let me go, soldier, let me go

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let me go, soldier, let me go

by wishbones

Summary

Until the nights stretched longer and longer, when the tightness returned to his chest, heavy and familiar. Until he started waking up with the sense that something was wrong even when everything looked right.

Shane slept beside him, steady and sure, breathing deep and even.
Ilya lay awake, staring at the ceiling, one hand pressed over the gold band on his finger like an anchor.

He had everything he'd ever wanted. And still, somewhere deep in his bones, he felt the dark beginning to stir again.

or, during Shane's first season playing in Ottawa, Ilya's mental health begins to decline.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Married life was supposed to be the easy part of Shane and Ilya's relationship.

That was what everyone said, anyway, that once the secrets were gone, once the distance closed and the ring was on his finger and their names were inked side by side on the same roster, the rest would fall into place.

And for a while, it did.

Ilya got to wake up *most* mornings, unless they were on the road, with Shane's arm slung heavy across his waist, warm and solid and real. He brushed his teeth next to his *husband*, still a word that startled something bright and fragile in his chest, and drank his coffee while Shane leaned against the counter, bare feet on cold floors, scrolling through the news and pretending not to watch Ilya too closely.

Because Shane *had* been watching him.

The antidepressants had been a quiet miracle over the later parts of the summer. Nothing dramatic or cinematic, just a softening of the sharp edges that had formed in Ilya's mind. He laughed more easily, and the heaviness in his chest didn't greet him every morning like a threat. He slept, he ate, and he stopped feeling like happiness was something he had to sprint toward before it vanished.

"You seem lighter," Shane had said one night in early September, fingers tracing slow patterns into Ilya's back, voice thoughtful. "Like… you're actually here."

Ilya had smiled into the pillow and let himself believe that maybe this time, it would last.

By the time the season started, everything looked perfect from the outside.

Shane had slotted easily into centering the second line, Ilya still on the first. They were a force on the power play, instincts finally allowed to bleed into real games instead of stolen moments and international tournaments. The Centaurs were winning. The city loved them; *the married hockey players, once rivals*, the story practically writing itself.

Ilya told himself he was happy, that everything was perfect. Most days, he even believed it.

But depression didn't always come back the way it left. It didn't crash in or announce itself. Sometimes it crept in sideways, through exhaustion that sleep didn't fix, through thoughts that lingered too long, through the quiet fear that contentment was temporary and therefore dangerous.

Ilya started catching himself watching Shane more differently than he once had. The way Shane laughed in the locker room with their team. The way he thrived on momentum, on positivity, on certainty and routine. Ilya wondered when the other shoe would drop, when Shane would realize he'd married someone who still had to work this hard just to feel *okay,* and how much it would affect his life too .

He didn't tell Shane any of that. Instead, he pushed harder, stayed longer on the ice, smiled wider. Told himself that marriage meant commitment, not perfection, and that he could outpace the darkness if he just kept moving.

And mostly, it worked.

Until the nights stretched longer and longer, when the tightness returned to his chest, heavy and familiar. Until he started waking up with the sense that something was wrong even when everything looked right.

Shane slept beside him, steady and sure, breathing deep and even.

Ilya lay awake, staring at the ceiling, one hand pressed over the gold band on his finger like an anchor.

He had everything he'd ever wanted. And still, somewhere deep in his bones, he felt the dark beginning to stir again.

Christmas morning came with a much needed three day break following it. This was the first Christmas that neither Shane nor Ilya had to travel between cities late on Christmas Eve or early on Christmas morning to celebrate.

Grey winter light filtered through the curtains, the house quiet except for the gentle thud of Anya's tail against her bed as she realized that something exciting was happening. She stood with her front paws braced on the mattress, nose hovering inches from Ilya's face, breathing warm dog breath directly into his soul.

"Okay, okay," Ilya murmured, smiling despite himself. "We are awake, sweet girl."

Shane groaned and rolled closer, burying his face against Ilya's shoulder. "She does this every morning," he said thickly. "She's so happy."

Anya whined, spinning once before launching herself between them, determined to ensure maximum chaos. *It must be nice to wake up every morning and feel this happy,* Ilya thinks as he nuzzles his nose into Shane's soft hair.

Later that day, at David and Yuna's place, the house was full of noise and warmth and the smell of food that had been cooking since dawn, wrapping paper covering every surface. David wore an aggressively festive sweater and Yuna laughed easily, pressing mugs of mulled cider into their hands.

Dinner stretched long and slow. Stories were told, wine was poured, Christmas carols playing softly in the background. Someone cried laughing at something Shane said, and Ilya watched his husband glow in it, a smile stretching his face, relaxed in a way he rarely was during the season.

Afterward, Ilya found himself on the floor with Shane's cousin's daughter, carefully assembling a tower of pink plastic Duplo blocks. She climbed into his lap like it was the most

natural thing in the world, curling against his chest while he read to her in a soft, animated voice that made Yuna smile across the room.

“You’re very good with kids,” she had said gently, tucking a curl behind his ear in a way only a mother would.

Ilya smiled back, something warm and wistful blooming behind his ribs.

“Yes,” he said. “I like them. They do not judge.”

Later that night, as they drove home through falling snow, Shane reached over and laced their fingers together across the console, Anya sleeping in the back seat.

“Good day?” Shane asked.

Ilya nodded. “Very good.”

He stared out at the lights blurring past, imagining, for just a moment, a life where days like this didn’t feel borrowed.

On Boxing Day the house buzzed from the moment Ilya woke up. He and Shane were hosting teammates and their families to a Centaurs Christmas barbecue for anyone that had stayed in town for the holidays.

Music played low in the background while Shane vacuumed aggressively, muttering about dog hair while Anya skidded across the hardwood, convinced this was the best day of her life. Grocery bags lined the counter and extra chairs were dragged out of storage. The house smelled like coffee and garlic and something already baking.

By noon, it was chaos. Anya tore through the backyard with Chiron, Troy and Harris’s dog, both of them slick with snow and joy and absolutely uninterested in coming inside. Shane stood at the back door, yelling threats that neither dog respected.

Inside, Ilya sat cross-legged on the rug with Milo Boodram, carefully rolling a toy truck back and forth between them.

“Again,” Milo demanded, delighted, as Ilya made high pitched sounds, mimicking the truck reversing back into a line of cars that Milo had received for Christmas.

Ilya laughed and obliged, his voice soft, patient. Zane hovered nearby, beer in hand, watching with something like awe.

“You want to borrow him for a few weeks?” Bood joked.

“Don’t tempt me,” Ilya replied easily.

Maisy Boodram fell asleep in his arms not long after, her tiny body warm and heavy against his chest, head tucked beneath his chin. Ilya rocked gently without thinking, fingers tracing

slow circles along her back, instinctive and careful. The noise of the house faded around him.

For a moment, the world narrowed to this: a sleeping child, the steady rhythm of her breath, the quiet trust in the way she leaned into him. It made his chest ache.

Shane found him there eventually, leaning against the doorway, eyes soft as he took in the scene. Ilya looked up, something vulnerable flickering across his face before he could hide it.

“She just fell asleep,” he whispered.

“I can see that,” Shane said quietly.

Ilya didn’t move. Honestly, he didn’t want to. He memorized the weight of her, the warmth, the way it felt so *right* it scared him.

Around them, the house was full; teammates laughing, kids shouting, dogs barking, life unfolding loudly and joyfully.

And in the middle of it all, Ilya felt the wanting settle deep in his bones.

The house finally went still sometime after midnight.

The last of the laughter faded down the driveway, stragglers climbing into their rideshares, the dishwasher humming steadily in the kitchen, and the smell of food lingered faintly in the air. Ilya showered quickly, exhaustion heavy in his limbs, and crawled into bed beside Shane without turning on his bedside light.

Anya was already asleep in her bed in the corner of the room, paws twitching, snoring softly like she’d personally hosted the entire day.

Shane lay propped against the headboard, reading glasses perched low on his nose, one knee bent beneath the blanket. He’d changed into sweatpants and an old t-shirt, hair still slightly damp from his own shower, completely absorbed in the book David and Yuna had given him for Christmas.

Ilya watched him for a moment.

Shane looking like this: relaxed, domestic, glasses sliding down his nose, still did something ridiculous to him. Always had. He shifted closer, sliding a hand over Shane’s stomach, fingers tracing warm skin beneath cotton.

Shane hummed distractedly, eyes never leaving the page.

Ilya leaned in, pressed a slow kiss to his shoulder, then another to his neck. His hand slipped lower, trailing the waistband of his pants before slipping deeper.

