwind it. He rolls his shoulders, tilts his neck from side to side in an attempt to alleviate some of the pressure. The ache doesn't budge.

As he skates his first lap, he keeps his strides short and controlled. No sharp turns or sudden stops. He bends carefully at the waist, testing the range and the pull of muscles along his lower back. Not sharp enough to panic or loudly insistent enough to justify saying something.

Just constant, or moreso constant than it had been before.

The assistant trainers are at the far end of the rink, setting up cones, laughing about something. Shane considers going over, asking for some heat or some antiinflammatory numbing gel or something, but the thought fizzles out before it reaches his feet.

Instead he joins the drill, stickhandling through cones, and keeping his face neutral as his spine slowly tighten and tightens.

When he skids and turns too hard, there's a brief, white-hot spike, but it has receded as fast as it came, like a tide drawing back.

Fine, Shane thinks, his jaw locking. Just tight.

Across the ice he catches Ilya's eye, his gaze sharp even this early. Shane gives him a lazy shrug and a half-smile, as if to say, just a mistake, don't mind me. Don't worry.

Don't worry. That's what Shane needs from him the most. He knows Ilya has a lot on his plate right now. Rumours are already circulating about draft picks and the media frenzy that accompanies it, and their schedule is stacked with games for the next few weeks, and Shane is still only just settling into the team, trying to find his footing after a complete upheaval once he left the Metros.

Sue him, he doesn't want to give Ilya more than what's already on his plate. And trust is an easy thing to use when you've spent years earning it. The thought makes guilt burn. Shane skates away. His back will loosen up, will return to an ache rather than a throb, rather than a burn. It always does.

ii.

Although they always book out two separate hotel rooms for Ilya and Shane, they always end up sharing one anyway. Which is good, until he cannot sleep. And Ilya has a tendency to twitch awake at any tiny movement, meaning Shane has to just lie here and pretend so he doesn't disturb his husband. Thankfully, he's quite good at pretending.

The only problem: the mattress is too soft.

It dips beneath Shane's weight in a way that feels fine for about five minutes and then slowly, relentlessly wrong. There is no angle where his spine feels supported, no position that doesn't send a quiet, grinding protest up his back. He lies on his side, then his back, then his other

side, cataloguing discomfort like a familiar inventory. Every movement costs him something, a sharp reminder negotiated in shallow breaths.

The only solution: get up.

But beside him, Ilya's breathing is slow and even, one arm flung loosely across his pillow, hair mussed in a way that makes Shane feel unreasonably tender and vaguely resentful at the same time. Ilya can sleep anywhere. Planes. Buses. Hotel beds that feel like they were designed by committee and tested by no one with a spine. And he can't wake Ilya. That, above all else, feels unacceptable.

Shane stares at the ceiling, tracing the faint greenish shadows cast by the blinking smoke detector. The pain hums beneath everything, low and insistent. Not sharp enough to demand intervention, but just persistent enough to not be ignored.

He shifts again, carefully. The mattress sighs. His lower back flares, bright and angry, and he bites down on a sound, jaw tightening as he waits it out.

Minutes stretch. Or hours. Time feels indistinct at this hour, flattened by fatigue and discomfort. Every moment between the ticking clock on the wall could be a second, but also could be an hour. His body feels heavy and wired all at once, exhausted but unable to surrender to the sleep he so desperately craves.

He matches his breath to Ilya's, but it doesn't help. He wonders, not for the first time, how many nights he has spent like this without really noticing the pattern. How often he's chalked it up to travel, to bad beds, to being kept up with adrenaline and replays in his head after games, when the truth has been pressing against him the whole time, and has made itself persistently known in his spine.

He shifts his weight a fraction to the right. Pain flares in protest, hot and immediate. Shane sucks in a breath through his teeth and goes still again, heart hammering. He waits for it to ebb, counting his breaths like he's been taught.

The mattress betrays him by sagging further. "Fuck," he whispers, barely sound at all.

He tries his side next, curling carefully, knees drawn just enough to relieve the pressure. The mattress dips under his hip, pulling his spine sideways. That's worse. Much worse. His leg tingles, pins-and-needles prickling down to his calf.

He rolls back onto his spine, jaw clenched, sweat prickling along his hairline despite the cool hotel air. He does not remember the last time he slept through the night without negotiating first.

Ilya shifts beside him, a low sound leaving his throat as he turns slightly toward Shane. His arm drapes over Shane's waist by accident, heavy and warm. It's usually a comfort, usually enough to have Shane tucking against him and burrowing his face in Ilya's neck.

But tonight he freezes. The contact sends a spike of awareness through him, a risk of pain. The wrong movement could make everything worse. He lies perfectly still, breath shallow,

waiting to see if Ilya will wake.

He doesn't. His breathing evens out again, slow and deep.

The weight of Ilya's arm pins Shane in place, keeps him from adjusting in the small, constant ways his body is asking for. He stares at the ceiling, eyes burning, feeling hopelessness rise inside him. He cannot do this all night.

Carefully — *so, so carefully* — he slides Ilya's arm off him, easing it back onto the mattress. Ilya murmurs something unintelligible but doesn't wake. Shane holds his breath until the sound fades, then shifts again, slow as tectonic plates.

It doesn't help. He presses a fist into the small of his back, seeking pressure, leverage, anything that might quiet the ache. It buys him a few seconds of relief before the pain adapts, slipping around the pressure.

He turns his head and looks at Ilya. Even asleep, his face is open, unguarded. His brow is smooth. His mouth slightly parted. There is something unfair about how peaceful he looks, about how easily his body seems to surrender to rest. Shane feels a sharp twist of envy, followed closely by guilt.

