

For Better, For Flu

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For Better, For Flu

by [nj_1996](#)

Summary

Winter 2019:

Shane's bye week lasts about twelve seconds before it turns into *fever-fuelled melodrama* and **1,187** unread messages ranging from "I'm dying" to "your backhand was trash." Ilya loses a game, hides in an airport alcove, and goes full worried boyfriend, praying to get to Shane as quickly as humanly possible, and counting the kilometres from Ottawa to Montreal while keeping it quiet from the team.

Then it's Nurse Ilya time: cool cloths, small sips, soft Russian endearments, and the clingiest naps known to man until the fever finally breaks and they know it's going to be okay.

Notes

My 3rd Hollanov fic, something entirely different! I gave you smut last time, now I just wanted the most teeth-rotting possible fluff.

Ahum Only partially based on my own experience with the flu last winter, and ever so slightly influenced by the tears flowing freely down my cheeks as I finally finished reading *The Long Game* last night.

Please enjoy, and do let me know your thoughts, or maybe even possible future stories! <3

Ilya wakes before his alarm. This is rude and insulting and probably proof that the universe enjoys watching him suffer. They lost last night, and he deserves at least seven uninterrupted hours of not thinking about hockey. Instead, his body decides that six is plenty, and his brain agrees, replaying the third period in high definition.

He groans softly and drags the blankets over his face. The hotel sheets smell like bleach. The air conditioner hums with the same soft rattle every road hotel in the league seems to share. Everything is beige and anonymous. Everything is slightly too warm.

And nothing smells like Shane.

There is no cologne in the air, no hoodie discarded on a chair, no soft snoring from the left side of the bed, no warm weight leaning into his space. Ilya has gotten used to that weight, used to the way Shane tucks himself in against him during the night like it is simply the most logical position for his body to be in.

The room feels larger and colder without him. He tells himself this is dramatic. Then he admits to himself that he likes dramatic. At least when it is Shane.

He reaches for his phone automatically. Shane always texts him something by now. Good morning. Something cute. Something ridiculous. A selfie with bed hair and the caption *look how tragic my life is without you*.

The screen lights up. Two messages.

Only two.

Shane:

Bye week officially starting

Shane:

Miss you already. Sleep well after practice. Call me later if you can.

Ilya stares. This is dangerously normal. This is how people in stable relationships talk. This is not how Shane Hollander talks. Shane Hollander treats messaging the way some people treat breathing. If Shane is quiet, it is usually because he is either asleep, crying over a dog video, having a minor meltdown about the state of the power play, or on the verge of a cold.

Ilya types back.

Ilya:

Miss you too. Will call before game.

He hesitates, then adds a tiny heart. He looks at it for a second. It looks back at him mockingly. He deletes it and locks his phone.

If he sends a heart from a team hotel, fate will choose that exact second to test him. There will be a fire drill or a sudden evacuation, someone will see it light up on the screen, and then

he will die instantly. Better to avoid provoking any cosmic events.

He forces himself out of bed and into the bland morning. Breakfast is eggs that taste like regret and fruit that tastes vaguely of disappointment. He eats mechanically, checks his phone twice, then three times, then eventually gives up and pockets it.

He tells himself Shane is fine. Shane is probably still asleep. Shane is probably sprawled across his enormous Montreal bed, mouth slightly open, arm thrown dramatically over his forehead. Shane is probably hugging a pillow and pretending it is Ilya.

The thought makes his chest feel tight with how much he wants to be there with him. He busies himself by drinking a bland hotel coffee that tastes like warm cardboard.

Practice is exhausting. The team is already tense because the losing streak is getting embarrassing, and every drill feels like it is designed specifically to irritate Ilya. His legs burn, his shoulders ache, and his patience evaporates like water on hot pavement.

Still no new messages.

Something is wrong. He knows it. He feels it the same way he feels a bad oncoming game. A wrongness in his chest. A tug on his nerves.

Shane always messages him. Even if it is just a complaining rant about weather. Montreal has that effect on him. The city changes temperature several times a day, and each time Shane personally texts Ilya to let him know he is offended by it.

After practice, Ilya showers quickly and hurries into a corner to check his phone again.

Still nothing.

Then a single notification pings.

Shane:

Think I'm gonna nap. Head hurts.

Ilya stares. A headache is normal. Shane gets them often when it rains, when it is sunny, when it is windy, or when hockey exists. Weather induced headaches are just part of being Shane Hollander.

He replies.

Ilya:

Rest. Will call after game.

He stares at the message for a second longer, as if willing extra information to appear. It does not.

He pockets his phone and joins the team for meetings. He tries to focus. The coach is outlining a new plan that will help them break the losing streak. Teammates mutter. Someone jokes about the power play. Ilya barely hears any of it.

His thoughts keep drifting to Montreal. Shane alone in that stupid apartment his interior designer furnished with mid century furniture and sentimental clutter he pretends not to care about. Shane curled in bed, frowning, one hand pressed to his forehead. Shane, who has the emotional resilience of a wet sponge when sick.

He wants to text again, but he stops himself. Shane deserves rest. Shane deserves peace. Shane deserves one quiet day where he is not overwhelmed by the weight of existing.

He sits on the bench, pulling his skates halfway on for pregame warm up.

His phone buzzes once.

He picks it up.

It buzzes again.

And again.

And again.

And then the buzzes come so rapidly that the notification banner cannot keep up. They begin stacking, overlapping, the screen flickering with the sheer volume of incoming messages.

Ilya freezes with a lace in his hand.

This is not normal.

He fumbles to unlock the phone. His mind races through every worst-case scenario he can imagine. Injury. Panic attack. Break in. Illness. Death.

But when he finally sees the preview screen, there is only one new message visible.

Shane:

Still tired. Going back to sleep. Talk later?

Ilya stares at the screen.

Talk later.

He slowly exhales. Relief spreads through him like hot cocoa on a freezing winter morning. He nods once, as if reassuring himself that this is fine and everything is under control. Shane is just tired. Shane is napping. Everything is normal.

He slides the phone carefully back into his pocket and finishes tying his skates. He tries very hard not to think about the number of notifications that had appeared all at once. Maybe Shane bumped his phone. Maybe he opened and closed the chat repeatedly. Maybe it glitched.

He heads to the team bus.

The city outside the window is grey and wet. February in Minnesota looks like a painting someone spilled water on. The skyline is blurry, the streets shiny with meltwater. Ilya watches it all pass by and tries not to think too hard.

Shane is probably still asleep. Shane is probably fine. People get headaches. People nap. People sometimes do not send forty-seven messages before lunch. People are not Shane Hollander.

He rests his head against the cold window and exhales, unable to shake the worry that engulfs him.

Somewhere across the distance, in a different country and a different city, in a bed far too big for one person, Shane Hollander curls deeper under his blankets. He feels hot and cold at the same time. He feels wrong in his skin. His throat aches. His head pounds. He is miserable in every dimension.

But Ilya does not know that yet.

Right now, he is simply enjoying the last peaceful stretch of his day. The last moment before Shane Hollander's flu descends into full theatrical catastrophe. The final hour in which Ilya believes the world is still calm.

He does not know that by the end of this night, his phone will contain almost a thousand messages, each one a cry for help or love or soup or divine intervention.

He settles back into the seat and closes his eyes. He thinks about the game. He thinks about goals. He thinks about winning.

He does not think about fevers or melodrama or boyfriends who, when sick, become the most dramatic human being alive.

Not yet.

For now, he sits quietly, unaware that the chaos has already begun.

Losing in Minnesota almost feels worse than losing anywhere else.

Maybe it is the way the arena is so loud for every home goal. Maybe it is the way the ice seems to tilt at the worst possible times. Maybe it is the way the home team score their empty netter and the crowd explodes and Ilya can feel his stomach sinking slowly to his skates.

Final buzzer. Another loss.

He skates off with his jaw clenched so tight it hurts. His shift numbers will look good. His personal stats will look fine. None of it matters. The only things anyone will remember are the goals they did not score and the ones they allowed.

The hallway to the visiting locker room is too bright and too short. He pulls his helmet off as he walks and runs a hand through damp hair. Sweat cools on his neck. Everything smells like ice and rubber and disappointment.

