

The Blue Pillow

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Summary

When they pulled into the garage of their house in Ottawa, Ilya gently prodded Shane to, “shower, get yourself ready.”

Of course, that could mean just about anything, and that was why Ilya phrased it that way. If Shane wanted quiet, wanted to cuddle in the quiet, he could pull on his most ridiculous flannel pajamas and curl in close. But if Shane wanted him, wanted the one language that never failed between them anymore, then Shane knew what he had to do.

And Ilya had a sense that he already knew what Shane would choose.

They had no match that day, just training with the Centaurs, but Ilya knew Shane had woken on the wrong side of the bed. One of those mornings where the light coming between the cracks in their window blinds felt abrasive. Where none of his clothes were right. Where he'd shower before leaving for the rink and then again once he got there, the first not having counted because he'd already ruined it by existing in the world. Lunch would be an ordeal that Ilya watched for the sole purpose of ensuring that Shane ate something. Anything too warm or too textured would be left untouched, until he inevitably defaulted to a bowl of chickpeas and spinach because at least those two foods behaved predictably and did exactly what Shane expected them to do. The buzzer made him flinch every time it went off when they got ready for some drills in the afternoon, sharp and unavoidable, and on the drive home Shane picked at the skin around his fingernails until it lifted in long, thin pieces.

Ilya had learned the signs long before he understood them. Back when they'd first started this, so many years ago now, he'd thought Shane was perhaps slightly difficult. Different. That was what everyone said. They were never cruel enough to say anything more than that then, though Ilya would later learn how quickly that restraint would wear thin once winning stopped making up for inconvenience. When he was particular to the point of peculiarity, or quiet to the point of unease, Ilya would watch those big brown eyes tracking everything and everyone on the ice.

There were times when Shane didn't speak at all. Not out of sulking or stubbornness, not as some calculated refusal, but because the words simply never arrived. His mouth would open and close again, the thought intact but unreachable, and he'd turn his head slightly away from Ilya, his gaze fixing on something neutral like a lamp or a building out the window. Ilya knew now that Shane could and would go nonverbal, though at the time he didn't have the English for it, didn't have any language beyond the uneasy certainty that pushing would only make it worse.

What Shane did have language for were systems. Rules. Things that behaved if you treated them correctly. Folding his clothes with precise, almost reverent care. Lacing his skates the same way every time. Eating the same meals, parking in the same spot, walking the same routes through the increasingly familiar away cities as if repetition might smooth out their edges. Ilya knew that people mistook Shane's steadiness for control, for leadership even, and Ilya knew that Shane let them. That it was easier than admitting how much effort it took to appear normal to the world that wouldn't see him that way.

At the time, Ilya hadn't known why the rituals mattered so much, why deviation hit Shane like a personal failure instead of a minor inconvenience. No one ever called it anything because the league loved men like Shane. Players who were disciplined, controlled, and relentlessly prepared.

What Ilya had known, back then, was that sex was simpler, even if it was riskier. He had gambled. All those years ago, he'd noticed that the only time Shane ever truly came alive, ever seemed able to meet Ilya where he was, was on the ice. Skates carving into the rink, their shoulders colliding. Physicality seemed to give Shane something that his words never quite managed to do. It was the way through to him, Ilya had realized, a way out.

So if Ilya wanted more, if he wanted anything, it would have to start there. It would have to be physical, Ilya knew almost right away. After that first, sharp “fuck off” chirp from Shane in the showers after the CCM commercial before their rookie year, even though Shane’s voice had been rough and startled, Ilya knew he was onto something. Not because Shane had said “not here” to him after he’d turned to face Shane front-on, but because he’d said anything at all. Because he’d stayed. Because he’d opened his hotel room door. Because as soon as Ilya had gotten his hands on him, had gotten his mouth on Shane’s, it was like Ilya had cracked the code and had found a way to get through to Shane like he’d only otherwise been able to on the ice.

Shane might not have been able to speak it, might not have been able to admit it even to himself, but Ilya knew he’d found the way in much better than he had in the hotel gym. They didn’t have to talk. They never did. Sex, touch, pressure, heat, it all seemed to cut through that weird noise he could see crossing Shane’s features in a way that made Ilya realize that was more immediate to focus on than anything else.

