

call it what you want

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Summary

Normally he would never. Normally he keeps this tight, locked behind his ribs, measured and careful and quiet. Normally every thought about Ilya gets sorted before it ever reaches his mouth. He makes sure nothing sounds like too much.

But the medication has loosened something he usually keeps wound tight. It has softened the reflex that tells him to stop, to swallow words back down before they can do damage. His thoughts drift instead of snapping into line, and his feelings rise up faster than he can push them away. Once the words start, they do not want to stop. They feel good coming out, like easing pressure he did not realize was building.

—

hospital scene where high shane spills his feelings about ilya :)

Notes

notes to consider!

this takes place right after ilya leaves the hospital room in episode 5 (instead of a nurse coming in it's Yuna Hollander)

i had a lot of fun writing this :P

Shane's still high off his ass, warm and floaty and loose in a way he never lets himself be, like someone turned the volume down on all the sharp edges he usually carries around. His body feels heavy and light at the same time, sunk into the mattress but drifting just above it, thoughts coming slow and soft. Even like this, he still knows Ilya could not stay. The certainty of it is there the second the door closes. Visiting hours. Media. Team obligations. Schedules that do not care about hospital beds or IV lines or the way Shane's chest still feels tight when he breathes too deep. All the reasons that make sense on paper and feel like nothing at all when the room goes quiet.

That does not stop him from wanting Ilya to be here anyway.

The want settles low in his chest, dull and heavy, like a bruise he keeps pressing just to check that it still hurts. It does. He lets his eyes linger on the door long after it clicks shut, staring at the thin line where it meets the frame, half expecting it to open again. The click echoes too loudly in his head, bouncing around until it feels bigger than it should. His mouth is dry, tongue thick like it does not quite belong to him. Every thought takes a second longer to form, every word has to push through a layer of cotton before it reaches his lips.

"Isn't he so nice?" Shane says suddenly, the words slipping out before he can catch them, his voice pitching high and stretching the last word until it almost turns into a hum.

Yuna Hollander looks up from where she has been standing at his bedside, one hand resting lightly near the monitor, the other folded around a paper cup that has long since gone cold. She has been watching the numbers rise and fall, watching her son breathe, watching for any sign that he is in pain. Her dark hair is pulled back neatly, a few strands already loosening at the temples, and there are faint lines at the corners of her eyes that deepen when she blinks in surprise.

"I'm sorry?" she asks, her tone gentle but puzzled.

Shane blinks at her, the moment stretching. His vision swims, the ceiling drifting in and out of focus, and then he smiles. It is wide and unguarded and a little crooked, the kind of smile Yuna has not seen since he was small. It catches her off guard, right in the chest. This is not the careful, polite smile he gives reporters. Not the distant one he gives fans. Not even the restrained version he usually offers her across kitchen tables and quick visits. This one is open, soft, unfiltered.

"Him," Shane says, nodding toward the door. The movement makes his head feel light, like it tips a fraction too far and has to wobble its way back into place. He lets out a small, breathy laugh at the sensation. "The guy who was just here."

Yuna follows his gaze to the closed door, understanding beginning to dawn. Her expression shifts, something warm and cautious settling into it.

"Ilya?" she asks quietly, like she is testing the name, making sure she has it right.

“Mmhmm.” Shane hums again, pleased she knows who he means. He relaxes back into the pillow, eyes half-lidded. “That’s him.”

Yuna steps a little closer to the bed, setting the cup aside. She studies his face, the softness there, the way his voice changes when he says that name. Her fingers curl lightly against the rail.

“He stayed with you for a long time,” she says gently.

“Yeah,” Shane replies immediately. “He was really worried.”

The words come out with no hesitation, no pause to think about how they sound. Shane’s brows knit faintly, like the memory is pressing in on him now that he has named it.

He knows he should have stopped talking right there. He feels the moment pass where he could have closed his mouth, smiled, let Ilya stay safely contained in his chest where no one else can touch him. He knows he should not keep going, should not keep letting Ilya spill out of him like this. Somewhere under the haze, beneath the warmth and the float of the medication, there is a sharp little spark of awareness that tells him exactly what he is doing. He is giving things away. He is letting someone see how deep this goes.

