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by heydoeydoey

Summary

Today something is different. Ilya feels off balance at morning skate. He wobbles, but he doesn't fall, because Shane is there, his hands on Ilya's waist, holding fistfuls of his jersey, his legs spread wide to brace Ilya on the ice.

Ilya almost breaks the rules. Almost lies. But Shane just looks at him, worried even though he doesn't want to say so, and Ilya can't. "Something is wrong," he says.

"Okay," Shane nods. "Let's figure it out."

Notes

As the tags say, I'm not a doctor so the medical stuff in here comes from Google research. Mostly the Cleveland Clinic website. Also...if medical stuff is not your thing, know that it's pretty mild in this fic. No catastrophic head injuries here, and any of the injuries mentioned are all off-screen, as it were.

Title from Mark Owen's "End of Everything".

Ilya's day starts the way it always does now: get out of bed, stretch his back on the foam roller he now travels with, brutally hot shower to attempt to further relax his muscles, breakfast, two acetaminophen and two ibuprofen, his antidepressant, morning skate, and then an hour in the treatment room attempting to undo the damage morning skate did. More acetaminophen. More ibuprofen. Nothing stronger, because he doesn't want to, even if he probably should.

Next to him, always, is Shane. Not saying anything, but there. His hand reaching out to help Ilya up after he foam rollers, sometimes in the shower with him, sometimes just in the bathroom washing his face and brushing his teeth, digging the pill organizer out of Ilya's toiletry kit when they're on the road because otherwise Ilya would just dump everything out on the bathroom counter and that drives Shane insane, obviously skating next to him on the ice, and then usually in the treatment room. Sometimes he's on the table next to Ilya, rehabbing his hip. Other times he just waits patiently while the physios work on Ilya.

He has opinions, Ilya is sure of that. Shane has an opinion about everything. Really, he usually has three or four that he needs to talk through at length before he settles on a final verdict. But he's keeping his mouth shut (or, more likely, talking to Yuna instead of Ilya) because they'd agreed, last season, when Ilya's knee was giving him trouble. They have seen each other through bad injuries and minor ones, and it would be very easy to make each other crazy with worry. To change how they play. To change how they live.

"We need rules," Ilya had said, last year, after an argument that started before morning skate, carried on through the afternoon, and ended with both of them in the penalty box after a fight on the ice, absolutely instigated by Shane after Ilya was tripped and landed hard on his bad knee. "We are getting old, for hockey."

"Middle-aged," Shane had insisted. "Some guys play into their forties."

"Goalies," Ilya had scoffed. "Not guys who play as hard as we do. Your hip hurts. My knee hurts. Sometimes my back. But you can't decide for me what is too much, and I can't decide for you."

"We're married," Shane had said, stubbornly.

"Yes. So we will be honest with each other. And we will trust each other. But we can't live trying to control each other, or I do not think we will be able to stay married."

Shane had looked so stricken at that that Ilya wanted to take it back immediately, but he didn't. The challenge with being married, in the same sport, on the same team, with *making history* is that they don't have much of a roadmap. They are breaking new ground every day of their lives, it feels like, and sometimes Ilya wishes there was someone who could say "this is how to do this".

But there isn't. So it has to be Ilya and Shane who say.

"Okay," Shane had agreed. "I understand."

And the rules have worked. They are honest with each other when they are in pain. They seek treatment. They follow doctors' orders (mostly). There are no *why don't you*s or *you shouldn't*s or *I think*s, even though Ilya knows they have both thought them.

Why don't you stop?

You shouldn't play tonight.

I think you're just hurting yourself more.

(They fight about other things, of course. But normal things, like the way the dregs from Shane's smoothies never wash out of the blender cups in the dishwasher, or the way Ilya leaves a trail of half-empty glasses throughout the house, never finishing one beverage before starting another one.)

Today, however, something is different. Ilya feels off balance at morning skate, not from pain but from the lack of it. Numbness radiates down his right leg, past his knee. He leans hard on the other leg to compensate, but that's no good, because his left knee is the one that's fucked. He wobbles, but he doesn't fall, because Shane is there, his hands on Ilya's waist, holding fistfuls of his jersey, his legs spread wide to brace Ilya on the ice.

Ilya almost breaks the rules. Almost lies. But Shane just looks at him, worried even though he doesn't want to say so, and Ilya can't. "Something is wrong," he says.