They were good at it. They always had been. And for a long time, Ilya mistook that relief for resolution, believing that whatever was breaking Shane down during the day could be burned off at night, leaving nothing behind that would ever need to be named.

Eventually, Shane tried to explain. Not all at once, and not easily. He put a name to what he’d had been dealing with since he was a kid, and said it like it was something fragile, easily mishandled, as though he weren’t entirely sure Ilya would know the word, or what to do with it if he did.

He did. David had mentioned it to him before.

It had been the first time they’d talked properly, out at the cottage a few days after they’d accidentally outed themselves to Shane’s parents. David had taken Ilya aside, not unkindly, but with a careful seriousness that felt earned. He’d told him that Shane’s mother had been... less understanding. That as both his mother and his manager, she struggled with anything that might make Shane less than his best. Less marketable. Less predictable. Anything that threatened the version of him the league found easiest to celebrate.

David hadn’t spoken badly of her, but instead, he’d just looked tired. He said that all he’d ever wanted for Shane was for him to be happy, and that only part of that happiness could be hockey, no matter how much it had come to define him. He wanted Shane to be loved, for who he was, not for what he could produce, and he wanted Ilya to be able to love him too. Regardless of hockey. Regardless of autism. Not in spite of it, but without fear of it.

So when Shane finally said it himself - "I'm autistic, Ilya" - sitting beside him with his hands folded tight in his lap, eyes fixed somewhere just past the horizon, Ilya understood what it had cost him. This wasn’t new information, not exactly, but it was Shane offering up something that had so often been treated as liability, asking without quite asking to be held there without being diminished.

Shane admitted that hockey was the first language he’d ever known, quite literally. Ever since the first game his father took him to when he was four, perched high in the stands with the cold seeping through his boots, the arena roaring loudly around him, Shane had chewed

steadily on a plastic drink straw while his too-big winter gloves snapped back and forth on their elastic drawstrings. From there, with the kind of absolute certainty that left no room for alternatives, he had decided he would become a professional hockey player.

He admitted, quietly then, that he'd had a speech delay. That he hadn't said more than a handful of words until he was five, and even then only after his father had insisted on speech therapy - drills and repetition at the kitchen table in their old house, night after night, until the sounds finally stayed put. His father had let him pace in careful circles around the sink island his mother hated while he practiced his *th* and *r* sounds, movement easing the pressure enough for his voice to come out clear. Enough for the words to hold.

He learned not just how to make the sounds, but how to place them. How to remember the right ways to follow a conversation. *Please. Thank you. How about you?* Scripts memorized and deployed, small verbal bridges that kept people from noticing how much effort it took to cross.

For years, Ilya had noticed it without really thinking about it, the faintly mechanical quality to the way Shane spoke to most people. Polite, appropriate, and perfectly calibrated. He'd clocked it in passing, the same way you notice a player's warm-up routine or a go-to answer in postgame interviews, and then dismissed it just as quickly, because that wasn't the Shane he knew. With Ilya, Shane spoke differently. Halting sometimes, uneven, or startlingly direct, but never rehearsed. Never smoothed down for ease of consumption.

It wasn't until Shane named it that Ilya understood the difference. Shane added that, yes, he'd gotten better at it. That after enough years, enough repetition, the niceties had become automatic to the point that he didn't have to think about them anymore. They ran in the background, like muscle memory, freeing him up to focus on staying present, on keeping the rest of himself aligned.

"It just happens now," Shane had said, a little apologetic, as if that in itself might be a failing, "I don't...consider it, which I guess is the way its meant to be."

Then, Shane told Ilya that he'd learned to read through hockey books, tracing letters alongside diagrams of plays and rink layouts until the shapes of the words settled into place. His father used to mute the games on the television in the living room and encourage Shane to provide his own commentary, even when it came out halting or out of order, while Shane bounced his back against the perfectly firm couch.