His phone is in his stall. He knows exactly where he left it, screen down on the top shelf inside his cubby, tucked behind his toiletries bag. The thought of it nags at him the entire way from the bench to the room.

He should shower first. He should listen to the coach first. He should pretend to be a responsible adult who prioritises his job.

Instead, the second he steps into the room and the doors close behind them, he heads straight for his stall.

The place buzzes with noise. Sticks clatter, Velcro rips, someone curses in a mix of English and French. The coach has not yet come in, which buys them all a few minutes of chaotic silence.

Ilya drops his gloves and helmet on the floor and reaches for his phone.

The screen lights up before he even picks it up. The preview banner shows a number he has never seen before.

1.187 unread messages.

His heart stops.

It is such a ridiculous number that for a moment his brain refuses to process it. He stares at the display, throat tight. His mind fills in every worst possibility at once.

Accident. Hospital. Family emergency. Break up. War.

He unlocks the phone with a hand that is suddenly slick with sweat.

The messages resolve into a familiar name at the top of the screen.

Shane Hollander

1.187 unread messages.

His heartbeat does not slow. It changes shape. The fear shifts from cold and sharp to something almost worse, a strange mix of relief and fresh panic.

Of course it is Shane.

Of course it is.

He taps the conversation and is greeted with a wall of blue text bubbles. They stack almost endlessly, scrolling up and up and up. The most recent one sits at the bottom.

Shane:

Ilya?

Another bubble pops in while he is looking at it.

Shane:

You alive? Game ended a bit ago...

Ilya swallows. He is aware of movement in his peripheral vision, teammates peeling off gear, someone laughing at a joke, someone else throwing tape in the direction of a bin. Nobody is close enough to see his screen. He keeps the phone angled carefully toward his body anyway.

He scrolls up, all the way up, to see where it started.

The first message of the avalanche is time stamped not long after his last one before warm up.

Shane:

Okay so, new development. I feel like shit.

Shane:

Like. Truly terrible.

Shane:

Everything hurts.

Shane:

Head pounding. Throat on fire. Why is my skin weird.

Shane:

I think I'm dying.

Shane:

Ilya I'm dying.

He scrolls further. The messages keep going.

Shane:

Life is so cruel.

Shane:

What did I ever do to deserve this.

Shane:

Do you remember when I fed that stray cat outside your building that one time. I am a good person.

Shane:

Is this punishment for yelling at that ref last week.

Shane:

I was right though.

A small laugh escapes him before he can stop it. He covers it quickly with a cough.

Across the room, one of his teammates glances over.

“You good, Rozanov?” The guy asks, half curious, half distracted.

“Fine.” Ilya says. His voice sounds normal, somehow. “Just, ah, message from home.”

The teammate nods and goes back to fighting his elbow pads.

Message from home. That is one way to put it.

He scrolls with his thumb, faster now. The narrative gets chaotic. Shane repeats himself, contradicts himself, and tells the same thought three different ways.

Shane:

Ilya I think this is it.

Shane:

The end has come.

Shane:

I cannot breathe.

Shane:

Okay I can breathe but it feels dramatic to say I cannot.

Shane:

Everything hurts. Even my hair hurts.

Shane:

I am too beautiful to die like this.

Ilya presses his lips together. His chest aches. He should be annoyed. He should be rolling his eyes. Instead, what he feels is a very specific and awful tenderness.

Shane, sick and alone in Montreal, sending him a flood of messages because he feels terrible and because he can.

There is a gap in the timestamps. Then more messages, this time with shorter intervals, like his thumbs could not keep up with his thoughts.

Shane:

I took my temperature. It's 38.4.

Shane:

Is that high.

Shane:

Google says it's a fever.

Shane:

Google also says I might die.

Shane:

Ilya I do not want to die in this apartment. It is not cute enough.

The corners of Ilya's mouth twitch helplessly.

He scrolls again. His stomach flips when he sees a line that is not about pain, but about him.

Shane:

I need you.

Shane:

Where are you.

Shane:

Ilya I feel so awful. I hate this. I hate being alone.

Shane:

It's so cold.

Shane:

And so hot.

Shane:

Why is my body doing this.

The messages continue into a new section, a fresh nightmare of live commentary. These ones are time stamped during the game.

Shane:

Okay I put the game on.

Shane:

You look very handsome even in Minnesota lighting.

Shane:

I am dying AND supporting you. This is love.

Ilya squints at that one for a second. Then he scrolls, bracing for impact.

It arrives barely three minutes of game clock later.

Shane:

You should've scored that backhand if you'd just been like one tenth of a second more patient. He was absolutely wide open.

Shane:

Cannot believe you missed that, Rozanov.

Shane:

Unbelievable.

Shane:

Even on my deathbed I see the ice better than you.

His cheeks flush. He wants to be offended. Instead, he feels something warm curl in his chest.

Of course, even flu ridden, even convinced he is dying, Shane is still watching his game. Still annoying him. Still analysing every missed chance.

Another line makes his breath catch.

Shane:

If this is the end, I love you.

He reads it twice. The words blur slightly at the edges.

His heart is too full of too many things at once. Worry, affection, exasperation, a fierce kind of love that makes his ribs feel too tight.

Someone drops onto the bench beside him. The thud of the body landing on wood jerks him back into the room.

“You see the replay of that last goal against?” Another teammate asks. “Whole line was a mess.”

“Yeah.” Ilya mutters. His thumb automatically locks the phone and he tucks it into his palm, screen hidden.

He can feel his features trying to arrange themselves into something neutral. He hopes they succeed.

“Coach wants everyone’s attention. He’s coming in.” Someone calls from near the door.

Ilya nods, stands, and slips his phone inside his bag for now. He will look again later. As soon as he can.

The coach storms in and begins talking. System issues, breakdowns, soft plays. The speech washes over Ilya in a wave of sound. His brain only catches fragments.

He is thinking of Shane again. Shane complaining about his skin feeling wrong. Shane worrying that his apartment is not good enough to die in. Shane typing *I need you* over and over into his phone because he does not know what else to do with the way his body hurts.

There is a tightness in Ilya's throat as he looks at the whiteboard. It has nothing to do with the plays drawn there.

When the coach finally leaves and the room begins to buzz again, he gets up slowly and heads for the showers. He moves on autopilot. Gear off. Shower. Soap. Rinse. Towel around his waist.

The second he is back at his stall, he reaches for his phone again.

Five more messages have arrived since he last checked.

Shane:

Ilya?

Shane:

Are you mad at me.

Shane:

it's because of the backhand comment, right?

Shane:

I didn't mean it. I mean I did but also I love you.

Shane:

I feel so awful.

Ilya lets out a breath that is almost a laugh and almost a groan. His hair drips onto his shoulders. He does not care.

He types back with quick, firm fingers.

Ilya:

Not mad. Just finished game and meetings.

He hesitates, then adds.

Ilya:

Stop saying you are dying. You are not dying, sweetheart.

The reply is almost immediate.

Shane:

You don't know that.

Shane:

I feel like I got hit by a truck. A truck made of knives. And sadness.

Ilya bites the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling in front of everyone.

He glances around. No one is paying attention to him. Everyone is in their own little storm of disappointment. Someone has music playing quietly from a speaker. The air smells like sweat and soap and something fried from the media room.

He types again.

Ilya:

Did you take anything? Medicine?

There is a pause this time. He can imagine Shane, struggling to sit up enough to reach for his phone.

Shane:

Yeah. I took some cold and flu thing.

Shane:

It tastes like poison but the box says it will help.

Shane:

Still feel like garbage though.

Shane:

Everything hurts.

Shane:

Except maybe my left elbow. That one is okay.

Ilya rubs a hand over his face. It does nothing to ease the ache in his chest.

He wants to be there. Right now. Not tomorrow, not when the team gets back to Canada. Now. He wants to be in that stupid Montreal apartment, sitting on the edge of Shane's bed, hand on his forehead, telling him he is not going to die and making him tea that he will complain about.

Instead, he is in a locker room in Minnesota, naked except for a towel, surrounded by teammates who think his entire world begins and ends with hockey.

One of them calls his name. "Rozanov. Team bus in ten."

"Okay." He replies without looking up.

He types quickly, fingers moving before he can second guess anything.

Ilya:

I am going to call you from hotel.

