

Such a Pretty Crier

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Such a Pretty Crier

by [Bruja_oscura](#)

Summary

Shane is still learning that he doesn't have to be perfect in his own relationship. Ilya is still learning the rules of Shane's bad days. So when Shane tries to push him away after a crushing loss, it leads to a tense argument. But ten years of rivalry are no match for Shane's tears; the second he starts to cry, Ilya folds like a house of cards.

Or: Shane tries to starve himself as punishment for losing, Ilya tries to feed him, and it turns into a very soft night of pampering because Ilya is legally incapable of staying angry at a crying Shane.

Notes

Someone said on Twitter that Ilya wouldn't stand a chance winning an argument against Shane's kicked puppy face, and I couldn't agree more.

Just a heads up: I wrote this with a pretty high fever (I didn't have anything better to do honestly), so I'll probably come back to re-read and edit it later. It seems coherent enough to me right now, but if you spot anything weird, please don't hesitate to correct me!

This may be the best thing I have ever written, this is my peak I fear. I also reread this from time to time and I can't honestly believe I brought myself to write something so emotional and close to my heart and my own feelings, and the way Ilya comforts me too 🥹🥹 like babe you wrote the freaking character. I brought this upon myself I think, the fact that I cry every time I came to edit something is just ridiculous.

Come say hi on [Twitter](#) if you want!

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

The buzzer didn't just end the game; it felt like it severed a wire in Shane's head.

4-1. A loss that shouldn't have happened. A defensive breakdown in the second period that Shane had tried to patch up, skating until his lungs burned and his quads screamed, but it hadn't been enough. It was never enough. *He* was never enough.

The aftermath was a blur of overstimulation. The locker room was too quiet, heavy with the sullen disappointment of twenty men. The showers were too loud, the water hitting the tile like shrapnel. Then came the media scrum—lights flashing in his eyes, microphones shoved too close to his face, the repetitive, inane questions demanding he explain *why* they failed.

Why. How. What will you change.

He gave the PR media accepted answers. He kept his face blank, his voice steady. The Captain's mask. But underneath, the static was building. It started at the base of his neck and crawled up, a low-level hum that made his skin feel too tight for his body. By the time he got into his car, Shane was vibrating with a need for control that he couldn't quite name. He wanted silence. He wanted the dark.

But he also wanted Ilya.

That was the new variable. The new, terrifying, wonderful variable. For a week, they'd been on opposite coasts, surviving on text messages and late-night calls. Today was supposed to be the reunion. Shane had spent the entire morning—before the disaster of the game—feeling a giddy, almost teenage anticipation about coming back to the apartment and just *being* with him.

They hadn't managed to cross paths before puck drop. Ilya's flight had touched down somewhere during the first intermission, which meant no pre-game coffee, no grounding touch before Shane had to suit up. Ilya had gone straight to Shane's apartment—having the code-key already memorized—to wait for him there.

He remembered checking his phone quickly between periods, right before the night had truly gone off the rails. There was a text from Ilya, telling him that he had arrive safely and a photo attached to it. A selfie taken from a low angle, showing him sprawled unapologetically across Shane's beige sectional, the TV in the background broadcasting the game commentary. He was splayed out, long legs thrown over the armrest, one arm tucked behind his head, looking for all the world like he owned the place,

He had smiled at the screen, a small, private crack in his game-face. It made something tight in his chest loosen. He loved that. He loved seeing Ilya take up space in his home, filling the empty, sterile corners with his loud, undeniable presence. Fitting himself into the negative spaces of Shane's life.

They were still figuring this out, the '*us*' part of being together.

For a decade, Shane's post-game routine had been solitary confinement. He would go home to an empty house, sit in the dark, and meticulously dissect his mistakes while restricting his food intake, a twisted way of regaining the control he'd lost on the ice. It was a bad habit. A lonely habit. But it was *his*.

Now, he wasn't going home to an empty house. He was going home to his *boyfriend*.

The word still felt foreign, like a sweater he hadn't quite broken in yet. It was a relief, God, it was such a relief to not be alone, to know Ilya was there. But it was also work. It meant he couldn't just shut down. He had to be present. He had to perform "happy partner" when all he wanted to do was crawl out of his own skin.

Don't be weird, he told himself as he keyed into the apartment. *Don't ruin this. He's been waiting for you.*

He opened the door, and the wall of scent hit him like a physical slap.

Garlic. Heavy cream. Bacon fat.

Under normal circumstances, it would have smelled delicious. Ilya had cooked. Ilya, who usually ordered takeout or ate raw ingredients over the sink, had actually cooked for him. It was a gesture of love so loud it made Shane's chest ache. But tonight, with his sensory processing already red-lining, the smell was thick and suffocating. It coated his throat. It made the nausea from the game roll uncomfortably in his stomach.

"You are alive!" Ilya's voice boomed from the kitchen.

He walked out, wearing sweatpants and a tight t-shirt, a dish towel thrown over his shoulder. He looked soft. Domestic. Beautiful. He looked like everything Shane wanted and everything Shane felt he didn't deserve right now.

"Hey," he managed, his voice sounding thin to his own ears.

"I know, I know. Game was shit," Ilya said, dismissing the professional tragedy with a wave of his hand. He walked over and pulled him into a hug.

Shane stiffened at first, his body a live wire, but then Ilya kissed him.

It was a grounding thing, solid and warm. It cut right through the screaming static in his head, silencing the noise of the locker room and the press and the failure. For a few blessed seconds, there was no sensory overload, no exhaustion, just the taste of Ilya and the simple, undeniable fact of him. It was a pocket of pure, silent peace in a day that had been nothing but war.

Then Ilya pulled back, and the sanctuary vanished.

The world rushed back in with violent speed. The heat of the kitchen, the smell of bacon fat and garlic clinging to Ilya's t-shirt, the hum of the fridge—it all crashed over him again, heavier than before. The peace was gone, replaced instantly by the suffocating "too much" of

everything. Shane forced himself to relax his shoulders, to pat Ilya's back, but the mask was slipping.

The two of them were alike in many ways, but what made them fundamentally different—surprising as it might seem to some—was hockey itself. Yes, they were both arguably the best players the league had seen in the last ten years, maybe even longer. But where hockey was a means to an end for Ilya, for Shane, it was the very air he breathed.

So when Ilya couldn't reach his goals, when he had a bad game or a slump in the season, he was disappointed—angry, even. But he could continue. He could take the loss, learn from it, and rise again. With Shane, it was different. In his mind, there was no world in which a bad game was acceptable, let alone a string of them. When the inevitable failure happened, he didn't just get mad; he shut down. The only exception to this rule was when he lost against Ilya; in those moments, his happiness for the love of his life managed to outshine the crushing disappointment of losing.

