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by briefinquiries

Summary

After a bad hit, Ilya insists he’s fine. After all, he's survived way worse than a concussion. Shane doesn’t believe him—and shows up anyway.

Shane was wedged into the middle of the couch, his dad to his left, his mom's feet tucked beneath her on his right. The Raiders game hummed through the living room, the volume a notch too loud, the voices of the commentators confident in that polished, charismatic way. His mom reacted a half-second ahead of the play like she always did, his dad chiming in here and there. Shane nodded when he was supposed to, smiled when they did, and kept his hands loose in his lap so no one would notice how tightly his fingers wanted to curl as he watched Ilya glide across the ice—fierce, effortless, commanding attention every time he came into frame.

Midway through the second period, the Raiders finally managed to set something up in Ottawa's zone. The puck moved back to the point, a quick pass across the blue line before a shot was fired through traffic. The shot was low and messy, the kind meant to create chaos more than score outright. The Ottawa goalie dropped into a butterfly and kicked the puck away with his pad, sending the rebound skidding into the crease.

Ilya was already there, parked in front of the net, jostling for position with a defenseman, his back half-turned. The rebound hit him before he even had time to react—clipping the inside edge of his skate and redirecting just enough to slip past the goalie's outstretched leg and dribble over the line.

For a beat, the arena and everyone inside of it seemed confused. Then the horn went off, the goal light flashing as the puck settled in the back of the net. Shane watched Ilya turn in a slow, bewildered circle, stick lifted like he wasn't entirely sure what he'd just done.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," Shane's dad groaned, already dropping his head back against the couch. "That's not even skill. That's just dumb luck."

His mom laughed, sharp and pleased. "Luck still counts," she said. "You don't get those goals unless you're in the right place. Say what you will, but Rozanov is good at that. He's always driving the net and causing chaos."

Shane nodded, keeping his expression neutral. "Yeah," he said. "An ugly goal's still a goal."

Shane kept his eyes fixed on the screen, but inside he was grinning. He could already picture it later—his phone propped up against the lamp on his bedside table, Ilya's face filling the screen, hair still damp from his shower and pretending like the whole thing had been deliberate. He'd talk about the importance of positioning, about instincts, about reading the play, like the puck hadn't bounced off his skate while he wasn't even looking.

Shane imagined himself leaning back on his bed, watching Ilya sell it with that infuriatingly smug face, the pause before the shrug, the way his mouth would twitch like he was daring Shane to call him on it. *Obviously I meant to do that*, *Hollander*, he'd say, completely serious. Shane would laugh, remind him of the replay, maybe even send him a link to the video.

Ilya would protest, offended on principle, but secretly pleased. Shane felt the grin settle deeper in his chest, a quiet, private thing. He stayed still on the couch, expression carefully

mild, already looking forward to later—when the game would be over, when the call would connect, when it would be just the two of them on opposite ends of the screen.

It had been longer than he liked since the last time Shane had seen Ilya in person. A road trip that stretched on and on, cities blurring together, flights and back-to-backs stealing whatever gaps they might have had. Over a month now, which felt ridiculous to miss someone this much when they talked almost every day, but the distance had a way of changing the math. Calls flattened things. Screens cut Ilya down to the shoulders and face Shane already knew by heart.

Their last time together had been quick, almost stolen. A night squeezed in between travel days, Ilya's suitcase half-unpacked on the floor, the room smelling faintly of hotel soap and the cigarette Ilya swore would be his last. They'd ordered takeout, eaten it out of the containers, knees knocking under the sheets. Shane remembered the weight of Ilya's arm slung over his shoulders later, the solid, anchoring heat of his bare skin, the way Ilya had gone quiet in that rare, unguarded way that meant he was tired enough to stop performing.

Shane and Ilya had talked about getting together when Ilya passed through Ottawa—had lingered on the idea longer than either of them admitted out loud. Shane had stared at the map on his phone, thumb hovering, quietly calculating the drive. Two hours. Maybe a little more with traffic. Doable. Tempting.

He'd been the one to shut it down.

"Don't be stupid," Shane had said, fond but firm, even as part of him didn't want to let it go. "I've got an early flight the next day out of Montreal. We'd barely get any time."

It had sounded practical. Responsible. Like the right call.

He'd memorized that last night instead, like he'd known this stretch was coming—how Ilya fit against him, how steady he felt when he finally let himself rest. He'd stood in the doorway the next morning and watched Ilya pack with methodical care, all focus and muscle memory, like leaving was just another drill to get through.

…

On the ice, the noise blurred.

Ilya's ears rang in a low, persistent hum that followed him as he skated back into position. He shook his head once, subtle. The goal still echoed in the arena, teammates tapped his helmet. He grinned widely when he was supposed to, lifted a hand to the crowd that booed him, played the part.

All he could think about was the shit Shane was going to give him later.

The image came uninvited: Shane's mouth tilting up, eyes bright with it, already lining up the jokes. *Great move*, he'd say. *Really subtle*. Ilya huffed out a breath through his nose and forced his focus back to the red line, the faceoff dot, the geometry of the ice. Thinking about Shane during a game was always a mistake.

It never stayed harmless.

His brain had a way of sliding from Shane's voice to Shane's hands… his mouth. The sheer thought of him was always the fastest route to distraction—heat curling low in his gut, tension where he absolutely did not need it. Not here. Not now. Not with cameras and boards and forty feet of ice daring him to lose his edge.

Honestly, all his opponents needed to do was say Shane Hollander's name.

That was it. That was the pressure point.

One casual mention—*your rival, the enemy, that Montreal guy*—and something in Ilya would short-circuit entirely. The sharpness dulled. The armor slipped. He'd go soft in a way that had nothing to do with the body and everything to do with the heart, like someone had reached in and pressed a thumb right into the place where he kept all the things he pretended not to need.

Shane made him reckless. Shane made him gentle. Shane made him melt into something unbearably human.

Which was exactly why Ilya could never let anyone see it.

Focus, he told himself. *You can think about Shane later.*

He pictured the puck instead. The next shift. The rhythm of his skates cutting into the ice, the clean simplicity of movement. Hockey was safe. Hockey made sense. Shane—Shane was something else entirely, something foreign and dangerous and very much not for the middle of a game.

Ilya set his jaw, leaned forward as the linesman raised his arm, and pushed the thought away with practiced precision. Ilya settled back into the rhythm of it.