Ilya:

Stay alive until then. This is an order.

A typing bubble appears. Disappears. Appears again.

Shane:

Ilya.

Shane:

If I do die before then, remember that I love you and also that you really should have scored that backhand.

He snorts out a startled laugh. A couple of heads turn. He ducks his head and pretends it was a cough.

His heart feels too big for his chest.

He grabs his clothes and changes quickly, slipping his phone into his pocket where he can feel the reassuring weight of it. He is already planning how fast he can get back to his room, how quickly he can lock himself away and press the little video icon next to Shane's name.

As he follows the rest of the team out toward the bus, he curls his fingers loosely around the phone in his pocket.

Shane is sick and dramatic and very far away. Ilya cannot fix any of those facts right now.

But he can listen. He can talk. He can be the steady voice on the other side of the screen.

And tomorrow night, as soon as he is back in Canada, he can do something more.

For now, he walks through the tunnel, climbs onto the bus, and sits down, already counting the minutes until he can see Shane's face, even if it is pale and flushed and framed by the ugliest blankets in Montreal.

The moment the team bus doors fold open outside the hotel, Ilya is already halfway out of his seat. He mutters something that could pass as an excuse to his nearest teammate, grabs his bag, and shoves his hands into his pockets so he does not immediately pull out his phone and sprint like a maniac.

The cold Minnesota air hits him as soon as he steps outside. It should be refreshing. It should clear his head. It does nothing.

His chest is still too full.

His fingers itch for his phone.

He forces himself to walk into the lobby like a normal person. He nods politely at the hotel staff. He waits for the elevator, though his entire body is vibrating with the urge to start climbing the stairs three steps at a time. When he finally gets inside the lift, he presses the button for his floor and leans back against the wall.

The second the doors close, he lets out a long breath and pinches the bridge of his nose.

He pulls out his phone.

Shane:

The room is spinning.

Shane:

I took more medicine but it tastes like despair.

Shane:

When will you call me.

As if summoned, the typing bubble appears again the moment the texts will have shown as read.

Shane:

Ilya?

The elevator dings.

He steps out, walks down the hallway, and unlocks his door. The light inside is dim from the drawn curtains, and everything smells faintly of detergent. It is quiet, blessedly private.

He tosses his bag on the floor and immediately presses the video call icon.

It rings once.

Twice.

A muffled sound answers, something like rustling fabric and a weak complaint.

The screen lights up.

Shane appears, and Ilya's heart drops straight through the floor.

Shane looks miserable. God, he looks so miserable. His hair is sticking out in exhausted tufts, his eyes glassy and too bright with fever. He is wrapped in at least two blankets and wearing a hoodie that is definitely Ilya's. Only half his face is visible.

He still somehow manages to pout.

"Ilya." The word comes out as a pitiful whine.

"Hi, sweetheart." Ilya's voice softens instantly. He cannot help it. "You look terrible."

Shane frowns weakly. "Thank you. Very comforting."

"You look beautiful," Ilya corrects. "And terrible. Both things can exist."

Shane presses his face deeper into the blankets. Only his nose and the terrible misery in his eyes remain visible. "I think I am dying."

“You said that. You are not dying.” Ilya says gently.

Shane lets out a small, pathetic sound. “You do not know that.”

“I do. I am very knowledgeable.” He adjusts his grip on the phone and walks towards the bed to sit down. The mattress creaks beneath him. “Show me your face properly.”

“No.” Shane mumbles.

“Shane.”

A beat of silence. Then a reluctant shift of blankets.

Shane pokes his entire face out, cheeks flushed an alarming pink, lips dry, expression doomed.

Ilya’s heart cracks cleanly down the middle.

“Sunshine.” He murmurs. “You have a fever.”

“Yes, I know.” Shane says, offended. “This is why I’m dying.”

“You are not dying.” Ilya tries for a stern tone. It comes out far too fond.

Shane’s eyes fill slightly, the kind of watery sheen that signals either fever tears or genuine emotion. Possibly both. “Everything hurts.”

“I know.” Ilya’s chest aches. “I wish I was there.”

Shane snuffles. “Me too. I hate being sick alone. My apartment is huge and empty and cold.”

“You said earlier it was hot.”

“It’s both.” Shane snaps weakly. “I am a mystery.”

Ilya laughs quietly, then lowers his voice. He does not need to whisper, the room is private, but the intimacy of the moment pulls the sound out of him soft and low.

“Tell me what hurts most.”

Shane immediately slumps deeper into the blankets. “My head. My throat. My pride.”

“Your pride.” Ilya repeats in disbelief.

“I missed three shots at practice yesterday.” Shane says, sounding legitimately wounded. “Maybe this flu weakened me *days* ago.”

Ilya rubs his forehead with one hand. “This is not how viruses work.”

“It could be.” Shane mutters.

“How much medicine did you take?”

“I don’t know.” Shane looks down at something beside him. “Enough that the box said it would help but not enough that it would kill me.”

“Good.” Ilya says. “Stay on the not dying dosage.”

Shane pouts again. “Ilya.”

“Yes.”

“I want a kiss.”

Ilya’s breath catches before he can stop it. “You cannot have a kiss.”

Shane gasps as if personally betrayed. “Why not.”

“Because you are contagious,” Ilya says. “And you are far away. And also, you look like you would give me five diseases.”

“I only have one disease.” Shane protests. “Two at most.”

Ilya shakes his head. He cannot believe how much he loves this man. “You will get your kiss when I get to Montreal.”

Shane lets out a pathetic groan and flops sideways onto the pillow. The camera lurches with him, giving Ilya an upside down view of his forehead.

His heart squeezes.

“You are too sick to hold your phone properly.” He mutters.

“I am too sick to do anything properly.” Shane whispers.

“I know.” He keeps his voice soft. “I will be home tomorrow night. As soon as we land in Ottawa, I am driving straight to you.”

Shane blinks slowly, eyes glossy. “Promise?”

“I promise.”

There is a quiet moment then, the kind that stretches warm through the air between them. Even pixelated on a phone screen, even sick and miserable, Shane’s face does something to him that Ilya cannot name.

Shane whispers, “I miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

“I feel awful.”

“I know.”

“But I feel a little better now.” Shane murmurs. “Since you called and I can see you.”

Ilya closes his eyes for half a second. Something in his chest pulls tight, painful in a way that feels like breathing too deeply in cold air. “Good.” He says quietly. “Rest for me. I will stay on call until you fall asleep.”

Shane looks suddenly shy. Fever softens him in ways nothing else does. “Okay.”

He shifts, burrowing into the blankets in a way that makes him look small and painfully dear. His face remains in frame, though, and that alone makes Ilya smile.

“Will you talk?” Shane asks in a tiny voice. “Your voice helps.”

“Of course.” Ilya murmurs. “What do you want me to say?”

“Anything.” Shane whispers, seemingly already drifting. “Just be here.”

So Ilya talks.

He tells him about the game. He complains about the ice. He mutters about the stupid counterattack that led to Minnesota’s second goal. He tells a quiet story about the rookie who forgot his skates in the hotel room.

Shane’s breathing slowly evens out.

His eyes close.

His face relaxes into something soft and heartbreakingly vulnerable.

Ilya stays on the call long after Shane has fallen asleep, watching the rise and fall of his chest, the small twitch of his fingers, the fever flushed cheeks.

When he finally whispers, “Goodnight, sweetheart.” Shane is far too asleep to hear it.

He ends the call, sets his phone gently on the nightstand, and lies back in the dark room.

It feels unbearably wrong that Shane is sick and alone in Montreal and he is here, hundreds of kilometres away in Minnesota.

Tomorrow night, he promises himself.

Tomorrow night, he will fix that.

He turns off the lamp and closes his eyes, already calculating how fast he can possibly drive to Montreal from Ottawa.

When Ilya wakes up, his first thought is that he overslept and missed morning practice.

His second thought is Shane.

He fumbles for his phone on the nightstand before his eyes are fully open. The screen is flooded with new notifications. Not as many as last night, thank God, but enough that his chest tightens.

Shane:

Ilya I woke up at 3am and I thought my soul was leaving my body.

Shane:

Turned out I just needed to pee.

Shane:

Hate this.