“Mm,” Shane murmured, barely there. “Ilya, not now.”

Ilya didn't stop right away. He nudged the book with his knuckles, smiling against Shane's skin.

Shane sighed, sharper this time. "I'm reading."

"I know," Ilya said softly, hand still warm against him.

Shane lifted the book slightly, angling it away, then more abruptly than Ilya expected, swatted Ilya's hand aside.

"Can you not?" Shane said, irritation creeping into his voice. "I just want to finish this chapter."

The touch snapped cleanly between them.

"Oh," Ilya said, startled. He pulled his hand back, heat creeping into his chest. "Sorry."

Shane didn't look up. "It's been a long day."

Ilya shifted onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. The quiet stretched. He tried once more, brushing his foot against Shane's calf, fingers grazing Shane's hip in a way that usually earned him a grin and the slap of a book closing. Nothing.

Finally, frustration curled tight in his chest, sharp and humiliating. He rolled onto his side, turning away, shoulders tense. Shane turned another page.

This wouldn't normally affect Ilya like it was tonight. He would just keep trying until he knew Shane couldn't resist. But the sour feeling in his belly overtook, negative thoughts running through his brain, screaming that he *wasn't good enough anymore.*

They lay like that for a while, close enough to touch, far enough for Ilya's heart to ache.

"I liked having children in the house today," Ilya said eventually, voice low and careful.

Shane hummed, noncommittally. "Yeah. It was nice."

"I was thinking," Ilya continued, staring into the dark, "surrogacy takes a long time. Years, maybe. If we want kids, maybe we should start looking into it now. Just… to research. Talk to people."

The pause was immediate.

Shane closed his book with a soft thud and set it on the nightstand a little too forcefully.

"Ilya," he said, already tired. "Not this again."

"Is not *again*," Ilya said quietly. "I am saying-"

"We're in the middle of a season," Shane interrupted. "We're winning. We're finally settled. Can we just… not add something huge right now?"

Ilya swallowed. “I am not asking to do anything right now.”

Shane rubbed his face, frustration leaking through. “It just feels like you can’t ever let things be good. Like you’re always looking for the next thing before this one disappears.”

The words landed heavy and wrong.

“That’s not what this is,” Ilya said, chest tight.

Shane exhaled, softer but careless. “It kind of is.”

Silence rushed in behind the words.

Ilya turned fully away, pulling the blanket tighter around himself. His throat burned, eyes stinging, but he kept his voice steady.

“Okay,” he said.

Shane hesitated, then reached out, fingers brushing Ilya’s shoulder. “I didn’t mean…”

“I am tired,” Ilya said, cutting him off gently. “Is late.”

Shane withdrew his hand.

The room settled again, Anya’s quiet snoring, the distant hum of the dishwasher finishing its cycle. Shane shifted closer eventually, arm resting against Ilya’s back, warm and familiar.

But Ilya couldn’t sleep.

He stared into the dark, heart beating too fast, replaying the words over and over until they settled into something heavier than they should have been.

You can’t ever let things be good.

He lay there until his eyes burned and the house felt too quiet, wondering when exactly his happiness had started to feel so fragile, and why, suddenly, it felt like something he might break just by wanting it too much.

The road trip started before Ilya’s body had fully caught up with the idea of leaving.

The airport was too bright, the team was too loud. Shane’s knee bumped his under the table at breakfast, familiar and grounding, and for a moment Ilya thought maybe everything would be fine.

It wasn’t until the plane leveled out that the thought struck him: *my pills.*

His stomach dropped hard enough that he sucked in a breath. He replayed the morning in his head with brutal clarity; the bathroom mirror fogged from Shane’s shower, the toothbrushes side by side, the drawer closed exactly the way Ilya always closed it.

The bottle was still there.

He pressed his thumb into the armrest and stared straight ahead.

It was a low dose, he told himself. He'd responded well, Terry had told him at his medical back at training camp. Nine days wasn't ideal, but it wasn't dangerous, surely. People missed doses all the time.

What *was* dangerous was telling Shane.

Ilya couldn't do that *now*. Not after Christmas, after Shane had looked at him like he was something fragile that needed careful handling. Ilya couldn't stand the thought of Shane hearing this and thinking, *of course.*

So he said nothing.

By the time they landed, the nausea had started. Was this anxiety or already a side effect of missing a dose?

It crept in slowly at first; a faint sourness at the back of his throat, a light-headedness that made the terminal feel slightly tilted. He forced down food on the bus on the way to the hotel, ignoring the way his hands trembled when he reached for his water bottle.

"You good?" Shane asked casually, shoulder brushing his.

"Yes," Ilya lied easily. "Just tired."

The first game on the road felt wrong from the opening face off.

The puck didn't sit right on his blade throughout the entire game. His timing was off, just enough for his line mates to notice. He missed a pass he'd made a thousand times before. Shane scored anyway, driving the net like a man possessed, jaw clenched, furious and brilliant.

After the game, Shane peeled his gear off in silence, sweat dripping from his hair.

"Shake it off," Shane said eventually, clapping Ilya's shoulder. "We'll get the next one."

Ilya nodded. "Yes. Of course."

But the nausea worsened overnight.

He woke at three a.m. with his stomach twisting violently, sprinted to the bathroom and gagged until his eyes watered. Nothing came up but bile and breathless shaking.

The second game was worse.

The headache set in early that morning, a tight band around his skull that no amount of water touched. Sounds echoed too loudly and light felt too sharp. He snapped at a trainer for hovering, then apologized immediately, throat tight.

Shane watched him carefully as they made their way back onto the ice for the third period.

“You sure you’re okay?” Shane asked again, quieter this time.

“I said I am fine,” Ilya replied too quickly. He softened his tone. “Is a bad night.”

Shane frowned but let it go.

They lost again. Shane scored but Ilya didn’t, not even managing to scrape out a secondary assist.

On the bus, someone joked about bad ice. Ilya pressed his forehead to the cold glass, fighting the nausea rolling through him in brutal waves.

By Seattle, the depression had stopped whispering. It had settled in his chest like dead weight.

The game was fast and mean, messy from the start. A Seattle forward chirped him from behind the net after Ilya fanned on a shot that would have been a *sure* goal if Ilya had hit the pick with his stick instead of air.

The chirp was both stupid and personal, “You’re washed up, Rozanov, now that your husband is on the same team and taking your minutes.”

Ilya barely registered the words before his vision narrowed, his gloves coming off before he could stop himself.

Seattle’s player grinned as they collided, fists swinging, the crowd roaring behind them. Ilya felt the punch in his jaw like a dull thud, barely registering the pain over the rage buzzing through his veins as he was taken down to the ice.

They both received matching penalties, five each for fighting, but Ilya was tagged with the additional instigator penalty for a fight he didn’t even *win.*

From the box, he watched Seattle score on the power play. The power play he had caused.

Ilya slammed his stick against the penalty box floor in frustration before skating over to the Ottawa bench. Shane couldn’t even look at him.

In the locker room after the second period, Ilya tore his helmet off and hurled it into his stall.

“Wake the fuck up,” he snapped, voice echoing off concrete. “We are playing like we don’t give a shit. You want to win? Then fucking score.”

The room went quiet, silence breaking as someone snorted.

“I could say the same for you, Rozy.”

The words hit like a punch to the sternum. Ilya turned, anger flaring and dying just as fast, because they weren’t wrong. He stared at the floor instead, jaw tight, hands shaking slightly

at his sides.

“Enough,” the coach barked, stepping in.

But the damage was done. By the third period, tension was high as the Centaurs took the ice down by two goals. They played disorganized hockey, taking too many stupid penalties and lacking on both offence and defence. How was this a better team on paper than the one that had taken them to the second round of the playoffs last season, yet they were still playing so badly?

They lost again.

The post-game interview was a nightmare, Ilya blinking away the too-bright fluro lights in the room.

The heat felt trapped against the concrete walls as Ilya can still feel sweat cooling along the back of his neck, damp beneath his collar, his undershirt sticking unpleasantly to his spine. His helmet is gone, gloves stripped off, but his hands don’t feel like they’ve gotten the message as they shake against his sides.

He curls his fingers into his palms, then forces them to relax as the media scrum tightens. Microphones push forward, a camera flash flicks on, white-hot.

“Ilya,” someone calls.

Ilya steps into position, shoulders squared out of habit.

“Tonight’s loss makes it three straight on the road,” a reporter starts immediately. “What’s going wrong in that room right now?”