Stride, glide, check over his shoulder. The ice narrowed to familiar landmarks—the blue line rushing up beneath his skates, the boards humming with impact, the soft, rhythmic thud of blades cutting close. Cold air burned its way into his lungs, sharp and clean, each breath scraping before settling into something steady. His legs loosened, muscles warming, movement smoothing out as his body remembered each movement. Whatever had been buzzing at the edges of his thoughts smoothed over, filed down to something manageable.

This was where he was good.

This was where things made sense.

He chased the puck into the corner, skates biting hard as he leaned into the turn, edges carving deep and sure. His lungs flared as he accelerated, heat blooming in his thighs, breath coming heavier now but controlled. He dropped his shoulder instinctively, bracing as he angled his body between the boards and the defender riding his back, stick extended, eyes locked on the puck as it rattled along the dasher. The glass shuddered beside him, vibrations traveling up through his pads, through bone and muscle.

For a split second, he felt perfectly aligned—felt the familiar confidence of winning the angle, of absorbing pressure without giving ground, of knowing exactly where the play was headed next. The burn in his chest sharpened, the world narrowing to speed and force and timing, and he welcomed it.

He never even saw the second man coming.

The hit came from his blind side—fast, heavy, and wrong. A shoulder slammed into him with no warning, all force and momentum, driving the air from his lungs in a sharp, useless burst. Ilya's chest collapsed inward, breath punched clean out of him as his skates left the ice for half a second, balance gone before his brain could even register what had happened.

Then his head snapped sideways.

The world fractured on impact. His helmet met the boards at just the wrong angle, plastic and padding doing their job and somehow still not enough. The sound rang hollow and enormous inside his skull, a deep, concussive crack that swallowed everything else. White light flared behind his eyes, violent and immediate, and the ice vanished beneath him.

For a moment, there was nothing.

No crowd. No rink. No body to connect to.

Just absolute and complete darkness, and the strange sensation of falling without moving.

Consciousness began to bleed back in, uneven and disoriented. Sound returned first, muffled and warped, like it had to fight its way through water to reach him. His head throbbed in sick, heavy pulses, each one sending a wave of nausea rolling through him. The world tilted, refused to settle, edges blurring as he tried to blink it into focus. Everything felt underwater, pressure wrapped tight around his ears, his own breathing loud and wrong, each inhale dragging in too much air and not enough at the same time.

Someone was shouting his name. The syllables blurred together, indistinct, sliding past him before he could catch hold of them. The world tilted, then tilted again, and Ilya blinked hard, trying to force the shapes into something recognizable. The ice swam beneath him, pulsing faintly with the thud of his heartbeat.

He lay there suspended in it, sound and sensation drifting in without order, struggling to remember where his body ended and the rink began.

Then one sound cut through it—sharp, undeniable, ringing louder than the crowd ever could.

Chto ty delayesh', syn? ***(What are you doing, son?)***

The words hit him with the same weight they always had, clear and intimate in the worst way, like his father was standing right there at the boards, arms crossed, already disappointed. The rink wavered, edges blurring, and for a heartbeat Ilya wasn't grown and armored in pads—he was young, small, lungs burning in cold air.

Ne bud' slabakom. ***(Don't be a pussy.)***

Bud' muzhikom. ***(Be a man.)***

Vstavai. ***(Get up!)***

Each command stacked on the last, louder than the whistle, louder than the pain blooming behind his eyes. His head throbbed, a deep, nauseating pulse that threatened to pull him back under, but the voice didn't allow for that. It never had.

Stopping was weakness. Staying down was a choice.

One that Ilya would not make.

It didn't matter that his vision swam when he tried to focus, that the ice seemed to tilt beneath him. It didn't matter that his stomach rolled, sour and sharp, or that every movement sent a fresh spike of pain lancing from the base of his skull down his spine. He told himself it didn't matter that his thoughts felt slow, thick, like he had to wade through them to find the right one.

It didn't matter that his jaw ached from where he'd clenched it, or that a dull pressure sat behind his eyes, building with every heartbeat. Pain was just information, something he could process. Discomfort was background noise. He'd learned that early—learned how to fold it away, make it small, make it irrelevant.

It doesn't matter, he told himself, the words firm and practiced, as he pushed to his feet.

The world tipped. Just for a second.

His legs protested, unsteady before muscle memory stepped in and took over. Skates bit into the ice, edges catching, and the rink steadied enough to function. He became aware, distantly, of eyes on him—players lingering a beat too long, a referee's glance that stayed fixed on his face instead of the puck.

Out of the corner of his vision, he caught movement near the bench. The team medic was already halfway onto the ice, skates angled toward him, posture alert. His coach stood at the boards, hand raised, expression tight with calculation and concern.

Ilya lifted his glove and waved them off without slowing, the motion sharp and automatic. I'm fine. The signal was clear.

They froze, hesitating—just long enough for Ilya to straighten fully, roll his shoulders like he was loosening up, like this was nothing more than a bad angle and a stinger. He met his coach's eyes for half a second and nodded.

Someone said his name.

A teammate's mouth was moving, concern creasing his expression, but the words slipped right past him, sound without meaning. Ilya blinked, nodded once like he'd answered, even though he hadn't heard a thing.

He rolled his shoulders, swallowed hard, and skated back into position, letting the noise of the rink close around him again. Whatever was wrong—whatever was ringing and burning and threatening to split him open—could wait.

The medic retreated. The bench settled.

Ilya turned back toward the play and skated off as if nothing had happened.

The stares followed him for a few strides longer.

Then the puck dropped again.

…

Shane felt it before he fully saw it.

One second Ilya was skating hard into the corner, body angled just right, legs driving with that familiar, ruthless efficiency. The next, everything collapsed into motion and noise—a blur of bodies, a crack of impact that punched straight through the broadcast speakers and into Shane's chest. The camera lurched to follow it, too slow, catching only the aftermath.

Ilya hit the boards hard, head snapping sideways, his body folding in on itself as he went down in a way that made Shane's stomach drop.

Ilya didn't move right away. He lay there on the ice, helmet crooked, one knee drawn up like his body hadn't decided yet what shape it was supposed to be. His stick slid out of his hand and spun a few feet away. The crowd noise swelled, then dipped, that uneasy ripple that meant everyone had noticed something was wrong.

One second passed.

Two.

Then three.

Shane's chest went tight, his lungs burning as he counted without meaning to. His mom leaned forward sharply, hands braced on her knees. His dad muttered something under his breath, the tone shifting, no longer casual.