If he wakes him, Ilya will ask questions. He will sit up, rub sleep from his eyes, and ask what's wrong in that careful voice he uses when he's trying not to scare Shane off. He will offer solutions. Pillows. Ice. The floor. He will insist, gently but relentlessly, on helping.

He can't do that to Ilya. Shane swings his legs over the side of the bed, moving in painful increments, bracing a hand on the mattress as he sits. The change in position sends a sharp jolt through his spine and he has to pause, breathing through it, teeth clenched so tightly his jaw aches in sympathy.

The carpet is rough under his bare feet. He stands slowly, testing his weight, then pads quietly across the room. The chair by the window looks about as inviting as the mattress, which is to say: not at all. He considers the floor. Considers stretching. Considers the quiet humiliation of needing relief this badly at three in the morning.

Behind him, the bed creaks softly. "Shane?" The word is thick with sleep.

Shane stills, shoulders tensing. "Go back to sleep," he says softly and dares to look over his shoulder at him. "Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you."

Ilya sits up anyway, silhouette dark against the faint glow of the city outside. The duvet pools around him. He rubs an eye. "You are not in bed."

"Yeah," Shane says. He forces a shrug he can feel all the way down his spine. "Couldn't get comfortable."

"Why didn't you wake me?" he asks, not accusatory, just tired and earnest. The sound of him, sleepy and vulnerable, makes something rise up in Shane's throat. He opens his hand and Shane's body moves before he commands it to, crossing to clasp hold of Ilya's warm hand.

Shane looks down at the carpet. “Didn’t want to make it your problem.”

Ilya guides him to sit on the bed beside him. Shane goes pliantly and Ilya m exhales, slow and controlled, and lifts a hand to the back of Shane’s neck, thumb resting there and circling on the knobs of his spine. “You are literally sharing my bed,” he says. “It is already my problem.”

“I’m fine. I just need the toilet.”

Ilya grumbles and flops back down against the bed. Shane considers that enough of a dismissal to escape to the ensuite. He plucks the light on and the extractor fan starts whirring in the corner. Shane looks at himself, and his tired eyes stare back. He twists and hooks up the back of his shirt. It would help if there was any evidence of pain — deep bruising, or swelling, or redness. Anything that would justify the clinging ache that chases him, getting more and more persistent as the months go on. But there’s nothing. His back muscles, the knobs of his spine, then the stretch of his hip bone. Nothing.

When he sneaks back into bed, he has a feeling Ilya is still awake, even if he pretends not to be. Shane wedges a small pillow under his hip and bends his leg up. It helps marginally, then he vows that he will not move for the rest of the night.

iii.

The ice beneath his skates give a terrible *hiss* as Shane pivots, the blades scraping with a puff of mist, spinning to chase the puck up across centre ice and back towards the opposition’s goal. His spine, a column of simmering agony, protests the twist with a white-hot spark, but it fades out again, thankfully.

Shane catches up to the puck, manages to steal it out from beneath Bood, who exclaims his irritation. Shane spins back to his own goal and jets towards it. He grits his teeth, pushing through, his focus entirely on the black disc.

Which is why he doesn’t register Hayes coming in from the blind side until it is too late.

It is, by all accounts, a standard, clean check in a drill they’ve run a thousand times. Haye’s shoulder connects solidly with Shane’s, a thump of padded force meant to separate man from puck. But for Shane, it’s a detonation.

The hot knot in his lower back erupts. Pain, vicious and electric, shoots up his spine and radiates down his leg like a lightning bolt. His vision spots. A grunt punches from his lungs, harsh and involuntary.

Somehow, he stays upright. The puck is gone, but he is still on his skates. He’s gotta count his luck when he can get it, he supposes. Hayes, pulling back, gives him a good-natured tap

on the shin guard with his stick. “Gotcha that time, Cap!”

The casual touch, the normalcy of it, shatters Shane’s tenuous control. The pain is like a wild animal caught in a trap, and it needs to bite.

“Get off me!” Shane snarled, his voice a whip-crack across the ice. He shoved Hayes’s stick away with a violent slash of his own. The harsh *crack* reverberates across the ice, and everyone goes still. “What the hell was that? Are you trying to run a drill or just take a free shot?”

The silence is instantaneous and profound. The drill dies, skates skid to a stop. Every helmeted head turns towards them.

Hayes’ face, visible under his cage, is a picture of stunned confusion, but is quickly starting to go pink. “Whoa, Hollander. Easy. It was just a check.”

“It was clumsy and late,” Shane shoots back, his heart hammering against his ribs, each beat a throbbing echo in his back. He knows he’s wrong, that he’s being unfair. He knows it’s a standard play. But the need to deflect, to translate the pain into anger, is nearly overwhelming. “Keep your head up and play the drill right, or take a seat.”

Then Ilya is in between them.

His pale blue eyes are sharp, focused, scanning Shane’s face and posture like a coach and a lover rolled into one. Shane hates him for it, a little. He doesn’t need Ilya to baby him. And then the acidity of that thought makes him feel even worse.

“Shane,” he says, voice steady but low, carrying both command and concern. “Breathe. Focus.”

Shane swallows, fighting down the flare of pain and the edge of his own temper. He can feel every eye in the rink on him, every player waiting for the storm to either explode or fizzle. But Ilya doesn’t flinch. He doesn’t argue or chastise or ask what had happened: they had all scene it for themselves. He just stands there, anchored, giving Shane a tether.