Ilya blinks twice, translating in his head, trying to take the hurt away from the words.

“We are not executing,” he says. His voice sounds steady to his own ears, which feels like a lie. “We are making mistakes, and good teams punish that.”

“Seattle punished you on the power play after your fight,” another reporter cuts in. “Do you regret taking that penalty?”

Ilya’s jaw flexes.

“No,” he says. “I regret the outcome.”

“Is that frustration boiling over?” someone asks. “Because it looked like you snapped out there.”

The word *snapped* lodges under his ribs.

“I play hard,” Ilya says shortly. “I always have.”

“But you’re also pointless in five straight games now,” another voice presses. “As captain, do you feel like you’re setting the right example?”

There it is.

Ilya swallows. His hand trembles again, so he grips the hem of his undershirt just out of frame, fingers digging into the fabric.

“I am not worried about my numbers,” he says, sharper now. “I am worried about winning hockey games.”

“Is there tension in the locker room?”

Ilya’s neck prickles with heat.

“Emotions run high when a team is losing,” he says. “Is not a secret.”

“Did one of your teammates tell you to take your own advice tonight?” another asks, almost casually.

The room feels like it tilts.

Ilya exhales slowly through his nose, fighting the sudden rush of nausea curling up his throat.

“Next question,” he says flatly.

“Are you concerned,” someone persists, “that the pressure of being captain on a team with such leadership depth is affecting your play?”

Something in his chest tightens dangerously.

“No,” Ilya says. “I’ve been under pressure my whole career.”

“Then what’s changed?” the reporter pushes.

For half a second there is nothing in Ilya’s head but static.

His mother’s voice. The fight. The power-play goal. The locker room going quiet.

“I am done,” Ilya says abruptly.

He steps back before anyone can stop him, turning away as another question is fired after him, something about leadership, about accountability.

By the time the media scrum reaches their next target, his hands are shaking hard enough that he has to stop and press his palm flat against his thighs, breathing through it, willing his body to settle.

He has never cared what reporters thought of him. Tonight, though, the words follow him anyway, sharp and lingering and heavy as they replay through his mind, as if they’ve found something tender he didn’t know how to protect.

And for the first time, standing there in sweat-soaked gear, with the weight of the *C* looming over his head, Ilya wonders if he's still strong enough to carry it.

ROZANOV SNAPS AS OTTAWA SLIDES
LOCKER ROOM CHEMISTRY FRACTURING?

By James Whittaker for ottawahockeynow.com

On Man in the Crease this morning, the panel didn't waste time softening the blow. Rozanov's postgame in Seattle was described as "telling," with analysts pointing to his clipped answers and visible frustration as evidence that the pressure is finally getting to him. "When your captain is snapping at the media and taking undisciplined penalties that directly cost you a goal, that's not leadership," one voice said. The panel lingered on the fight: five for fighting, two for instigating the fight, and framed it as emblematic of a player trying to do too much while producing too little. Five straight games without a point, they noted, isn't just a slump when you're wearing the C; it's a problem.

The conversation then drifted, as it often does, into uncomfortable territory. Rozanov's marriage to Shane Hollander was raised not as a personal milestone but as a possible explanation for what the panel called "complacency", suggesting that domestic stability can dull the edge that once defined his game. "It's fair to ask whether being married and settled has changed the way he plays," one analyst said, adding that intensity is often the first thing to go. From there, the comparison to Hollander felt inevitable rather than accidental. With Hollander producing, steady, and "quietly leading by example," the panel questioned whether Ottawa might already have a better option in the room. "Leadership doesn't come from a letter," they said, "it comes from performance, and right now, Hollander's giving you that more consistently."

By the end of the segment, the tone was clear. Rozanov wasn't framed as a captain going through a rough stretch; he was framed as a liability under scrutiny. The final takeaway was blunt: if this slump continues, the Centaurs may need to start asking hard questions: not just about systems or lines, but about whether their captain is still the right man for the job.

In the hotel room that night, Ilya sat on the edge of the bed, elbows braced on his knees, head in his hands.

"I am fucking it up," he said quietly.

Shane froze mid-unpacking. "What?"

"I cannot do anything right," Ilya continued, voice low and raw. "Every shift feels wrong. I used to play like I did not have to think, Shane. Now is like…" He gestured helplessly. "Dragging everyone down with me."

Shane crossed the room in two strides, crouched in front of him. "Hey, no. That's not…"

“It is,” Ilya said, sharp. “You see it. Everyone does.”

Shane hesitated, torn, before quickly schooling his face into something more sympathetic. Ilya saw the look on Shane’s face, the brief flash of something that he never wanted to see again. His chest hollowed out.

Shane straightened slowly. “We’ll figure it out,” he said, but it sounded carefully measured.

Ilya nodded, swallowing hard.

That night, he lay awake staring at the ceiling, Shane down the hall in his own hotel room, nausea twisting in his belly, thoughts spiralling.

Hockey had always been the one thing he trusted. The one place he never doubted himself.

Now it felt like every mistake confirmed something the depression had been whispering for days: that maybe he wasn’t just struggling, maybe he *was* the problem.

They lost all five games on the road.

By the end of the road trip, the word *slide* had started appearing in headlines, followed closely by *collapse* and *questions*. Ilya stopped reading after the third game, but the tone lingered anyway, sharp, speculative and impatient.

The flight back to Ottawa was quiet in the way only losing made it.

Players slept or stared straight ahead with headphones on. A few seats were empty where guys had sprawled earlier in the trip, but Ilya sat alone now, deliberately. Shane had taken a seat closer to the front near the coaching staff, jaw tight, shoulders squared, talking in low, controlled bursts. He was pissed.

Ilya didn’t know exactly when it had happened, what fragile moment had tipped Shane from worried to angry, but he felt it like pressure against his ribs. Something unspoken and heavy sitting between them.

He twisted the cap off his water bottle and paused. His hands were shaking.

Not violently, but just enough to notice. Just enough to make his grip feel unreliable, like his body wasn’t entirely under his control anymore. He stared at them, flexed his fingers once, then forced himself to drink.

When did that start?

Ilya used to be immune to the noise. Fans, reporters, analysts, it had all rolled off him once, something he relished in. He’d been too good for too long, too sure of himself, too grounded in the simple truth that hockey made sense to him even when nothing else did.

Now, the noise followed him everywhere. The thought had crept in somewhere over California, unwanted and persistent. He'd tried to shake it off, but it stuck anyway, clingy and sour.

What if this is it?

Not a sudden fall or a dramatic collapse. Just… erosion. Slower reactions, heavier legs or a mind that didn't snap the way it used to.

What if this was the beginning of the downward trajectory everyone talked about but never thought would apply to him?

He glanced down at his chest, at the imaginary weight of the *C* that wasn't there now but always felt present anyway. He was meant to be a Captain, a leader in the locker room. The guy people were supposed to look up to.

Except they didn't. Rookies never approached him anymore, not with questions or jokes, not even nervous admiration. They gravitated toward Shane and the other veterans instead, drawn to their steadiness, Shane's clarity, the way he communicated without cutting.

Shane had stepped into the leadership bubble without meaning to, voice calm and authoritative in the room, mediating tensions, pulling guys together. He didn't need a letter on his sweater for people to listen like Ilya did, and it felt like a joke.

He leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes, nausea curling faintly in his stomach again, familiar now. He felt hollowed out, scraped thin, like he'd been performing the role of himself and finally ran out of energy to keep it convincing.

He didn't want to die but he didn't want to keep living like this.

The plane hummed steadily beneath him, carrying them home whether he was ready or not. He wrapped his fingers tighter around the bottle, willing the shaking to stop, willing himself back into something solid.

But all he could think about was how *easy* hockey used to be.

The drive home was quiet in the way exhaustion made it inevitable.

Snow dusted the edges of the road, headlights blurring into long streaks as Shane guided the car through familiar streets. The city felt muted after nine days of airports and hotels and bad puck luck. Fatigue sat heavy in both of them, bone-deep, mixed with disappointment neither of them knew how to touch without making it worse.

Ilya stared out the window, jaw tight, hands folded together in his lap like he didn't trust them to behave otherwise.

Shane broke the silence first.

“Ilya,” he said gently. “Please talk to me.”

Ilya swallowed. “I am fine.” The lie tasted thin even to him.

Shane exhaled through his nose, frustration flickering but not flaring. “You haven’t been fine all trip.”

They stopped at a red light, Shane taking one hand off the wheel and resting it on Ilya’s thigh, warm and steady, thumb rubbing slow circles through the fabric of his pants like muscle memory.