So, naturally, his boyfriend could never have imagined how destroyed Shane truly was after a bad game. After all, Ilya had never been there for the aftermath before. Back when whatever was between them was just sex, Shane would use a quick fuck to burn off the surface-level frustration, and then he would retreat to his own apartment or a lonely hotel room to lick his wounds in private.

But now? Now, things were different. Now they were together and they spent every spare second glued to each other's sides, desperate to make up for the years they had wasted being too stubborn to acknowledge the love in each other's eyes. And because of that closeness, there was nowhere left to hide. Tonight, Ilya was about to learn exactly how much it cost Shane to lose. How unforgiving his mind could get with himself.

"Is okay," Ilya murmured into his hair, unaware that the comfort he was offering was currently scraping against Shane's raw nerves. He pulled back further to scan Shane's face, his eyes searching. "You look tired. But you are here. And I made dinner. Actual food. Not protein powder."

He looked so proud, so eager to please.

Shane felt a wave of guilt so sharp it nearly doubled him over. He couldn't tell him. He couldn't say, *I need to sit in a dark room for an hour without speaking*, or *The smell of cheese is making me want to tear my skin off*, or *I need to not eat tonight because it's the only way I can feel in charge of my body*.

Those were Shane's problems. Ugly, messy, solitary problems. You didn't dump those on the boyfriend you were still trying to impress. You didn't taint the first night back with your neuroses.

"That's... great," Shane lied. "Thanks, Ilya."

"Go wash up. I serve."

Shane went to the bathroom. He stared at himself in the mirror—pale, eyes wide and strained, the ghost of the game still haunting his reflection. He splashed cold water on his face, trying to scrub away the static. It didn't work. When he walked back out, bracing himself for the assault of the overhead LEDs, the kitchen was dimmer. The harsh, clinical brightness had been replaced by the softer, golden glow of the under-cabinet lights.

Ilya. He must have noticed the way Shane was squinting, the tightness around his eyes that screamed "*too much*."

The physical relief was instant, his optic nerves stopping their screaming, but it was immediately chased by a sour wash of guilt. Ilya was already adjusting his life just to accommodate Shane's moods. He didn't want to be the high-maintenance boyfriend. He didn't want to be the guy who needed the world softened just to function. He wanted to be easy. He wanted to be *normal*.

He sat down on the island, the movement feeling heavy. Even with the lights low, his ears were still ringing, picking up frequencies that shouldn't matter. The clinking of silverware on plates sounded like gunshots in the quiet room.

Ilya placed the bowl in front of him with a flourish, beaming like he'd just scored an overtime winner.

"Carbonara," his boyfriend announced, gesturing grandly at the dish. "Real thing. No cream, just egg and cheese. Like Italian grandmother taught me on YouTube."

That, at least, startled a genuine, albeit small, huff of laughter from him. It felt good, a brief, clean release of pressure in his chest. For a second the static cleared.

"You watched a tutorial?" Shane asked, a real smile tugging at his lips.

"Many tutorials. I am expert now," Ilya declared proudly.

But then Shane looked down and the smile died a little.

The sauce was thick. Glistening. The smell billowed up, hot and overwhelming, reclaiming the air in the room. His stomach seized. His throat closed. But Ilya was watching him, waiting. And the plate sat in front of him like an accusation. To anyone else, it was just pasta. To Shane, right now, it was a sensory nightmare. The smell of the cheese was too sharp, too heavy, clogging the air in the kitchen until he felt like he couldn't take a full breath. The texture, he knew without tasting it, would be wrong. Slimy.

They talked. They talked about the flight, about the weather in California, about Shane's parents and the holidays. Ilya wove a tapestry of conversation that conspicuously, surgically avoided the one topic hanging over them like a guillotine blade: Hockey. The game. The monumental loss. Shane's impediment to perform how he should, how was expected of him.

Ilya was protecting him. It was sweet. It made Shane want to crawl under the table.

He did his best to play his part in the choreography. He nodded at the right times. He forced a smile when Ilya made a joke about his mother's cooking. He asked follow-up questions, keeping the rhythm natural, keeping the silence at bay so the static in his head wouldn't drown him out.

And he ate. Or rather, he performed the act of eating. He cut a microscopic piece of bacon. He wrapped a single, lonely strand of fettuccine around his fork. He placed it in his mouth and swallowed it whole, bypassing the taste buds that were screaming *wrong, wrong, wrong*, treating the food like medicine he had to choke down.

He thought he was being subtle. He thought he was managing the variable, keeping the "Shane problems" hidden behind a facade of polite participation. But he forgot who he was sitting with. Ilya Rozanov made a living finding the smallest weakness in a defense. He made millions noticing a shift in weight, a drop of a shoulder, a micro-expression of hesitation. And for ten years, his favorite subject of study hadn't been game tape; it had been Shane Hollander. So of course he would notice, there is little Shane could shield from him nowadays.

Ilya stopped talking mid-sentence. The story about Shane's mom died in the air.

"Stop playing with it," Ilya's voice came from across the kitchen island, no longer chatty, tight with sudden impatience. "You are not five. Eat."

Shane flinched.

He was used to the tone. Or rather, he was getting used to it. He was learning not to take the sharp, blunt edges of Ilya's English personally, to understand that the lack of softness wasn't a lack of care. It was just the language barrier that would always stand between them, the direct, unvarnished way Ilya translated thought into sound. It was just how they spoke in Russia. Or at least, how Ilya spoke. Efficient. Commanding.

Under normal conditions, Shane would have brushed it off. He might have even teased him back about being a dictator. But these were not normal conditions. His buffer was gone. The sound of Ilya's voice felt like something scraping against his nerves, prickly and irritating. It bypassed his rational brain completely and hit his fight-or-flight response like a physical blow.

"I'm not hungry."

"You are lying," Ilya snapped, looking at him with something in his eyes that Shane didn't have the capacity to understand right now. He looked huge in the small kitchen, his presence taking up all the oxygen. "You played hard tonight. You burned everything."

"Not hard enough," Shane muttered. The words slipped out before he could check them, the toxic, relentless internal monologue leaking into the room.

Something crossed Ilya's eyes then. Something dark. A flash of that protective, possessive aggression that usually happened when an opponent took a cheap shot at Shane. But there was no opponent here. Just Shane, beating himself up.

"So you starve yourself?" Ilya asked, the question sharp with frustration, landing like an accusation.

"I'm not starving myself!" Shane shot back. He gripped the fork so hard the edges dug into his palm, a grounding point of pain to focus on. "I just... I can't eat it. Okay? It's too much. The day was too much."