Hayes shifts awkwardly behind him. “Uh… I didn’t—”

“Not now,” Ilya interrupts, voice still calm but sharp enough that Hayes’ jaw snaps shut with a clack. His hand presses briefly against Shane’s upper back, like a question. Shane feels the electricity in his spine dull for the first time since the hit. His breathing slows, just enough that he can think instead of lashing. Breaths in through his nose, out through his mouth.

Shane forces a nod, gritting his teeth against the lingering ache. “Thanks,” he mutters, voice rough, more to himself than to anyone else

He turns, ignoring the wide-eyed stares of his teammates, the concerned frown already forming on Ilya’s face — he cannot bear it. The familiar burn of shame floods him, hotter than the pain in his spine. He’s never spoken to a teammate like that, never lost his cool over nothing.

He mutters something about getting some air, skates a stiff, tight circle back to the boards, and slides off. He doesn't make it as far as the exit.

He makes it as far as the tunnel before his body makes the decision for him.

The adrenaline drains too fast, like someone pulled a plug. The pain rushes back in to fill the space it leaves, heavy and nauseating. Shane's hand finds the concrete wall without him quite remembering when he reached for it. He leans there, helmet still on, breath coming shallow, willing the tremor out of his leg before anyone can see it.

Footsteps echo behind him. "Ilya," Shane says without turning..

"Locker room," Ilya replies, without the space for a choice.

Shane wants to argue. Wants to say he just needs a minute, that he's fine, that this is nothing. The words line up automatically, reflexive as muscle memory. But when he tries to straighten, his back spasms in protest, sharp enough to steal whatever fight he had left. He exhales through his teeth and lets Ilya steer him instead.

The locker room is quieter than usual, most of the team still on the ice. It smells like damp gear and disinfectant. Ilya shuts the door behind them with more care than the moment probably warrants, then turns and crosses his arms, leaning back against the opposite row of stalls. He waits.

The silence stretches.

"What was that?" he asks finally.

Shane drops onto the bench harder than he intends to. The jolt sends another flare through his spine and he hisses, shoulders tightening before he can stop himself. Ilya's eyes flick down, cataloguing the reaction with unsettling accuracy.

"Nothing," Shane says too quickly. "I overreacted."

"You don't," Ilya says. It lands flatly. He shifts against the lockers, and one of them hinges off the side and groans. Shane understands that locker very much. "Not like that."

Shane laughs once, brittle. "Guess there's a first time."

Ilya doesn't smile. He steps closer, his boots quiet on the rubber matting. "You snapped at Hayes in the middle of a routine drill," he says. "Then you left the ice early. And you're standing like someone just stabbed you in the back."

"I'm fine," Shane repeats, louder now, as if volume might make it true. He reaches for his helmet strap with hands that don't quite cooperate. "Just tweaked something. It happens."

Ilya catches his wrist mid-motion, just hard enough to stop him. Shane freezes, irritation flaring hot and defensive, but Ilya's grip loosens immediately, respectful even in the interruption. "Don't," Ilya says. "Don't do that thing where you pretend everything is okay. Not with me."

That lands closer to bone than Shane expects. He looks up, and meets Ilya's gaze at last. There is no anger there. Just concern, sharpened by familiarity, by care and love. The kind that sees past the performance. His eyes are these deep pools of care, of worry. Hot guilt washes up against Shane's insides.

"It was clean hit," Ilya continues. "You know that. Hayes knows that. So if you are yelling, is not about him."

Shane swallows. His jaw tightens, a reflexive clamp against words he has spent years not saying. "I don't need a lecture."

"I'm not giving one." Ilya crouches slightly, bringing them eye to eye. "I'm asking what is wrong."

He fixes his gaze on the floor between his skates, on the scuffed rubber matting darkened by years of melted ice and sweat. Anywhere but Ilya's face. Anywhere but those eyes that are too patient, too knowing.

"There's nothing wrong," he says. The words come out flatter than he intends, drained of heat and bite alike. "I lost my temper. That's it."

Ilya doesn't move. He stays crouched, balanced on the balls of his feet, close enough that Shane can feel his presence like a second body heat. "You do not lose your temper," he says again, quietly. "That is part of why they made you captain."

Shane exhales slowly through his nose. His back throbs in time with his pulse, a dull, grinding ache that makes sitting still an exercise in restraint. He shifts once, twice, then stills, jaw clenched. "I'm fine," he says again, softer this time, almost weary. "I just need a minute."

Ilya studies him for a long moment. His expression changes subtly, not softening, not hardening, but recalibrating. He straightens slightly, giving Shane a fraction more space, though he does not step away. "How long," he asks.

Shane's fingers curl into the fabric of his gloves. He can feel the answer trying to force its way up his throat, demanding language, demanding acknowledgement. He swallows it back down. "It doesn't matter," he says. "It's handled."

Ilya's jaw tightens. "By who."

"By me."

"That is not an answer."

"It's the only one you're getting," Shane snaps, then immediately winces—not from pain this time, but from the edge in his own voice. He drags a hand over his face, frustration bleeding through his composure. "Ilya, please. Don't turn this into something. We all get aches sometimes. It's, like, a two at best on the pain scale."

Silence stretches again, thicker now, laying on Shane's tongue like dust.

Ilya stands and backs off, giving Shane room whether he wants it or not. When he speaks again, his voice is steady, but something guarded has slipped into it. “You are asking me to ignore what I am seeing.”

“I’m asking you to trust me,” Shane says. He looks up then, finally, meeting Ilya’s eyes. There is something almost pleading in his expression, buried beneath stubborn resolve. “I can handle it.”