His coordination, terrible at first, had been ironed out in peewees through sheer repetition, muscle memory drilled until it overrode hesitation, until his body knew what to do before his mind had time to interfere. Math came later, a way to understand player stats and probabilities, numbers behaving predictably when people did not. He said he'd made it through junior high and high school social studies the same way, by anchoring everything back to the game: its origins, its history, reports on Rocket Richard, on YMCA-funded hockey equipment during the First World War. Every subject bent back toward the rink eventually.

Everything came back to hockey, Shane told him. Not because he loved it, though he did, but because it was one of the only things that made sense. It was structured, it gave him rules,

sequences, and outcomes he could anticipate. Sitting out on the dock at the cottage, the boards still warm beneath them, the sun slipping low over the water, Shane had spoken without looking at Ilya at all, eyes fixed on the horizon as if the words might scatter if he tried to hold them too closely, and for the first time, Ilya understood that what he had taken for ease, for compatibility, had always been fluency of a different kind - and that all this time, he had truly been listening in the only way Shane had ever known how to speak.

That understanding stayed with him. It rewired old memories, softened moments he'd once misread. The silence in the car rides, the way Shane went rigid when plans shifted without warning, the days that seemed to scrape at him from the moment he woke up, when nothing quite fit and every sound landed a fraction too sharp. Those weren't failures or moods. They were Shane losing access to his best language, forced to translate himself into something less precise.

Bad days, Ilya had learned, were days when hockey couldn't quite hold everything together. When the structure bent under the weight of travel schedules, media noise, and the accumulated friction of being watched for decades of his life. Days when Shane's body still knew what to do, but the effort of keeping it all aligned showed in small, unmistakable ways, when he flinched at the buzzer, skipped meals, fingers worrying at his own skin until it lifted.

When the fluency faltered and the rules blurred, Ilya didn't fix those days. He didn't try to talk them away - he knew that he couldn't - rather he adjusted, the way he could do now when he now knows the shape of Shane well enough to make room for every part of him.

And so, when they pulled into the garage of their house in Ottawa, Ilya gently prodded Shane to, "Shower, get yourself ready."

Of course, that could mean just about anything, and that was why Ilya phrased it that way. If Shane wanted quiet, wanted to cuddle in the quiet, he could pull on his most ridiculous flannel pajamas and curl in close. But if Shane wanted him, wanted the one language that never failed between them anymore, then Shane knew what he had to do.

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So when he was done with his own shower, taken quickly in the guest bath to catch up to Shane, Ilya walked into their room in only a towel, to see him already in their bed, fully naked.

"I know we didn't have a game today," Shane started, his voice still a little shaky, his legs nervously fidgeting together, "but I feel like I played for all three periods."

Ilya slipped out of his towel, his cock already half-hard from the sight of his husband naked. Shane was a sight to behold, and when he was like this, it only made him all the more hotter. It was a look he could only see in bed, a look of pure need. The way his lips trembled, how his breath came out in short puffs, and the way he couldn't keep still. How he was always just one touch away from breaking. He loved it. Ilya slipped onto the bed, his knees falling between Shane's legs.

“Well,” he said, a cocky smirk spreading across his face, “maybe I can score a hat trick then.”

That broke Shane, a smile finally crossing his face as his body loosened, tension easing out of him in small, visible ways. He reached up, hand sliding along the side of Ilya’s face to tangle gently in his hair, fingers lingering there as if confirming something. Shane had told him once how much he liked the feel of the curls beneath his fingertips, how they reminded him of a pillowcase he’d had as a kid. Ilya hadn’t quite believed him at the time, had assumed it was sentimentality or a metaphor, until they’d gone to Shane’s parents’ house and been given the inevitable tour.

In the green bedroom that still held all of Shane’s old things, untouched since he’d moved out, there it was - a dark blue decorative pillow, its coarse weave unmistakable. Ilya could acknowledge, with reluctant amusement, that it did in fact resemble his curls.