“I know you’re lying,” Shane said quietly. “And I’m not mad about it. I just…” He glanced over, eyes tired but soft. “Please talk to me about these things, Ilya. You’re my husband and I love you.”

The words hit harder than any headline ever could.

Ilya’s throat closed up instantly. He cleared it once, trying to find the words. His chest felt tight, crowded with everything he couldn’t make himself say; the pills, the nausea, the fear, the way the *C* felt heavier every day.

“I love you too,” he managed.

Shane studied him for a moment longer, searching, then nodded slightly and took his hand back to the wheel as the light changed.

“Okay,” Shane said, letting it rest. “Tomorrow’s a day off. We’ll sleep in. Maybe get groceries? And Anya needs a long walk,” Shane continued, voice careful, deliberately normal. “If the weather holds, maybe we go down to the river? Just… relax.”

“Yes,” Ilya said softly. “That sounds nice.”

They pulled into their driveway a few minutes later, the house dark and waiting, both familiar and solid. Shane turned off the engine and sat there for a second longer than necessary.

“We’ll figure it out,” Shane said, more promise than plan.

Ilya nodded, staring at the front door, wishing he believed that as easily as he believed Shane loved him.

The house was quiet when Shane woke up the following morning.

Not the dead quiet of the road, or the strained quiet of a losing locker room, just the normal, domestic stillness of home. Pale winter light crept through the curtains, soft and unhurried. Shane blinked at the clock, surprised to see it was already a little past nine.

His body had decided, apparently, that this was enough rest, as he rolled onto his side and looked at Ilya.

Ilya was still fast asleep, curls a mess against the pillow, mouth slightly parted. His face looked softer in sleep, younger somehow, the hard lines that had settled there over the road trip eased away. Shane watched his chest rise and fall, slow and even, and felt something twist quietly in his own.

Careful not to wake him, Shane leaned in and pressed a kiss to Ilya's forehead, lingering there for a beat. He brushed the curls back from his face, thumb tracing the edge of his hairline.

Shane slipped out of bed and pulled on his running gear, tying his shoes by the front door. Outside, the air was sharp and clean, cold enough to burn his lungs in a way that felt grounding.

By the time Shane got back, sweat-soaked and breathless, his thoughts felt marginally less tangled. He showered quickly, then moved through the kitchen with quiet purpose, putting together breakfast out of habit: toast, eggs, and fruit, simple things that he knew Ilya would eat.

Then he turned his attention to the coffee; tamping the grounds carefully, pulling a double espresso shot, watching the stream darken and thicken just right. He even used the milk frothing wand, steaming the milk slowly until it was just the right temperature, foam silky and dense. It was a ridiculous amount of effort for a Tuesday morning.

But Ilya noticed these things, and Shane knew deep down that he hadn't been the best husband lately.

He was still treading water himself, playing on a new team with new expectations. He'd been bumped up to first-line center mid–road trip, thrown into a pseudo-leadership role he hadn't exactly had time to process after losing his captaincy in Montreal. He'd leaned into it because that was what he did; he kept moving, kept producing, but it had cost him something at home.

He poured the coffee carefully into Ilya's favorite mug and carried it upstairs, the smell filling the hallway.

Ilya hadn't moved since Shane had left the house over an hour ago.

Shane set the mug gently on the bedside table and sat down on the edge of the bed, careful not to jostle the mattress too much. He rested his forearms on his thighs and just… looked at him.

In sleep, Ilya looked peaceful. Not happy, exactly, but not hurting, either. Shane wished, not for the first time, that he knew how to bridge the gap between that version of Ilya and the one who'd been retreating further into himself every day of the road trip.

He reached out, brushed his thumb lightly over Ilya's knuckles where his hand lay curled near his chest, straightening the gold crucifix resting in his chest hair, wondering if he'd have to admit that love, on its own, might not be enough to pull Ilya back.

Shane's hand moved slowly, deliberately, as he tried to wake Ilya from sleep.

He rubbed his palm over Ilya's bare arm, warm skin under his fingers, grounding himself in the simple fact that Ilya was *here*.

"Hey," he said softly. "Ilya. I made you coffee."

Ilya stirred, his lashes fluttered, eyes opening heavy and unfocused at first. When they landed on Shane, a small smile appeared automatically, instinctive, almost like muscle memory.

"Hi," he murmured.

For half a second, that was all there was, then the smile slipped.

It wasn't dramatic, it didn't crumble or shatter. It just… faded, replaced by something duller, heavier, like a curtain dropping behind his eyes that Shane felt immediately deep in his chest.

He frowned, fingers lifting to toy gently with the shell of Ilya's ear, a habit born from years of learning where calm lived in Ilya's body.

"You okay?" Shane asked quietly.

Ilya hesitated. It was brief, barely noticeable to anyone else, but Shane caught it. Ilya's gaze sharpened, then softened again as he looked directly at Shane, really looking at him, before nodding once against the pillow.

"Yes, Hollander," he said, voice light in a way that felt practiced. "I am fine. Just tired."

Shane didn't call him out on it. He just watched him for a beat longer, disbelief flickering across his face before he masked it. He slid his hand down, resting it flat against Ilya's chest, rubbing slow circles over his heart, feeling it beat steady beneath his palm.

"Okay," Shane said, even though it clearly wasn't. "I'm gonna shower and then go pick up Anya from the dog hotel."

He brushed his thumb once more over Ilya's collarbone. "You wanna come with me?"

Ilya shook his head immediately, curls shifting against the pillow.

"No," he said softly. "I am too tired. Bring her to me."

Something in the way he said it, small, almost pleadingly, made Shane's chest tighten.

"Yeah," Shane replied, leaning down to press a kiss to Ilya's temple. "I will."

He stood slowly, like leaving too fast might make Ilya disappear somehow. At the doorway, he paused and looked back. Ilya had already turned onto his side, one hand curled loosely at his chest, eyes open and staring at nothing.

Shane left the room with a weight settling deep in his gut.

Ilya watched Shane strip off his clothes and disappear into the ensuite, the soft click of the bathroom door sounding louder than it should have. The rush of the shower followed a moment later, water pounding against tile, a familiar domestic noise that usually soothed him. Today, it didn't.

He stretched once beneath the blankets, joints aching dully, then rolled onto his side again and pulled the covers up toward his chest. His throat tightened without warning, heat flooding behind his eyes. He squeezed them shut, but it was useless, tears burning anyway, spilling silently into the pillow.

Weak.
Lazy.
Faggot.

His father's voice came uninvited, sharp and cruel, as clear as if it had been spoken into the room. Ilya curled in on himself, fingers digging into the fabric of the sheets like he could anchor himself there, like he could keep the words from lodging any deeper than they already had. He felt too sad to move.

Not the dramatic kind of sadness that demanded action or release, just a heavy, soaking weight that pinned him in place. Frustration pooled in his chest, thick and useless. He'd done what he was supposed to do; the moment they'd gotten home last night, he'd restarted his antidepressants, dry-swallowing the pill with shaking hands at the bathroom sink like it might save him immediately.

Why didn't he feel better yet?

He knew, rationally, that it didn't work like that. He knew it took time. But knowing didn't stop the despair from creeping in anyway, whispering that maybe this time it wouldn't work at all.

That maybe this was just him now. The realization that something was really wrong came quietly, almost gently: he didn't want to go get Anya.

The thought floated through his mind and settled there, undeniable. After a road trip this long, Anya would usually already be home by now, would have been scooped up the moment they landed, Ilya laughing as she bowled into him, tail a blur, nails skittering across the floor.

Ilya loved her fiercely. She grounded him, had always helped him and been loyal like any loving dog would be.

And still, he couldn't make himself get out of bed.

The shame of it twisted sharp and sudden, layering over the sadness until his chest felt too tight to breathe properly. He pressed his face into the pillow, muffling a small, broken sound that barely made it past his lips.

Ilya shut his eyes when the shower cut off.

The sudden quiet felt too loud. Steam drifted out into the bedroom, carrying the faint, clean smell of Shane's soap. The coffee on the bedside table smelled incredible, rich, warm and grounding, and still it took Ilya a full couple of minutes to even roll onto his back and reach for it. His arm felt heavy, like it didn't quite belong to him.

Shane stepped out of the ensuite a moment later, damp hair curling at his temples, skin still slick from the shower. The sight of Shane's naked body, damp from the shower, did nothing to spark Ilya's dick like it normally would. Was this the libido-blocking effect his doctor had warned him about? Or was Ilya too far gone now to even get an erection anymore?