Ilya searches his face, reading every line of tension, every micro-flinch Shane can’t quite suppress. The concern doesn’t leave his eyes, but neither does the understanding. He knows this wall. He’s run into it before. “All right,” Ilya says at last.

The word lands with unexpected weight. Shane blinks. “All right?”

“Yes.” Ilya exhales, slow and controlled. “I will not push you. Not today.”

Relief and disappointment twist together in Shane’s chest, inseparable.

“But,” Ilya continues, holding up a hand before Shane can speak, “this does not disappear.” Shane’s lips press together. He nods once, sharply. “You sit out the rest of practice,” Ilya says. “You cool down. You stretch. You do not go back on the ice angry like that.”

“Ilya—”

“That is not a request,” Ilya says, but there is no heat in it now. “That is me letting this go as far as I can.” He hesitates, then steps forward again, just enough to rest a hand briefly on Shane’s shoulder. “When you are ready,” Ilya adds quietly, “you tell me. Not the trainers. Not the coaches. Me.”

Shane nods again, throat tight. “Okay.”

Ilya straightens, as if satisfied that he has contained this whole thing, and turns toward the door. Shane watches him go. Sighs, and starts taking off his skates.

iv.

Ilya is peppering his jaw and neck with kisses, mouthing Russian pet names into Shane’s freckles like they can rewrite to form the words. Shane arches into it: he loves when Ilya gets like this, all needy and affectionate, like Shane is an oasis and Ilya cannot get enough of him.

Shane strokes his hands through Ilya’s hair and pulls him up for a kiss. Their tongues sink against one another, used to this routine now, this comfort. Shane secures his other arm around Ilya’s neck to keep him close. In response, Ilya grinds down against Shane’s groin,

and Shane makes a breathy sound into the kiss, bucking his hips needily against Ilya's. Hot sparks come alight down there.

Ilya braces both his arms beside Shane's head and gets properly on top of him, his weight a warm press against Shane as he straddles him, his knees pushing Shane's legs apart. Ilya continues to kiss him, hot and wanton, before he moves his ministrations southward.

Making a humming noise of affirmation, Shane rolls his hips up to meet Ilya — and then his vision whites out.

Pain lances up his spine. A hot, sharp jolt that makes him gasp, not from pleasure, but in surprised pain. Ilya notices immediately. His head snaps up, his hands steadying from where he'd been palming at the tent in Shane's joggers.

He assesses Shane's face, reads the pain, and pulls back, swiping a hand across his kiss-swollen lips. "Where does it hurt?" he asks, then, "did I hurt you?"

"Hurt? I'm not hurt." Shane tries to keep his voice light and amicable, but it's difficult to breathe. The chronic heat has flared to an electrical burn, burrowing into his lower back and spreading creeping fingers there. "Aren't you gonna keep going?"

There's a torn look on Ilya's face now, creased in concentration. It's the same assessing look that his face pulls — that adorable eyebrow scrunch — when he's replaying games and studying technique and planning new game strategies. Shane doesn't like when that scrutiny is levelled at him. It feels as though Ilya's pale, piercing eyes could peel back every layer of Shane and find what is lying in his centre: a hot knot of pain that makes everything else a little difficult to focus on.

He doesn't want Ilya to stop. This is their first chance at being intimate with each other in quite a while. Despite being on the same team, their schedules clash frustratingly often. Sponsorships, video advertisements, plans and interviews and appointments. Times like these are maybe one or two nights a week, and Shane savours them. But this damned injury…

Ilya's fingers hover uncertainly over Shane's hips, his brow furrowed. "Do you want me to?" Ilya asks softly.

Shane forces a smile, though it's tight, teeth catching on his lower lip. "It's nothing. Just… my back. Feels weird, that's all." He tries to shift, to reposition himself so that the pressure isn't so sharp, but even the smallest movement sends a tremor of fire up his spine. He hates being this fragile in front of Ilya, hates the way Ilya's eyes instantly darken with concern. "I just need some sleep."

Ilya's still staring, discerning, and for a mortifying second Shane thinks he's going to press, but he doesn't. He just gives Shane's inner thigh one last, lingering touch before he crawls his way back up the bed and lays down beside Shane, close enough that their heads share the same pillow.

He leans up, capturing Ilya's lips again, slower this time, savoring the press of them, the familiar tang of Ilya's mouth. His other hand drifts to Ilya's jaw, cradling it. Ilya hums against

him, soft, approving, and presses a kiss along the line of Shane's shoulder, careful, deliberate.

They continue, but Shane can sense that Ilya's touch has shifted. Everything is now cautious, choreographed a moment before he presses, like every touch is a negotiation. Shane hates it. This is what he'd been worried about — Ilya treating him like a fragile thing, like fine china.

He knows Ilya wants to help, and part of him wants to be honest about it, but what can Ilya do? Painkillers don't work, physio doesn't work. That's the whole point of chronic-pain. It's long lasting. Shane just has to learn to deal with it, like he's dealt with everything else.

The only thing Ilya can do right now is kiss him until Shane sees stars and the flare dies down.

He's *fine.* Everything is *fine.*

v.

The roar of the playoff crowd is like a living thing, a wall of sound that vibrates in Shane's chest as he takes warm-up laps and warms up his wrists fiddling with a puck.

Each stride sends a dull, teeth-rattling ache through his lower back, a constant companion now. A new, more alarming symptom had joined it when Shane woke up this morning: a creeping numbness down his right leg, a dead zone that makes his edges feel unreliable.

Worse, he's been avoiding Ilya. He got up before him, before Ilya had shaken off the dregs of sleep, so Ilya did not see the stiff way he limped to the shower. The warm water helped. Shane popped some ibuprofen and found another heat pad to stick there, but it's only lessened the pain incrementally.