“Shane’s always been big on ‘good textures,’” David had told him later, when they were out doing house viewings before buying their place in Ottawa. Shane and Yuna were off at a brand meeting of some kind, and David had offered to keep Ilya company. What Ilya hadn’t expected was to learn more about Shane in the process, not until David absently picked up a decorative pillow from one of the show-home beds and turned it over in his hands.

“He never liked the feeling of my hair, or his mother’s,” David had said, not bitterly, just matter-of-fact, “which always hurt a little, when he was a kid, but you’ve got that texture he likes.”

A very similar pillow, along with the old blue one, now lived on Shane’s side of their bed. Proof, Ilya thought now, of the quiet ways Shane kept the things that made the world feel manageable close at hand.

Ilya kissed the side of Shane’s head now, settling in next to him and pressing his chest against Shane’s side. Ilya kissed his nose, his hands roaming all over Shane’s belly and ribs, as far and as much as he could reach.

“You know I love you,” Shane said, looking up into Ilya’s face.

“You’ve told me,” Ilya replied between some more kisses, his fingers trailing down Shane’s thigh, “but you know I love you too.”

“I know,” Shane sighed, his legs falling open. Ilya slid his fingers down Shane’s hipbones, his fingertips brushing over Shane’s cock just lightly, testing the waters.

A soft, “fuck, that’s good,” escaped Shane’s lips, and Ilya chuckled.

“I’m happy to help,” Ilya replied.

He moved to kiss Shane’s neck, his fingers dragging up Shane’s ribs now to grab a hold of his pec muscles. Shane was always so needy for him, and it was something Ilya always loved about him. How when he got going, he was always so desperate for it. How every little bit of attention he was given was the best thing ever. How Ilya was always his everything.

“Ilya,” he gasped, his hips slowly rolling. Ilya chuckled against his throat, his thumb brushing over Shane's nipple. Shane gasped again, his cock twitching against the blankets in front of them.

“Fuck, Ilya.” Shane’s voice was breathier, more strained, and he knew that it wouldn't take much to break him, give him what he wanted.

Ilya grinned against his skin and bit down gently. Shane moaned, his legs kicking against Ilya's as he whined, “come on, Ilya.”

Tipping Shane back down onto his back, Ilya kissed down his chest to his nipple, licking over it. Shane whimpered, and Ilya could feel the sweat gathering on his skin

“Come on,” he begged as Ilya sucked on his nipple, and Shane was all but sobbing for it.

It had taken years of trial and error to learn what Shane found too much, what made his skin react like someone had pressed the wrong side of Velcro against it. Ilya hadn't understood it at first. He'd had to catalogue it the same way he did everything else. What worked, what didn't, what could be pushed and what absolutely could not. But when he got it right, when Shane settled instead of braced, it was unmistakable.

They'd tried everything. Every possible variation, every suggestion that came from curiosity or habit or Ilya's own instincts. There were plenty of things Shane couldn't handle. Not because he didn't want them, not because he was being difficult, but because his brain flagged the sensation as wrong. Off. Like lettuce on a sandwich when it should have been spinach. Like wearing a jacket on a T-shirt day. Like the house being a degree too hot or a degree too cold. Small things most people never registered, piling up until Shane felt wrong inside his own skin.

If Ilya was honest, that had been hard for him at first. He'd been a selfish player for a long time, and he'd brought some of that into bed with him. He liked intensity, he liked momentum, and he'd had to learn that there were limits here that weren't negotiable, not without cost. Some things simply weren't doable for Shane. Once Ilya stopped treating that like a challenge to overcome and started treating it like a fact to work around, everything got easier.

Because there *was* one thing they both loved that never failed, it *was* sex, and it happened to be something Ilya loved doing almost as much as playing hockey.

So he slipped lower on the bed until his head was level with Shane's crotch. He licked up the underside of his cock, and Shane cried out. His hands fell to Ilya's head, holding him close, but not pushing him down, just feeling his hair.

“Yeah,” he moaned as Ilya took him into his mouth.

Ilya felt his own cock twitch between his legs as he took in Shane's sounds.