"And you punish your body for it?" Ilya moved closer, his frustration boiling over. "You carry the whole team, you skate until your legs shake, and then you come home and refuse fuel? It is stupid, Shane. It is reckless."

"Stop analyzing me!" Shane stood up, the chair legs dragging across the floor with a screech that made his teeth ache. "I handled myself for ten years before you showed up! I don't need a babysitter. I don't need you watching every bite I take like I'm some... some broken project you have to fix."

"I am not trying to fix you! I am trying to love you!" Ilya yelled, throwing his hands up. "But you make it so hard! You lock the door. You hide inside your head where I cannot reach. Why are you with me if you want to be alone so bad?"

The words hit Shane like a physical blow to the chest. The air in the room seemed to vanish. The hum of the refrigerator got louder, buzzing in his ears. The lights felt searingly bright. The anger that had been holding him upright simply evaporated, leaving him hollow and trembling.

He wasn't trying to lock Ilya out, he was just trying to keep the overwhelming noise of the world from crushing them both. He was trying to be the Shane Hollander that everyone expected—solid, unbreakable, easy—and he was failing.

His throat constricted, tight and painful. He tried to swallow the feeling down, to push it into the box where he kept the panic during games, but the lid wouldn't stay down.

"I'm not..." Shane's voice broke. "I don't want to be alone."

He looked up at Ilya, and the fight went out of him completely. His eyes burned, and before he could turn away, the tears spilled over. They felt hot on his skin, humiliating and undeniable. He stood there, shoulders slumped, looking at Ilya with wet, wide eyes, radiating a misery so raw it felt like he was skinless.

His bottom lip trembled—a small, involuntary spasm that betrayed just how close he was to shattering completely. He didn't look like the Captain of the Montreal Voyageurs. He looked devastated. He looked like something small and kicked that didn't understand why it was being punished.

The silence that crashed into the room was sudden and absolute.

Ilya's mouth snapped shut. The fury in his posture dissolved instantly, replaced by a shock so profound it looked painful. It was like watching a string being cut. The arrogance, the frustration, the hardness—it all fell away, leaving him looking horrified.

“Shane,” Ilya breathed out. The name was a prayer.

He moved fast, closing the distance between them and crashing into Shane's space, blocking out the bright kitchen lights, blocking out the overwhelming room. His hands hovering for a split second before cupping Shane's face, treating him like he was made of spun glass.

“No, no, hey. *Zolotse*. Don't. Please.” Ilya's voice was a wreck. “I am sorry. I am so sorry. I am idiot. I am brute. I am sorry.” He repeated it like a mantra, his thumbs brushing frantically at the tears, smearing the wetness across Shane's cheekbones as if he could erase the evidence of his own stupidity. “I am sorry, *solynshko*. I didn't mean to... I am so sorry. I pushed too hard.”

“I didn't mean to yell,” Shane whispered, his voice thick.

“Not. Is okay, I deserved it” Ilya murmured against his skin, kissing a fresh tear right as it escaped. He tasted the salt, lingering for a second too long, his hold tightening possessively on the back of Shane's neck. “I was loud. Too loud. I know you hate the noise.”

The apology made it worse. It was a confirmation of his own defectiveness. *I know you hate the noise*. It sounded like an accommodation for a child, or a warning label on a fragile piece of equipment.

Shane felt the warmth of Ilya's chest, the solid, grounding weight of his hands, and a desperate part of him wanted to burrow into it and hide until the world stopped spinning. But his skin was crawling. The physical contact, as much as he craved it, was just *more*. More heat. More texture. More weight. More input on a system that was already flashing red warning lights.

The sensation of Ilya's scruff against his wet cheek, usually a comfort, felt like sandpaper grating against a sunburn.

“I can't,” Shane choked out.

He jerked back. But it wasn't a gentle retreat; he flinched, a desperate, physical scramble for personal space. He stumbled back until his hips hit the edge of the granite counter, putting a sudden, cold foot of distance between them.

“Shane?” Ilya's hands fell to his sides, looking empty.

“Don't,” Shane gasped, wrapping his arms tight around his own middle, holding himself together because he felt like he was physically spilling out. He turned his face away, unable to bear the weight of Ilya's concern. “Just... don't look at me. Please.”

The shame was a hot, acidic wave rising in his throat. He was twenty-eight years old. He was the Captain of the Montreal Voyageurs. He played through broken bones and torn ligaments without flinching. And now? Now he was cowering in his own kitchen, crying and hyperventilating because his boyfriend raised his voice and the pasta smelled wrong.

It was pathetic. It was humiliating.

"I'm sorry," Shane whispered again, the words scraping his throat. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the image of Ilya's devastated face, but the darkness just made the ringing in his ears louder. "I'm sorry, I just... I need a second. It's too much. Everything is just too much."

He didn't make a conscious decision to sit. Gravity just took over where his will finally failed. He slid down the front of the counter, his spine scraping against the marble, until he hit the cold tile floor. He pulled his knees to his chest, wrapping his arms around them in a tight, desperate knot, burying his face in the space between his arms and his thighs.

He curled in on himself, trying to make his body as small as he felt.

The tears kept coming, hot and stupid, soaking into the denim of his jeans, but the sobbing was silent now. A jagged, gasping fight for air that hurt his ribs. Inside his head, the static had turned into a screaming, coherent loop of self-hatred.

Ilya had flown across the continent. Ilya had gone grocery shopping. Ilya, who hated cooking, had watched videos of Italian grandmothers just to make Shane smile. He had set the table. He had waited. He had been so proud.

And Shane had thrown it back in his face because he couldn't handle the *smell*.

He wasn't enough. He was never going to be enough. He couldn't even do the basics of being a human being, let alone a partner. Normal people came home from work and ate dinner with their boyfriends. Normal people didn't need the lights dimmed and the world silenced just to exist. Normal people didn't treat a gesture of love like an assault.

He was a bad boyfriend. He was a defective boyfriend. He had failed to keep his problems out of their relationship.

Ilya doesn't need this, Shane thought, the realization settling in his gut like lead. He has his own pressure. He has the media, the trade rumors, his own bruises to heal. He needs a partner who supports him. Someone easy. Someone fun. He didn't need a basket case who required a manual to operate.

Shane squeezed his eyes shut tighter, wishing he could just disappear into the floorboards. He was just another problem for Ilya to solve, another weight on Ilya's shoulders, and the guilt of it was crushing him faster than the anxiety ever could.

He waited for the footsteps walking away. He waited for the slam of a door. He waited for the inevitable sound of Ilya giving up on him. But the footsteps didn't leave. They got closer, then stopped.