"Shane." Ilya falls in beside him, his smooth, powerful strokes a contrast to Shane's stiff, careful motion. "Your weight is off. You are pushing only with left. What is it?"

Shane keeps his eyes forward, watching the puck carom off the boards before catching it again. "It's nothing. We don't play in San Jose often. The ice feels different."

"It is not the ice," Ilya says, his voice low. "It is you. You are grey."

"I'm fine," Shane bites out, the lie as automatic as breathing. He takes a half-hearted shot on net, the motion sending a fresh spike of fire down his numb leg. It scores, though. It always scores. "Save the analysis for the other team."

Ilya clicks his tongue, displeased. Shane catches him having a word with Coach Weibe. When Shane isn't put in for the start of the first period, he knows Ilya had something to do with it. He wants to scream.

The game starts up without him. He watches from the bench, a knot of dread and jealousy tightening in his gut as his line starts. Every shift is a lifetime. The bench is hard and merciless against his spine, another variable to consider as he twitches in the box. Staying still helps, he manages to find an angle that stretches the tight muscles around his spine in a way that feels slightly relieving more than pressurising.

Finally, a whistle marks his sub-in. “Hollander! You’re up!”

Shane jerks his head up. Ilya’s being pulled out from centre. Shane’s in.

Feeling marginally hopeful, Shane vaults over the boards. He feels Ilya’s eyes on him.

The impact of the ice sends another jolt up his spine. For a few shifts, he can manage. The adrenaline is a potent, if temporary, mask. He becomes a ghost of his usual self: he’s careful to keep himself positionally sound, his technique razor sharp, but without his trademark explosive speed. He avoids contact where he can, angling players off instead of engaging.

Then, in the defensive zone, it happens.

A scrambling play, a missed assignment where the puck rebounds off the goal and is loose under their skates.

Shane skates toward the puck, eyes locked on it, every muscle primed. He tries to stay light, careful, to avoid the hits that have made his back flare before. But from the corner of his eye, he sees it: an opponent closing in, reckless, eyes locked on Shane rather than the puck.

Before he can react, a shoulder hits him hard from the side, a foul check by all definitions, not sanctioned by the whistle. Shane’s feet slide out from under him, and the world tilts. Pain, white-hot and unrelenting, tears up his lower back and slices down his right leg like molten iron. His knees buckle, and he hits the ice hard, the boards rattling to his left as he’s slammed against them.

The outraged roar of the crowd fades to a low, oppressive thrum in his ears as he curls against the ice, trying to breathe through the pain. He can’t move. The puck slides away, forgotten. He’s alone in the storm of his own body.

For a long, terrible moment, he doesn’t move. He can’t. He’s adrift in a nauseating void, consciousness a thin thread. He hears the distant, muffled blast of the whistle, the concerned shouts filtering through the static.

Get up. The thought is a feeble spark. *Get up or they’ll know.*

Somehow, his arms push. He gets a knee under him, his right leg a useless, heavy log. The world swims, tilting violently. Using his stick as a crutch, he hauls himself upright, every movement a Herculean effort of will. His face, behind the cage, is the colour of chalk, sweat dripping from his chin like tears.

He shouldn’t play through this. He knows better than to play through this.

Coach Wiebe is halfway over the boards. The referees are up, checking if he's alright, checking that he hasn't hurt anything. It was a legal hit, if a messy one. Shane waves him off with a violent, shaky gesture. "I'm good!" he yells, his voice a ragged stranger's. "I'm good! Just got the wind knocked out!"

He takes a trembling, experimental glide towards the bench. His right skate scrapes the ice, barely lifting. Ilya, on the bench, watches him with dark, knowing eyes that seem to see right through the performance. Shane collapses onto the bench, sucking in air that doesn't seem to reach his lungs. His back is a constellation of white-hot stars, his leg a foreign, leaden weight.

"Shane—" Coach Wiebe started.

"I'm fine," Shane says, cutting him off, staring straight ahead at the game he can no longer properly play. "Put me back in next shift." The words are a defiant whisper against the screaming truth of his body, a promise he's no longer sure he can physically keep.

Hot coals. That's the best way that Shane can describe his pain right now.

They don't sub him back in, but that doesn't help the pain at all.

Afterwards, the rest of the team corner Shane in the locker room.

"Are you alright, Hollander?" asks Dykstra over the sound of tape ripping, gear thudding to the floor, the team whooping and hollering at their win. "You looked like you were gonna throw up when you got checked."

"Vertigo." Shane looks down at his feet, where he's been untangling his laces. He rolls his ankle in an experimental circle and all he gets is a dull spike of pins and needles.

"That hit was dirty," Haas adds, "they missed the call."

The pain flares again, sharp enough to blur the edges of the room. His right leg goes numb from the knee down. He swallows hard. "Assholes," mutters Shane, just for something to say, and Haas claps him on the back with firm approval

"We whooped them for you, Hollander, don't worry."

How many minutes was Shane in play today? Thirteen, at most. Terrible numbers. He stares at the locker, feeling the season still unfolding around him, without him, and wonders, not for the first time, how much of himself he's been holding together by sheer refusal alone.

Chapter 2: plus one

It happens on a nothing play. That's the part that will haunt Shane later on. The cost was not equal to the prize — or the subsequent lack thereof.

They're training, like Shane has trained almost every single day since he was eight years old. There shouldn't be any difference today. They're running passes in a neutral zone turnover, and the puck squirts loose and he pushes off to chase it like he's done tens or hundreds of thousands of times before.