Get up, Shane thought, panic rising fast and sharp. *Please get up.*

Another second passed. Maybe two. Time warped, thick and viscous, each heartbeat loud in his ears. Shane realized distantly that he was holding his breath and forced himself to inhale, the air scraping on the way in.

On the screen, the camera cut wide. Shane saw the bench come alive—coach standing now, arm out, mouth moving fast. The medic was already halfway over the boards, one skate on the ice, another trainer close behind him, both of them frozen in that awful in-between moment where they were waiting for permission they didn't want to need.

This was it, his brain insisted. This was the part where they don't get up, where the stretcher comes out, where the broadcast goes quiet and respectful and terrifying. His fingers curled into the couch cushion, nails digging in, breath coming shallow and sharp.

Then Ilya pushed himself onto an elbow.

Shane sucked in a breath so hard it hurt. He stayed there for a moment, head bowed. The medic hesitated, half-crouched, eyes locked on him. Shane could see the coach's hand pause mid-gesture, indecision written all over his posture.

Ilya's glove pressed to the ice and he pushed himself upright in stages—knee, pause. His head hung for a beat too long before he lifted it, eyes unfocused, the rink seeming to tilt around him.

The medic took a step forward.

But then Ilya got to his feet.

He wobbled, but stayed upright. Shane barely dared to breathe. Ilya rolled his shoulders once, slow and deliberate, like he was shaking off nothing more than a bad hit. Then he lifted his glove and waved toward the bench.

I'm fine.

The motion was firm and dismissive.

The medic froze, then reluctantly backed off. The coach hesitated, jaw tight, before lowering his arm. The bench settled, unease smoothed over by habit and necessity.

Ilya adjusted his helmet, took a couple of careful strides, then skated off under his own power, posture stubborn, jaw set.

Shane's mom hadn't moved. She was still leaning forward, elbows on her knees, eyes locked on the screen with an intensity that made something cold flare in Shane's chest. Her mouth was set, concerned and assessing.

His mom shook her head once, small and certain, the way she did when she'd already decided something and the rest of the world just hadn't caught up yet. "He's not okay," she said quietly.

Shane swallowed. "But he got up."

"That doesn't mean anything," she replied, eyes locked on the screen, voice steady with the kind of confidence that came from years of watching this exact moment play out. "Look at him. See how he's holding himself?" A beat. "He's acting tough."

She leaned forward slightly, as if that alone might sharpen the picture. "He wants to finish the game," she said. "He will. But mark my words—he's not okay."

The panic hit immediately, hot and disorienting. Shane turned back to the TV like it might contradict her if he stared hard enough. Ilya was skating again, taking shorter strides now, keeping to the perimeter like he was buying time, like he was waiting for the ice to stop tilting.

From the outside, it almost passed.

Almost.

Shane's hands clenched in his lap.

He wanted to do something. Call. Text. Anything that would reach across the distance and make this stop. But there was nothing he could do from a couch, boxed in by silence and secrecy, watching the person he cared so much about pretend he wasn't hurt because that was what he'd been taught to do.

…

The ice didn't feel right under his skates.

It was still solid, Ilya knew that logically. But everything about it felt off, like someone had shifted the rink a few degrees to the left and forgotten to tell him. His legs moved on instinct, muscle memory dragging him through the motions while his head lagged half a second behind, trying to catch up.

The bench came at him faster than he expected. Or slower. He couldn't tell which.

"Rozanov—" someone said, close. "Ilya."

He turned, or meant to. The world smeared at the edges, colors bleeding together. He blinked hard, once, then again, until the shape resolved into his coach's face—creased with concern, eyes scanning him the way coaches did when they were already calculating consequences.

"You okay?" his coach asked.

The question landed strangely, like it had to travel a long distance to reach him. Ilya nodded immediately, the motion automatic. Too fast. He knew better than to hesitate.

"Yes," he said, though the word felt thick in his mouth. He cleared his throat and tried again, forcing it steadier. "Fine."

His coach studied him, hand still resting on the top of the boards. "You sure?"

Ilya smiled—small, easy, the one he'd perfected. The one that said don't worry, I've got this, trust me. He rolled his shoulders like he was loosening them out, like that was all this was. A stinger. Nothing worth making a scene over.

"Just caught me strange," he added, because that sounded plausible. "I am fine."

The coach hesitated, eyes flicking to his helmet, his posture, the way Ilya's weight shifted a fraction too late. Then he nodded, clapped him once on the shoulder. "Alright."

Ilya turned back toward the ice before anything else could be asked.

As soon as his gaze left the bench, the noise rushed back in too loud, too sharp. His head pulsed with every heartbeat, a deep pressure that made him vaguely nauseous. He swallowed hard and focused on the numbers painted into the ice, the simple certainty of lines and circles. Count them. Follow them.

And then the horn sounded, and he pushed off again, hoping momentum would carry him where his clarity wouldn't.

The rest of the game blurred into a series of small failures.

Ilya was a step slow on every shift. He chased plays he normally anticipated, arriving a heartbeat late, stick swiping at empty space where the puck had been. His focus slid in and out, attention snagging on nothing—on the crowd noise, on the ache behind his eyes, on the way the ice seemed to ripple when he turned too fast. He missed a clean outlet pass and had to scramble back, lungs burning harder than they should have.

Ottawa tied it only thirty seconds into the third, and he knew the moment it happened that it was on him.

He drifted too wide on the backcheck, misjudged the angle, hesitated where he should have committed. The puck moved past him clean and fast, tape to tape, and by the time he pivoted, the shooter was already winding up. The goal horn cut through the arena, sharp and punishing. Ilya coasted to the corner, chest tight, staring at the boards like they might offer an explanation he could use.

Too fucking slow, he thought.

He told himself to reset. One shift at a time. Simple things. Get the puck deep. Finish checks. But even the simple things felt slippery. His thoughts came in fragments, like he was trying to listen to instructions through a bad connection. He overcorrected on a turn, nearly lost an edge. Took a penalty he shouldn't have, stuck a fraction too high because his timing was off.

Ottawa scored again not long after—another breakdown, another scramble in front of the net. Ilya was there, technically, body in the lane, but it felt like watching it happen through glass. By the time he reacted, the puck was already in the back of the net.

2–1.

The final minutes came and went without him really registering them. A whistle. A faceoff. The empty net threat looming and then gone. Before he could get his bearings, the final horn sounded, long and final, echoing through the rink.

Game over.