Shane:

I am simultaneously freezing and sweating. This feels illegal.

Shane:

Also I had a nightmare that you shaved your head.

Shane:

Please never do that.

Shane:

Ilya I mean it please never do that.

Shane:

I'm actually crying right now imagining you without your curls. I hate myself.

The timestamp on that string is brutal. Deep in the middle of the night. Ilya imagines Shane in his dark bedroom, feverish and alone, waking up terrified and grabbing his phone because that is the one thing he can reach that feels like company.

His stomach twists.

He sends a quick reply.

Ilya:

I did not shave my head. Still very handsome.

Ilya:

How do you feel now?

There is a pause, long enough for him to drag himself out of bed and start pulling on clothes.

The reply comes while he is brushing his teeth.

Shane:

Like garbage that someone lit on fire.

Shane:

But the medicine kicked in so my head is less explodey.

Shane:

Still dying though.

He spits foam into the sink and stares at his reflection. His eyes look tired. His jaw is tight. There is a small ache between his brows that has nothing to do with lack of sleep.

He types with his thumb.

Ilya:

Again, you are not dying, sweetheart.

Ilya:

We fly to last road city this morning. Then home to Canada tonight.

Ilya:

I will come straight to you after we land.

He tucks the phone away reluctantly and heads downstairs to join the team.

The day moves in strange jerks. Lobby, bus, airport. Security lines and polite smiling at people who recognise him and say *tough one last night*. He nods and keeps moving. Inside, his attention is split between gate numbers and the tiny screen in his hand.

On the plane, he takes a window seat and angles his body so no one can read over his shoulder. Teammates assume he is sulking about the loss. Someone claps his shoulder and says, “Shake it off, Rozanov. New game tonight.”

He grunts something that could be agreement.

He opens Shane’s latest messages.

Shane:

I tried to drink water and my throat screamed at me.

Shane:

I am offended.

Shane:

I have done nothing but support this body with expensive skincare and good knitwear and the best meal planning in the league for years. This is how it repays me.

Shane:

Rude.

Despite everything, Ilya smiles.

Ilya:

Drink anyway. Small sips.

Ilya:

You need it.

The little bubble appears almost immediately.

Shane:

You are very bossy for a man who is currently in the wrong country.

Shane:

Okay. Small sips. If I drown it's your fault.

He shakes his head and leans back. The plane engines roar to life. As they lift off, he stares out at the receding ground and thinks about distance in a way that feels physical.

Shane is one flight, one border, one more game, and several hundred kilometres of highway away. Too far. Much too far.

He closes his eyes and tries to sleep. Rest would be smart. There is a game tonight. He is supposed to care about that.

Instead, images of Shane's flushed face and watery eyes keep pushing in at the edges of his thoughts. The sound of his voice from last night, small and hoarse, saying, *I feel a little better now, since you called and I can see you.*

He does not sleep.

By the time they land in Detroit, he feels like he has been awake for years.

The day continues in the usual pattern. Bus. Hotel. Pre game meal. Meetings. He goes through the motions like a ghost wearing his body.

He checks his phone at every opportunity.

Shane:

Took my temperature again. 38.9. This feels excessive.

Shane:

Googled it and it says "see doctor if fever persists."

Shane:

Fever has persisted for like, a million hours.

Shane:

Should I write a will.

Ilya rubs his forehead.

Ilya:

If you die before I get there I will be very angry. Do not do this.

Ilya:

Call team doctor if it gets higher. Serious. Promise me.

A pause. Then:

Shane:

Okay. Promise. No dying. No higher than 38.9.

Shane:

Also if I do write a will you get my softest hoodie and that stupid mug from the All Stars game that you pretend to hate.

His chest warms painfully.

Ilya:

I already stole the hoodie.

Ilya:

Keep living for the mug.

The game itself is a blur.

He skates hard, hits harder, plays like someone trying to punch through the ice. His body knows what to do even when his mind is somewhere else entirely. When he comes off after a shift, he finds himself glancing at the bench where the backup goalie keeps the tablets, half expecting to see Shane's face there instead of the replay.

In breaks, when the coaches talk and the crowd noise swells, he pictures Shane lying in bed with the game on mute, eyes half closed, still watching him. Still judging his decisions. Still texting criticisms between waves of nausea.

They win by one goal.

He barely registers the final horn. The relief from the team, the shouting, the laughter, all of it feels slightly muted, like he is hearing it through a wall.

The only thought he can really hold onto is, *Now we go home.*

Back in the locker room, he showers quickly and checks his phone with wet hands.

No new messages.

He frowns. The last one is from before warm up.

Shane:

Trying to stay awake for your game but my eyes keep closing.

Shane:

If I miss any of it this is the flu's fault, not mine.

Ilya dries his hands properly this time and types.

Ilya:

We won. I was excellent. You are allowed to be asleep.

Ilya:

Text when you wake up.

He waits a few seconds, hoping, but nothing appears.

He tells himself this is good. Sleep is good. Shane needs rest. If he is sleeping, it means the fever has not tipped him into some new disaster, and the medicine is working enough for his body to shut down for a while.

The worry in his chest does not listen to any of that.

The rest of the night happens fast. Bus to the airport. Security with the team. The usual companionable noise of exhausted men who have just stolen a win and are already half thinking about their own beds.

When he finally gets on the plane and buckles in, he turns his phone to silent, screen down on his thigh. If a message comes, he will feel the vibration through his leg. If it does not, he will not sit staring at the dark screen like a man waiting for a lifeline.

He tries to sleep.

He fails.

He tries to watch the in-flight screens where his teammates have pulled up highlight reels.

He fails.

The second they land in Ottawa, his phone lights up.

Shane:

Ilya... I woke up and everything hurts again.

Shane:

Throat feels like knives. Head feels like cement. I hate this.

Shane:

Where are you?

Ilya's pulse jumps.

The plane is still taxiing, and he forces himself to focus long enough to grab his duffel and thank the flight attendants. He keeps the phone angled toward his body, shielding it from

curious eyes.

As soon as he steps into the airport terminal, he veers away from the cluster of teammates heading toward baggage claim and ducks into a quiet alcove beside a vending machine. The lighting here is dim. Foot traffic is low. No one is close enough to overhear anything.

He hits the call button.

It rings once. Shane answers immediately, voice raw.

“Ilya.”

“Sweetheart.” His voice comes out far softer than he intends. “Tell me.”

“I feel awful.” Shane murmurs, sounding half delirious. “Worse than before. Maybe worse than ever.”

“Did you take medicine?”

“Yes. It is not helping yet.” There is a small, pitiful noise. “I hate this so much.”

“I know.” Ilya presses a hand against the wall behind him, grounding himself. “Listen. I am in Ottawa now. We just landed.”

There is a small inhale from Shane. Hopeful. Fragile. “You are in Canada?”

“Yes. And I am getting my car now.”

“How long?” Shane asks quietly.

“Two hours,” Ilya says. “Maybe less.”

“That soon?”

“Yes.” His voice firms. “I am there soon, *solntse*.”

Silence stretches for a heartbeat, then Shane lets out a trembling exhale that sounds dangerously close to tears.

“Ilya... I feel scared.”

“I know,” Ilya says. His voice is steady in the dim quiet of the airport. “But I am almost there. You will not be alone long, *da?*”

“I miss you.”

“I miss you too.” Ilya says. “Stay in bed. Try not to move too much. I will text when I am in car.”

Shane snuffles. “Okay.”

“And keep your phone near you.” Ilya adds. “If your fever goes above thirty-nine again, you tell me.”

“I promise.” Shane whispers. “Just hurry, please. But like... Don’t drive too fast and die also. Please.”

“I will.”

He ends the call gently, already knowing he will not adhere to that request. He will go as fast as he safely can, needing to get to Shane now that he’s finally allowed to.

For a moment he stays there, head bowed, breath steadying, the knowledge settling into his bones.

Shane is waiting.

Shane is hurting.

And nothing will stop him from getting to Montreal as fast as humanly possible.

He shoulders his bag, strides toward the airport exit with purpose, and fishes his car keys from his pocket.

Two hours.

Two hours and he will be where he is meant to be.

With Shane.