Ilya stared at the ceiling, the thought landing uncomfortably in his chest. *Is this it?* The idea unsettled him more than he wanted to admit.

Shane dressed quickly, tugging on jeans and a hoodie, then sat back down on the bed beside him, the mattress dipping under his weight.

"You sure you don't want to come for the drive?" Shane asked gently. "Get some fresh air?"

Ilya shook his head without opening his eyes. "No."

He reached out, patted Shane's thigh once, a small, affectionate gesture that took more effort than it should have. "Bring me my dog."

Shane laughed softly. "Our dog," he corrected, lifting his left hand so the wedding band caught the light. "Remember? We're married now. What's mine is yours and vice versa."

Ilya frowned faintly, brain snagging uselessly on the unfamiliar phrase. *Vice versa.* He turned it over mentally, trying to translate it into something that made sense in his tired head.

Shane leaned down and pressed a kiss to his lips, quick and gentle, then another. The third lingered, deeper than Ilya expected, warm and familiar and surprisingly tender.

Ilya balked at it more than anything. Shane *hated* kissing him when he hadn't brushed his teeth.

The realization hit him all at once: Shane wasn't just being affectionate, he was checking to make sure Ilya was still here. Ilya pulled back first, breath a little unsteady.

"Please drive safely," he said quietly.

Shane searched his face for a long second, then nodded. "I will."

He pressed one last kiss to Ilya's forehead, fingers brushing his hair back gently, and stood.

"I'll be back soon," Shane said. "With your dog."

Shane's worry settled deeper the moment he closed the car door.

It wasn't the sharp, panicked kind, but a steady, gnawing pressure that sat under his ribs and refused to let go. He rested his forehead briefly against the steering wheel, exhaled, then started the engine and pulled out of the driveway. He needed to call his Mom.

The phone rang twice before she picked up. "Shane?" Yuna said immediately. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," Shane replied, too fast. He merged onto the main road, eyes fixed ahead. "I'm just… I'm on my way to pick up Anya and thought I'd check in."

There was a pause on the line. Not suspicious but attentive.

"And Ilya?" Yuna asked. "Is he with you?"

Shane sighed, long and heartbreaking. "No."

"Oh," Yuna said, and the tone shifted instantly. "Okay. Is he asleep, or is he *not okay*?"

Shane swallowed. "He says he's tired."

"Mmhmm," Yuna hummed. "And what do *you* think?"

Shane tightened his grip on the wheel. "I think he's hurting. I just don't know how much."

"Your father and I watched every game on this road trip," she said after a moment. "Including the game in Seattle."

Shane winced. "Of course you did."

"I always do," she replied calmly. "And I watched you, too."

Shane's jaw tightened. "I'm fine, Mom."

"That wasn't about you," Yuna said gently. "It's about the way you kept looking for him on the bench." Shane couldn't answer.

"Ilya hasn't looked like himself for a few weeks now," Yuna continued. "Not just on the score card, but his posture, the fight…" She trailed off. "That wasn't anger. It looked like desperation."

Shane felt his chest tighten. "He won't talk to me about it."

"He *can't* yet," Yuna corrected softly. "Not when he feels like this."

"He thinks he's dragging the team down," Shane admitted, voice low. "He actually said it, a few nights ago, and then he shut down."

“And what did you say?”

“I told him we’d figure it out,” Shane said. Then, quieter, “But I don’t know if he believed me.”

Yuna exhaled slowly. “Shane, your husband is a man who has spent his entire life believing his worth comes from performance. When that slips, even a little, everything else feels like it’s next.”

Shane blinked hard, eyes stinging unexpectedly. “I can see it in his head. He’s wondering if this is the beginning of the end.”

“And is it?” Yuna asked.

“No,” Shane said immediately. “God, no.”

“Then you need to help him see that,” Yuna said. “Not with fixes or pep talks. With presence.”

“I’m trying,” Shane said, frustration creeping in. “I’m trying to hold things together too. I’m on a new team. I got bumped up to first-line center on this road trip.”

“I know,” Yuna said. “And I’m proud of you. But hear me very carefully, Shane Hollander.”

Her voice softened, but the steel underneath was unmistakable.

“Ilya doesn’t need a captain right now, especially one who just replaced him on the first line. He needs his husband.”

Shane closed his eyes briefly at a red light. “I’m scared,” he admitted. “I don’t know how bad it is.”

Yuna didn’t hesitate. “Then you stay close. You don’t let him disappear quietly like he thinks he deserves to. And if he won’t ask for help, you help anyway.”

The light turned green. Shane drove on. “I’m bringing the dog home,” he said weakly in response.

Yuna smiled, he could hear it. “Good. She’s smarter than both of you. Let her do some of the work.”

Shane let out a breath that almost sounded like a laugh. “I love Ilya so much,” he said.

“I know,” Yuna replied gently. “That’s why you called.”

They hung up a few minutes later, the kennel coming into view.

Shane parked, sat there for a moment longer, and let the truth settle heavy but clear in his chest. Something was wrong, and he couldn’t pretend he didn’t see it anymore.

Shane's heart sank the moment he pulled into the garage back at home.

Usually, after trips like this, Ilya would already be waiting by the front door, eyes bright with anticipation, arms open and ready. Anya would barely have made it two steps inside before launching herself at him, licking his face like she'd been starved of affection instead of living in dog luxury for nine days, but the entryway was empty today.

Shane swallowed and popped the trunk. "Okay, Anya," he murmured as he lifted her out of the car, tail already whipping side to side as he opened the front door and let her in.

Her nails clicked excitedly against the wooden floors as she rushed inside, nose down, sniffing hard, tracking the scent she cared about most.

Shane kicked off his shoes and closed the door behind them. "He's upstairs, baby," he said, forcing a smile into his voice. "Go on."

Anya's head tilted, ears perked, and then she bolted, scrambling up the stairs with joyful bounds as Shane's chest tightened.

He crossed the room and sat down on the bed beside them, leaning back against the headboard, watching as Ilya curled instinctively around Anya, burying his face into her neck, breathing her in like she was oxygen.

Shane reached over Ilya to scratch Anya behind the ears, smiling softly. "You didn't miss her *that* much," he teased lightly. "You look like you're being attacked." Ilya didn't laugh.

Shane's smile faltered as he saw it; the way Ilya's eyes shone too brightly, his mouth trembling as he pressed his face back into Anya's fur, trying and failing to hold it together.

Shane's mother's voice echoed in his head: *be present.*

He slid closer immediately, one hand coming up to cup Ilya's cheek, thumb brushing gently over warm skin.

"Hey," Shane said softly. "Hey, hey. What's wrong?"

Ilya's face crumpled, breath hitching sharply as tears spilled over. He turned into Shane's hand like he'd been waiting for permission, shoulders shaking as the first sob tore out of him.

"I feel so sad," Ilya choked. "All the time. I don't know what to do anymore."

Shane's heart cracked clean open. He pulled Ilya fully into his chest, wrapping both arms around him, holding him tight but not suffocating, rocking slightly as Anya shifted to make room and pressed her warm body against Ilya's back like she understood exactly what was happening.

"Okay," Shane murmured, voice steady even as his throat burned. "Okay. You don't have to know what to do. It's going to be okay, Ilya."

Ilya clutched at Shane's hoodie, fingers digging in desperately. "I tried," he sobbed. "I restarted my pills, I tried…I thought it would help and it didn't and I just feel so broken, Shane. I cannot even get out of bed. I could not even go get her."

"Hey," Shane said firmly, tilting Ilya's face up just enough to look at him. "Listen to me. You are not broken."

Ilya shook his head helplessly. "I will ruin everything…the team, you. I can feel everyone pulling away from me."

Shane pressed his forehead to Ilya's, breathing him in. "You are not ruining me, *or* us. And the team will be fine, Ilya, I don't care about them right now."

Ilya sobbed harder at that, like the words had finally pierced through the fog inside his brain.

"I am scared," he whispered. "I do not feel like myself anymore."

"I know," Shane said quietly. "I'm not going anywhere. We're going to do this together, okay? You're going to feel better."

He kissed Ilya's temple, then his hair, again and again, grounding them both.

Anya whined softly and shoved her nose between them, insisting on involvement, and Shane laughed wetly through his own tears welling in his eyes.

"See?" Shane said gently. "Even Anya wants to help."

Ilya clung to him, crying until his chest ached, until the sobs eased into shaky breaths, until the exhaustion finally started to edge out despair. Shane held him the entire time.

Eventually, Ilya's sobs taper off.