Normally he would never. Normally he keeps this tight, locked behind his ribs, measured and careful and quiet. Normally every thought about Ilya gets sorted before it ever reaches his mouth. He makes sure nothing sounds like too much.

But the medication has loosened something he usually keeps wound tight. It has softened the reflex that tells him to stop, to swallow words back down before they can do damage. His thoughts drift instead of snapping into line, and his feelings rise up faster than he can push them away. Once the words start, they do not want to stop. They feel good coming out, like easing pressure he did not realize was building.

He hears himself talking and part of him falters at it, at how open he sounds, at how obvious the affection is. He knows he is saying too much. He knows every sentence adds another piece to the picture, making it clearer how important Ilya is to him, and how deeply he is lodged in Shane’s life. He should care more about that. He should pull back.

But he cannot seem to help it.

The fear that usually clamps down on his chest when he gets too close to honesty has gone quiet. It is not gone entirely, just muted, like someone turned the volume down so low he can barely hear it anymore. There is no spike of panic, no sharp instinct to pull back once the truth edges too close. In its place is a simple, almost childlike certainty that talking about Ilya feels good.

If anyone had let him, he would have talked about him for hours.

He would have talked about the way Ilya takes up space without asking permission, how his presence feels solid and reassuring even when he is being obnoxious. He would have talked about the way he smiles when he thinks no one is watching, softer than the one he wears in

public. He would have talked about how safe it feels to be known that thoroughly, even when it scares him.

He would have talked about him the way the media wanted him to talk about Rose.

That thought floats up slow and hazy, followed by a faint twist in his chest. Reporters loved Rose. Loved the story of her beside him, loved the idea of her smile in the stands and her hand on his arm. They asked about her constantly. What she was like. How supportive she was. Whether she would be there long term. They wanted Shane to gush, to confirm the narrative they had already decided on.

And he had. Carefully. Politely. In ways that felt practiced and hollow.

He knows Ilya was jealous of that. Not in a loud way. Not in the way Ilya jokes about being jealous of teammates or ice time. This was quieter. Sharper. It sat under the surface, in the pauses and the way Ilya's jaw would tighten when another headline came out, when another photo circulated of Shane smiling beside Rose like that was the whole story.

Over the things the media said about Shane and Rose's relationship. About how good they looked together. About how natural it seemed.

About how it should have been him.

Shane knew because he felt it too. The jealousy. The sharp, unpleasant twist of it that settled low in his stomach and stayed there longer than he wanted to admit. It was not the loud, ugly kind people joked about. It was quieter, heavier, threaded through with resentment and guilt in equal measure. It crept up on him in moments he did not expect and lingered long after he told himself he had no right to feel it.

The unfairness of it pressed hardest when he let himself think about how simple it all looked from the outside. How clean the story was when it involved Rose. How easily her name fit into headlines and how easily it slipped off a reporter's tongue. She was real, yes, but the version of their relationship the world consumed was something else entirely. Polished. Convenient. A shape that made sense to everyone watching.

And Ilya did not fit that shape.

It burned to see something real and important reduced to a lie that was easier for everyone else to swallow. Burned to watch interviews get dissected and photos get praised for capturing a closeness that felt hollow compared to what he kept hidden. Burned to know that the moments that mattered most to him were the ones that had to stay unnamed, unacknowledged, and overprotected.

He was jealous of Rose in a way that made him uncomfortable, a way he did not like examining too closely. Not because she had done anything wrong. She had not. She played her part with grace and good humor, accepted the narrative handed to her and carried it without complaint. Shane admired her for that. Trusted her. Cared about her.

That only made it worse.

He was jealous of how easily she fit into a role that Ilya could never occupy out loud. Of how natural it looked to have her at his side, how no one questioned her presence or asked them to explain themselves. Of how he could reach for her in public and have it mean nothing more than what people expected it to mean.

Ilya could not stand there. Ilya could not smile for cameras or be written into stories that made sense. Ilya existed in the margins, in hotel rooms and quiet texts and late night calls that ended too soon. Shane could talk about Rose without thinking, could praise her without fear. With Ilya, every word was weighed, every silence intentional.

That imbalance gnawed at him.