Ilya straightened slowly, joints stiff, brain lagging behind the movement. He shook his head out of habit, immediately regretted it, and followed his teammates toward the tunnel. The loss settled over him like a weight, familiar but heavier tonight, tangled up with the dull certainty that he hadn't been himself out there.

By the time he reached the bench, the noise had already started to fade.

…

Shane's mom made a quiet sound beside him. "See that?" she said.

Shane's throat went dry. "What?"

"The way he's wobbling," she said, eyes never leaving the screen as Ilya headed down the tunnel. "He's compensating." She shook her head once, already certain. "He's not okay."

Shane didn't answer. He couldn't. His gaze stayed glued to the broadcast as the camera followed Ilya down the tunnel, the bright rink lights giving way to shadow. The shot cut away before anything obvious could happen, before there was proof he could point to and say this is why I'm scared.

They went to commercial. His dad started talking again, filling the space like he always did, dissecting plays, outcomes, what-ifs. Shane barely heard him. His pulse thudded loud in his ears, every beat echoing the same thought: Ilya needs to be okay.

When the postgame interview came on, Shane leaned forward without realizing it.

Ilya stood in front of the backdrop, hair plastered to his forehead, cheeks flushed. He looked exhausted in a way that went deeper than usual. He answered the first question fine—short, practiced, automatic. The second took longer. There was a pause, barely perceptible, and when he spoke again his words ran together just slightly, edges softened, timing off.

Not enough for the commentators to comment on it.

More than enough for Shane to notice.

His mom's mouth pressed into a thin line. "Mm," she murmured. "I think he's concussed. I hope he isn't too arrogant to get that checked out."

Shane's chest tightened. He watched Ilya blink a little too slowly, tilt his head like he was trying to line the world back up. On the screen, Ilya blinked a little too slowly, tilted his head like he was trying to line the world back up, his words just a fraction behind his thoughts.

The interview wrapped. The camera cut away.

That was it.

Something in Shane snapped into place. The fear didn't disappear; it narrowed and turned into something purposeful enough to stand on. He stopped wondering if he was overreacting.

Stopped weighing pros and cons, stopped listening to the voice that told him to wait.

Ottawa wasn't that far.

He could drive back early enough to catch his morning flight. His car was full of gas. His phone was already in his hand, screen lighting up as his thumb hovered over maps.

Shane stood up so fast the couch creaked beneath him. His parents looked at him, startled, but he was already halfway out of the room, heart hammering with the certainty of it.

Ilya shouldn't be alone.

…

Ilya didn't realize his hands were shaking until he tried to take his gloves off.

The room was loud, and then suddenly not, sound dropping out in uneven patches like someone was messing with the volume. He sat for a second longer than necessary, elbows on his knees, breathing through the pressure building behind his eyes. Sweat cooled too fast against his skin, leaving him faintly nauseous. He told himself to stand. Didn't, right away.

His phone buzzed against the bench.

Once.

Twice.

He frowned down at it, vision lagging just enough that he had to blink to make the screen behave. Shane's name swam into focus, bright and familiar and immediately dangerous.

For a split second, instinct won. His thumb hovered, already moving to accept the call. He wanted to hear Shane's voice. Wanted the normalcy of it, the grounding weight of knowing Shane was there, watching, already halfway into teasing him about the goal.

Then reality caught up.

He couldn't do it. Not like this.

He couldn't fake fine with Shane, not convincingly. Shane would hear it in his voice, see it in his face if they switched to video. He'd ask the wrong question in that gentle way of his, the one that always cracked Ilya open before he realized what was happening. And Ilya didn't trust himself not to sway, or slur, or close his eyes for just a second too long.

The phone kept buzzing in his hand.

"Shit," he muttered, more breath than sound.

He declined the call.

Guilt flared immediately, sharp and unwelcome. He swallowed hard and forced his fingers to work, thumbs clumsy on the screen as he opened their messages.

He needed an excuse. Something that would make Shane back off without digging.

Lily: sorry
Lily: locker room is crazy now
Lily: will call later

He stared at it, grimaced, then sent it anyway. Dumb, but serviceable. He leaned his head back against the locker, eyes closing for a beat longer than he should have.

The reply came fast.

Jane: Are you okay?

Ilya huffed out a weak breath and opened his eyes, the fluorescent lights overhead making his head throb harder. He typed without thinking too much, muscle memory taking over the way it always did when he needed to deflect.

Lily: no. i hate losing. you know this

He could picture Shane reading it—could picture the pause, the slight tilt of his head, the way he never accepted the first answer if it wasn't the real one.

"Rozanov."

He cracked one eye open.

Marcus Hale stood a few feet away, still half in his gear, sweat-dark hair plastered to his forehead. He jerked his chin forward and reached out, nudging Ilya's shoulder with the back of his glove before gesturing vaguely at his own face.

"You got quite the shiner," Marcus said.

Ilya frowned and lifted a hand to his cheekbone. The second his fingers made contact, pain flared, blooming outward like heat under the skin. He hissed quietly through his teeth and pulled his hand back.

"Fuck," he muttered.

Marcus's brows knit. "Yeah," he said. "You sure you're okay?"

Ilya rolled his jaw carefully, testing it. Everything felt tender—too tender. He imagined the skin already darkening, purpling beneath the surface, a bruise he wouldn't see until later but could already feel announcing itself.

"I'm fine," Ilya said automatically.

Marcus didn't argue. He just gave him a look that said sure and clapped him once, lightly, on the shoulder. "At least have the trainers take a look," he said, quieter now.

Then he moved on, drawn back into the noise and motion of the room.

Ilya slumped a little once he was gone, shoulders sagging as the adrenaline continued its slow retreat. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, too bright, too close. His phone buzzed again in his hand.

Jane: I don't mean the loss.

Ilya closed his eyes.

For a moment, he didn't answer at all. The room felt too loud again, teammates laughing somewhere down the bench, music starting up, normalcy pressing in on him from all sides while Shane's words cut straight through it. He pressed his thumb against the side of the phone like he could ground himself that way.

He wanted Shane's voice in his ear, steady and calm and worried in that way that made everything else fade.

But he knew—knew with a certainty that made his chest ache—that if he opened that door, even a crack, he wouldn't be able to hold it together.

So he did what he always did.

Lily: i am fine. you worry too much.

The reply didn't come immediately this time.

Ilya watched the screen anyway, thumb resting uselessly against the edge of the phone. His head throbbed in slow, ugly pulses. Someone laughed nearby and it felt too loud, too close. He shifted on the bench, the metal cold against his spine.