"Okay," Shane nods. "Let's figure it out."

They'd started with Terry, of course, whose face had been grim when Ilya explained about the numbness. It had been quick work, referring Ilya to an orthopedic surgeon, who—because Ilya is Ilya—was able to make room for him to come in that afternoon. She's pretty, Dr. Bala, perhaps ten years older than them. The diplomas hanging on the wall in her office say she attended University of Toronto and McGill. She also has a shiny award on a shelf, although it's too far away for Ilya to read what it is for. Probably not hockey.

She asks him questions about past injuries that he's pretty sure are all listed out in the files Terry sent to her. He's been lucky in that regard, especially because he's never been one to shy away from the physicality of the game. Only two concussions, one during his second season in Boston and one during his last, none since he came to Ottawa. His ribs, in 2017. A few sprains over the years. And his fucking knee, which is on borrowed time. He's going to need a knee replacement eventually.

Until this morning, he figured whatever has been going on with his back is just wear and tear, hockey and age. The kind of thing players in their thirties just…deal with. Play through. Until they can't anymore.

"I'd like to do a CT." Dr. Bala, says. "The numbness you're experiencing could be caused by a lot of things—anything from a pinched nerve to a neurological issue. The CT will give us some more information and help us rule some things out. We might decide we want an MRI too, but we'll start with the CT."

At least the CT is fast. Ilya hates being laid out in the MRI tube, listening to it clunk. Dr. Bala promises to call him the next day to talk about the results, and Shane drives them home, drumming his thumb on the steering wheel the whole time, the way he does when he's nervous.

"Just say what you are thinking," Ilya says.

Shane takes a deep breath in and releases it slowly. "It's against the rules."

"Say it anyway."

"What if you can't play anymore?" It comes out of Shane's mouth quiet and uncertain. Ilya looks over at Shane, staring determinedly forward at the road, hands at ten and two on the steering wheel. He sighs, and reaches over to curl his hand around the back of Shane's neck.

"Then I can't play anymore. And you will buy me a speedboat for the cottage as a retirement present."

"That's a fucking terrible idea," Shane says immediately. "You're dangerous enough already on a jetski."

"Boat is a good idea," Ilya insists. "Better for kids, when we have them. And maybe one of them will want to be a water skier, you don't know."

Shane's face does the soft, fond thing it always does when Ilya talks about their future kids. "I'm still not buying you a speedboat."

Terry and Dr. Bala are in agreement that Ilya isn't medically cleared to be on the ice, so he spends morning skate in Harris' office, playing with Chiron and generally making a nuisance of himself. Harris has gotten pretty good at tuning him out when he needs to.

"When do you find out?" Harris asks, half-shutting his computer screen the way he does when he wants to take a break.

"The CT results?" Ilya confirms, and Harris nods. "Sometime today. Doctor will call."

Except Dr. Bala won't give him the results over the phone when she does call, a couple hours later, once he and Shane are back home and Shane is down in the basement gym, doing yoga.

"Can you come in at three?" she asks, and Ilya glances at the clock. It's quarter to two.

"Yes," he says. "This doesn't seem like good news."

"It's complicated," Dr. Bala says. "Better to discuss in person."

Ilya supposes he's at least grateful she's not sending him for an MRI right now. He hangs up, and trudges down the basement stairs. Shane is in child's pose, stretching out his hips. He lifts his head when Ilya's feet draw even with his face.

“Hi, baby.” He’s smiling up at Ilya, but his face falls as takes in whatever expression is on Ilya’s. “What’s wrong?”

“Dr. Bala wants me to come back in. She won’t give me the CT results over the phone.”

“Oh,” Shane says softly.

“She says it’s complicated.”

Shane gets to his feet. “Come here.”

Ilya’s face looks bad, then, clearly. He steps into Shane’s open arms, lets Shane hold him close and say soft things in his ear, some in Russian, some in English.

“Do you want to leave a little early?” Shane offers. “Stop for food on the way?”

Ilya squints at him a little suspiciously. They don’t have enough time to sit down in any of Shane’s preferred restaurants. “Shane Hollander, are you offering to take me to McDonald’s?”

“I mean, we probably only have time for a drive-thru.”

Ilya puts his hand on Shane’s forehead. “Do you have fever? Hit your head? Been replaced with an alien?”

“Shut up, do you want a disgusting burger or not?”

“I want,” Ilya says, grinning.

