

Four Minutes

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Four Minutes

by [UnicornFlowers](#)

Summary

"Ilya had loved him through his worst moments. Ilya had helped him find a therapist when he'd collapsed on the floor of their hotel bathroom after losing a particularly brutal game, scratching at his chest. Ilya had held him, even when Shane yelled at him because there was panic crawling under his skin and he felt as though it might claw its way out. Ilya had told him it was okay; that it didn't make him a bad player to resent the spotlight sometimes, that it didn't make him a bad teammate to hate the team when they were too loud and too drunk and too physical, that it didn't make him a bad person to need space to breathe. Ilya saved him.

And look what you give him in return. You're a shitty husband, Shane Hollander.

You don't deserve his last name."

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content warnings: discussion of mental health, depiction of a panic attack, depiction of invasive medical procedure, depiction of violence (generally non-graphic), use of hate speech, depiction of a hate crime

Notes

DISCLAIMER: this is a work of fiction, the medical procedures depicted are not 100% accurate, some aspects have been altered for dramatic effect or narrative flow

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Okay med check,” Yuna’s voice vaults itself down the stairs and skids to a halt at Shane’s feet before she even makes it into the kitchen. “I need to see everyone in this family who takes drugs popping them now.”

This has been her routine every time his parents stay the night - in fact, he, Ilya, and his father have started waiting to take their meds until she’s done getting ready, just so she can have the satisfaction of watching all of them down their pills at once. In some ways it’s sweet, in some ways it makes Shane want to peel the skin off his face out of frustration because, holy fuck, he’s thirty years old and neurotic enough for the both of them to know what happens if he misses a day.

But he doesn’t mention it; he knows the one-two punch of her husband getting diagnosed with hypertension and her son with anxiety all in the same season was harder than she’d ever let on.

“Yes ma’am,” Ilya gives her a two-finger salute before downing his with water, and Shane looks anywhere else in the room because it would be weird and morally unsettling to be thinking about how good his husband is at swallowing while his parents are two feet away. (Though the smug half-simper Ilya gives him when he looks back tells him his secret is blown.)

“Do you have to say it like that?” Shane mumbles just to shut up his own brain.

“Drugs is medicine is life, because I don’t want you-“ and then all of the sudden she’s beside him, pressing his cheeks between her palms while carefully avoiding scuffing her freshly done French-tips on his face. “-crashing out on me, or whatever it is you kids say.”

“Kids? Mom I’m thirty.”

Ilya waves her off, “Shane does not know slang.”

“Shane’s been thirty since he was ten,” his father decides to jump in. Shane rolls his eyes - what a fun family dynamic for him.

“You guys make me sound-“

“Boring?”

“Thank you, Ilya.”

“You help me with words, I help you with words,” Ilya winks at him, garishly handsome where he basks in the golden chill of a November morning - beautiful beyond belief and making Shane feel like a bad son for wishing his parents were anywhere but in their house right now.

Oddly, it’s Anya who breaks him from his stupor, parking herself at his feet and staring up at him with enormous, expectant eyes. He can’t believe his fucking dog is in on the family conspiracy.

“Yeah I’m going, I’m going.” He swallows his pills and says, “ah” at her, which satisfies her enough that she can go peacefully start nipping at his mother’s heels (she’s the favorite - Ilya had been very bitter to come runner up to Yuna Hollander in a competition for his own dog’s love, but there’s little to be done about it now). Shane doesn’t know where the fuck she learned to that, or if she even understands what the point is, but in the stretches between his parent’s drop in visits, she acts as patrol.

Which he supposes is good, because, strangely enough, between he and Ilya, Shane is worse about his meds. (In his defense, he’d lived thirty years of life with the same morning routine, and it hadn’t included pills.)

“Also Ilya,” his mother calls as she adjusts her earrings in the reflection of the microwave, to which his husband’s head pops up from where he’d been diligently studying something on his phone. “Alexei’s not still heckling you, is he? I haven’t gotten an update on him since... what?” Yuna Hollander looks to her own husband as if he would somehow know. “July?”

Shane’s heart sinks cold into his stomach - he wishes he could say the same.

No, in fact, the last time *Shane* heard from Alexei was about two weeks ago, when he called asking Shane to slip him a clean five hundred dollars on top of the monthly 2K installments he’s already been forking over because apparently Anastasia was sick again (Shane hadn’t been entirely sure how much of his story was credible, but “your niece needs five hundred dollars out of your salary of millions for antibiotics” had been a pretty hard ‘no’ to sell and, as such, Shane hadn’t even tried).

“No. He stopped calling, out of the blue,” Ilya says lightly, voice wisping in the air, carefree; if only he knew why. Maybe it’s better that he doesn’t. “Will not complain. Makes my life easier.”

—

The locker room always buzzes with the arrival of a new teammate, but this must be the first time the buzz has been one of staunch disapproval and a preemptive disappointment - unease flares beneath Shane’s skin at the fog of negative energy stuffing up the space. Not that he doesn’t like to be informed, but Shane prefers to use his existing teammates as a litmus test for his future ones, which is to say he uses them as a stand in for putting in the leg work when it comes to “researching” new members. He’s not on social media much (or, at the very least, tries not to be), which means that guys’ are really his only resource.