It made him angry in a way that felt directionless, with nowhere safe to land. Angry at the media. Angry at the expectations. Angry at himself for participating in it, even when he knew better. Even when he knew who he wanted beside him.

The jealousy was tangled and messy and deeply unfair, but it was real. It sat alongside his affection for Rose and his longing for Ilya, refusing to be sorted neatly into something acceptable. And under it all was the quiet, aching knowledge that no matter how much he wanted it, the world was not ready to see the truth the way he lived it.

Right now, drugged and loose and unguarded, he knows exactly how he would talk about Ilya if the world let him. He would sound proud. He would talk about him the way people talk about someone they love without fear of being overheard. He wanted to say his name and mean it publicly. To give interviews filled with soft praise and easy smiles and let the world see exactly who matters to him.

He wants to talk about Ilya like he is allowed to love him out loud. He wants to say his name the way he says Rose's, without weighing the consequences first. He wants to gush, to ramble, to give him credit for things no one else sees. He wants to tell someone, anyone, that the person he thinks about first after games, the person whose face comes to mind when he drifts off to sleep at night, is not the one the headlines print. Not the one the world has decided he should care about. Not the carefully curated version meant to be digestible for everyone else. It is messy, it is real, and it is entirely Ilya.

Shane lays back, his head sinking deeper into the pillow until it cradles the base of his skull, the thin hospital fabric cool and soft against his cheek. It smells faintly of detergent and something sterile, but even that feels muted, dulled by the haze settling over him. His body feels heavy in a pleasant way, like gravity has decided to be kind for once, holding him in place instead of pressing down too hard.

"People think he's cocky..." Shane starts, voice uneven, dragging out the words, eyes squeezed tight. There's a small crease at the corner of his brow, a hesitation, a pause that feels conscious but isn't. "And he is..." His lips twitch into a grin, a wide, stupid, unguarded smile that he never shows outside moments like this. "But..." He exhales, almost laughing at himself. "There's so much more to him than that."

His hand lifts a little higher this time, wavering in the air above the mattress, fingers curling and uncurling like he is trying to grab onto something just out of reach. The movement is

clumsy, delayed, his body lagging a half-second behind his intent. He squints faintly, frustrated—not at the feeling, but at the fact that he cannot quite get the words to line up the way they should. They keep slipping sideways, coming out wrong or incomplete. Still, he keeps going, propelled by the same loose, earnest momentum that has been carrying him all along.

“He... he notices everything,” Shane babbles, the words spilling out unevenly, like he cannot get them out fast enough. His voice softens as he says it, drops into something quieter, almost shy, like he is confessing a want he has never let himself articulate before. “The little things. The stuff no one else sees.”

There is a pause, his brow knitting faintly as he searches for an example, something concrete enough to hold onto. His hand wobbles, then drifts back down to the bed, palm pressing flat against the sheet as if anchoring himself to the moment, to the truth of it.

“Like the drinks I like,” he continues, a faint, incredulous smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He exhales softly, a breath that sounds half like a laugh and half like disbelief. “I don’t even think about that stuff.”

His fingers curl slightly into the fabric beneath them.

“But he does,” Shane says. “He remembers.” His voice warms as he talks, pride and affection bleeding through every syllable. His lips part, smile widening just a fraction. “He always hands me the right one.”

The thought seems to hit him then, full and heavy. His chest rises on a deeper breath.

“And when I choose something different,” Shane adds, quieter now, “he notices that too.” His lashes flutter, eyes still closed, like he can see the moment perfectly behind them. “He doesn’t make a big deal out of it. But he still points it out.”

“Like, ‘huh,’” Shane murmurs, his voice soft as he mimics Ilya’s tone, “‘since when did you start drinking beer?’” His lips curve into a smile, gentler this time, almost awed, as though the memory itself is something precious he can hardly believe he gets to hold.

A soft chuckle slips from his lips then, low and breathy, threading its way through the haze that has him floating somewhere between thought and sensation. He can see it so clearly in his mind’s eye; every detail sharp despite the drugs in his system. The two of them had been sitting at the resort’s bar, the smell of citrus and malt lingered faintly, the quiet murmur of other guests surrounding them but never intruding.