There was a soft *clink* of ceramic on wood—the sound of the pasta bowl being moved far, far away to the counter on the other side of the room. The smell receded, just a fraction, but enough to let a thimbleful of oxygen back into the kitchen.

Then, a rustle of fabric. A soft exhalation of air.

Shane squeezed his eyes tighter, bracing for a hand on his shoulder, for the demand of comfort he couldn't give right now. But the touch never came. Slowly, carefully, Shane peeled one eye open, peering out from the fortress of his own arms.

Ilya was sitting on the floor.

He was sitting directly across from Shane, back against the oven, legs crossed loosely. But he wasn't close. He had left a deliberate, wide expanse of tiled floor between them—a no-man's-land of safety. He wasn't crowding Shane. He wasn't looming. He wasn't even looking directly at him; his gaze was fixed on a spot on the floor near Shane's foot, soft and unfocused.

He had made himself small. He had made himself quiet.

And he was breathing.

It wasn't his normal breathing. It was deliberate. Loud. Rhythmic. Ilya took a deep, exaggerated inhale through his nose, his chest expanding visibly, holding it for a count of four. Then a slow, audible exhale through his mouth, like he was blowing out a candle.

In... two... three... four. Out... two... three... four.

He didn't say a word, didn't issue a command like *"breathe with me."* He didn't try to fix it with logic or apologies. He just sat there, a few feet away, and became a living metronome. Shane watched him, mesmerized.

The only sound in the room was the steady, rolling tide of his boyfriend's breath.

In... two... three... four.

Shane's lungs, which had been locked in a spasm of shallow, panicked gasps, began to stutter. Biology took over. The mirror neurons in his brain, desperate for a pattern to latch onto, began to sync with the only steady thing in the room. He took a shaky, wet breath. It hitched painfully, but it went deeper than the last one.

Ilya didn't react, didn't jump on the progress or praise him. He just kept the rhythm going, steady as a heartbeat, unshakeable as a mountain.

Out... two... three... four.

He was offering Shane an anchor, but he wasn't forcing Shane to grab it. He was just floating it out there in the empty space between them. The knot in Shane's chest loosened, just a millimeter. The crushing weight of *I ruined it* didn't disappear, but the panic began to recede, replaced by a dull, aching exhaustion. Ilya wasn't leaving. Ilya wasn't angry.

Ilya was just breathing.

It took a long time. Minutes that stretched out in the dim kitchen, measured only by the rise and fall of Ilya's chest. But eventually, the frantic rabbit-heart rhythm in Shane's chest slowed. The ringing in his ears faded to a dull hum. His muscles, which had been locked tight

enough to snap, loosened into a heavy, boneless exhaustion. He was still on the floor, still curled up, but he wasn't shaking anymore.

He uncurled slightly. Just enough to rest his cheek against his knee, looking at Ilya across the tiles. Ilya saw the shift immediately. He didn't move closer, but his shoulders dropped a fraction, the tension bleeding out of his frame.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

The question was barely audible. Ilya's voice was pitched so low it didn't vibrate in the air; it just slid across the floorboards. It wasn't an accusation anymore. It was genuine, baffled curiosity.

Shane wiped his nose on his sleeve, feeling raw and hollowed out. "Tell you what?" his voice rasped.

"That you were overstimulated."

Shane flinched. His nose wrinkled, his mouth twisting into a sharp, instinctive grimace of distaste. It was a visceral reaction, like tasting lemon juice. Ilya blinked, his brow furrowing in immediate confusion. He replayed the sentence in his head, looking for the mistake.

"I use wrong word?" Ilya whispered, tilting his head. "Is... translation error? In Russian, it means—"

"No," Shane interrupted, his voice muffled against his knees. He closed his eyes. "No, you used the right word. It's the correct term."

"Then why you make face like you smell bad milk?"

"Because I hate it," Shane admitted, the truth small and bitter. "I hate that word."

He hated how clinical it sounded. *Overstimulated*. It sounded like something you wrote on a chart. It sounded like something you said about a toddler who missed their nap, or a broken piece of machinery that couldn't handle the voltage. It didn't sound like something that happened to a grown man, a professional athlete, a *captain*.

It made him feel like a medical condition. A problem to be managed.

"It makes me feel..." Shane trailed off, gesturing vaguely with one hand, unable to find the language for *defective/weak/broken*. "It makes me feel like a child."

"Okay," Ilya said simply, nodding, accepting Shane's reality as absolute law. "We burn the word. It is trash. No more." He shifted slightly on the floor, getting comfortable on the hard tile, making it clear he wasn't going anywhere.

"But you have to help me, Shane," Ilya continued, his voice barely a murmur. "I am flying blind here. I know hockey. I know how to read a goalie, I know how to read *you* most of time. I know when you are going to make a pass before you do. But this?" He gestured vaguely at the space between them. "This is new ice. And I don't want to hurt you. I don't

want to be loud idiot making you wince." He paused, looking at Shane with an openness that was disarming. "Explain to me. Not with fancy words. With *your* words. What does it feel like? So I can understand."

Shane swallowed hard. The request was gentle, but the task felt monumental. He wasn't used to translating his internal chaos into sentences; he was used to suppressing it until it went away.

"It feels..." Shane started, then stopped. He picked at a loose thread on his jeans. "It feels like I have no skin."

Ilya didn't flinch. He just nodded, urging him on.

"It feels like everyone else has this... filter," Shane whispered, staring at the floor. "Like, you can walk into a room and the lights are just lights, and the noise is just noise. But for me, sometimes... the filter breaks. And then everything comes in at 100 percent volume. The smell of the food isn't just a smell, it's... it's choking me. The sound of the fork is like a needle in my ear." He took a shaky breath. "And when it gets like that, having to talk, having to pretend I'm normal... it feels like lifting five hundred pounds. I just want to turn it off. I want everything to stop."

Ilya nodded slowly, absorbing the image. He didn't look horrified anymore; he looked like he was studying game tape, looking for the pattern, the root cause. "And today?" He asked, his voice careful, probing but not pushing. "What broke the filter today? Is it random? Or is there a... *ah*, trigger?"

Shane picked at the thread on his jeans again until it snapped. The shame was there, hot and prickly, but he also felt a sudden, stinging wave of emotion that had nothing to do with the panic. It was the way Ilya was sitting there, patiently asking all the right questions, treating Shane's shattered psyche with the same focused, delicate precision he used to handle a puck. Trying to understand.

It made him feel naked.