Ilya does not remember walking through the airport doors. One moment he is in the dim alcove beside the vending machine, Shane’s voice still in his ear, soft and sick and unbearably small. The next he is stepping out into the cold Ottawa night, the air sharp in his lungs as if the city is trying to wake him fully.

He is already awake. Wide awake. Every part of him feels pulled tight with one singular purpose.

Get to Shane.

The parking lot is quiet, lights humming above rows of cars dusted with a thin sheen of frost. His breath clouds in front of him as he strides across the asphalt, keys ready in his hand. His duffel bangs against his leg, too light, too meaningless. Everything that matters is two hours east.

He finds his car, unlocks it, tosses the bag into the passenger seat, and sits down. He closes the door. The silence inside is thick, as if the world is holding its breath with him.

He checks his phone once more.

Shane:

Okay. Lying in bed. Trying not to cry again. Hurry but be safe. I love you. Please come fast.

The timestamp is recent. Fresh. A minute old, maybe less.

Ilya exhales slowly through his nose.

“I am coming.” He whispers in Russian into the dark car interior.

He turns the key. The engine comes alive. The dashboard lights up.

He pulls out of the spot, out of the row, out of the airport lot. The second he hits the main road, he presses down on the accelerator.

The speedometer climbs.

He does not ease up.

Inside his chest, something restless unfurls, a kind of primal urgency he has never felt so strongly. He is not an impulsive person. He is not reckless. Not anymore. He is careful to the point of obsession most days, especially when it comes to Shane.

But tonight, every instinct he has is shouting the same thing.

Shane is alone. Shane is scared. Shane needs you.

Go.

The city falls away quickly behind him. Highway signs glide past overhead. The asphalt stretches out long and dark in front of him, faintly reflective under the streetlights. The road from Ottawa to Montreal is familiar. He has driven it dozens of times.

Never like this.

He pictures Shane as he drives.

The flushed cheeks.

The watery eyes.

The little tremor in his voice.

The way he whispered *I feel scared* with such bare panic that Ilya felt something inside his chest twist until it almost hurt.

A car passes him going the opposite direction. He barely registers it.

The highway ahead is mostly empty. Good.

At one point he glances at the speedometer and winces.

“Shane would kill me...” He mumbles aloud, then almost smiles. “So I will not tell him.”

His phone buzzes from where it’s attached to the dashboard. His eyes scan quickly over the incoming messages, gaze shifting between the road and his only line of communication to his boyfriend.

Shane:

I thought I was going to throw up but then I didn't. This feels like emotional manipulation.

Shane:

Also my throat hates me. Please bring tea. And yourself. Mostly yourself.

Shane:

Where are you now?

Ilya presses the voice dictation button to reply.

Ilya:

Twenty minutes outside Ottawa. On highway. Roads quiet. I come fast.

A pause. Then:

Shane:

Okay. Good. I feel awful. I want you. Please don't text and drive. Be safe.

Ilya takes a deep breath and nods, attention fully shifting to the road again. He grips the wheel tighter, and continues.

He crosses from Ontario into Quebec with the smooth hum of the engine all around him. The familiar road signs now in French give him a small, strange rush of relief.

Closer.

Closer.

Closer.

He imagines the moment he will finally walk into Shane's apartment. The dim bedroom. The blankets cocooning the man he loves. That exhausted, feverish face lifting when he appears in the doorway. The way Shane will probably cry a little, though he will deny it.

Ilya's chest aches.

He presses on the accelerator again.

An hour passes like nothing. The road eats itself under his tires. Streetlights become sparser. The sky is a deep, dark black. Montreal's distant glow begins to appear on the horizon.

His phone buzzes again.

He does not want to wait to talk to Shane, even over text. Ilya pulls into the next service exit, parks under a lamp, and reaches for it instantly.

Shane:

I feel worse again. I think my fever is going up. I hate this so much. I need you.

Shane:

Please tell me you're close.

Ilya's heart thuds sharply.

He types:

Ilya:

I am one hour away. Maybe less. I will be there soon, sweetheart. I promise.

A moment later:

Shane:

Okay. I'll try to stay alive.

Ilya sighs, rests his forehead briefly against the steering wheel, then forces himself upright and pulls back onto the highway.

The last stretch feels longer. Shane's messages feel heavy in his chest. Every kilometre feels too slow. Every curve in the road feels like a delay.

But then, finally, he sees the sign.

MONTREAL

30 km

His chest loosens. His breath comes out shaky.

He whispers to himself, "Almost there."

Traffic thickens slightly as he approaches the outskirts, but he navigates through it with the intensity of a man who has never wanted anything more than to reach one point on a map.

He takes the exit toward Shane's neighbourhood. The streets here are familiar. He slows just enough not to run a light, but every muscle in him is leaning forward as if trying to arrive before the car does.

Finally, he turns onto Shane's street.

His heart pounds.

He pulls into the building's lot, parks crookedly because precision is impossible right now, grabs his bag, and starts toward the door at a near jog.

The cold bites at his cheeks. He barely feels it.

Inside the lobby, he jabs the elevator button repeatedly until the doors slide open. He steps inside, chest tight, hands shaking slightly, and presses Shane's floor.

The doors close.

He leans back, breath unsteady, heart hammering.

He is here.

He is finally here.

And Shane is only seconds away.

The elevator doors open with a soft chime that feels far too calm for the way Ilya's heart is pounding. He steps out into the hallway and the carpeted floor muffles the hurried force of his stride. His duffel hangs from one hand, absurdly light for something that has carried his entire life so often. His other hand is tight around his phone.

Shane's last message sits on the screen.

Shane:

My head is so hot. I feel like a malfunctioning radiator. Please hurry.

Ilya grips the phone harder.

The hallway smells of detergent and old plaster. Apartment lights shine in warm rectangles across the carpet. A distant television murmurs behind one door. Everything is too ordinary. Too calm. The world should look different when someone he loves is hurting.

He reaches Shane's door.

For one half of a second, he pauses, breath caught halfway between a gasp and a prayer.

Then he unlocks it and steps inside.

The apartment is dim. The only light comes from the soft glow of a lamp in the living room, probably left on so Ilya would not come into darkness. The air is warm, almost too warm, the way it gets when a feverish person keeps adjusting the thermostat without noticing.

"Shane?" He calls quietly.

A faint groan answers from the bedroom.

His entire chest loosens. His entire chest tightens.

He drops his bag by the door and moves through the apartment, past the sofa piled with blankets, past an abandoned mug on the counter, straight toward the half open bedroom door.

He pushes it fully open.

And there he is.

Shane Hollander, the prince of melodrama, champion of ill-timed fevers, destroyer of Ilya's emotional stability.

He is curled in bed like a tragic figure from an old novel. The blankets are an absolute disaster. He is tangled in them, half on top of one, half swallowed by another. A hoodie that judging by sizing clearly belongs to Ilya is pulled over his head, hood too big, slipping

sideways. Strands of black hair are plastered to his forehead with fever sweat. His cheeks are flushed. His lips are parted in a miserable pout.

He looks heartbreakingly beautiful.

He also looks like he wants to die.

Shane lifts his head slightly when Ilya steps into the room. His eyes are bleary, pupils unfocused. But the moment he sees him, something sparks through the fever haze.

“Ilya.” He croaks, voice rough and stuffed.

Ilya crosses the room in three long strides.

He sits on the edge of the bed and reaches out, brushing Shane’s hair back from his forehead. Heat radiates against his fingertips.

“Sweetheart,” He murmurs. “You are burning, *solntse*.”

“I told you,” Shane says miserably. “Am dying.”

“You have the flu.” Ilya says, but his voice is not teasing. He cups Shane’s cheek in his palm. “Why are you so hot.”

“Because my immune system is dramatic,” Shane whispers. “Like me.”

Ilya feels something inside him melt and break at once. “You should have called the doctor.”

“I called *you*.” Shane says weakly. “You were in Minnesota. And Detroit. And nowhere near me.” He snuffles, tears welling up in his eyes, then frowns faintly. “I hate being sick alone.”

“I am not doctor. But you are not alone now.”

Shane closes his eyes as if the words physically settle over him.

When Ilya leans in, instinctively, to kiss him hello, Shane lifts a weak hand and presses it to his chest.

“No.” He protests softly. “You are just back from travel and you have games and your immune system is too important. You cannot get sick too.”