Shane whimpered as Ilya pulled him deeper into his mouth, his hands pressing against the sides of Ilya's head. Ilya hummed around him, the vibrations going through Shane, and he

felt it when Shane's cock twitched in his mouth. Shane always loved the vibrations, loved that Ilya knew to hum when he went down on him. Ilya knew it would drive Shane wild, but that it wouldn't be too much for him. Ilya sucked harder, bobbing his head, his tongue swiping over the tip of Shane's cock.

"Fuck," Shane cursed. Ilya felt his thighs shake, and he knew Shane was close. He sucked harder, his lips tight around his cock, and felt it when his cock twitched.

"Ilya!" it wasn't a scream, Shane never really did that, but it was certainly louder than any other noise Shane had made up until that point, and then Shane was coming down his throat. Ilya swallowed it down, Shane whimpering as he did so.

"Fuck," he said again when Ilya finally pulled off.

Ilya chuckled as he wiped the spit off his lips and chin, asking, "good?"

Shane's eyes fluttered open, "yeah, I'm good," and Ilya grinned at that, knowing that it was important to have check-ins way more often than he'd once assumed was ever needed before crawling up the bed.

He kissed Shane's lips, causing him to smile and say again, "I'm good."

Ilya kissed him again, "Good."

He rolled to his back, and Shane looked at him, propping himself up onto one arm and letting his eyes roam Ilya's body. Preening a little like a cat, Svetlana had told him once, Ilya just enjoyed feeling Shane's eyes on him.

"What about you?" Shane asked, one finger tracing slow, absent circles in the hair on Ilya's torso, the motion steady enough to be grounding.

Ilya huffed a quiet laugh and said, "I don't need anything."

It was true, in the plainest sense. He played hockey on a team that wasn't uncomfortable with him and didn't keep him miles away from Shane for most of the season. He lived in a house that felt like a home. He shared a bed with the person he'd chosen, and with a family that had chosen him back. There wasn't much left that he reached for these days.

Shane didn't quite accept that. He leaned in, pressed a soft kiss to Ilya's nose, eyes widening just enough to be deliberate. Ilya sighed and rolled his eyes, but he didn't move away.

Shane tried again, quieter this time, "come on. Tell me."

"Just kiss me," Ilya said, and Shane did.

There were things Shane was particular about. Ilya had learned that early, learned it the same way he learned systems on the ice, by paying attention. Some kinds of closeness worked better than others, depending on the day, the place, the temperature of the room, the way Shane's body had already been asked to perform. It wasn't reluctance, exactly, it was simply a calibration that Ilya had never had to learn before.

Some days, Shane's skin seemed to carry a low, constant buzz, like everything landed a fraction too sharply. On those days, certain kinds of pressure helped, and others didn't. It wasn't about desire; it was about whether his body could translate sensation without it turning into static.

Ilya had stopped trying to understand it in terms of logic a long time ago. Shane didn't need a reason that made sense to him. He just needed to know where Shane was, and what would keep him there instead of pushing him out of himself.

Tonight, Shane stayed close. His hand didn't drift away, his breathing stayed even, and unlike Vegas, all those years ago, the signals lined up in that quiet, familiar way that didn't require words anymore.

Ilya followed.

He let his fingers trail down Shane's side, down to his ass, and felt where Shane had clearly cleaned himself in the shower. He was always so good about that, but there was only so much one could do in the shower without it being a little awkward.

"Is this okay?" Ilya asked.

Shane leaned up to kiss Ilya's cheek as he said, "yeah, it's okay."

His breath was a little heavy, and Ilya could see the need in his eyes. It was hard to say no to that look, and Ilya never wanted to, so pulled away and reached for the lube in the nightstand. He poured some onto his fingers and rubbed them together. Shane sighed, and Ilya smiled. He trailed his slick fingers back down Shane's body, circling his entrance, asking, "you ready?"

"Yeah," Shane said, and Ilya slowly slid one finger inside.

Shane arched against him, his breath catching in his throat with a, "fuck."

Ilya slowly worked his finger inside of Shane, stretching him. It took a few minutes to get him ready, Shane's breath hitching as he did. Shane always liked a little more prep than most of the guys he'd been with, but then again, Ilya kind of liked that. It meant that Ilya was the only one to do it for him, that Ilya was his only lover. It was something he didn't mind having to work for.