Not like in the locker room, and not like in bed—that was easy. That was just skin and muscle and scar tissue. This was a different kind of exposure. He was stripping away the carefully curated mask of stability he'd worn since he was sixteen. He was showing Ilya the wires, the short-circuits, the ugly, messy parts of his brain that didn't work right.

It was terrifying, made him want to run.

But just like the first time they had finally crossed the line from rivals to something else, stripping off the years of animosity to find the tenderness underneath, Ilya's careful demeanor was a balm. It was cool water on a burn. it soothed. It told him, without words, that he wouldn't be attacked while he was defenseless.

The trust settled in his chest, heavier and warmer than the anxiety.

“The game,” Shane admitted, his voice barely audible. “The loss.” He felt pathetic saying it out loud. *I had a breakdown because we lost a hockey game.* But he knew, deep down, it was more than that. “It’s not just the score,” he added quickly, desperate to make him understand. “It’s... I have to win. That’s it. That’s my only job. Sometimes it feels like I have to be perfect. To be the one who doesn’t make mistakes.”

He dug his chin into his knees, his voice trembling.

“Since I was a kid, that was the deal. I have to be the Golden Boy. And when I don’t... when I fail... I feel like I’m letting everyone down. My parents. The country. The team.” He looked up at Ilya, his eyes wet and terrified. “*You.*”

He shuddered, a full-body tremor that started in his chest.

“When I lose, when I’m not perfect... I feel like I don’t deserve anything good. I don’t deserve to be comfortable. I don’t deserve to eat dinner. I just... I feel like I have to be punished. It feels like the failure cracks me open. All that energy I use to keep the world out, to keep the filter working? It’s gone. I used it all up trying to win. And when I come home after a game like that, I have nothing left. No shields. Just... static. And then everything hurts.”

Ilya’s expression softened into something profoundly sad. “And I came in,” he said softly, a thread of regret in his tone, “loud and bright. With strong smells. And demanding you to eat.”

“You didn’t know,” Shane said quickly, the guilt flaring up again. “You were just being nice. You were being a good boyfriend.”

“I was being a *loud* boyfriend,” Ilya corrected. “Because I didn’t know the rules of the day.” He looked at Shane, his expression serious. “Next time, you tell me. You don’t have to use word you hate. You can say... *‘I need quiet’*. Or *‘lights out’*. Anything. And I will back off. I will turn off the sun if you need it.”

It sounded so simple. So easy.

“I’m not used to that,” Shane admitted, his voice cracking. He hugged his knees tighter. “I’m not used to... this. Leaning on someone. Giving this part of me to someone else.”

He looked up at Ilya then, his eyes now dry but stinging.

“For ten years, Ilya, it’s just been me. If I have a bad day, I handle it. I starve, or I sit in the dark, or I stare at a wall until my brain reboots. I don’t drag anyone else down with me. I don’t... I don’t lean on other people. I stand up.”

“You stand up on the ice,” Ilya countered firmly. “You carry the team. You carry the city. That is enough standing.”

Ilya finally moved. He reached out slowly, telegraphing every inch of the movement, until his hand rested palm-up on the floor, halfway between them. An invitation. “Here, in this kitchen, you do not have to be Captain. You do not have to be strong or perfect. You can be... skinless. You can be tired.” His boyfriend’s eyes held him, fierce and tender. “You say you

are not used to leaning? Fine. I teach you. I have big shoulders. I can take it. I promise you, Shane, you are not heavy." He took a deep breath before continuing, "I am here now; you don't need to carry this alone."

Shane stared at Ilya's hand. The open palm. The waiting fingers.

It went against every survival instinct he had honed since he was a teenager. But looking at Ilya—sitting on the floor in his expensive sweatpants, waiting patiently for Shane to bridge the gap—Shane realized he didn't want to survive alone anymore. So, slowly, hesitantly, he uncurled one hand from his legs, and reached out across the cold tiles placing it in Ilya's, whose fingers closed around his instantly. Warm. Solid. An anchor.

And the moment his hand was enveloped in the tight unyielding hold of his boyfriend, something miraculous happened. The buzzing under Shane's skin, that prickly, electric static that had been tormenting him for hours, suddenly went quiet at the point of contact. The pressure was grounding. It felt like a lead blanket settling over a frayed wire, damping down the sparks.

The relief was so violent, so immediate, that it broke him all over again. Fresh overwhelmed tears, hot and fast, spilled down his cheeks. He didn't think, he just needed *more*. He needed that silence to cover his whole body.

Shane scrambled across the small gap of tiles, a desperate, uncoordinated movement, and threw himself at Ilya. Climbing him till he was straddling his lap, his knees hitting the floor on either side of Ilya's hips. He buried his face frantically into the crook of his neck, seeking the dark, seeking the warmth, blocking out the last of the kitchen light.

He wrapped his arms around Ilya's broad shoulders and squeezed, holding on with every ounce of strength left in his exhausted muscles. He clung to him like he was drowning and Ilya was the only solid thing in the entire ocean. He pressed himself so close that not even a molecule of air could fit between them, trying to fuse their ribcages together, trying to borrow Ilya's calm, Ilya's steady heart, Ilya's skin.

Ilya let out a small *oof* at the impact, but he didn't waver. He was a wall. He caught Shane instantly, his arms coming up to wrap tight around Shane's waist, locking him in place.

"I got you," Ilya rumbled against his ear, his voice vibrating through Shane's chest. "I got you. Hold on. As tight as you need. I got you."

It wasn't enough.

The contact was good—the heat, the solid wall of Ilya's chest—but Shane's nervous system was still vibrating, buzzing with that phantom energy that made him feel like he was dissolving. He felt untethered, like his own skin wasn't tight enough to keep his soul inside his body.

He didn't just need to be held. He needed to be contained.

"Tighter," Shane gasped into Ilya's neck, his voice wet and desperate. He dug his own fingers into Ilya's shoulders, trying to demonstrate, trying to pull himself through Ilya's ribcage. "Please. Tighter."

Ilya hesitated for a fraction of a second—a flicker of instinct to be gentle with something so precious.

"Do it," Shane begged, a raw, broken sound. "Squeeze me. Please. I need... I need you to crush it out of me."

Ilya didn't ask again. He understood. He shifted his grip, sliding his arms higher up Shane's back, locking his hands together like a vise. And then, he engaged the muscles that could clear a 200-pound defenseman from the crease.

He squeezed. *Hard*. Hard enough that Shane's ribs groaned under the pressure. Hard enough to push the air out of his lungs in a sharp *whoosh*.

And it was perfect.

The crushing weight was exactly what his screaming nerves needed. It forced his brain to focus on the singular, overwhelming sensation of pressure, drowning out the static, the smell of the pasta, the memory of the game. Shane went boneless. He slumped completely against Ilya, surrendering to the force of the embrace, letting Ilya hold him up entirely.