Ilya blinks. Then frowns.

Then the frown deepens with theatrical offence.

“Shane,” He says very seriously. “If you do not let me kiss you, I will take off all my clothes and stand naked on your balcony until I get a fever too.”

Shane’s eyes fly open.

“What...” He whispers, horrified.

“I am serious.” Ilya says, crossing his arms. “Very committed. I do it now, if you say no. In cold.”

“You would freeze.”

“Yes.”

“You would get hypothermia.”

“Yes.”

“You would die.”

“Yes.”

Shane stares at him, somehow both pale and flushed. “You cannot do that.”

“Then let me kiss you.”

For a long moment, Shane is perfectly still. Then, very slowly, with the exhaustion of a man climbing from a grave, he reaches out and curls two fingers into the front of Ilya’s jacket.

“Fine.” He whispers.

He tugs him downward with nothing but gravity.

Ilya bends to meet him, eyes softening despite every frantic beat in his chest. Their lips touch gently at first, just a warm press. Shane sighs into it, a trembling exhale that seems to release something tight inside him.

Then, when Ilya begins to pull back, Shane’s hand tightens.

Ilya stays.

Kisses him again. Slower. Deeper. Careful, but certain.

When he finally breaks away, Shane’s eyes are shining.

“Do not leave again.” Shane whispers, voice breaking on the last word. “Please.”

“I will not.” Ilya promises. He strokes a thumb across Shane’s cheek, wiping away the tear that has escaped. “I am here now. I am staying. Only practice for next few days. I will tell my coach I have personal shit.”

Shane swallows, throat bobbing painfully. “I feel so awful. Everything hurts.”

“I know.” Ilya murmurs. “You will feel better soon.”

“It is already better.” Shane mumbles, leaning into his hand. “You being here makes it better.”

Ilya feels his heart twist again.

He pulls off his jacket, then his shoes, then climbs carefully onto the bed. Shane immediately curls toward him, seeking heat, comfort, contact. He fits himself against Ilya's side like he was waiting for that exact moment.

Ilya wraps an arm around him, one hand sliding up to card through sweaty, damp strands of hair. Shane makes a soft sound, almost a whimper, like the slightest touch to his skin is too much, too sensitive, too overwhelming to bear.

"My poor baby." Ilya whispers.

"I know." Shane snuffles.

"Your temperature is too high."

"I know."

"You are miserable."

"I know."

"And dramatic."

Shane opens one eye and scowls at him. "I know."

Despite everything, Ilya smiles.

He shifts Shane gently, straightening the blankets around him, untangling his legs, tucking him properly against his chest. Shane relaxes into each movement as if being handled so softly is the thing he has been longing for all day.

Ilya lowers his forehead to Shane's temple.

"You safe now." He murmurs. "I am here."

Shane breathes out shakily. "Thank God."

They stay like that for several minutes, silent except for Shane's weak snuffles and occasional miserable sighs. Ilya keeps brushing his hair back, keeps murmuring soft little things in Russian without thinking, keeps holding him closer whenever Shane shivers.

At one point, Shane's voice breaks out of the quiet, small and thready.

"You drove too fast, didn't you."

"Yes." Ilya admits in an instant. "No regrets."

Shane grumbles ever so slightly to voice his disagreement, but does not argue.

A moment later, he shifts closer, almost crawling half onto Ilya, seeking more warmth. Ilya gathers him easily, arms full of sick boyfriend and blanket and fever heat. It is too warm. He can feel himself starting to sweat in uncomfortable places. He does not care.

Shane whispers into his chest, "My whole body hurts. My head. My throat. My skin. Everything."

"I know." Ilya kisses the top of his head. "I am going to take care of you now."

Shane nods weakly. "Okay."

"I will get you water. Medicine. Tea. Soup."

"Okay."

"I will hold you until the fever breaks."

"Okay."

"And I will kiss you again later." Ilya murmurs into his hair.

Shane makes the most pathetic sound imaginable. "Please do."

Ilya closes his eyes.

Finally.

He is here.

Shane is in his arms.

And although Shane is sick and miserable and half delirious with fever, the tension that has been gripping Ilya for two days slowly begins to ease.

They breathe together, the room too warm around them, snow whispering outside the window.

Shane whispers one last thing before sleep pulls him under.

"Ilya... thank you for coming."

"Always." Ilya says.

And he means it.

Shane falls asleep so quickly that Ilya at first does not trust it. One moment Shane is breathing in short, miserable huffs against his chest. The next he goes quiet, then still, then heavy.

It is the heaviness that tells Ilya the truth.

Shane is out.

Fever sleep. The deepest, most desperate kind.

For a moment, Ilya stays where he is, holding him. Shane is half sprawled across him, face pressed to his shirt, leg hooked over Ilya's thigh like he is trying to anchor himself. The room is too warm, the air thick with fever heat. Sweat prickles the back of Ilya's neck.

He does not move.

Not until Shane lets out a little unconscious whimper, shifting restlessly.

Then Ilya decides.

He carefully, *carefully* loosens his arm. Shane makes a soft protesting noise. Ilya murmurs something quiet in Russian, smoothing his palms over Shane's hair until he settles again.

When he finally slips out from beneath him, he does it like a man escaping a snare.

Shane immediately curls inward, shivering without the contact.
Ilya's heart clenches.

He whispers, "I am coming back, my love. Just a minute."

Shane does not wake. But he softens again, muscles unclenching as if he hears something inside the words rather than the words themselves.

Step one: hydration.

Ilya moves in silence, the way he does in hotel rooms after late games. He finds the kitchen light, turns it on low, fills a glass with water and places it on the nightstand.

He studies Shane's face in the half light.

Flushed. Too flushed. His lips are dry. His breathing is slightly uneven.

Step two: check the fever.

The thermometer lies on the nightstand like a neglected warning. Ilya picks it up gently, wipes it clean, and kneels beside the bed.

"Sweetheart," He whispers, touching Shane's shoulder. "Just for a moment. Wake up for me."

Shane grumbles something incoherent, lifts his head an inch, then drops it again.

"Shane."

A tiny groan. "Ilya. No."

"Yes," Ilya says softly. "Open."

"No." Shane repeats, which in flu language really means *I am too tired for this*.

Ilya strokes his hair back, thumb brushing his temple. “If you do this, I will hold you again after. I promise.”

Shane cracks one eye open. “You promise?”

“Yes.”

“Fine.” Shane whispers, defeated.

He opens his mouth, and Ilya slips the thermometer in. Shane looks utterly pathetic with it sticking out of his lips, eyes half-closed, hair matted to his forehead, expression hovering between annoyance and exhaustion.

The thermometer beeps.

Ilya pulls it out.

39.1.

His stomach drops.

Not dangerous yet, but too high. Too high for Shane, who wilts under even a normal fever. Too high for comfort. Too high for how hot his skin feels.

He pushes the blankets down a little, allowing some air to reach Shane’s overheated body.

Shane shivers at the loss of warmth and immediately tries to pull the blanket back up. Ilya gently intercepts.

“Shane, you are too hot.”

“I am cold.” Shane argues, voice barely audible.

“I know,” Ilya says. “Body is confused. I help you cool down.”

Shane groans like this is a direct attack on his human rights.

Step three: fever cloth.

Ilya goes to the bathroom, runs a washcloth under cool water, wrings it out, and returns to the bed.

Shane watches him with narrow, suspicious eyes.

“No.” He says.

“Yes.” Ilya answers.

“You are planning to torture me.” Shane complains weakly.

“It is just water.” Ilya reminds him.

“Cold water.” Shane says, as if presenting evidence to a judge.

“It is not that cold.”

“You hate me.” Shane concludes dramatically.

But when Ilya presses the cloth to Shane’s forehead, the reaction is immediate.

Shane melts.

His eyes flutter. His shoulders drop. A soft, breathy sigh escapes him, the kind that goes straight to the tenderest parts of Ilya’s chest.

“Oh.” Shane whispers.

“Yes.” Ilya murmurs. “Good, right?”

Shane nods weakly, eyes already closing again.

Step four: medicine.

Ilya checks the box on the nightstand, calculates times, doses. They can do another round soon. Not yet. He will not risk giving too much.