Not all at once, but slowly, unevenly, like waves losing their strength at sea. Ilya's breathing evens out, still shaky but no longer breaking apart completely. Anya settles with a huff between them, head heavy on Ilya's ribs, eyes half-closed now that the crisis seems contained.

Shane keeps one arm wrapped around Ilya, the other resting warm and steady against his chest. He doesn't rush him or say anything that might sound like an ending. He just stays.

And while he stays, his mind starts moving.

I restarted my meds.

The words come back to him as he has the clarity to rewind their conversation.

Shane stares at the far wall over Ilya's shoulder, jaw tightening slightly. He replays the moment in his head: how Ilya had said it, voice wrecked and tangled in tears. The phrasing

had snagged at him then, but he'd been too focused on keeping Ilya upright to chase it.

Restarted. Shane's fingers flex once against Ilya's chest.

He shifts just enough to look down at him, keeping his voice low and gentle so he doesn't startle him.

"Hey," Shane says quietly. "Can I ask you something?"

Ilya nods faintly against his chest, eyes still closed.

"When you said you restarted your meds," Shane continues carefully, "what did you mean?"

There's a pause and Ilya's breathing tightens.

"I…" He swallows. "I mean, I took them again last night."

His stomach drops. "Okay," Shane says, still calm. "And before last night?"

Ilya doesn't answer right away. His fingers curl into Shane's hoodie again, slower this time, like he's bracing for a fight.

"I forgot them," Ilya whispers.

Shane closes his eyes for half a second. "Forgot them where?" he asks, voice still gentle.

"At home," Ilya says. "On the road trip."

The room feels very still. "For the whole?" Shane asks.

Ilya hesitates again, longer now. "Yes."

Shane exhales slowly through his nose, careful not to let the rush of fear, anger and *guilt* spill into his voice. He keeps his arm firm around Ilya, trying to steady both of them.

"You didn't take them at all?" he asks.

Ilya shakes his head, just barely. "No, Shane."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Shane asks, softly but directly. Ilya's face crumples again, though the tears don't come this time.

"I did not want you to think I was irresponsible," he says, voice thin. "Or that I was making excuses. You already thought I…" He cuts himself off, breath hitching. "I did not want to be another problem for you."

The words hit Shane square in the chest. He shifts, pulling back just enough to look at Ilya properly, one hand coming up to cradle the back of his neck.

"Ilya," Shane says, firm now. "That wasn't you being irresponsible, that was you being human. We've all forgotten something on a road trip."

Ilya shakes his head weakly. “I should have remembered.”

“Maybe,” Shane says. “But missing meds can absolutely do this to you. You weren’t failing, you were in withdrawal.”

Ilya shakes his head. “I was already feeling bad,” he starts, shutting his eyes so he didn’t have to face Shane. “Before the road trip. Things were getting harder, like the pills were not working anymore.”

“I wish you’d told me,” Shane admits quietly. “Not because I’m mad, but because I could have helped. I could have called Terry, we could have gotten you a refill on the road.”

“I know,” Ilya whispers. “I just…everything already felt too hard.”

Shane nods, pressing his lips to Ilya’s forehead. “I know.”

He pulls Ilya back into his chest, holding him tighter now, not careful of showing how much this had scared him.

“You don’t ever have to protect me from this,” Shane says into his hair. “That’s not your job. We’re married, this is the part where we carry things together, *in sickness and in health,* remember?”

Ilya exhales shakily, something loosening in his posture, like a knot finally easing in his chest.

“I did not want you to look at me differently,” he murmurs.

Shane kisses his hair, slow and deliberate. “Too late,” he says softly. “I look at you like my husband who went through hell and didn’t say anything because he didn’t want to be a burden.”

Anya nudges Ilya’s hand insistently, demanding attention, bringing him back into the room. Ilya gives a weak, watery laugh and scratches behind her ears.

“I really messed up,” he says quietly.

Shane shakes his head. “You’re struggling, there’s a difference.”

He leans back against the headboard, keeping Ilya tucked into his side.

“Okay,” Shane says, formulating a plan in his head. “Here’s what we’re gonna do.”

Ilya nods faintly, exhausted but listening.

“And next time,” Shane adds gently, “you have to tell me. Even if you think it makes you look bad. *Especially* then.”

Ilya closes his eyes, pressing his face into Shane’s chest again.

“Okay,” he whispers.

Shane holds him there, one hand steady over Ilya’s heart, silently promising himself that he won’t miss the signs again.

The house settles around them in slow increments; the hum of the heating system, the distant rush of a car passing on the street, the soft glow of a single lamp Shane left on near the dresser. Ilya lies heavy and slack against him now, exhaustion finally overpowering the storm that tore through him earlier. Anya shifts and resettles with a tired huff, curling against Ilya’s legs.

Shane doesn’t move, he doesn’t check the time. He doesn’t go downstairs to clean up or make tomorrow’s to-do list or distract himself with something useful. He stays exactly where he is, one arm firm around Ilya’s shoulders, the other resting flat over his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart under his palm.

Every time Ilya’s breathing stutters, Shane murmurs softly, “I’m here,” until it evens out again. Eventually, Ilya slips fully into sleep.

Shane shifts carefully, easing him back onto the pillows without breaking contact, tucking the blanket up around his shoulders. He presses a kiss into Ilya’s hair and stays sitting upright against the headboard, unwilling to lie down in case the movement wakes him.

The anger hits once the room is quiet enough for his thoughts to echo. Not at Ilya, but at himself; Ilya had been suffering silently for *nine days*.

The number loops in his head, sharp and unforgiving. Nine days of nausea and brain fog, of a man who’d carried a *C* on his chest while his brain chemistry was actively betraying him, and Shane hadn’t caught it. Or worse, he *had* noticed and told himself it was just stress or travel or hockey.

He scrubs a hand over his face, jaw tightening. Ilya was the captain. The one who was expected to hold the room together, to absorb the losses, to take the questions, to lead when things started slipping. And Shane, his *husband*, had watched him unravel and assumed he’d handle it the way he always did.

Guilt settles heavy in Shane’s chest. He thinks of the nights he’d gone quiet himself, too wrapped up in learning a new system, new linemates, new expectations. Of how easily he’d let Ilya’s distance go unchallenged because confronting it felt like one more thing neither of them had the energy for.

He reaches out again, resting his hand over Ilya’s heart, grounding himself in the proof that he’s here, that he’s breathing, that he didn’t disappear while Shane wasn’t looking.

“I’m sorry,” Shane murmurs, even though Ilya can’t hear him, deeply asleep. “You don’t have to be strong all the time. Not with me.”

The anger burns itself down into something steadier, more dangerous in its own way.

Sometime after midnight, Ilya stirs, brow furrowing faintly. “Shane?” he murmurs, voice thick with sleep.

“I’m here,” Shane says instantly, thumb brushing gently along Ilya’s jaw. “Go back to sleep, Ilya.”

Ilya relaxes after that, fingers curling weakly into Shane’s shirt like muscle memory.

“Stay,” he whispers.

“I will,” Shane replies, without hesitation. “I promise.”

And he means it; not just for tonight, but for the days ahead, for the hard mornings and the long seasons and the moments when Ilya forgets he’s allowed to be held.

Shane stays awake long after Ilya falls fully back into sleep, holding the weight of his guilt and his love in equal measures, understanding now that being a good husband isn’t about fixing everything, but staying close enough to notice when the strongest person in the room is quietly falling apart.

The next morning, Ilya wakes up slowly. Not the sharp, panicked kind of waking he’s gotten used to lately, but the heavy, disoriented kind, where his body hasn’t yet caught up with the fact that he’s conscious. For a few seconds, he doesn’t open his eyes. He lies still, listening.

The dream lingers stubbornly at the edges of his mind. His mother’s face, clearer than it ever is when he tries to remember her on purpose. The way her hand had cupped his cheek, cool and trembling. The smell of her perfume, the sound of her voice, soft and frightened and trying so hard not to let him hear it.

He’d been so young in the dream, so helpless. Ilya swallows, throat tight.

For a terrifying half-second after waking, it felt real. Like Irina had been there, reaching back into something he wasn’t supposed to touch.

An omen, his brain whispers unhelpfully. He squeezes his eyes shut.

His mother had died scared, facing something impossible with no one strong enough beside her. The fear crawls up Ilya’s spine now, cold and familiar.

What if that’s how it ends for me too?

He breathes in carefully. Shane’s scent is there, his soap, sleep, something warm and human; a solid weight behind him. Shane’s chest rises against his back with every breath, steady and unhurried.