These things happen in quick succession: his hips turn, his spine twists, his weight shifts —

and something *locks.*

Not a sharp pain. This is more like a dead electric shock, like his body has hit a wall his brain did not know was there. He's left reeling in the aftermath, disoriented, like his nerves have just been burnt away.

He reaches out, continuing the momentum, and the tip of his stick grazes the puck, just barely. And his right leg doesn't come with him.

From the corner of his eye, before the black dots crowd in, he can tell that Ilya is already launching towards him like a torpedo, vaulting around the goal, because Shane doesn't fall like he's been hit, or checked, or tripped. He folds in on himself, his body shrinking like that could minimise the pain too.

Knees buckling, his upper body pitches forward. His hands slam into the ice to keep his face from smashing against itn — and that pain barely registers. The world feeling like its tilted off its axis. He tries to straighten up, tries to shake off the strain, but can't. He tries again, and the sound he makes is high-pitched and keening. A sound he doesn't ever remember making before, not even when he broke his collarbone and the world slanted. This is a confused sound.

The ice is cool against his cheek. Shane doesn't remember crumpling fully against it. The rest of his body is failing him too, it seems.

A sweltering silence presses in against Shane's ears. Medical staff, their trainers, are on the ice immediately. Someone's talking to him, hand on his shoulder, face by his face. Shane tries to look. He thinks he might see Ilya's crumpled face, pitched white with alarm, before he's pulled off. Shane stares down at the ice between his gloves like they've betrayed him.

"Shane," someone is saying, "Shane, look at me. *Look at me."*

Ilya. Shane knows he's worried. This is probably giving him horrible memories of when Shane took that nasty hit whilst he was still at Montreal, the one that left him concussed and banged up in the hospital for a week afterwards. This isn't as bad as that.

He tries to say he's sorry, that he's fine, but his tongue is like fabric felt and his cheeks are sandpaper.

Hands are on him, voices layering over each other. He knew they were talking to him, but the words are like garbled radio signals, full of meaning he can't decode. Look at me, Shane. He knows that voice, the usually velvety pitch strung tight. Ilya. It is strained, stripped of its usual cool confidence. Shane tries to turn his head, but his neck is a rusted hinge. In his blurred periphery, he sees a flash of Ilya's face, pale and rigid with an alarm so deep it looked like fear. Then, a red jacket blocked the view.

"Hollander? Can you straighten your legs?" Coach Wiebe. The usual boom of his voice is gone, replaced by a forced, careful calm that is infinitely worse. Shane tries. He sends the command down, a desperate, silent scream from his brain to the dead zone of his leg.

Nothing.

A hollow, staticky feedback. He exhales, a sharp burst of air that's mostly panic, and gives the tiniest shake of his head. The movement feels like a seismic confession.

I'm sorry, he tries to say to Ilya, to all of them, his tongue thick and useless in his mouth. It's a nothing play. Ilya is crouched beside him now, but they won't risk trying to flip Shane over. Even so, he feels Ilya rip off his glove and take his hand, waxy skin against Ilya's sweat-slick palm.

I just twisted wrong.

Then he hears the word *board.*

No. The denial is a spark in the void. This is a practice. You don't get stretchered off in practice. You get helped up, you skate it off, you lie through your teeth in the quiet of the physio's room. That's what he's done — that's what has always worked for him.

"No," he managed to croak. "Just… help me up. I slipped."

"You didn't slip." Ilya's voice is closer now, low and raw and sounding betrayed. The truth of it is a final, weighty blanket, smothering the last of his fight. He didn't slip. His body had just seemed to have given way, given *up*. *"Shane."*

Then they are rolling him. A coordinated, careful motion that feels like a violation. His body is a thing to be managed, a logistics problem. When he's shifted onto his back, his spine gives a persistent rip of pain and Shane makes a mangled noise through his teeth.

Ilya's hand tightens on his. He snarls something in Russian, something Shane vaguely recognises, a warning of some kind.

He feels the firm plastic of the backboard against his spine, the cold seeping through his sweaty gear. Straps come over his chest, his hips, his thighs. They secure his head with pads, the world narrowing further to a tunnel of arena lights and concerned faces peering down. Ilya's taken off his helmet. His sweaty curls frame his face like a cloud of spilled golden ink.

As they lift the board, the world tilts, sickeningly off kilter. The ice falls away from below him, and he's staring at the lofty, black cavernous ceiling of the arena, at the meaningless banners hanging from the rafters.

He feels a tether in the form of Ilya's presence at his side, unshakable, fierce, and utterly unwilling to let him fall alone.

Then the mouth of the tunnel swallows him, the bright lights of the practice rink fading into the concrete dimness of the corridor. The last thing he sees from the world of skates and ice was not the worried face of the physio beside him, but the ghost-image burns onto his vision: his own stick, lying abandoned. And three feet away, the puck. Just sitting there.

A nothing play.

The gurney rattles beneath him as they wheel him through sliding doors and down fluorescent corridors, ceiling tiles blurring into one long, unbroken strip of light. His body feels wrong, heavy in places, alarmingly absent in others. The pain has receded into something dull and ominous, like it's holding its breath.

He is acutely aware of how still he's supposed to be. Every bump in the floor sends a jolt through his spine, not sharp exactly, but deep, reverberating. He focuses on keeping his breathing even, on not tensing up, on not making this worse than it already is.

Ilya is there, by his gurney as the doctors take him from the paramedics and they move deeper into the hospital. Shane can't see him at first, not without turning his head, which he's been very firmly instructed not to do. But he hears him, his skates long gone, sneakers scuffing against the hospital floor as he keeps pace beside the gurney.