Then the typing bubble appeared.

Jane: Probably.
Jane: What hotel are you at?

Ilya frowned slightly, the question taking a second longer than it should have to land.

Another message followed, quick enough to look casual.

Jane: Is it close to the rink or did they put you guys somewhere far away again?

Ilya swallowed, staring at the screen. His fingers hesitated over the keyboard.

Lily: same place as last time
Lily: about ten minutes away

He leaned his head back against the locker again, eyes closing despite himself. The ache behind them surged, sharp enough to make him grit his teeth. For a moment, the room tilted, the noise dropping out like someone had thrown a switch. He stayed still until it passed, breathing shallow, counting the seconds the way he'd learned to.

The rest of the night unfolded in fragments.

Media first—bright lights, questions that felt too close, too fast. He answered on autopilot, voice steady enough, even when it took him a beat longer than usual to find the right words. No one commented. No one ever did as long as you didn't make them. He smiled when he was supposed to, blamed execution, said the right things about effort and learning moments.

Then the team meeting. Video clips flashing by, red and blue lines drawn over mistakes he already knew he'd made. His head throbbed in time with the laser pointer tapping the screen. He focused on the table in front of him, the grain of the wood, anything that would keep the nausea from cresting.

By the time he finally left the rink, it had been nearly an hour and a half since the final horn. The adrenaline had long since burned off, leaving behind a heavy, dragging exhaustion that settled deep in his muscles. The bus ride to the hotel passed in a blur of streetlights and low conversation, the city outside the window streaking past in soft, unfocused lines.

When he got to his room, it felt too quiet.

He shut the door carefully behind him and stood there for a second longer than necessary, bag still slung over his shoulder, the silence pressing in around him. The quiet made everything louder—the dull, pounding ache behind his eyes, the slow roll of nausea in his stomach, the way the floor seemed just a little too far away when he shifted his weight.

His neck protested when he moved, a sharp pull radiating down between his shoulders, and he froze until the spike eased back into something manageable. He focused on his breathing, shallow and deliberate, waiting for the room to stop tilting.

His phone buzzed in his hand. Ilya frowned at it before he even unlocked the screen, a dull sense of apprehension settling in his chest. Shane's name lit up the display, bright and insistent.

Jane: What room are you in?

Ilya stared at the message longer than necessary. His brow furrowed, confusion cutting through the fog for a moment. His head pulsed in response, a deep, throbbing pressure that made the light from the screen feel too sharp.

Ilya swallowed and typed.

Lily: 1217

The numbers looked wrong for a second. He blinked until they settled into place, then hesitated, a knot forming low in his chest.

Lily: why?

Without waiting for a reply, he kicked off his shoes, dropped his bag by the door, and crossed the room towards the bathroom, each step measured like the floor might betray him if he moved too fast. The light switch felt too far away. When he flicked it on, the sudden brightness made his vision swim, a sharp spike of pain flaring behind his eyes that had him bracing both hands on the counter until it dulled.

He kept his head down for a second longer than necessary.

When he finally looked up, the mirror greeted him without mercy.

The bruise was already there.

It bloomed dark and unmistakable along his cheekbone, purple bleeding into yellow at the edges, swelling just enough to change the shape of his face. The skin looked tight, angry. He lifted his fingers toward it, then stopped short, remembering how much it had hurt when he'd tried that in the locker room. Just seeing it was enough—confirmation settling heavy in his chest.

"Shit," he breathed.

Ilya turned his face slightly, watching the bruise pull when he moved. His neck twinged again in protest, a reminder that the damage wasn't just skin-deep. He swallowed hard and leaned closer to the sink, gripping the porcelain like it could keep him upright.

He stared at his reflection a second longer than he should have, the edges of the mirror wavering. His stomach dipped in response, a hollow, queasy drop that made his jaw tighten. He swallowed and held still, waiting for it to pass. He'd felt worse. He'd played through worse. This was nothing.

Breathe, he told himself.

He turned on the faucet, the rush of water loud and grounding, and leaned closer to the sink. Cool air scraped his lungs as he drew in a careful breath through his nose, then let it out slowly through his mouth.

In.

Out.

His head pulsed—deep, pressurized, like someone was steadily inflating something behind his eyes—but he kept breathing, kept his gaze fixed on the edge of the counter instead of the mirror. If he didn't move too fast, if he stayed controlled, this would pass.

"I'm fine," he muttered. "You're fine."

The nausea crept persistently higher anyway— an insistent coil tightening low in his gut, spreading warmth and wrongness up his throat. His mouth flooded with saliva, sharp and metallic, and he grimaced, swallowing hard.

Okay. Still okay. This was just nerves. Anxiety. He knew this pattern. He could manage anxiety.

He planted his feet more firmly and focused on his breathing again, slower this time, deliberate. In for four. Hold. Out for six. The way he'd learned to do it years ago, back when he'd needed to calm himself down without anyone noticing.

But his body didn't slow.

His chest tightened instead, breath growing shallow despite his effort. His heart began to pound, fast and uneven, each beat echoing in his ears. His fingers curled against the counter, trembling now, and the nausea sharpened into urgency.

No, his mind flashed, sudden and panicked.

Not this. Don't do this.

The room felt smaller all at once, the air thick and insufficient. He tried to take a deeper breath and couldn't—his lungs stalled halfway, chest hitching uselessly. Heat crawled up his neck, sweat breaking out along his spine.

This was the part he hated.

He could manage anxiety. He knew how to talk himself through it—how to slow his breathing, how to ground, how to wait out the spike until it burned itself down to something tolerable. Anxiety was a fight he'd learned to win through repetition and discipline.

But getting sick wasn't like that.

There was no bargaining with it, no forcing it into a corner. Once his body decided this was how it would release the pressure, there was nothing he could do to stop it. No amount of control or toughness mattered. It took over completely, stripping him of the one thing he relied on most—command over himself.

During the chaos of his childhood, his body had never learned the difference between anxiety and sickness. Fear and nausea lived in the same place, tripped the same wires. Once the switch flipped, it didn't matter which one had come first—they fed each other until everything blurred together, control slipping through his fingers no matter how tightly he held on.

He squeezed his eyes shut, breathing fast now despite himself. "No," he whispered. "No, no —"

His stomach lurched violently.

That was it.