Ilya exhales shakily. He isn't alone. That thought lands slowly, like something that might spook if he grabs it too fast. Shane hadn't left him. Shane hadn't drifted away in the night or retreated into his dreams.

He shifts slightly, testing it. Shane tightens his arm instinctively, pressing closer to Ilya without waking.

The ache in Ilya's chest loosens just a fraction.

Maybe it is not an omen, he thinks. *Maybe it was a warning, and I did not ignore it this time.*

He stays still, letting himself exist there, being held by his husband, breathing and alive.

Shane wakes not long after Ilya does. He doesn't move right away, registering the light first, soft and grey through the curtains, then the weight of Ilya in his arms. The way Ilya's breathing is shallow but steady, signalling he's awake.

"You okay?" Shane murmurs quietly, voice rough with sleep.

Ilya nods against the pillow. "I dreamed about my mother."

"One of those dreams that feels too real?" he asks gently.

"Yes," Ilya whispers. "I woke up and thought…" He trails off, jaw tightening. "I was scared it meant something."

Shane presses a kiss into his hair. "Dreams don't decide your future, Ilya."

Ilya doesn't answer, but he leans back into Shane's chest, and that feels like something.

They lie there for a few minutes longer, quiet and still, Anya snoring faintly at the foot of the bed, blissfully unconcerned.

Eventually, Shane speaks again. "Okay," he says softly. "Here's what I'm thinking."

Ilya tenses instinctively, but Shane's voice stays calm, treading lightly.

"Nothing drastic," Shane continues. "Today, we call Terry. Just to check in about the meds, and what withdrawal can do."

Ilya swallows. "I don't want him to think…"

"I don't care what they think," Shane says firmly, but not unkindly. "I care about you."

"And then," Shane says more gently, "you rest. Today, tomorrow or however long you need. The team will survive a few days without you trying to be superhuman."

Ilya huffs a faint breath of a laugh. "I am supposed to be the captain."

“And captains get medical leave too,” Shane replies immediately. “You don’t lose the *C* because your brain chemistry fucked you over.”

Ilya goes quiet at that, emotion tightening his throat again, but this time it lacks panic. It’s something closer to a fragile breath of relief.

“Okay,” he says softly.

Shane kisses his temple. “Okay.”

They’d finally won a game the night before, a solid win on home ice against Dallas. The kind of game that should have felt like a turning point for Ilya: tight, disciplined and familiar in the way hockey used to feel in his body. The crowd had been loud, the room lighter. For a few hours, the world had quieted in Ilya’s head.

That morning, Shane drove Ilya to Dr Galina Molchalina’s office, neither of them talking much. The city slid past the windshield, winter-muted and pale. When they pulled up outside the office, Shane put the car in park but didn’t turn the engine off right away.

“I’ll grab a coffee,” Shane said easily. “Or go for a walk? Take your time, I’ll be back in an hour.”

Ilya nodded, fingers curled in his lap. “Okay.”

Shane leaned across the console and pressed a kiss to Ilya’s temple. “Text me if you need me sooner.”

“I will.”

Ilya climbed out of the car and shut the door gently behind him. Shane watched him cross the pavement, shoulders hunched slightly against the cold, curls tucked into a beanie. Fondness hit him hard and unexpectedly.

God, he loved him. Then Shane’s eyes dropped, and he let out a startled, helpless laugh, covering his mouth with his hand. *Of course*.

Ilya was clearly wearing gray sweatpants with no underwear. The fabric clinging indecently to Ilya’s hips, riding up between his cheeks in a way that left absolutely nothing to the imagination.

Shane shook his head, still smiling to himself. *Only you,* he thought fondly. *Walking into therapy like that.*

Inside, the office is warm. Too warm, maybe. Quiet in the way that feels intentional rather than empty. Galina looks up from her chair as Ilya steps in, her expression open and calm, no trace of surprise.

“Ilya,” she says gently. “Come in.”

He barely makes it to the chair before it hits him, and he bursts into tears.

Not the sharp, explosive kind of crying he seemed to be doing a lot of lately. This is quieter, almost more devastating. His shoulders cave inward as tears spill freely, breath hitching, hands coming up uselessly to his face like he might be able to hide it.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he chokes out in Russian. “I used to…I used to be able to handle these things. I was angry, but I was *functional*.”

Galina doesn’t interrupt. She simply watches him with steady, compassionate eyes, letting him fall apart without trying to hurry him through it.

This isn’t the man she’d first met over a year ago. That Ilya had been sharp-edged, defensive, angry at the world and terrified of being seen. He’d been closeted, guarded, fueled by adrenaline and spite and survival.

This version of Ilya is hollowed out. Raw and cracked open, stripped of the anger that used to prop him upright.

“I feel like everything is slipping,” Ilya continues, voice breaking. “My head. My body. Hockey. *Shane.* I’m supposed to be leading people and I can barely get out of bed.”

Galina nods slowly. “You’re exhausted,” she says softly. “And you’ve been unwell.”

“I missed my meds,” Ilya whispers in admission, shame flooding his chest again. “For over a week on the road. And then everything just… collapsed.”

“Withdrawal can do that,” Galina says evenly. “Especially when someone is already under extreme pressure.”

Ilya drags a hand down his face, tears smearing across his knuckles. “I feel weak.”

“No,” Galina says gently but firmly. “You feel *human*.”

That lands harder than he expects. He laughs once, wet and broken. “I don’t recognize myself.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s gone,” Galina replies. “It means you’ve reached a point where coping the way you always have isn’t enough anymore.”

Ilya’s chest tightens. “What if this is how it ends?” he asks quietly. “What if I just… decline?”

Galina leans forward slightly, grounding the space.

“Then we adjust,” she says. “We treat the illness. We can widen your support network. We take the pressure off where we can. And we remember that one bad stretch, even a painful one like this, does not erase the rest of your very bright life.”

Ilya presses his palms into his thighs, breathing hard, trying to take that in.

“I don’t want to be scared like my mother was,” he whispers.

Galina’s gaze softens. “You aren’t alone the way she was,” she says. “That matters more than you think.”

Ilya steps out into the cold January air with his hands already halfway into his pockets.

The craving hits fast and sharp, muscle memory more than desire. His fingers brush the familiar shape of the cigarette pack, the lighter tucked inside. For a split second, he imagines the relief of it: the burn in his lungs, the grounding ritual, something he can control.

Then he looks up, seeing Shane’s car is still there, parked exactly where it had been over an hour ago. The same angle, same dusting of road salt along the wheel wells.

Ilya freezes in place, something tightening painfully behind his ribs. He closes his fingers around the cigarettes once, hard, then releases them. Slowly and deliberately, he tucks the pack deeper into his pocket instead of pulling it out.

He pulls his jacket tighter around himself and walks toward the car, sliding easily into the passenger seat.

“Hey,” Shane says immediately, voice warm and careful. “How did it go?”

Shane’s hair is a little mussed, like he’s run his hands through it too many times. His coffee cup sits untouched in the cup holder, the engine still idling.

“Did you sit here the whole time?” Ilya asks slowly. Shane’s ears go pink instantly.

He ducks his head, one hand coming up to rub at the back of his neck. “Yeah,” he admits. “I…uh. I called Hayden. I caught up with him for a bit, and answered some emails.”

Ilya raises an eyebrow, unconvinced.

Shane glances up at him, sheepish. “Okay, I mostly just… stayed.”

“Shane,” Ilya says quietly.

“I just wanted to be nearby,” Shane says, rushing slightly now, like he’s afraid of being told he overstepped. “In case you needed me. Or changed your mind. Or…” He shrugs helplessly. “I didn’t want you walking out and feeling alone.”

The words land harder than anything Galina had said inside.

Ilya’s chest tightens suddenly and violently. His vision blurs before he can stop it, hot tears surging up, traitorous. He blinks hard, jaw clenching, embarrassed by how fast his composure fractures.

“Fuck,” he mutters, swiping at his eyes with the back of his glove. “Sorry.”

Shane is leaning over the console of the car in an instant.

He doesn’t crowd him, just moves close enough that Ilya can feel his warmth, one hand hovering uncertainly at first before settling gently between his shouder blades.

“Hey,” Shane says softly. “You don’t have to apologize.”

Ilya laughs weakly through the tears, shaking his head. “I was going to have a cigarette,” he admits. “And then I saw your car and…” He exhales sharply. “I don’t know. I just…”

Shane’s hand presses a little more firmly into his back, trying to ground him. “You chose us instead,” he says simply.