"Mr Rozanov—" someone begins.

"I am husband. I am emergency contact," snaps Ilya. "I will stay."

He's talking to someone, English clipped and precise in the way it only gets when he's stressed.

"Yes, but he did not fall from height," Ilya is saying. "He twisted. There was no contact at the time of collapse. No one checked him."

A pause like he's waiting for a reply that Shane can't hear.

"I understand what you are saying," Ilya says, and Shane knows immediately that this is not true. "But when you say fracture, you mean — what fracture?"

Shane closes his eyes.

The word lands heavy even secondhand. Fracture. It echoes unpleasantly in the hollow space behind his ribs. He tries to assess himself again, cataloguing sensation the way the physios

taught him. He can feel his left leg. His right leg is… there, but dulled, like it's been wrapped in thick cloth. He wiggles his toes experimentally. There's a lag, but they move.

Okay. Okay.

The gurney slows. Someone stops at his head, another at his side. A nurse leans into his field of vision, her face calm and practiced. "Shane, we're going to transfer you onto a hospital bed now. Try not to help, all right?"

He wants to argue, wants to say he can help, that he can sit up and spare them the effort, but the words stick somewhere between his brain and his mouth. He nods instead, as much as the brace allows.

As they move him, his spine protests, a low, grinding flare that makes his breath hitch. He makes a sound despite himself, short and sharp.

Immediately: "Hey. Hey." Ilya's voice, closer now. "Be careful with him."

"Mr Rozanov…"

A hand finds his, fingers lacing tight, warm and solid. Shane grips back harder than he means to.

"I'm here," Ilya says, unnecessarily, like Shane might have missed that part.

The pain eases back down to its new, unnerving baseline. A doctor appears at the foot of the bed, flipping through something on a tablet. He speaks quickly, efficiently, the words stacking up faster than Shane can comfortably follow.

"We're going to order an MRI of the lumbar spine, possibly thoracic as well.. We want to rule out acute disc herniation with nerve root compromise, occult fracture, or any spinal cord involvement."

Shane blinks. Beside him, Ilya goes very still, his fingers tightening where they're interlaced with Shane's. "Sorry," Ilya says after a beat, his accent thick in his panic. "Can you— Can you say again? Slowly."

The doctor obliges, patient but brisk, repeating himself with slightly different phrasing. The words don't land any softer the second time. Shane watches Ilya's face as he listens, sees the way his jaw tightens, the way his brow creases deeper with every unfamiliar term.

"Disc hern-i-ation," Ilya repeats carefully, testing the phrase. "This is… disc is out of place?"

"Essentially, yes," the doctor says. "And if it's pressing on a nerve, that would explain the leg symptoms."

"And fracture?" Ilya asks, too quickly, his voice low and panicked. "You think his back is broken?" The question is raw.

Shane's chest tightens. He hadn't let himself go there yet. *Broken back.* The words feel obscene, catastrophic, like something that happens to other people in cautionary tales. Broken backs happen when people get paralysed, when people stop being able to move their legs.

The doctor shakes his head. "We don't know that. This is precautionary. The MRI will tell us more."

"But you are worried," Ilya presses.

"We are being thorough," the doctor corrects gently.

Ilya nods, but his grip on Shane's hand tightens, knuckles whitening.

They start moving again, the bed rolling toward imaging. The corridor narrows, colder here, quieter. Shane's awareness keeps snagging on the absence of pain where it should be screaming, on the way his right leg feels like it belongs to someone else.

"Ilya," he says quietly.

Ilya leans in immediately. "Yes."

"I can feel my foot," Shane says. It feels important to say it out loud. "It's slow, but it's there."

Ilya swallows. His smile is quick and brittle, like it's being held together by force of will. But it's tinged with relief, at what Shane is saying, or just the mere fact that he's speaking. "Good," he says. "That is very good."

They stop outside the MRI suite. A technician starts explaining the process, noise, duration, the importance of staying still. Shane nods along, absorbing only half of it. His attention is on Ilya, who is now arguing softly with the tech about whether he can stay in the room.

"You cannot," the tech says, apologetic but firm. "The magnet—"

"I know what magnet is," Ilya snaps, then visibly reins himself in. "I am sorry. I just — he should not be alone."

Shane squeezes his hand. "I'll be fine," he says, automatically. Then, because it feels truer somehow, he adds, "I'll see you after."

Ilya looks at him for a long moment. Whatever he sees there makes his expression soften, fear and resolve settling into something steadier. "I will be," he says. "I'm not going anywhere."

They slide Shane onto the MRI table. The surface is hard, unforgiving, his spine acutely aware of every millimeter of contact. As they position him, strap him in, fit the headphones over his ears, the world narrows to the clinicalness of the procedure and the chill of new sensation.

The last thing he sees before the machine claims his field of vision is Ilya standing just beyond the threshold, through the glass, hands fisted at his sides, watching like if he looks away, something irreversible might happen.

Ilya perches on the edge of the chair beside the bed, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. He rubs his hands together once, stops, then clasps them tightly, as if afraid they might betray him if left alone.

“They said one hour,” he says. “For results.”

“Mm,” Shane murmurs.

“I did not understand some of what they said earlier,” Ilya admits suddenly. His voice is quieter now, stripped of its earlier sharpness. “The words. They use many words to say very little.”

Shane turns his head as much as he’s allowed, studying Ilya’s profile. The tension there is unmistakable, pulled taut like a wire wound too tight. A jaw in his tendon bulges.

“They do that on purpose,” Shane says. “Makes them seem professional.”