Shane’s breathing steadies. Ilya sits on the edge of the bed, keeping one hand moving slowly through his hair as the washcloth does its work.

Every few minutes Shane stirs, making tiny noises of discomfort.

“Ilya,” he whispers once, eyes still closed.

“Yes.”

“You came.”

“Of course.”

“You drove too fast.”

“Yes,” Ilya says, because he promised honesty. “But safely.”

Shane makes a soft disgruntled noise. “Still too fast.”

“I had to get to you.”

Shane turns his face into Ilya’s thigh, seeking contact with a kind of helpless instinct.

“You always come,” Shane says, barely audible.

“I always will.”

They had already had this conversation, and it was worrying that Shane didn't seem to really remember it. Still, there was not much more than Ilya could do.

Silence settles again.

Step five: water.

"Sweetheart," Ilya whispers eventually. "Wake up. Drink for me."

Shane is deep in fever fog now, barely responsive, but he obeys the moment Ilya lifts him slightly into his arms.

He is pliant, exhausted, too warm.

Ilya holds the glass to his lips and tips it gently.

"Small sips." He says.

Shane frowns like the concept of sipping is personally offensive, but he drinks.

Half the glass. Then he slumps forward, forehead against Ilya's shoulder.

"I am so tired." Shane murmurs.

"I know," Ilya whispers. "Lie back."

He lowers him carefully and settles beside him.

Shane immediately curls into him again, burying his face in Ilya's chest with desperate, feverish need.

"Stay, please." Shane breathes.

"I am not going anywhere."

Ilya adjusts the blankets around them, letting some air circulate, ensuring Shane does not overheat again. One hand stays on his forehead, checking the temperature, moving the cool cloth when needed. The other arm holds him close.

Shane hums faintly, already slipping back into sleep.

A few minutes later, half-conscious, he mumbles, "Ilya... my skin hurts."

"I know," Ilya whispers, kissing his hair. "I am here."

"Hurts less when you hold me," Shane says in a slurred, honest whisper.

Ilya closes his eyes.

His throat tightens.

He pulls him closer.

They stay like that as the snow outside falls softly, the room lit only by a dim lamp, the washcloth being traded for a fresh cool one every little while.

Ilya watches over him, steady and patient, heart full to aching with love and worry.

Step six: wait until the fever breaks.

He will not sleep tonight.

Not until that number drops.

Not until Shane stops trembling.

Not until the tight, fevered lines in his face ease.

Shane shifts again, curling a hand around Ilya's shirt.

"Ilya?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"...thank you."

Ilya presses a kiss to his forehead.

"Always."

He stays awake, watching every breath.

Because this is Shane.

Because he loves him.

Because nothing in the world could move him from this bed now.

Ilya must fall asleep at some point, although he does not remember giving himself permission to do so. One moment he is propped up against Shane's headboard, running a cool cloth along his overheated skin, whispering soft reassurances in Russian. The next he wakes with a painful kink in his neck and a dead arm under many kilograms of boyfriend.

His first conscious thought is panic.

His second is Shane.

He jerks his head down.

Shane is wrapped around him like a koala. One leg slung over him, one arm locked across his waist, face squished into Ilya's chest in a way that cannot possibly allow proper airflow. His curls are damp but not soaked as before. His breathing is steady.

Ilya touches his forehead.

He freezes.

The heat is there, but the blazing furnace heat from earlier is gone. The fever has shifted to something warm, manageable, almost normal.

A long breath escapes him, shaky with relief.

“Oh, thank God” He murmurs.

A sleepy sound comes from the vicinity of his shirt.

“Mmph.” Shane says into his sternum.

Ilya smooths his hand through his hair.

“Shane. Wake up for a moment.”

Shane groans dramatically and shifts his face about two centimetres to the side, just enough to mumble, “No. Sleeping.”

“I know. But let me see you.”

Shane slowly drags his head back enough for Ilya to see his face properly. His eyes blink open, sluggish and glassy, but clearer than last night. His cheeks are still flushed, but not burning. The grey exhaustion in his expression has softened.

“You’re still here.” Shane whispers.

“Of course.” Ilya replies, brushing his thumb over his cheek.

Shane swallows, and this time he does not wince nearly as hard.
Progress.

“How do you feel?” Ilya asks.

Shane scrunches his nose. “Like death, but... less death.”

“Very scientific improvement, yes.”

Shane ignores the joke entirely and presses closer to him, forehead to neck. “You’re warm.” He mumbles.

“You are also warm.” Ilya says. Then he adds quietly, “But less than before.”

Shane hums, low and pleased. “I don’t feel like I’m on fire anymore.”

Ilya’s chest loosens even further.

Good.

Thank God.

Good.

“Let me check.” He murmurs.

Shane groans in protest but lifts his head again when Ilya insists. Ilya retrieves the thermometer, and Shane reluctantly accepts it like a martyr accepting his fate.

He waits.

It beeps.

38.4.

Ilya exhales deeply. Relief floods him so intensely he has to sit down on the edge of the bed.

The fever has broken. Not entirely gone, but broken. This is the part where things turn in the right direction.

Shane sees his expression and blinks sleepily.

“That number is good?” He asks, voice soft.

“It is very good.” Ilya says. “Much better.”

Shane lets his head drop onto Ilya’s arm. “Told you I wasn’t dying. I’m made of some really strong stuff.”

“You told me you were dying seventy-four times,” Ilya says. “At minimum.”

Shane gives a tiny, proud nod. “Drama works.”

Ilya chooses not to respond to that.

Instead, he moves his hand to Shane’s hair again. Shane melts instantly, eyes fluttering shut.

“Still tired?” Ilya asks.

“So tired.” Shane mumbles. “And hungry. And thirsty. And tired again.”

Ilya smiles, a small, helpless thing. “All of these can be fixed. I will fix them.”

He goes and retrieves the soup and water he prepared earlier and helps Shane sit up, using his body as support when Shane’s muscles tremble.

“I feel gross.” Shane mutters. “And weak. And I must smell and look horrible.”

“You are sick,” Ilya replies. “And doing very well.”

“No.” Shane says, but leans into the spoonful of soup like someone who has just been given divine nourishment. When he swallows, his eyes widen slightly. “This is actually good.”

“I told you. I am good cook.”

“You play hockey,” Shane says. “And you cook? Why are you allowed to be good at everything.”

“I am not good at everything,” Ilya corrects. “I am terrible at laundry.”

Shane snorts weakly. “You really are.”

“That is why you love me.” Ilya says seriously.

Shane opens again for the next spoonful.

He eats slowly, but he eats. Half the bowl disappears. Then he drinks a decent amount of water, which Ilya praises him for, because it makes Shane turn faintly pink in a way that is unbearably endearing.

When Shane has had enough, Ilya helps him lie back down, adjusting pillows, smoothing blankets, tucking him in with ridiculous care.

Shane watches him do it through heavy lids, expression soft and unguarded.

“You’re really staying?” Shane murmurs.

“Yes.” Ilya says, brushing some hair from his forehead. “All day. And all night.”

Shane inhales, slow and relieved. “Good.”

He shifts, curling against Ilya’s side again out of instinct more than thought. His body fits there perfectly.

Ilya wraps an arm around him, feeling the way Shane’s breathing changes as comfort takes over. Less frantic. Less pained. More like himself.

“My body doesn’t feel as horrible,” Shane says. “Still bad. But like... regular bad. Not apocalyptic bad.”

“That is the fever dropping,” Ilya tells him. “You will be tired for rest of the day. Maybe tomorrow. But you will be okay.”

Shane sighs, content and exhausted. “I like when you talk like that.”

“Like what.”

“Like you know what you’re doing.” His eyes slip halfway closed. “Like you’ve done this before.”

“I have not.” Ilya admits. “I have never taken care of someone like this.”

Shane blinks slowly. “Never?”

“No.”

There is a pause.

Then Shane whispers, “You’re good at it.”

It hits Ilya low in the chest.

“I am glad.” He says quietly.

Shane tucks his face against Ilya’s neck again. “Can we... watch something? A movie? Something soft. And I’ll probably fall asleep again.”

“Yes,” Ilya says immediately. “Anything you want.”

“Put on something stupid,” Shane murmurs. “Nothing with plot. I cannot handle plot.”