“We’re taking your car. I don’t want mine to smell like grease.”

“Fine,” Ilya agrees happily. “You drive, I will be passenger princess and eat a Big Mac, nuggets, and a large fry.” He considers for a moment. “And a milkshake.”

Shane snorts. “Of course you will.”

Sitting in the waiting room, Ilya slightly regrets the milkshake. Or at least it’s easier to blame that for the churning in his stomach, rather than nerves. He does not like the sound of a *complicated* diagnosis. All of his previous injuries have been straightforward.

The receptionist calls Ilya’s name, and a head or two in the waiting room jerks up in surprised recognition but they’re on their feet with Shane’s hand on Ilya’s back guiding him through the waiting room before anyone can try to approach. It would be bad manners, especially in a doctor’s office, but Ilya has found over the years that manners are usually sorely lacking in the face of Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander. He might ask if there’s a side door they can leave from.

Dr. Bala sees them in her office again, rather than a treatment room, and somehow this feels like a bad sign too.

“I’ll cut right to the chase,” she says once they’re seated in chairs opposite her desk, an English idiom that Ilya remembers learning and knows what it means in context, but doesn’t understand the origins of. He supposes he doesn’t need to.

“Please,” he says, nodding.

Dr. Bala flips open an iPad and taps on the screen, pulling up his scans to show him. Ilya recognizes that those are vertebrae on the screen, but beyond that sees nothing else. He assumes they’re his, at least. “The good news,” Dr. Bala starts, “is that I am not recommending surgery right now.”

Next to him, Shane lets out a relieved breath.

“No?” Ilya asks.

Dr. Bala shakes her head. “You have a herniated disc, usually treatable with rest and PT. It’s putting pressure on this nerve,” she points with a stylus, “which is what’s causing the numbness you’ve been experiencing. If the numbness were more pronounced, or if you had more severe symptoms like prolonged weakness, incontinence issues, those sorts of things, we might be looking at surgery, but I would recommend starting with PT first.”

“Okay,” Ilya says. “But there is bad news, yes?”

“Yes. Do you see these lines here, here and here?” She points to three more spots on the image, dark lines which Ilya suspects ought to be the same greyish white as the rest of his bones. He nods. “At some point, you developed spondylolysis.”

“Spondylolysis,” Ilya repeats, his tongue tripping over the unfamiliar syllables.

“Essentially, they’re stress fractures in your vertebrae. Spondylolysis can often be asymptomatic, or easy to mistake for muscular pain, especially for athletes in contact sports.”

“Did it cause the disc problem?” Ilya asks, beginning to put together the bad news.

“Most likely.”

“Is the spondylolysis,” Shane starts, frowning at the word, annoyed he’s not pronouncing it correctly on his first try, probably, “curable? Treatable?”

“Treatable, yes. The rest and PT will help with that too.”

Ilya squints at her. She is being too kind, and it doesn’t quite feel like *cutting to the chase*. “But it will happen again,” Ilya says. “Pain. More disc issues. Maybe worse?”

“I think that’s probably true. There’s only so much more you would be able to strengthen your core to protect your spine, given your current level of physical fitness. And spondylolysis can lead to degenerative issues in the spine, as well as vertebral slipping.”

“Can he keep playing hockey?” Shane asks, a little shortly, and Ilya can’t help smiling. “Or not?”

“I’m recommending six months of PT, with no skating for the first three and no contact on the ice for the second three. After that, we can re-evaluate.”

Ilya blinks. It is January. Six months means Ilya’s season is over. The three months of no skating is enough to end Ilya’s season. He looks over at Shane, whose mouth is set in a grim line.

“Can you give us a minute?” he asks Shane in Russian. Shane looks over at him, eyes sad. “I want to ask her something that will embarrass you,” Ilya jokes, and Shane huffs out a reluctant little laugh.

“I’ll step out,” he says in English, for Dr. Bala’s benefit.

Ilya waits until the door closes behind Shane. “I have had pain for years. Two, probably, maybe three. Even with rest and PT…there will still be pain when I play?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Do you think I should stop?”

“If you’re asking whether I think it’s medically necessary…it’s too soon to say. I’ll have a better answer after you finish PT.” Ilya blows a raspberry and Dr. Bala laughs. “I know, it’s not a helpful answer.”

He agrees for her to send everything over to Terry and takes the card for the physical therapist she recommends, although he imagines Terry will have a referral too.