"Better?" Ilya rumbled, his mouth pressed against Shane's ear.

"Yeah," Shane breathed out, his eyes drooping shut. The world finally stopped spinning. "Yeah. Don't let go."

"Never," Ilya vowed, tightening his grip just a fraction more, sealing them together. "I have you. You are not going anywhere. I have you."

They stayed like that for what felt, to Shane, like a lifetime. Time lost its shape in the dim kitchen. There were no periods, no buzzers, no schedules. There was only the floor, the hum of the refrigerator, and the crushing, saving weight of Ilya's arms.

Shane knew, logically, that the tile floor must be unforgiving. He knew Ilya's legs must be cramping, that his back must be screaming in protest against the hard oven. But Ilya didn't move. He didn't shift his weight. He didn't loosen his grip by even a millimeter. He held Shane with a terrifying, absolute stillness, as if he were afraid that breathing too hard might shatter the fragile peace Shane had finally found.

The only sound was Ilya's voice.

He had started murmuring a few minutes in, a low, continuous stream of Russian against Shane's temple. Shane didn't understand a word. He didn't know if Ilya was reciting poetry, praying, or just listing the names of stars.

But that was exactly what he needed. This was just sound. It was a low, gravelly vibration that traveled from Ilya's chest directly into Shane's own, soothing his frying nerves. He didn't

have to process the words; he just had to float in the cadence of them.

“Ya s toboy, zolotse. Ya s toboy. Nikuda ne uhoju. Ti v bezopasnosti. Vso budet khorosho, kotonok, ya zdes', ya obo vsom pozabochus'. Takoy dragotsenny, takoy smely, yesli by ty tol'ko mog videt' sebya tak, kak vizhu tebya ya...”

The meaning didn't matter. It was the vibration that helped. The deep rumble of Ilya's chest against Shane's own, a physical lullaby that seeped into his bones and chased away the last echoes of the static.

Eventually, the adrenaline crash hit. Shane's body went from vibrating to heavy. A profound, bone-deep exhaustion swept over him, making his eyelids feel like lead weights. The panic was gone, leaving him hollowed out and drifting.

Ilya, sensing the shift in Shane's breathing—the way the ragged gasps had smoothed into slow, sleepy exhales—finally moved. He turned his head slightly, pressing a kiss to Shane's sweaty hair.

“Shane?” he whispered.

Shane made a small, questioning noise in his throat, too tired to form words.

“You are cooling down,” Ilya murmured. “The floor is cold. Do you want bath? Warm water. No lights. Just quiet.”

A bath. The idea filtered slowly through Shane's sluggish brain. Warmth. Weightlessness. Silence. It sounded like heaven. It sounded like the only way to get the feeling of the day off his skin. But then the guilt, sharp and persistent even through the exhaustion, poked through the haze.

“But... the food,” Shane mumbled against Ilya's neck, his voice thick with regret. “You cooked.”

“Does not matter,” Ilya cut in immediately, his voice firm, allowing no room for argument. “The food is just food. It waits. Or it goes in trash. I do not care about pasta, Shane. Do not worry about anything else right now. Now tell me, bath or bed?”

Shane nodded against Ilya's neck. A tiny, jerky movement of surrender.

“Bath,” he murmured.

“Okay,” Ilya said softly. “I need to loosen my arms to move. Is that okay? Just a little bit.”

Shane hesitated. The fear of the pressure vanishing, of his skin starting to crawl again, spiked for a second. He tightened his grip on Ilya's t-shirt instinctively.

“I am not leaving,” Ilya promised, reading the hesitation in the tension of Shane's fingers. “I am just moving us. I promise.”

Shane swallowed, then gave a small, reluctant nod.

Ilya didn't let go. Not really. He shifted his hands, sliding one arm down from Shane's back to hook firmly under his knees. The other arm braced wide across Shane's back, securing him. Then, with a grunt that vibrated through Shane's ribs, Ilya pushed off the floor, lifting Shane almost effortlessly, rising from the ground with a smooth, terrifying power. Shane gasped, bracing for the wobble, for the struggle, but there was none. To Ilya Rozanov, who spent his life moving men on ice, Shane was nothing. He was air.

Shane's reaction was immediate and primal. As soon as gravity shifted, he scrambled for purchase, wrapping his legs tight around Ilya's hips and locking his ankles together, burying himself into the lift. He tightened his arms around Ilya's neck, gripping the fabric of his t-shirt in fists so hard his knuckles turned white.

A high, thin whine escaped his throat, muffled against the pulse point of Ilya's neck.

It was half sensory overwhelm, half dizzying, desperate relief. He was a big man—he was professional muscle and bone—but Ilya held him suspended like he weighed absolutely nothing. His casual strength made Shane's head spin in the best way possible. To be handled with such terrifying ease, to be made small enough to carry.

Ilya's physical power was like a reflection of his mental strength. His boyfriend was strong. He was unshakeable. He could lift Shane off the ground without even breathing hard, and if he could carry the heavy, dead weight of his exhausted body, then he was strong enough to carry Shane's problems, too. He could take the weight. All of it.

"Shhh," Ilya soothed, feeling the desperation in the way Shane clung to him. He adjusted his grip, one arm forming a solid bar under Shane's thighs, the other splayed wide and protective across his back. "Is okay. I got you. You are safe."

He walked them out of the kitchen, carrying Shane's dead weight without a hitch in his stride, murmuring soft assurances against his temple. "I take care of everything," Ilya promised, his voice low and absolute, cutting through the steam. "The food. The bed. The world outside. You do not have to think about a single thing until morning. I handle it all."

The bathroom was a sanctuary. Ilya kept the lights off, letting the streetlamps outside filter through the frosted glass in a soft, hazy grey. He sat Shane on the closed toilet lid like a doll, undressing him with efficient, reverent hands, still murmuring reassurances to fill the silence. When the tub was full, Ilya checked the water with his hand.

"Okay," Ilya whispered, crouching in front of Shane. "Water is ready. I am going to help you in now. I will take your weight. You just step. Ready?"

Shane nodded, his movements sluggish and heavy. He let Ilya guide him, stepping into the warmth. As he sank down, the water rose to meet him, warm and enveloping, instantly silencing the rest of the gravity in the room. He slumped back against the porcelain, the water lapping at his chin, and felt his limbs begin to detach from his body.

Ilya rolled up his sleeves. He didn't rush. He sat on the edge of the tub, picking up two bottles from the ledge.

“Soap,” Ilya murmured, holding them up in the dim light. “You want eucalyptus one, or unscented one. Which one feels better?”