Ilya picks up the remote with his free hand and flips through options until he lands on a familiar cooking show. It requires no thought whatsoever and has loud enough narration that Shane can drift in and out without missing anything.

Shane makes a small approving sound and burrows even closer, if that is physically possible.

Within minutes, his breathing evens.

Within ten, he is asleep.

But this time, it is different.

This sleep is not the frantic, overheated, restless fever sleep from before. This is warm and heavy and peaceful. His cheeks have lost the deep red blotching. His forehead is damp but not burning.

The fever has truly broken.

Ilya keeps his arm around him, fingers resting lightly on Shane’s shoulder, anchored there by instinct.

He watches the soft rise and fall of Shane’s back. The tiny twitch of his hand against Ilya’s ribs. The way he sighs occasionally with a sound that is far closer to comfort than pain.

Outside the window, the morning light grows brighter.

Shane sleeps through the rest of the episode. Through the next one, too. His fever stays low. His breathing stays steady. His body finally, finally rests in a way that lets Ilya’s own heart slow down.

After nearly two hours, Shane stirs.

He lifts his head blearily, blinking up at Ilya.

“How long was I asleep?” he asks.

“Almost two hours.”

“Two... hours?” Shane repeats, stunned. “That is illegal.”

“You needed it,” Ilya says.

Shane rubs his cheek against Ilya’s shirt in a catlike motion that is clearly unconscious. “I feel... better,” he admits.

Relief blooms warm in Ilya’s chest.

“Good.”

Still dazed, still soft, Shane whispers, “Ilya... thank you.”

“For what.”

“For being here. For taking care of me. For not being scared away. I know I’m awful when I’m sick.”

“You are dramatic,” Ilya agrees. “But you are never awful.”

Shane blushes faintly. “You really love me, don’t you.”

“Yes,” Ilya says, with no hesitation. “I do.”

Shane hesitates, then beams at him. Full, sweet, loose with relief.

“Oh,” He whispers. “Good.”

He collapses back into Ilya’s chest, limp with comfort.

Ilya laughs softly, smoothing a hand down his back.

“Get comfortable,” he murmurs. “Fever broke, I still do not let you move until tomorrow.”

Shane makes a very tiny, pleased sound.

And for the first time since this began, Ilya allows himself to relax into the pillows, feeling the weight of Shane warm and alive against him, and thinks:

Finally.

He is really getting better.

By the time afternoon light starts pooling across the floorboards, the apartment feels like it has finally exhaled. The air is normal again, not too warm, not too heavy. The worst is gone.

Ilya sits on the sofa with Shane tucked firmly against his side. Shane insisted he was well enough to migrate from the bed, and while Ilya had doubts, Shane gave him a stubborn scowl until he relented. Now Shane is curled under a blanket, cheek resting on Ilya’s shoulder, looking like a very smug convalescent prince.

His skin is cool enough that Ilya finally stops checking his forehead every ten minutes. The relief sits warm in his chest, heavy and welcome.

“You should see your face.” Shane murmurs, voice soft but no longer ragged. “You look like you just won a trophy.”

“I feel like I won something,” Ilya answers. He lets his hand drift through Shane’s hair, no longer damp, just soft. “Your fever stayed down.”

“That’s because you nursed me back to life.” Shane says dramatically. “Like a large, stern, handsome Florence Nightingale.”

Ilya gives him a flat look. “Florence Nightingale was a woman.”

“Yes,” Shane says. “But did she look as good in a hoodie as you do?”

Ilya chooses not to dignify that with an answer.

The TV plays quietly in front of them. Shane had vetoed movies on the grounds that they require ‘emotional resilience I do not currently have,’ and instead queued up game highlights.

He watches one replay unfold, squinting with concentration, then pokes Ilya in the ribs.

“You see that?” Shane says. “If you had passed half a second earlier, that would’ve actually worked.”

Ilya narrows his eyes, offended. “I had pressure on my right. I could not pass earlier.”

“You could have,” Shane says, very self-satisfied. “Even with a fever I can see it.”

“You had a fever of thirty-nine degrees and sent me about a thousand messages.” Ilya reminds him. “Including many insults.”

Shane’s mouth curls into a guilty smile. “You read all of those?”

“Unfortunately.”

Shane’s eyes sparkle with amusement. “Which one offended you most?”

Ilya levels him with a stare. “You said my backhand was awful.”

“It was.” Shane replies instantly.

Ilya stares harder.

Shane just pats his chest soothingly. “Not your *worst* backhand.” He says, like this is a comfort.

“It was not awful.” Ilya insists.

“You missed an open shot.”

“I was guarded.”

“You were not guarded,” Shane says, dangerously close to laughing. “You just missed.”

Ilya huffs. “You were delirious.”

“I was correct,” Shane says. “While delirious.”

Ilya feels something bloom in him at that, a strange mix of fondness and mock irritation. This is good. This is familiar. This is Shane returned to himself, annoying him with delighted confidence.

He leans in, brushing his nose against Shane’s temple. “If you were not recovering from illness, I would tickle you until you apologised.”

“You would not.” Shane says smugly.

“No,” Ilya admits. “I would not.”

Shane lets out a pleased little hum and nestles closer, his head fitting under Ilya’s chin as if it belongs there.

On the screen, another one of Ilya’s shifts appears. Shane perks up immediately.

“Oh, this one,” He says. “Pause it.”

Ilya pauses it.

Shane squints like a coach reviewing tape. “See here? You were drifting too far to the inside. You left the weak side exposed.”

Ilya stares at him. “You almost fainted standing up this morning.”

“Yes,” Shane says. “And yet my hockey IQ remains unmatched.”

Ilya lets his head fall back against the sofa. “Why do I date you.”

“Because I am delightful,” Shane says, wrapping both arms around him in a sleepy hug. “And because I love you desperately.”

Ilya stops breathing for a second.

Even though Shane said it yesterday. Even though he meant it then, and now, and always. Hearing it when the fever is gone, when Shane is fully himself, hits differently.

Ilya lowers his voice. “Say it again.”

Shane turns his head, meets his eyes, and says softly, without hesitation, “I love you.”

Ilya kisses his forehead. “I love you too.”

Shane beams, the wide, warm smile Ilya did not realise he had missed until now. “Good.”

He snuggles in again, pulling the blanket up around both of them.

They fall into a quiet rhythm after that. Not silence exactly. More like the comfortable background noise of two people who have been through something frightening together and come out the other side softer for it.

Every so often, Shane offers another critique, and it makes Ilya’s eyes roll fondly without fail.

“You should drink more water.” Ilya fires back after Shane hits him with another one.

“Don’t deflect.”

“You are sick.”

“I am recovering.” Shane insists.

“You are still wrong.”

“No,” Shane says smugly. “I am never wrong.”

“Yes,” Ilya says, feigning irritation. “You are very annoying.”

Shane grins, absolutely thriving. “And yet you are cuddling me.”

“I have made terrible life choices.” Ilya claims.

Shane kisses his jaw. “The worst.”

Ilya gives up.

He tightens his arm around Shane’s waist. Shane makes a content sound and settles against him, eyes drifting half shut again.

The snow outside has slowed. The apartment is warm. The world has shrunk down to the two of them in a nest of blankets, half watching hockey, half in their own bubble of affection and recovery.

After a while, Shane murmurs, “I’m still tired. But like... regular tired. Not death tired.”

“That is good, my love.” Ilya says quietly.

“You’ll stay?” Shane asks, though he already knows the answer.

“I stay as long as you need.”

Shane exhales a soft, relieved breath and presses one more kiss to Ilya’s chest.

“Then I think,” he says, eyes drooping again, voice softer than snow, “that maybe being sick wasn’t the worst thing after all.”

Ilya brushes his fingers down Shane’s back. “Why is that?”

“Because it made you hold me like this.”

Ilya’s heart does something embarrassing.

He tucks Shane closer, kisses the top of his head, and whispers, “Go to sleep, sweetheart.”

Shane smiles, already fading into a warm, drifting half dream.

And Ilya stays right there, keeping him close, while the afternoon light turns gold around them and the world outside their little nest continues on, quiet and unintrusive.

Shane is better.

Alive.

Warm.

Loved.

And Ilya, for the first time in days, feels completely at peace.

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