The fight drained out of him all at once as his body took over. He staggered away from the sink, barely registering the jolt of pain through his head as he dropped to his knees in front of

the toilet. He retched hard, the force of it snapping through him, each heave sending white-hot pain blooming behind his eyes.

His helmet might've been off, but his head still felt like it was getting hit.

Tears streamed down his face without permission. His hands gripped the rim of the toilet like it was the only solid thing left in the room. He gagged again, body folding in on itself, throat burning, breath coming in broken, panicked gasps between waves.

Ilya felt like a coward admitting it, but he hated getting sick more than anything else.

Pain, he could endure. Pain was clean. Pain was something you took and survived and moved past. He'd been brave about broken bones, bad hits, injuries that made other people wince.

But right now, he wasn't being brave.

Right now, he was being small.

When it finally eased, he sagged forward, forehead resting against the cool porcelain, breathing shallow and wrecked. Sweat cooled too fast against his skin, leaving him shivering slightly. His stomach cramped weakly, empty and sore.

For a long moment, he stayed there—knees tucked under him, one arm wrapped tight around his middle like he could physically keep himself together.

When he was a kid, this was how it had always gone.

Before games. Before nights when the house felt wrong—too loud, too charged, too unpredictable in ways that made his stomach knot before his brain could catch up. Before his mother died. After she died. During the long stretch where everything had broken and nothing had been put back together properly.

Crying hadn't been allowed. Shaking hadn't been safe. Fear only made things worse.

So his body had found another way out.

Throwing up had been safer than crying. Safer than shaking. His body had learned a release valve and never unlearned it.

Even now—years later, stronger, older, removed from that house and that man—the wiring was still there. Anxiety flipped the same switch it always had. Control slipped. His stomach responded the way it had been trained to respond, reflexive and unforgiving.

Ilya pressed his forehead briefly to his knees, eyes closing.

He hated that this part of him had survived when so much else hadn't. Hated that no amount of discipline or success or distance had fully undone it.

Another small wave rolled through him—not enough to retch again, but enough to make his chest tighten reflexively, his body bracing for something it had been trained to expect. He

rocked slightly on the cold tile, grounding himself the way he always had, alone in bathrooms that smelled like bleach and metal and memory.

His head pounded.

Not a sharp pain—worse than that. A crushing, internal pressure, like the inside of his skull had been overfilled and had nowhere to drain. The force of vomiting had sent it spiking, each retch echoing upward until it felt like his brain was being squeezed from the inside out. He hunched forward instinctively, elbows on his knees, forehead dropping toward his arms.

"Fuck," he breathed, but the word barely made it out.

The room dimmed at the edges. Sound dulled. His vision narrowed to a soft, tunneling blur as another pulse of pressure rolled through his head, heavier than the last. He focused on the tile beneath him—the grout line, the faint crack running diagonally—but even that started to slip.

His phone buzzed somewhere in the other room.

Shane.

The sound reached him like it was coming through water. It made his chest ache in a way that had nothing to do with panic and everything to do with want. He squeezed his eyes shut, intending just to block it out for a second, just long enough to ride this out.

But his body sagged further forward.

The pressure peaked—white and overwhelming—and then his muscles gave up trying to hold him upright. His head dropped fully, chin tucking to his chest as he folded in on himself, breath stuttering out in a weak, involuntary sound.

He'd been brave on the ice.

He just didn't know how to be brave about this.

…

Shane stood outside room 1217 with his heart in his throat.

He knocked once, then again—firm but not loud, the way you do when you're trying not to draw attention. The hallway was quiet, carpet swallowing the sound. He waited, counting without meaning to.

Nothing.

"Ilya?" he said softly, leaning closer to the door like that might help.

His phone stayed dark in his hand. No reply. No typing bubble. The unease that had been simmering since the tunnel tightened into something sharp and urgent.

"Okay then," Shane muttered, mostly to himself.

He tried the handle.

It turned easily.

The door swung open just enough for him to slip inside, and Shane closed it behind him with careful, controlled movements, like the room itself might spook if he wasn't gentle. He made a mental note for some future moment when his heart wasn't trying to beat out of his chest, where he could give Ilya a proper lecture about personal safety and locking his stupid hotel room.

Later, he promised himself. When this was over.

The lights were off except for the dim glow of a lamp by the bed, casting the room in soft, uneven shadows. The air smelled faintly of soap and sweat and something metallic that made the back of his throat tighten. Shane stood still for a beat, letting his eyes adjust, every sense on high alert, the quiet of the room pressing in like a held breath.

"Ilya?" he called softly.

No answer.

The silence stretched heavily. Shane took a few careful steps farther into the room, his shoes whispering against the carpet. His pulse roared in his ears, each beat loud enough that he was sure it had to be audible. He tried again, a little louder this time, unable to keep the edge out of his voice.

"Ilya. It's me."

Still nothing.

His eyes went to the bed automatically—and stalled there. The covers were still perfectly smooth, pillows untouched, the whole thing looking exactly the way hotel beds always did when no one had sat on them yet. No dent. No discarded hoodie. No sign Ilya had even made it that far.

Shane's chest tightened.

"Ilya," he said again, louder now.

Nothing.

The wrongness of it settled in fast and heavy.

That's when he noticed the thin strip of light glowing beneath the bathroom door, sharp against the dark carpet. Shane froze for half a second, every instinct flaring at once.

"Ilya?" His voice came out tight now.

No response.

He crossed the room quickly, knocked once out of habit even as his hand closed around the handle. “Hey,” he said, trying for calm he didn’t feel. “It’s me.”

Still nothing.

He pushed the door open.

Ilya was on the bathroom floor near the toilet, hunched over, folded inward like he’d run out of strength mid-motion. His head was bowed, shoulders slack, one cheek pressed against his knee. He looked too still—unnaturally so.

“Oh—fuck,” Shane breathed.

He dropped to his knees beside him, tile cold through his joggers, heart slamming painfully against his ribs. “Ilya,” he said urgently, one hand hovering just short of touching him, afraid of how little he was moving.

Shane reached out and laid his hand gently on Ilya’s shoulder.

Shane didn’t even have time to feel relieved before Ilya jolted awake with a sharp, panicked gasp. His body snapped tight like a wire pulled too fast. He flinched hard, scrambling backward a few inches, hands coming up defensively as his breath hitched into something frantic and uneven.

“Hey—hey, it’s okay,” Shane said immediately, voice low and steady, hands lifting into Ilya’s line of sight. “It’s just me.”