Shane blinked at them. The eucalyptus was usually his favorite—sharp and clean—but right now, the idea of a smell that strong made his nose twitch. He pointed a trembling finger at the white, unscented bottle.

“Good,” Ilya praised, setting the other one aside. “Good choice. Unscented. Quiet soap.” He poured a little onto a sponge. “I am going to wash your arm now. Left arm. Is that okay?”

Shane nodded.

Ilya moved slowly. The sponge was soft, the pressure firm and grounding. He washed Shane’s arm with long, deliberate strokes, washing away the sweat of the game, the stress of the argument, the residue of the panic.

“You are doing so good,” Ilya murmured, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through the water. “Just like that. You don’t have to do anything. No lifting. No helping. I have it.” He moved to the other arm. “Right arm now. Going to lift it. Let it be heavy, Shane. Give it to me.”

Shane tried to lift his arm to help, a reflex of independence, but Ilya gently pushed it back down into the water.

“No,” Ilya corrected, firm but kind. “I said let it be heavy. You don’t work right now. You are off the clock. I am in charge of the arms. Let go.”

The command flicked a switch deep in Shane’s brain, Ilya was in charge. The relief was narcotic. Shane exhaled a breath he didn’t know he was holding, and his arm went completely limp in Ilya’s grip.

“There,” Ilya soothed, washing the heavy limb. “That is a good boy. Look at you. Letting go. You are so good at this.” He moved to Shane’s chest, telegraphing every touch. “Chest now. Just the sponge. Gentle.”

Shane’s head lolled back against the rim of the tub. He felt untethered. The water held him up, and Ilya held him down, and for the first time in ten years, Shane felt like he didn’t have to hold himself together. He felt like he was dissolving into the steam, floating in a space where mistakes didn’t exist.

“I am going to rinse your hair now, yes?” Ilya announced softly. “Close your eyes. I will cover them. No water in your face. I promise.”

Shane closed his eyes. He felt Ilya’s large hand cup his forehead, creating a seal, a visor against the world. Then, the warm water cascaded over his scalp.

“You are so good,” Ilya whispered, his fingers massaging the shampoo into Shane’s scalp with a slow, hypnotic rhythm. “You think you are broken, but you are not. You are enough. I

could never be disappointed of you. You are too good, letting me take care of you. That makes you good.”

Shane let out a soft, broken sound—half sob, half whine.

“I know,” Ilya hummed, scratching lightly at the base of Shane’s skull, hitting a pressure point that made Shane’s toes curl. “It is a lot of work, being Shane Hollander. But not in here. In here, you are just mine. And I don’t need you to be strong or perfect. I need you to be soft. I need you to let me do the work.”

He rinsed the foam away, the water swirling around Shane’s ears, muffling the world even further.

“See?” Ilya’s voice came through the water, distorted and dreamlike. “I have you. I have the thinking. You just float, *solnyshko*. You deserve all the good things in this world.”

And so he did. He drifted in the warm dark, anchored only by the sure, commanding hands of the man who was strong enough to carry him. His defenses were completely gone, washed away down the drain and the praises where only making him more floaty. When Shane looked up at him, his eyes were wide, shimmering with moisture—half bathwater, half fresh, silent overwhelmed tears. He looked open. He looked wrecked in the most beautiful way.

Ilya’s expression softened into a smile that was terrifyingly tender. He leaned forward, ignoring the water soaking into the front of his shirt, and pressed a soft, lingering kiss to Shane’s damp cheek. “Such a pretty crier,” he murmured against his skin, the praise sounding like a benediction, transforming Shane’s shame into something precious. “So lovely when you let go.”

Shane let out a low, trembling whine—a sound of pure, unadulterated need that vibrated in the quiet bathroom. He leaned into the kiss, eyes squeezing shut, his wet lashes brushing against Ilya’s jaw, completely overwhelmed by the gentleness where he expected judgment.

Ilya let out a breathy, incredulous laugh, shaking his head slightly. The sound was warm, vibrating against Shane’s damp skin.

“Unfair,” Ilya whispered, his thumb brushing over Shane’s cheekbone to catch a stray drop of water. “Is completely unfair.” He rested his forehead against Shane’s wet one, smiling crookedly. “How am I ever supposed to win an argument with you?” Ilya teased gently, his voice thick with adoration. “You look at me with those big, wet eyes, you make that sound... and I am finished. Game over. You win everything. I give you the moon. I give you the Stanley Cup. It is cheating, honestly.”

Shane managed a weak, watery smile, his lips trembling, feeling warm all the way through his chest. He felt floaty and soft, like he was made of clouds instead of bruises.

“Okay,” Ilya murmured, reluctantly pulling back just an inch to look Shane in the eyes again. “Water is getting cold. And I promised you bed. Ready to stand up? I still have you. Just like before.”

He didn't wait for Shane to move his own heavy limbs. He was there, hands steady on his waist, guiding him up from the lukewarm bath. Before the cold air could bite, Ilya was there with a plush towel, wrapping it around Shane's shoulders like a cape. He dried him with efficient, brisk rubs, treating him with the same focused care he'd give to a piece of expensive equipment after a game, doing all the work so Shane could just sway on his feet, eyes half-closed.

The walk to the bedroom was a blur, Shane felt like he was moving underwater. Ilya sat him on the edge of the bed and turned to the duffel bag he'd left on the floor. He rummaged for a second before pulling out a black t-shirt.

He bunched it up and pulled it over Shane's head. "Arms up."

Shane obeyed blindly. The cotton slid down his chest, soft and worn. It wasn't until the fabric settled around him that Shane realized it wasn't his. The shoulder seams hung low on his arms, the hem hitting his thighs. And the smell of cedar, expensive detergent, and the faint, underlying scent of *Ilya*. It was heavy and grounding, wrapping him in a sensory cloud that screamed *safe*. It was a shield Shane could wear. He breathed it in, his nose burying slightly in the collar, and felt his heart rate drop another ten beats.

"Okay," Ilya said, satisfied after also helping him with a pair of soft grey sweatpants. He sat down next to him, the mattress dipping under his weight, his knee knocking gently against Shane's. But as he started to lean back, ready to crawl under the covers and disappear for twelve hours, Ilya's hand landed on his thigh.

"No," Ilya said. His voice back to being serious. Low, deep, and immovable. He leaned in, catching Shane's wandering gaze and holding it. "We are not done. You need food."

Shane's face crumpled instantly. His nose wrinkled, his mouth twisting into a visceral expression of disgust. The mere idea of putting anything in his stomach made his throat close up again.