It had been the first time he’d truly seen Ilya since Rose. Shane could picture the way Ilya had leaned forward slightly on the stool, one elbow resting casually on the counter, eyes flicking up to meet his with that sharp, assessing look that always seemed to pierce right through him. The curl of Ilya’s lips, that tiny smirk he tried to hide, now perfectly replayed in Shane’s memory.

He pauses, chewing on the inside of his cheek, eyes drifting toward the door, imagining Ilya standing there, just like he did earlier. “And he... he worries, but he hides it, you know? Acts

like he doesn't care, but you can see it in his hands, in the way he moves, in the stupid little smiles he gives when he thinks I'm not looking. He's... he's... God..." Shane sighs, loud and drawn-out, a mix of exasperation and awe. "He's everything. More than everything."

He chuckles quietly again, shaking his head, the sound soft and breathy, lost somewhere between pride and vulnerability. "He's loud and annoying, and... stubborn as hell. But... he's kind. More kind than anyone gives him credit for. And funny. Really funny. Even when he doesn't mean to be. And he... he just... he's Ilya. And I... I can't..." His words trail off, voice hitching, but the smile remains, wide and unshakable, unrestrained.

Shane leans his head back against the pillow again, the tension in his shoulders softening, letting the haze wash over him. He would talk about Ilya like this forever if someone would just let him. Forever, and it still wouldn't be enough.

The words slip out of him softer than everything else he has said, like they weigh more, like they might break if he says them too loudly. They do not land with the same careless warmth as his earlier babbling. They settle instead, delicate and exposed, hanging in the air for a second with nothing to protect them. Shane's eyes flutter open just enough for him to stare at the ceiling, unfocused, pupils blown wide from the medication. The big grin he has been wearing eases away, dissolving into something quieter, more inward.

"He puts on this whole thing," Shane continues, voice low and earnest, like he is explaining a secret instead of confessing one.

His gaze drifts, tracking nothing in particular. The ceiling tiles blur together, white bleeding into white, but he is not really looking at them anyway. He is somewhere else now, somewhere familiar.

"He's loud and confident and he knows everyone's watching," Shane says. "So he gives them what they want. The jokes. The attitude." His lips twitch faintly, fond rather than amused. "He's really good at it too." His fingers curl faintly against the blanket. "Everyone buys it. They see what he wants them to see."

He swallows, throat working.

"But when it's just us," Shane says, almost whispering now, "he's different."

The words come slower, careful in a way nothing else has been, like even drugged he understands these are not meant for just anyone. His lips twitch again, fondness pulling at them whether he wants it to or not. It is the kind of expression that happens before he can stop it, before he remembers who is watching.

"He doesn't have to be on," Shane continues, voice barely above the hum of the machines. "He doesn't have to prove anything. He can just be Ilya."

His eyes stay closed as he talks, lashes resting against his cheeks, like it is easier to see Ilya this way. Like opening his eyes might break the picture forming behind them.

“He gets quieter,” Shane says. “Not boring quiet. Just... calm.” A small breath leaves him. “Like he finally gets to put everything down.”

There is a pause, heavy but unhurried.

“He lets himself be tired,” Shane murmurs. “Lets himself lean into me. Sometimes he pulls me against him and rests his head on top of mine.”

The words come out slow and careful, like he is replaying the memory frame by frame as he speaks. His eyes stay closed, lashes fluttering faintly, his breathing evening out as if just thinking about it is enough to make his body relax. One hand shifts against the blanket, curling inward, instinctive, like it is reaching for something that is not there.

His throat works as he swallows, the image settling deeper.

“He doesn’t say anything when he does it,” Shane continues. “He just pulls me in. Like it’s normal.” His fingers press briefly into the mattress. “Sometimes I can feel his breathing change when he relaxes.”

The room feels quieter around him now, the steady beep of the monitor distant.

“He smells like hotel soap and sweat and ice,” Shane says, voice almost absent, caught in the memory. “And his chin always ends up right there.” He gestures vaguely toward the top of his head, missing the spot by an inch. “Sometimes he kisses my hair.”

His mouth curves again, almost shy, almost boyish.

“I don’t move when he does that,” Shane admits. His smile softens. “I don’t want to be the reason he pulls away.”