"Ilya," Shane moaned when Ilya slipped a third finger inside of him. Ilya pushed them deep, his other hand sliding over Shane's chest. He tweaked his nipple, and Shane sobbed.

"You ready?" Ilya asked.

Shane nodded, so Ilya withdrew his fingers, and Shane sighed.

"You okay?" Ilya asked. He didn't want to do anything that Shane didn't want, even if it was something that would help.

Shane smiled at him, saying, "yeah," with a grin as he leaned up and kissed Ilya.

Ilya nodded and poured a little more lube onto his palm. He slicked his cock up, settling between Shane's legs and lining himself up. He pushed inside, and Shane cried out, his legs kicking out against the blankets just a little. Ilya felt when his hips met Shane's ass, and he paused, his fingers stroking Shane's thigh as he hiked it up closer to Shane's chest again.

Shane breathed heavily, his hands roaming backwards to Ilya's ribcage and to his neck, "you feel so good."

"I know," Ilya teased, before thrusting into him.

Shane cried out, his back arching. "Oh fuck, Ilya."

"Yeah, you feel so good," Ilya grunted.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Ilya set a slow, steady rhythm, and Shane matched it as he rocked back and forth against their sheets. It felt good, like always, and he loved how tight Shane was, how it took a little work for him to move, like his body didn't want him to pull out. It was always so good like that, so perfect for him. For them both. The more he moved, the more he felt the need building in his belly.

Ilya loved that Shane was getting the same thing.

He knew that Shane's cock was getting hard again from the way he was moving against him, from the little sobs that came out with every thrust, and from the way his fingers were digging into his skin to hold him close.

Ilya leaned over to kiss him, and Shane's hand flew up to Ilya's head, pulling at his hair just a little, tangling in his curls. He didn't mind it, not really, but Ilya knew that Shane could get a little rough at times, when he felt too good and forgot himself, so Ilya reached across the bed and grabbed the blue pillow that Shane loved, tucking it under Shane's head.

Once, a few months ago, after they'd first liberated the pillow from Yuna and David's house, Shane admitted that he liked how it felt under his head when Ilya fucked him, and Ilya had taken note.

Shane liked how all the different things felt against his skin, like the sheets. Though only their ones at home, not in hotels. Like the hair on Ilya's lower belly and the hair around his cock rubbing against Shane's own legs, his own bare stomach. Like the feeling of the decorative pillows that they had on their bed. Like how Ilya's hair felt under his fingertips. Like how the stubble on his cheeks felt against the skin of his stomach when Ilya kissed his way down his body. Like the feeling of Ilya's tongue on his skin.

All the little things Ilya never used to think about, he'd learned that Shane noticed immediately. There had been a time when he couldn't read him the way he could now. A time when he'd taken those small hesitations the wrong way, when he'd thought Shane pulling

back from touch meant disinterest or distance, when really it was just that his skin had reached a point where nothing landed right anymore, too much signal, not enough filter.

There was one night that stood out. One night when Ilya had been sure he'd pushed too far, been too rough, when Shane shifted beneath him in a way that felt like retreat. Only later did Ilya understand that it hadn't been him at all. Shane hadn't needed less. He'd needed something different. Something else to hold onto. Something with edges and weight that could gather his attention and keep it there long enough for the rest of it to make sense.

They'd been in bed together, moving the way they usually did, Shane on his back, Ilya between his legs. Ilya remembered the moment clearly, the way Shane's hand had twisted into his hair too tightly, fingers pulling without meaning to, the pressure sharp enough to hurt. Ilya had stilled instinctively, then reached down and gently eased Shane's hand free.

He'd replaced it with a pillow instead. Not the blue one, they hadn't brought that back yet, but the one Jackie had given them for Christmas a few months earlier. She'd been learning to crochet, and even though the yarn was soft, the stitch was dense, solid. It had that weird weight to it that normal pillows just didn't. Structure in the thick stitches.