Ilya’s eyes darted wildly for a second, unfocused, glassy, like he was trying to orient himself in pieces rather than all at once. His chest rose and fell too fast, breaths shallow and sharp.

“It’s okay,” Shane said, softer now. “It’s just me.”

Ilya blinked, hard. Once. Twice. His gaze finally landed on Shane’s face and stuck there, confusion melting into exhausted recognition. His shoulders sagged like he’d been holding them up by sheer force alone.

And that was when Shane really saw him.

Not just the way he was folded in on himself. Not just the tremor still lingering in his hands. But his face—tilted slightly as he leaned forward, caught by the bathroom light at the wrong angle.

The bruise was unmistakable.

Dark and ugly along his eye and down his cheekbone, already deepening into purples and blues, the skin swollen just enough to pull tight when he moved. It stood out starkly against the flushed red of his eyes, against the tear tracks Shane could still see if he looked too closely.

“Hollander?” The name came out cracked and reverent all at once, like a habit and a plea tangled together. As if naming him might keep him there.

Ilya cleared his throat immediately, jaw tightening, the familiar armor sliding back into place even as his voice betrayed him. He straightened a fraction, wiped at his face with the back of his hand.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

Shane opened his mouth, then hesitated—long enough for Ilya to beat him to it.

“Let me guess,” Ilya said, voice rough. “You missed me. Or you got bored. Or you finally decided Ottawa is not that far after all.” A weak huff of a laugh. “Very good timing, by the way. Bathroom floor really sets the mood.”

“I saw you get hit,” Shane said quietly, refusing to play along with Ilya’s defensive humor. “During the game. Ilya, you went down so hard. And then you didn’t answer, and—” He shrugged helplessly. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Ilya’s mouth twitched despite himself. He rolled his eyes carefully, like even that took effort. “Wow,” he murmured. “So this is my fault, huh? Injury and dramatic collapse ruined your evening?”

Shane’s face contorted into a grimace. “Ilya… That’s not what I—”

“I know,” Ilya cut in, softer now as he let his head hang. “It was joke.” He swallowed, then added, almost under his breath, “I am fine,” he added automatically, the lie thin and reflexive. “I just—” He shook his head once, winced, and stopped. “Didn’t mean to fall asleep on the floor.”

Shane didn’t smile.

Ilya noticed. His joke faltered, the edge dulling.

“It was bad hit,” he admitted finally, quieter. “Okay?”

Shane nodded once. “Yeah,” he said. “It was.”

“But I have had worse,” Ilya continued, still desperately clinging to his armor. The words came out reflexive, like he could say them often enough to make them true. “This is nothing.”

“Hey,” Shane interrupted gently, just enough to stop the spiral. “You don’t have to convince me how tough you are,” Shane said softly.

Ilya swallowed, jaw tightening again, eyes flicking away like he’d been caught doing something wrong.

Shane reached out then, slow and careful, and brushed a few damp strands of hair back from Ilya’s forehead. His fingers were warm; Ilya’s skin was hot and slick with sweat. The touch

was gentle, but it made Ilya's eyes flutter shut anyway, his shoulders easing like he'd been bracing for something else.

His voice dropped even lower. "Let me take care of you," Shane said. "Just for tonight. You can go back to being tough later."

Shane's hand lingered there, thumb resting lightly at Ilya's hairline like he was afraid too much pressure might tip him back into pain. He didn't rush to fill the silence. He let it settle, warm and steady, something Ilya could lean into.

Ilya's breath shuddered once. Then again.

"Okay," he murmured, barely audible, the word less an agreement than a surrender.

Shane exhaled slowly, relief softening his posture. He shifted away just long enough to flush the toilet—the sight of it making Ilya grimace despite himself, the sound too loud and sharp in the small bathroom—then turned on the sink. Shane soaked a washcloth in cool water, wrung it out, and came back, settling on the edge of the tub just behind Ilya.

Shane adjusted his position slightly, knees angling so he could support him better. "Hey," he murmured. "Come here."

He guided Ilya gently, coaxing him to shift until his weight tipped sideways, his head coming to rest against Shane's knee. It took no time at all for Ilya to relax into the touch, cheek pressing into the solid warmth through Shane's sweatpants.

"Good," Shane said quietly, more reassurance than instruction.

He lifted the washcloth and started again, wiping carefully along Ilya's forehead and hairline, slow and methodical, avoiding the bruise. The cool fabric drew a small, involuntary sound from Ilya, his breath hitching as his shoulders sank another inch, the fight bleeding out of him with every gentle pass.

Ilya swallowed, hard.

He tipped his head just enough to look up at Shane, eyes glassy and rimmed red, expression stripped bare in a way that made Shane's chest ache. There was nothing deflecting it this time—no joke or edge.

"I don't think…" His voice cracked. He tried again, softer. "I don't think I'm okay."

Shane's throat tightened as he gazed back at him softly. Carefully, he brushed his thumb along Ilya's cheek, then jaw. "I know," he murmured.

He leaned down slowly, like he was approaching something fragile, and pressed a gentle kiss to Ilya's forehead—well clear of the bruise. It lingered just a second longer than necessary.

Ilya let out a shaky breath and leaned into the touch, eyes fluttering closed.

After a moment, Shane shifted, easing his hand away only enough to get Ilya's attention again. "Hey," he said quietly. "Let's get you to bed, okay? The floor's not doing you any favors."

Ilya didn't move right away.

Then, barely above a whisper, he asked, "What if I get sick again?"

The question was small. Too small for someone like Ilya. It caught Shane off guard, because of how young Ilya sounded saying them. Stripped of sarcasm or armor. Instead, it was just fear.

Ilya swallowed, fingers twisting together in his lap. He hesitated, then spoke again, voice low and rough. "I do not like throwing up. I—" He stopped, jaw tightening, then tried again. "I have hard time ever telling when it's going to happen. It just… hits. And then I don't have control anymore."

His shoulders hunched slightly, protective. "I do not like that," he added, quieter. "Not being able to stop it."

Something in Shane's chest shifted.

The absurdity of it hit him all at once—not in a funny way, but in that aching, disarming way that rearranged things inside you. Ilya Rosanov. Professional athlete. Built like he could take on the world and win. Someone who had just taken a brutal hit, played through it, walked off the ice bruised and concussed.

And this was what scared him.

Not the pain. Not the concussion. Not the possibility that something was genuinely wrong. But the loss of control. The vulnerability of throwing up. The quiet terror of his body doing something he couldn't predict or command.

It made him so unbearably human.