There is something tender in the way he says it, something protective.

He exhales slowly, chest rising and falling.

“I think that’s my favorite,” Shane whispers.

The words barely make it past his lips, breath more than sound, like admitting it out loud might somehow make it less his. His voice is thin but steady, softened by the haze and by the care he is taking with the feeling itself. It sits tender in his chest, something he does not poke at too hard even now.

Yuna shifts slightly at his side, the quiet movement barely more than a rustle of fabric against plastic. The chair creaks under her weight as she adjusts, one hand tightening briefly around the strap of her purse before relaxing again. She has been sitting like that for a while now, still and careful, like she is afraid that too much motion might break whatever fragile calm has settled over him.

She looks at him, and something in her expression changes.

She has seen Shane hurt before. Bruised. Angry. Shut down. She has seen him polished and smiling and perfectly composed in front of people who expect things from him. But this version of him is unfamiliar. Open.

Her fingers curl together in her lap.

She does not interrupt him. Does not clear her throat or ask a question or try to redirect the conversation the way she normally would. She just watches, eyes tracing the lines of his face, the way his mouth curves when he talks, the way his voice drops into something almost tender.

There is a flicker of surprise there. Then concern. Then something heavier and harder to name.

She glances once toward the floor, and then back to Shane. Her posture softens despite herself. She leans in just a fraction, like instinct pulls her closer even if she does not quite understand what she is hearing.

This is not gossip. This is not rambling. This is not the medication alone.

This is her son talking about someone he loves, stripped of armor and expectation, unaware of how much he is revealing.

Her lips part like she might say his name, then close again. Instead, she reaches out slowly and rests her hand near his.

She lets him keep talking.

“He worries more than anyone knows,” Shane continues. “About getting things wrong. About messing it up. About not being enough, especially to his family.”

The words come out with a quiet certainty, like this is something he has learned over time, piece by piece, not something Ilya ever announced outright. Shane’s brow tightens faintly, a small crease forming there as if he can feel that worry secondhand, as if it has brushed against him often enough to leave a mark.

“He carries it everywhere,” Shane continues, voice still soft, still unguarded. “Like if he messes up once, it means something about who he is.” His fingers curl against the blanket. “He thinks people are always waiting for him to fail.”

He swallows, throat working.

“He tries so hard,” Shane says. “Harder than anyone sees. For them. For everyone.” There is a note of frustration under the fondness now. “And it’s never enough in his head. No matter what he does, it never quite feels like enough.”

His mouth presses into a thin line for a moment, then relaxes again.

“He hates that about himself,” Shane adds. “Thinks it makes him weak. Thinks he should just be... better than that.”

Shane exhales, slow and steady, like he is letting go of something he has been holding in too tightly.

“I don’t,” he says simply.

The words are quiet, but they land with a weight that cuts through the haze.

“I like that he worries,” Shane says. “Not because I want him to hurt. But because it tells me who he is.” His lips curve into a small, sad smile. “It tells me he’s trying.”

He shifts slightly on the bed, the IV line tugging, and he frowns at the sensation before settling again.

“I wish he could see himself the way I see him,” Shane murmurs. “Just once. I wish he knew how much he already is.”

The thought settles over him, warm and aching and precious. His lips part like he might say more, like there are still a hundred small truths waiting to spill out. The room stays quiet around him, the steady beep of the monitor marking time as Shane lets that truth sit, solid and unwavering.

His hand presses lightly against his chest, right over his heart, like he is anchoring the feeling there.

“He feels safe with me,” Shane adds, quieter still. “I can tell.”

Shane swallows, emotion pooling thick and slow, gathering somewhere low in his chest before rising up like it might choke him if he lets it. His throat works around the feeling, the effort visible, exaggerated by the haze he is floating in. His eyes stay closed, lashes damp.

“That’s mine,” he murmurs. There is no boldness in it. No claim meant to impress. Just quiet certainty. “That part of him. He gives it to me.”

The room feels very still after that. The hum of the lights fades. The steady beeping of the machines seems to recede, like the world itself is giving him space to hold onto the truth he has just spoken.

“And he trusts me with it,” Shane says, the words careful. His voice wavers just slightly, not enough to break, but enough to reveal how close he is. “With all of it.”