Ilya had watched as Shane grabbed it immediately, pulled it close to his face, fingers digging into the weave, and Ilya could feel the change under him almost at once in the way Shane's body settled, the tension draining out in small increments, his breathing evening out as he was anchored again. Present.

And as Ilya had fucked him, Shane had held onto that pillow like his life depended on it. Ilya was just glad that Shane felt good, and that it wasn't his own hair. So the next time he'd gone too rough on Shane's hair, he'd replaced his hand with a pillow again.

And it had helped, and the next time, he'd done it again, and it helped again.

It helped every time.

It helped until it became something that Shane seemed to want, and so Ilya made sure to grab it for him whenever they were in bed together. It didn't always have to be those pillows specifically, though Ilya knew Shane liked the crochet one the second best to the old blue one.

But when he wasn't able to grab it, Ilya always made sure to find something else for Shane to hold onto.

Today though, they were at home, and so he reached over and grabbed for the blue one, putting it within Shane's reach, and Shane grabbed it, pulling it to his chest. He sighed and leaned back to kiss Ilya.

Ilya moaned and nipped at his lip, murmuring, "you're so good," making Shane moan, "Ilya!"

"You feel so good," Ilya encouraged.

Ilya knew that he wouldn't last long, not with how Shane was moving beside him, not with the sounds that he was making. He knew he was getting close, and from the way Shane was moving, he knew he was too.

"Shane," Ilya gasped as his balls tightened.

Shane was silent, but Ilya felt it when he came under him. Shane's breath hitched, his fingers dug into Ilya's skin from where one of his hands had relinquished the pillow, and he squeezed around Ilya. It sent Ilya over the edge, and he came inside of Shane.

They both breathed out at the same time, and Shane pulled the pillow up to his face, hugging it close. Ilya smiled without meaning to, the expression settling in place before he could stop it. He shifted back, careful, and Shane turned toward him with a sleepy little smile, tucking the pillow behind his head. There was something unguarded in his eyes then, something soft enough that Ilya felt it land in his chest.

"Hey," Ilya said.

"Hey," Shane replied.

"You okay?" Ilya asked.

"Yeah," Shane said, a small grin tugging at his mouth, "I'm okay."

Ilya leaned in and kissed him, slow and easy. Shane kissed him back, lips warm and pliant, familiar in a way that still surprised him sometimes.

"I love you," Ilya said when they parted.

"I love you too," Shane said.

Ilya smiled again. Shane noticed and huffed out a laugh, asking, "what?"

"Nothing," Ilya said, "You're just-," he stopped himself and shook his head, "I love you so much."

"Shut up," Shane muttered, but there was no heat in it.

"Make me," Ilya said lightly, and Shane laughed again, the sound low and loose. Ilya kissed him once more, smiling into it, and then settled back, drawing Shane in against him.

Shane was warm and a little damp from sweat, his limbs heavy in that way that meant he'd let himself go slack. Ilya didn't mind, he never did. This was his favorite part, really, the quiet afterward, when Shane went pliable and trusting, when his body seemed to remember that it didn't have to hold itself so tightly. Shane sighed, the sound soft and involuntary, and melted into him.

Ilya closed his eyes, Shane's fingers finding their way into his hair, combing through it without thinking. He thought, not for the first time, about how much more of this he'd learned since they started playing for the Centaurs. Since they'd gone from seeing each other

four or five times a season to sharing practices, flights, routines. Since proximity had stopped being something temporary. Even before they'd lived in the same city, those stretches when they were only a couple of hours apart, there had been a gradual unveiling. Little habits, preferences. The things that made him tick.

None of it had made Shane smaller, and if anything, it had filled him out, made him sharper and more real in Ilya's mind. More himself.

Maybe this was what being married was meant to be. Not the grand gestures, not the milestones everyone else marked, but this slow, accumulation of knowledge. Falling in love with your person again and again, each time you noticed something new and chose it anyway. Chose it because it was theirs.

"You're good?" Ilya murmured, more habit than concern.

"Yeah," Shane said, already half-drifted off, "I'm good."

Ilya held him there, breathing in time with him, and let the moment stay exactly as it was.

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