He hesitates, then looks at Shane fully. “When they said fracture,” he continues, carefully, like he’s approaching thin ice, “I thought… broken back.”

Shane’s chest tightens. “Yeah,” he says. “Me too.”

Ilya’s jaw clenches. He drags a hand through his hair, curls springing back messily. “I have seen this before,” he says, more to himself than to Shane. “Not you. But—” He stops. Swallows. “I do not like not knowing.”

Shane shifts, but it’s a mistake. Pain rips up his back, sharp enough that his breath stutters. He bites it back, but Ilya sees anyway. “Shit,” Ilya says, already on his feet. “Does it hurt more? Do you need—”

“I’m okay,” Shane says quickly, hating how thin it sounds. “Just moved wrong.”

Ilya sits back down, slower this time, like he’s afraid of startling him. “You are very bad at being still,” he says, attempting lightness. It doesn’t quite land.

“Occupational hazard.”

Another stretch of quiet. “What if,” Ilya starts, then stops. Shane waits. “What if this is… bad,” Ilya finishes, finally. “What if they tell you no skating. Long time. Or—” He exhales sharply. “What if this changes things.”

Shane closes his eyes for a moment. The fear is there, coiled tight in his gut, but hearing it said out loud drains some of its power. “Then we deal with it,” he says. “Same as anything else.”

Ilya looks unconvinced. “You say that like is simple.”

“It’s not,” Shane says. “But it’s the only option.”

The doctor steps in, tablet in hand. Her expression is neutral, practiced, neither alarmed nor relieved, which somehow makes Shane’s pulse spike harder. “All right,” the doctor says. “We’ve had a look at the images.”

Shane’s hand finds Ilya’s forearm without thinking, fingers curling tight.

“What we’re seeing,” the doctor continues, “is a disc herniation at L4-L5 with nerve root compression on the right side. There’s also evidence of chronic degeneration, which is nothing unusual for an elite athlete with your mileage, but it does mean this wasn’t a one-off.”

Shane absorbs the words slowly.

“No fracture,” the doctor adds, as if she can read Ilya’s mind, who is a bundle of coiled nerves beside Shane. “No spinal cord injury.”

The relief is immediate and dizzying. Shane hadn’t realized how tightly he’d been bracing until the tension releases all at once, leaving him shaky. Ilya lets out a breath that sounds suspiciously like a laugh, then presses his forehead briefly against the edge of the bed, eyes closed.

“Okay,” Shane says, voice hoarse. “Okay.”

“This is serious,” the doctor continues. “But it’s manageable; we’re not talking surgery at this point. We’re talking rest, imaging follow-up, physical therapy, and a structured return-to-play plan. You’ll need time.”

“How much?” Shane asks, even if the question is painful.

“We’ll know more after the swelling settles,” the doctor says. “But think weeks before skating. Months before full contact.”

Months.

Before Shane can process that properly, Ilya straightens, nodding, and Shane can see him already shifting into problem-solving mode. “And pain,” he says. “This pain — this nerve — can be helped? The pain?”

“Yes,” the doctor says. “We’ll give you some pain medication for now, whilst the flare up is severe, Mr Hollander, but we’ll be looking at long-term treatment plans to help manage it. Just focus on being comfortable for now,” the doctor continues with a reassuring smile. “And

then we will start a prognosis plan. I will assign you a physiotherapist who will help you plan a course of action."

After he leaves, the curtain falling closed behind him, the room feels different. Not lighter, exactly but slightly less dire. Shane stares at the ceiling, chest rising and falling a little easier now.

"So," he says. "Not broken."

Ilya huffs a quiet laugh. "Not broken," he agrees. Then, more seriously, "But also not nothing."

"Yeah," Shane says.

Ilya reaches out, resting his hand over Shane's, thumb warm and steady against his skin. "We do this properly," he says. It is not a suggestion. Shane turns his head, meets his eyes. "You will not lie."

The fear is still there, but muffled, wrapped in warmth. "Okay," he says.

Ilya looks away. "I should be so angry at you," he mutters. Shane stares at the white hospital sheets. "But also, angry at myself. For letting you tell me it is fine."

"I was afraid," Ilya says at last, quieter now. "When you went down. I thought—" He stops, jaw tightening. He does not finish the sentence.

Shane's fingers curl reflexively around Ilya's thumb. "I'm here."

"I know," Ilya says, but his voice wavers despite himself. He squeezes back, grounding them both. "But I need you to be here later too. Not just now."

Shane nods. It costs him something, but he does it anyway. "I'll tell you," he says. "When it hurts. When it's bad. Even when it's… boring bad."

That earns a faint, crooked smile. "Especially then."

Ilya straightens slightly, composure settling back into place. "We will learn the rules," he says. "Your rules. What helps. What does not. And when you stop."

Shane lets out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "You sound like a physio."

"I am terrifyingly competent," Ilya deadpans.

A weak laugh escapes Shane, surprising them both. It pulls painfully at his back, but he doesn't regret it. And this time, the word feels like the beginning of something rather than the end.

End Notes

this was written a lot from my own experience. last year i had a herniated disc in my thoracic spine (ouch) and the pain consumed me for over a month. it was terrible, couldn't breathe or stand up or lie down without it hurting. continued my sport, lol stupid, but at a weights session i did a shoulder press and literally blacked out.

so yeah, pain is your body telling you something is wrong. listen to it. many athletes struggle with pain killer addictions due to chronic and untreatable injury. thankfully i got some great physio and lots of rest to recover, but for a lot of people it isn't that easy.

anyway, love you, the plus one will be out in the next few days once i finish editing it...

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