Ilya swallows hard, nodding once.

“Thank you,” he says, voice breaking despite his effort to keep it steady. “For staying.”

Shane smiles at him then, soft and fond. Like the answer had never been in question.

“Always,” he says.

Ilya lets himself lean into him for a moment, forehead pressing briefly to Shane’s shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent of him. The cold bites at his cheeks, but his chest feels strangely warm.

When they pull apart, Shane presses a kiss to Ilya’s shoulder and squeezes his thigh.

“C’mon,” he says gently. “Let’s go home.”

Ilya nods, settling back into the seat, wiping his face once more before buckling in.

As Shane pulls away from the curb, Ilya rests his head against the window, eyes closing.

For the first time in days, the ache in his chest doesn’t feel quite so isolating.

Ilya always feels hollowed out after seeing Galina.

Never lighter, not relieved, just peeled open. Like she’s taken all the careful layers he uses to get through the day and set them aside, leaving him too exposed to put himself back together quickly. By the time Shane pulls into the driveway, his bones feel tired, his thoughts fuzzy and tender.

Anya greets him at the door like she hasn’t seen him in years.

“Hello, sweet girl,” Ilya murmurs, crouching down despite the protest in his knees. He buries his hands in her fur, presses his forehead briefly to hers, breathing her in. The solid warmth of her always helps.

“I need a cigarette,” he says quietly, already halfway toward the back door.

Outside, the cold bites immediately. Ilya sits on the porch chair with his arms crossed tight over his chest, shoulders hunched as if he can physically keep himself contained. He lights up, the first drag sharp and grounding, smoke blooming into the winter air.

Inside, he can hear Shane talking to Anya, a soft, sing-song encouragement, before the back door opens. Anya bolts past Shane and into the yard, skidding slightly on the frozen grass, bouncing around like the cold doesn’t exist. She circles, finally finds a spot, then freezes mid-squat like she’s suddenly remembered she’s being observed. Ilya snorts softly.

Shane steps outside a moment later, carrying two throw blankets. He sits down on the outdoor couch beside Ilya without asking, close enough that their thighs touch. He drapes one blanket around Ilya’s shoulders, careful and practiced, then spreads the other across both of their laps like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

“Thank you,” Ilya says quietly, tapping ash into the tray.

It isn’t just about the blankets. It’s about Shane sitting with him anyway. About not making a face, not lecturing, not retreating even though Shane still hates the smell, hates the habit, hates what it represents. It’s about him staying. About him choosing *this* version of Ilya, too.

Shane nods like he understands exactly what he’s being thanked for.

“I know this is hard,” Shane says after a moment. “But you don’t have to do it alone anymore. That’s… a good change, Ilya. Even if it doesn’t feel like it yet. This time is different from when you first started seeing Galina.”

They sit in silence for a bit, breath fogging faintly in the cold. The smoke drifts away quickly, stolen by the wind.

Anya reappears, tail wagging, proudly dropping a slobbery stick at Ilya’s feet. She stares up at him with wide, hopeful eyes.

Shane huffs out a quiet laugh. “She’s relentless.”

Ilya nudges the stick with the toe of his shoe but doesn’t throw it. His arms are still wrapped too tight around himself for that.

“I can’t believe you did this by yourself last season,” Shane says suddenly, the words slipping out softer than intended. “Going through all of it alone, without me knowing.”

Ilya shrugs, taking another drag, smoke curling slow from his lips.

“You were with me,” he says. “You just did not know.”

Shane’s jaw tightens at that, emotion flickering across his face before he reins it in. He reaches out under the blanket, fingers curling around Ilya’s wrist, thumb pressing lightly against his pulse point.

“I know now,” Shane says quietly. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

Ilya exhales, the smoke dissipating into the cold, and for the first time since the appointment, the tightness in his chest eases just a little.

He tosses the stick weakly into the yard, Anya taking off after it like it’s the best day of her life.

The cold settles deeper as the cigarette burns down.

The backyard is quiet, frozen grass crunching faintly under Anya’s paws as she trots back and forth with her stick, proud and tireless and loyal. The porch light casts a soft yellow pool over the two of them, smoke drifting lazily through it before disappearing into the atmosphere.

Shane breaks the silence first. “So,” he says carefully, eyes still on the yard. “The team doctor doubled the dose. Do you feel okay with that?”

Ilya shrugs, pulling the blanket tighter around his shoulders. “Yes, I think so. Terry said is normal to start low, see how you tolerate it, then increase. Does not mean it wasn’t working before.”

“I know,” Shane says quickly. “I just wanted to check.”

They sit there for a moment, watching Anya drop the stick and stare at it like she’s daring it to move on its own.

“It is only day two,” Ilya adds quietly. “I feel no different.”

Shane nods, absorbing that. “Are you feeling any side effects?”

The question is gentle, but Ilya knows it’s been living in Shane’s head for *days*. He’d caught glimpses of it the night before, Shane scrolling on his phone, jaw tight, disappearing down an internet rabbit hole about SSRIs and timelines and what to watch for. Shane shows his love this way: by learning everything he can and worrying silently.

Ilya gestures vaguely at his midsection. “Stomach’s still off,” he says. “Nausea comes and goes.”

Shane nods again, filing it away. “Okay. That tracks with what I read.”

Ilya huffs a small breath of amusement. “Of course you read.” Shane finally turns to look at him then.

The golden curls poking out from under the beanie, unruly and familiar. The stubble shadowing his sharp jaw. The way he exhales smoke slowly, deliberately, like he’s trying to breathe something heavy out of his body instead of letting it sit there.

Shane's chest tightens. He reaches out and cups the back of Ilya's neck, thumb pressing gently into the warm skin there. He leans in and presses a soft kiss to Ilya's cheek, lingering slightly, then lowers his head to rest against Ilya's shoulder, looking up at him from there.

"I'm so, so proud of you," Shane says quietly.

The words hit harder than Ilya expects. His eyes burn instantly. He turns his face away, embarrassed by how fast the tears gather, jaw tightening as he stares out into the dark.

Shane doesn't let him retreat inside any further. He shifts, climbing carefully into Ilya's lap under the shared blanket, knees bracketing his hips, the couch creaking softly under the movement. He takes Ilya's face in both hands, thumbs warm against his cheeks, forcing him to look back.

"Hey," Shane says firmly. "I'm serious."

Ilya's lashes are wet now, breath uneven.

"I'm so fucking proud of you," Shane repeats, voice rough with it. "For telling me. For going to the appointment. For taking the meds even when you're scared they won't help. For still getting out of bed."

Ilya shakes his head weakly. "It does not feel like much."

"I don't care how it feels," Shane says. "This is huge."

He presses his forehead to Ilya's, noses brushing, grounding them both.

"You're doing the hardest part," Shane murmurs. "And I'm so honored I get to be here for it."

Ilya exhales shakily, smoke dissipating into the cold air as he lets his head drop forward, resting against Shane's shoulder. His hands come up slowly, uncertain at first, then settle at Shane's waist, fingers curling into the fabric of his jacket like he's afraid Shane might disappear if he doesn't hold on.

"Okay," Ilya whispers.

Shane wraps his arms around him fully, pulling him close, rocking slightly as the cold creeps in around them and Anya finally abandons the stick to trot back over, nosing insistently at their knees.

For the first time in weeks, the sadness doesn't feel quite so heavy. It still exists, still lingering around the edges, but it's no longer sitting with him alone in the dark.

And years later, when Shane passes Ilya their newborn daughter in the hospital, swaddled tightly in a hospital blanket, red faced and scrunching, Ilya feels the tears welling up in his eyes. He presses his lips against her soft, downy hair, and whispers "moya docha, I will never let you down."

Shane’s hand settles warm and sure at the small of his back, grounding him the way he always has. “You're already the best Papa,” Shane murmurs, voice thick with emotion.

Their daughter lets out a thin, indignant cry, then quiets as Ilya instinctively adjusts his hold, rocking her just slightly. In that moment, her steady heartbeat against his chest, Shane’s thumb brushing away his tears, Ilya understands something with a calm, unshakeable certainty.

He had survived. He had healed, was *still* healing, he had stayed.

And this; this life, this love, this tiny person breathing softly between him and Shane, is not something he ever has to earn.

End Notes

Title is from RUNNING LOW by Baker Boy and Pardyalone.

Ilya Rozanov (and his mental health) is very dear to my heart. If you or anyone you know is struggling with their mental health, please, please seek help. You are loved. You are not alone ❤️❤️.

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