A resources that is currently throwing out words like, “hard to play with” and “asshole” and “jackoff” - which isn’t a term Shane was aware people were still using.

“Ian McKinnley?” Wyatt’s voice splits the chatter in half. “He’s like...broke now, right? I thought I saw CNN reporting on it or something.”

Ian McKinnely - the name has been floating around for a few days now, but Shane has been too preoccupied fielding questions about his relationship to do much of anything with it. The internet’s recent obsession has been their decision to hyphenate their last names - apparently a big mistake, and also the end of the world, possibly the universe, if you believe Twitter. Shane would complain about it, but then again, he got to marry and play on the same team with the man of his dreams, so he supposes the pendulum of luck had to swing back the other way eventually.

“Isn’t McKinnely the guy who tied up all his shit in crypto then lost it all in the crash?” Evan asks mildly from where he’s lacing up his skates.

“Yeah he sunk millions into that shit. It was everywhere.”

“Wait it gets better,” Troy jumps in, nestled in the cove of his stall with his boxers on but the rest of his gear nesting in a little ring around his feet, phone resting against the dip of his hip unhurried. “He’s also a raging homophone.”

Shane feels his face crinkle before the words even leave his mouth, “What? And Harris approved this guy?”

“No but Crowell and his cronies in Ottawa management did. The owners got strong armed into it.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah,” Troy shakes his head and frowns at his screen halfway between disgust and sympathy before turning the phone around to share with the class. Shane is the first to arrive on the scene as Troy murmurs, “It’s been a PR nightmare for Harris. He sent me these last night in the middle of a meeting.”

“What is this?” Shane leans over the phone and squints, feeling halfway to geriatric without his glasses.

“Screenshots of IG story posts,” Troy’s voice is disembodied as Shane reads over the post - a pale blue thing with approachable bubble text and a couple of Canva stickers shaped like brains. “He deleted them about ten minutes after they went up but, y’know. Something something the internet is forever something something.”

“I’m sad to see that the LGBTQ+ rhetoric has overshadowed the importance of...men’s mental health awareness month,” Shane reads aloud, forgoing the small text at the bottom that’s too small for him to attempt without sounding like an idiot. He draws back, “This doesn’t seem all that bad. A little out of touch but-“

“Keep scrolling.”

The team waits on expectantly, all eyes looking at their elected representative - which Shane supposes is fine because he can sense from Troy’s rigid grimace that they’re about to reach levels of gay bashing that would be extremely cancellable coming from a straight person’s mouth. He looks down and reads.

“The disease of homosexuality- oh,” his brain cuts off his voice as he swipes through the little blue slide deck, each installment brimming with more flagrant homophobia. It’s so vitriolic Shane half expects the caustic prose to liquify Troy’s phone in his hand; it’s almost comically hateful. The last second to last slide (placed, ironically, just before the “resources to get involved” page), forgoes cute graphics entirely, instead opting for- “Wow he thinks we’re “AIDS infested, hedonistic psychotics with a pathological need for attention”,” bolded and underlined in the largest font size that would fit on screen. *Nice of him to put it front and center.* “These are some...big words.”

The locker room comes alive with the blowback. From the chaos Shane can pick out more than a few swear words and even a, “if he fucks with my boys he’s gonna learn first hand what a stick up the ass feels like” - probably from Neil Schwartz, the nineteen-year-old American newbie whose favorite hobbies are hugging his teammates, dropping profanity during press conferences, and getting a little too violent when a fight breaks out on the ice.

(Shane has been trying his best to mentor some subtlety into the kid, though his efforts have been sorely counteracted by Neil's extremely dedicated, and even more enabling, American fanbase.)

Shane honestly doesn't know how to feel about McKinnely - on the one hand, he thinks seeing a post like that when he was twenty years old and just coming to terms with his sexuality might have destroyed him, and that he would rather die or fall into a cement mixer or get pulverized by a semi on the highway than have to share ice with a man who might turn the queer fan safe haven of team Ottawa into yet another shining example of NHL intolerance. But then again, he's thirty years old and, frankly, tired of letting every jackass with a shitty opinion dictate how he lives his life.

"I don't know most of those words so it does not affect me," Ilya, on the other hand, would never back down from the challenge of sticking it to a close-minded prick; in fact, Shane has a sneaking suspicion the coming months will see him become even more bisexual than he already is. He grins over his shoulder at Troy, "This will be fun."

God, Shane loves his husband.

"Of course you would think that," Evan huffs, expression incredulous but tone betraying the likelihood that he's actually looking forward to seeing the cataclysmic battle of wills that plays out between unapologetically homophobic Ian McKinnely and unapologetically homo Ilya Hollander-Rosanov. "Just be careful. I doubt a guy this lost in the sauce is gonna find your witty bisexual banter charming."