"I can't," Shane croaked, shaking his head weakly. "I really can't, Ilya. I'll be sick."

"Stop," Ilya ordered. He didn't raise his voice, but the command was clear. He reached up, smoothing his thumb over the furrow in Shane's brow, physically wiping away the stress. "I hear your brain working. Stop it. What did I say in the bathroom? Who is doing the thinking tonight?"

Shane blinked, the fight draining out of him under Ilya's steady gaze. "You are."

"Correct. I am brain. You are just body. And I am telling you, the body is empty. It needs to eat." Ilya softened his tone, his hand cupping Shane's jaw, thumb stroking his cheekbone. "I will give you something else. No smells. No sauce. I will bring you toast. Plain. Dry. Boring food."

Shane slumped, and looking up at his boyfriend through his lashes, he remembered what he had said just minutes ago. So Shane used it. He let his shoulders drop, he widened his eyes,

letting them shine with that exhausted, pathetic glimmer, and pushed out his bottom lip in a slight, trembling pout. He didn't say a word, just silently begged, *please, don't make me.*

Ilya stared at him. For a second, his resolve flickered. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, affectionate and exasperated, eyes softening at the sight. "You are terrible," he murmured, leaning in to brush his nose against Shane's. "That is a very dirty play, Hollander."

Shane let out a small, hopeful breath, tilting his head.

"But no," Ilya said, pulling back just an inch. He hardened his expression into a protective, ironclad authority. "It does not work this time. You are cute, but you are empty. You have to eat. That is the rule." He gave Shane's thigh a final, decisive squeeze, grounding him. "I am going to get the toast. You stay right here. Do not move. I mean it."

When he returned three minutes later, he moved like a shadow, silent and careful. He placed a small plate on the nightstand and sat back down on the bed, his presence immediately warming the space beside Shane.

"Here," Ilya murmured, handing Shane a slice of toast. It was exactly as promised: plain, lightly toasted, unthreatening.

Shane took it, his hand feeling heavy as he looked at the bread like it was a complex math equation he had to solve.

"Just one bite," Ilya coached softly, his hand settling on the back of Shane's neck, his thumb rubbing a slow, hypnotic circle against the hairline. "Start with the corner. I am right here."

Shane took a breath, raised the toast, and took a small, tentative bite. It was dry. It required effort to chew. But it wasn't slimy, and it didn't smell so overwhelming.

"Good," Ilya praised instantly, the word low and rumbling. "That is it. Very good. Keep going. Good boy."

Shane chewed slowly, focusing on Ilya's thumb against his neck, using that rhythmic pressure as a metronome to swallow. He took another bite. Then another. Ilya reached for the plate and picked up a piece of toast for himself. He took a large bite, chewing purposefully, making it a shared activity. Here, they weren't hockey stars or professional athletes in a high demanding league, they were not carrying their teams on their backs nor the expectations of entire nations and fans; they were just two men sitting in the dark, eating dry toast in silence.

"See?" Ilya whispered, bumping his shoulder against Shane's. "Boring food party. We are wild animals."

Shane managed a weak huff of laughter. He finished the slice. It felt like climbing a mountain, but he did it.

"I'm done," Shane whispered, the plate rattling slightly as he put it down against his knee.

"You did perfect," Ilya said, taking the plate and setting it aside. He wiped a crumb from the corner of Shane's mouth with his thumb, his touch lingering. "I am proud of you. You fought brain and you won."

He maneuvered them down until they were lying properly, pulling the duvet up over Shane's shoulders, tucking him in tight. Ilya lay on his side, facing Shane, one arm draped over Shane's waist, holding him close but not crushing him this time. Just a steady, reassuring weight.

The room was silent, save for their breathing. Shane's eyes were heavy, the sleep pulling at him like a tide, but the question his boyfriend had asked earlier was still itching at the back of his mind.

"Ilya?"

"Mmm?" Ilya hummed, his eyes already closed, his chin resting on top of Shane's head.

"I just..." Shane's voice was a slur, barely forming the words. "I didn't want to be... a problem. Tonight was supposed to be nice. I didn't want to bring my... my mess into it. That's why I didn't tell you before."

Ilya's eyes opened. He shifted slightly, pulling back just enough to see Shane's face in the dark.

"Shane," he said softly. "What do you think a relationship is?"

He blinked, confused. "I don't know. Being together. Making each other happy."

"That is the easy part," Ilya corrected. "That is the highlight. But relationship? The real thing? It is this. It is messy." He ran his hand down Shane's arm, over the borrowed t-shirt. "You think because I am who I am, I only want the shiny parts of you? The fun parts?" Ilya shook his head. "No. I signed up for the whole package. The boring, the shitty results, the shutouts, the victories *and* the days where your filter breaks and you need to sit in the dark."

"It's a lot of baggage," Shane whispered, the guilt still lingering.

"We all have baggage, *solnyshko*," Ilya said firmly, pronouncing *baggage* in a way that in any other circumstances would've made Shane laugh. "I have plenty. You carry mine all the time, even when you do not know it. So let me carry yours. That is deal. You don't bring *'problems'* to the relationship. You bring *yourself*. And I love yourself." He kissed Shane's forehead, a seal on the promise. "You do not have to hide the hard days from me. Never again. Okay?"

Shane felt the last bit of tension leave his body, exhaling a long, shaky breath that turned into a yawn. "Okay," he whispered, his eyes sliding shut, finally feeling safe enough to let go completely. "Okay."

The silence that settled over the room wasn't heavy anymore; it was soft, like a blanket. Shane drifted off within seconds, his body finally accepting the permission to stop running.

Ilya waited until he felt his breathing deepen into a slow, rhythmic puff against his chest before he allowed his own eyes to close once more.

They were still learning the shape of this, still learning how to comfort each other and how far to push. It wasn't a magic fix; the instinct to withdraw, to carry the burden alone, wasn't going to vanish overnight, for either of them. They were navigating uncharted territory, after all, both new to having something this serious, this *important*, at stake.

So there would probably be more conversations like this, more stumbles, more trial and error until they learned the exact frequency of each other's needs. Many times they would jump into the void blind and hope it was the right call. Just like tonight, some days they would get it right, but there would be times where they hurt each other trying to help, where they pressed on a bruise they didn't mean to touch or misread the silence.

But that was the work. And they were willing to do it. Now that they finally had each other completely, they weren't going to let go that easily.

The world outside was still loud, full of scoreboards and noise and expectations, but in here, tucked under the weight of Ilya's arm, none of it could touch them. And for tonight, that was the only victory that mattered.

End Notes

Alexa play pretty when I cry by Lana del Rey

Something something about being a professional athlete and being able to adapt quickly.

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