His chest rises and falls unevenly now, breath coming shallow for a moment before he forces it to slow. The emotion crests hard, threatening to pull him under, then settles again in a heavy wave. He presses his tongue against the roof of his mouth, grounding himself in the physical sensation, anchoring himself to something solid so he does not drift away entirely.

“I don’t think he knows how much that means,” Shane murmurs. “How much it matters that he chose me for that.”

The certainty of it sits deep in him. It cuts clean through the haze, through the fear that usually wraps tight around his ribs. For all the secrecy, all the lies and half truths, this is real.

This is something no headline can touch. No narrative can rewrite. No one else can take away.

This belongs to them.

Tears slip free without warning, tracing hot, quiet paths down the sides of his face, catching briefly at the curve of his jaw before soaking into the pillow beneath his cheek. They come slowly at first, almost hesitant, then steadily, as if his body has decided this is happening whether he is ready or not. Shane does not wipe them away. The thought never even forms. His hands stay where they are, heavy and useless at his sides, fingers slack and unmoving.

He does not seem to notice at first.

His eyes remain closed, lashes damp and dark against his skin, his mouth parted just slightly as he breathes. The tears keep coming, silent and unembarrassed, rolling freely down his cheeks. His face is soft in a way it rarely is, stripped of armor and pretense. There is no tension in his jaw, no effort to pull himself together, no reflexive tightening of his hands or shoulders. The medication has dulled the instinct to hide, to straighten up, to pretend he is fine. It lets the feeling move through him without resistance.

His chest rises and falls unevenly, carrying the rhythm of each breath. In through his nose. Out through his mouth. Each exhale catches slightly on the way out, his ribs stuttering as if the air is heavy with all the words he has not said, all the truths he keeps tucked away. He can feel the pulse of it in his heart, a slow, relentless thrum that refuses to quiet.

A shiver passes through him, small and involuntary, but he does not try to stop it. His body curves slightly against the pillow, leaning into the release rather than away from it. The tears keep falling, pooling at the corners of his mouth, smudging the damp pillow beneath him. They are warm and insistent, carrying the weight of everything he has kept inside; everything he feels for Ilya, everything he has never said aloud, every fragment of longing and devotion.

“I’m sorry,” he mutters, the words catching in his throat. His voice is shaky and small.

“Hey,” his mother says gently, immediately leaning closer. Her hand comes up to cradle his face, warm and steady, palm firm against his cheek like an anchor. Her thumb rubs softly over his skin, brushing away a tear before it can fall any farther. “You don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

Shane tilts his head into her touch without thinking, the way he used to when he was younger and scraped his knees or came home exhausted from practice. His brown eyes glisten under the hospital lights, glassy and unfocused, lashes clumped together with tears. His cheeks are flushed, rosy with emotion and medication, freckles standing out darker where the tears have traced paths down his skin.

“I just...” His breath hitches. He swallows, throat working hard around the feeling. “I just love him so much,” he whispers, like saying it louder might make it too real, too fragile.

His mother’s expression softens even more, something tender and knowing settling into her features. She does not look surprised. She does not look alarmed. She just looks at her son.

“I know you do,” she says quietly.

The certainty in her voice seems to undo him more than anything else. Not the words themselves, but the way she says them, like there was never any doubt to begin with. Shane’s lips tremble despite his effort to keep them still, another tear slipping free and tracing the familiar path down his cheek. He tries to breathe through it, slow and steady like he has been doing, but the sound catches anyway, a quiet hitch he cannot quite control.

He squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, lashes pressing together, forehead tipping forward until it nearly rests against her shoulder. The movement is instinctive, seeking comfort without asking for it, like his body remembers how to do this even if his adult brain has forgotten.

She pulls him closer immediately, no hesitation, cradling his head against her body as if he weighs nothing at all. One arm wraps around his shoulders, anchoring him there. She rocks him slowly, a gentle back and forth that feels older than memory, a rhythm learned long before words were needed.

Her fingers thread through the thick black strands of his hair, nails lightly scratching at his scalp in a way that sends a shudder through him. It is the same touch she used when he was small and hurt and did not know how to explain why. The same touch that always meant he was safe.