Shane felt himself soften in a way that had nothing to do with pity and everything to do with recognition. With affection so sharp it almost hurt. This—this fragile honesty, this unguarded fear—felt like a privilege to be trusted with.

Shane crouched a little lower, bringing himself fully into Ilya's line of sight. "Hey," he said gently. "If you get sick again, that's okay. We can bring the trashcan over if you're worried about making it back to the bathroom."

Ilya blinked at him, lashes clumped, eyes unfocused and rimmed red. The idea seemed to take a moment to land. Then his shoulders loosened, just a fraction.

"Okay," he said quietly.

Shane nodded, like that settled it. "I'll put it right next to the bed."

He shifted closer and offered his hand, palm up, an invitation rather than a command. “Let’s get you up, yeah? Slow.”

Ilya hesitated for half a second, then placed his hand in Shane’s. His grip was clammy and a little damp, fingers curling tight like he didn’t fully trust the floor yet. Shane braced himself and guided him carefully, keeping his movements measured, talking the whole way without really meaning to.

“Alright. Go slow,” Shane murmured. “I’ve got you.”

Ilya leaned heavily into him as he stood, swaying just enough to make Shane’s arm tighten instinctively around his waist. Shane paused, letting him find his balance, feeling the way Ilya’s weight settled against him like relief rather than embarrassment.

“Too fast?” Shane asked.

“No,” Ilya said, though his eyes were closed. “Just… room is spinny.”

“Okay,” Shane replied. “We’ll wait.”

They stood there, Shane solid and unmoving, one hand firm at Ilya’s back, the other still laced with his. When Ilya finally nodded, Shane guided him toward the bed one careful step at a time.

“There we go,” Shane said softly.

By the time they reached the mattress, Shane eased him down onto the edge of the bed and stayed close, knees nearly touching, ready to catch him if the room tipped again.

“There,” Shane said gently. “Floor’s officially off duty.”

Ilya huffed a faint, exhausted sound that might have been a laugh and leaned forward, forehead dropping briefly against Shane’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” he murmured. “For driving all this way. You did not have to do this.”

Shane’s arms came around him without hesitation, steady and sure. He rested his chin lightly against Ilya’s hair, curls brushing across his face as he breathed him in.

“I know,” he said softly. “I’ll always come, Ilya. You know that, right?”

Almost instantly, Ilya scoffed.

Slow. Familiar. A little crooked.

“Sometimes even hands-free, yes?” Ilya murmured, voice still rough but warmed now with something unmistakably him. He poked Shane’s stomach playfully with what little energy he had left.

Shane snorted before he could stop himself. He batted Ilya's hand away gently before pulling back just enough to look at him, eyebrows raised. "You're concussed," he said dryly. "And somehow still making jokes like that?"

Ilya's smirk deepened, pleased with himself. "What?" he said faintly. "You prefer when I am unconscious?"

"Absolutely not," Shane said, laughing as he shifted his weight as he went to pull off the bed. He barely made it an inch before Ilya's fingers closed around his wrist, not tight but urgent, tugging him back like he'd forgotten something important.

His expression changed immediately—smirk gone, eyes soft and imploring in a way that made Shane's chest ache.

"No, no. I'm just teasing," Ilya said, the words slipping out needy and unguarded. "Stay."

"Ilya," Shane said gently, already losing. "I'm literally just getting my phone."

Ilya frowned, processing this like it was deeply suspicious. "Why would you need your phone when I am right here?"

Shane laughed again, helpless now.

Ilya made a small, affronted sound and tugged harder. "Please," he insisted. "Come back to bed."

That did it.

Shane shook his head, chuckling, and let himself be pulled back down, sitting on the edge of the mattress again without resistance. "You're unbelievable," he said fondly.

Ilya relaxed instantly, satisfied, his grip loosening now that Shane had complied. He leaned in closer, cheek brushing Shane's shoulder, eyes already drifting.

"Mmm," he murmured. "Good choice."

"Okay," Shane said, shifting. "Come on. Let's actually lie down."

He guided them both back onto the bed, slow and careful, making sure Ilya didn't move too quickly. Once he was settled, Shane curled in behind him, instinct taking over, arm slipping around Ilya's waist and pulling him gently back until his spine fit flush against Shane's chest.

Shane adjusted the pillow with one hand, then slid his other up, fingers threading softly through Ilya's hair. He stroked slow, repetitive passes from crown to nape, soothing and familiar. Ilya melted into it immediately, body going loose in a way that made it clear how exhausted he was.

"How's your head?" Shane murmured near his ear.

There was a pause.

Ilya swallowed, then answered quietly, without joking this time. “It hurts.”

Shane adjusted his hold, careful not to jostle him, palm resting warm and steady over Ilya’s stomach as his fingers kept combing through his hair. “Do you want water? Or Tylenol?”

Ilya let out a small, shaky breath and shook his head, eyes closing fully now. “No. I took some at the arena. I just want to lay here with you, okay?”

He pressed back into Shane’s chest, trusting, safe.

Shane exhaled slowly, letting his forehead rest against the back of Ilya’s head, letting himself really feel it—the relief, the fear ebbing now that Ilya was here, breathing, safe.

“Okay,” he murmured. “We can do that.”

He stayed exactly where he was, arm firm around Ilya’s middle, fingers still moving through his hair in slow, absent patterns. He hadn’t realized how tense he’d been until this moment, how every part of him had been braced for something worse. Now, with Ilya tucked against him, the adrenaline finally drained, leaving behind something softer and deeper.

God, he loved him. More than he ever let himself think about in moments like this. Enough that the sight of him on a bathroom floor had nearly cracked him open. Enough that he’d driven hours without stopping to question it. Enough that holding him like this felt less like a choice and more like gravity.

Shane sighed, long and quiet, and let himself melt into it—into the warmth of Ilya’s back, the steady rhythm of his breathing slowly evening out beneath his hand.

Within minutes, the tension left Ilya’s face completely. The line between his brows smoothed. His jaw slackened just a little. His breaths deepened, lengthened, each one softer than the last.

Careful not to move, he tilted his head just enough to look down at him as he slept. Ilya’s lashes rested against his cheeks now, no longer fluttering, his expression peaceful in a way that made Shane’s throat ache.

He pressed a gentle kiss into Ilya’s hair and stayed exactly where he was, holding him through the night, listening to his breathing, grateful in a quiet, overwhelming way that for now—at least for this moment—Ilya was safe and they were together.

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