Shane is scrolling on his phone in the hallway but he slides it into his pocket when Ilya opens the door. “Home?” he asks.

“Home,” Ilya nods.

It’s a quiet evening. Shane makes dinner—his dad’s roast chicken recipe, crispy potatoes, green beans; actual *food*, not just calories to carry them through practice or a game—and Ilya does the dishes. They take Anya on her last walk of the night together, down to the end of their street and back, because it’s too cold to stay out much longer than that and Anya is clearly more interested in curling up in front of the fireplace.

“Movie?” Shane suggests. “You can pick.”

Ilya shakes his head. “I think we should talk.”

Shane blinks and looks away. Ilya has a sudden, strange pang of longing for the days when they didn’t know all of each other's tells. He doesn’t want to go back to those days, prefers everything about their life now, but it is hard to start the conversation knowing already that Shane is upset, that he will be disappointed.

Ilya sits on the couch and pats the spot next to him. Shane sits, and Ilya reaches, taking Shane’s left hand in both of his. Shane’s wearing the silicone ring he wears during the season,

a familiar drag against Ilya's palm.

"I think it's time, sweetheart. I can't play the rest of this season, and even if I heal well enough to play again…it's still going to hurt. And that's just my back. My knee isn't much better."

Shane nods, but then he's taking a shuddering breath in, and Ilya's own breath feels caught in his chest. Shane pulls his hand out of Ilya's to wrap his arms around him instead, letting Ilya rest his head on Shane's chest, Shane's heartbeat thumping in his ear.

"You could wait and see how PT goes," Shane says. "You don't have to decide now."

"I know," Ilya nods. "But…I would rather decide. I don't want to be one of those guys that's on LTIR for months at a time, comes off for a week or two, gets hurt again and ends up back on LTIR, while everybody is thinking 'why won't he just hang up his skates?'."

"You're Ilya Rozanov," Shane says fiercely, "You could play one game a season for the rest of your life and they should all bow down in gratitude for it."

Ilya laughs. "The rest of my life? Eighty years old, still trying to play hockey? No thank you, sweetheart. That sounds more like a Hollander move."

"I don't think I know what hockey is if you're not on the ice with me. Like, I just keep thinking…we played Pittsburgh last week and we're never going to play together again?"

Ilya feels tears start to sting his eyes. "Playing with you was the best part," he says. "Better than playing against you, better than beating you."

"Will you say that again so I can record it and post it on Instagram?" Shane says, and both of them laugh, a little wetly.

"This is just one thing ending. We have so much more we are going to do together, lyubimyy."

Shane kisses the crown of his head. "I know. It's just hard to imagine. I always thought we'd go out together, the same way we started."

"I always knew you'd play longer," Ilya says, honestly. "Hockey is not the same for us."

"No?"

Shane loves hockey because he loves how hard it makes him work. Being the best means something *because* of how hard it is. Ilya loves hockey because it comes to him so easily, like breathing. For a long time it was the only thing in his life that was that easy.

"Hockey was like…escape hatch away from my father. Away from my grief. There's nothing I need to escape anymore."

"Baby," Shane says, and then he's tipping Ilya's face up to kiss him, fierce and sweet. "I love you. I'm so proud of you. And I'm really going to miss being on the ice with you."

“I know,” Ilya says. “But instead I will sit with the other WAGs and wear your name.”

“Jesus,” Shane groans.

“No, Hollander. Obviously.” Ilya grins. “I will be the best WAG. Captain of the WAGs. Oh, I will make that my Instagram bio to announce my retirement.”

He starts to dig his phone out of his pocket and Shane laughs, grabbing his wrist. “Maybe wait until you tell Coach and the team and management?”

“Always so boring,” Ilya complains. “What if I want to hard launch retirement?”

“I think that’s actually called breach of contract,” Shane says, laughing. Ilya tips his face up to kiss the hinge of Shane’s jaw.

“Okay. I will wait.”

“Good. If you’re on LTIR and we win the cup again this year, our names get to go on it together one more time.”

“Oh, twice is not enough? So greedy, Hollander,” Ilya teases, but there’s something about it that takes some of the sting out of not playing with Shane anymore, of not *knowing* that the game against Pittsburgh was going to be the last one.

“Like you don’t want the hat trick too,” Shane scoffs.

“Yeah, okay,” Ilya agrees. “A hat trick is always better.”

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