Shane exhales, the sound breaking loose as a soft, broken breath against her shirt. His shoulders sag as he finally lets go of the effort to hold himself together. Tears soak into the fabric at her shoulder.

She keeps rocking him, steady and patient, her hand moving slowly through his hair, smoothing it back, then doing it again. Over and over.

“It’s okay,” she murmurs, “I’ve got you.”

Something inside Shane gives way at that. His fingers curl weakly into the fabric at her side. His breathing evens out gradually, still uneven but no longer frantic, the emotion ebbing in slow waves instead of crashing all at once.

For a moment, he is not a professional athlete or a public figure or someone who has to be careful with every word. He is just her son.

“I’m sorry—”

He doesn’t even get to finish the sentence.

Yuna gently pulls away just enough to see his face, cupping it in her hands like she needs him to look at her, like this matters too much to let him hide. Her palms are warm against his cheeks, thumbs brushing lightly over skin still damp with tears. She is careful, deliberate, as if he might shatter if she moves too fast.

“I love you no matter what,” she says.

Shane's breath catches hard in his chest. His mouth opens, then closes again, like he is trying to find something to say and coming up empty. His eyes search her face, as if he is looking for the condition he has spent his whole life bracing for.

There isn't one.

Her expression does not change. There is no hesitation there. No confusion. Just love, steady and unmovable, like it has always been waiting for him to believe it.

"You hear me?" Yuna asks quietly, thumbs still brushing at his cheeks. "Nothing changes that."

His chin trembles. A small, broken sound slips out of him before he can stop it, something caught between a sob and a breath. He nods once, shallow and uncertain, then again, harder this time, like he is trying to convince himself it is real.

"I didn't mean to make this about me," Shane whispers, guilt creeping back in on instinct. "I just... I didn't want to disappoint you."

Her hands tighten just a fraction, grounding him. "You could never disappoint me by loving someone," she says. "Never."

Another tear spills over, tracking down into her thumb. She wipes it away without comment.

"You don't have to be sorry for who you are," Yuna continues, voice gentle but firm. "And you don't have to protect me from it."

Shane swallows, emotion thick and slow again. His shoulders slump, the tension draining out of him all at once like he has been holding himself upright by force alone.

"I was scared," he admits, the words small but honest.

"I know," she says. "I was scared for you too."

Shane blinks, the words sinking in, and a shiver runs through him. His chest rises and falls unevenly as he breathes in the quiet, the steady rhythm of her presence beside him, the certainty in her tone. It is a simple truth, but it hits him harder than anything else: he is not alone in this, and he never has to be.

Yuna's hand moves again, running gently through his thick hair, brushing strands away from his damp forehead. The backs of her fingers graze his cheek softly, grounding him in the present. "You need to rest," she murmurs, voice low and soothing. "You've been through a lot."

Shane exhales, slow and heavy, and lets himself sink into the comfort she offers. He nods, small and reluctant at first, but with a growing willingness, allowing Yuna to ease him back against the pillow. The movement is careful, tender, and Shane feels the weight of his exhaustion finally pressing down, loosening the last of the tension in his body.

“I—” he starts, voice weak and hesitant, as if the need to keep talking is still clawing at him from somewhere deep inside.

“Shh...” Yuna whispers, pressing a finger lightly against his lips, a gentle barrier to stop him from forcing words he doesn’t have the strength to finish. “We can talk about this more another day. Right now, we have to focus on getting you better first.”

Her words are not just instruction; they are a promise. Safe, unwavering, unyielding. Shane feels the pull of it, a tether securing him, letting him finally allow the release he has been holding back. His eyelids droop, heavy, and he tilts his head slightly into her hand, letting himself rest.

The room grows still, quiet except for the faint, rhythmic beeping of the monitor. Shane’s chest rises and falls beneath Yuna’s touch, the slow cadence of his breathing syncing with hers in some small, unspoken harmony. He clings to the warmth, the certainty, the safety, letting the world shrink down to the two of them in that small, suspended space.

Shane exhales once more, the breath long and shaky, and for the first time in hours, maybe days, he lets himself sink fully into it. He closes his eyes, lets the tears dry on their own.

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