Ilya just shrugs broad shoulders, "I will leave him no choice. I may even convert him," and suddenly the flex of his back muscles as he pulls an undershirt over his head is much more important than whatever Ian McKinnely has to say.

"Yeah, you know what if you do that I won't complain about your shitty pre-game speeches for the next three matches." Evan tosses an empty gatorade bottle at his head.

Ilya tosses it back, "You love my speeches. They are-...when you make someone want to do something?" He looks at Shane expectantly - not inquisitively, just waiting for Shane to fill in the gaps (at one point, the barest hint of shame would've wrinkled at the edges of his voice when he asked; Shane can't express how tender it makes him to know they're past that).

“Inspirational?”

Ilya snaps and points an index finger at him.

“Oh yeah, ‘let us go fuck Montreal in the assholes’,” Evan harks back in the worst Russian accent Shane has ever had the displeasure of bearing witness to. “You’re basically a motivational speaker. They’re gonna give you a podcast.”

“That does not sound like me. I am much sexier. Your accent is terrible.”

—

“So the decision to hyphenate your names-“ *oh god this again* - can they have one press conference that's actually about hockey? Would that be too much to ask? “-why a month into the season?”

Because when we adopt a child we don't want them to have to choose, is the truth, and is also exactly what Harris advised them not to say in the interest of avoiding a media frenzy. So Ilya just shrugs instead,

“Did not like how old jersey looked. Next question.”

“Do you worry that this change will upset your legacy as individual players?” A woman with unnaturally shiny hair asks them - not a new question, just rephrased.

“No, next question. You guys are making this really easy today.”

“What about your reputation?”, “Isn’t marketing going to be harder?”, “Don’t you think the fans will have a hard time with this transition?” - look, despite what every PR and brand manager he’s ever had has tried to convince him, Ilya doesn’t get paid to have a public-palatable set of names, nor does he care if he and his husband are too many syllables for Canadian fans to wrap their heads around. He gets *paid* to play hockey, and he’s damn fucking good at it; really it’s no one’s business what he does off the ice.

However, this, too, is considered an unacceptable answer, so Ilya bites his tongue, even though the tense bounce of Shane’s knee shaking against his own is stoking the first embers of anger in the pit of his stomach - he’s so fucking tired of people making his husband anxious, especially when gathering Shane to his chest and rubbing soothing circles into the base of his spine is “not appropriate behavior for national broadcast”. Okay.

“But Hollander-Rosanov...that’s kind of a mouthful, isn’t it?” *Your dad was kind of a mouthful last night*, he doesn’t say because McDowell is, according to some new outlets, “highly respected” and Ilya likes his job. “Will it affect your brand, do you think?”

“Nope. Not really-“

“Could we get an answer from Hollander?”

Jesus fucking christ. Ilya is not a violent man, but sometimes he think Ansel McDowell and his gaunt, skeletal slouch and annoying, rodent-like sniveling could push him to it. Or maybe he just has less patience now that he’s not performing for some ephemeral, fleeting notion of an imagined Shane Hollander watching his interview, but rather trying to protect the real one suffering through it with him.

“That’s not my name.” Shane jumps in, PR smile drawn tight and unconvincing across his lips. He glances down at the pocket of his sweatpants where his phone is, the barely there buzz of it drawing his attention not for the first time during the interview, before his head is snapping back to the cameras. “And no, we’re not particularly concerned about that- I’m sorry, I have to get this.”

Shane stands then, not so much as sparing a sideways glance at Harris for approval before exiting stage left with his eyes glued to his phone screen - he's been looking at his phone a lot lately.

Harris is unfazed by his exit, "Does anyone have any questions unrelated to surnames?"

—

Alexei is something of an enigma, Shane has come to discover. Considering he is, according to Ilya, human bag of shit, he sure does have a way of making Shane pull for him - which, when Shane stops to think about it for more than a passing second, probably reveals more about him than it does about Alexei.

"What?" Shane's voice is brittle in the frigid air, which, yes, he knows, is a shitty tone to take with a man facing the gaping maw of his own mortality. But it takes so much mental energy just to talk himself out of feeling soul-crushingly guilty every time he picks up Alexei's call that he has barely anything left in the take to spare on pleasantries.

"Hello, Shane, is nice to talk with you." Alexei's English is more rudimentary than Ilya's, but the distinct kernel of resemblance between their accents is more than enough to give Shane a health amount of cognitive dissonance every time he has the displeasure of hearing it. He opens every phone call with the same line. "You are doing well. Yes?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. What do you need, Alexei?"

There's a long pause that proceeds his question - so long that, were it not for the static sound of a child crying unattended in the background, Shane would think the call had disconnected. It ends with a sharp breath and,

"I need flight to Canada." *What?* "And money. More soon than end of month."

Shane's mind stalls out, processing capacity dropping to near zero as the words "flight to Canada" sit bloated and heavy at the front of his mind - *a flight here? Why the fuck would he want that?* Shane's heart scales the rungs of his ribs in record time and gets stuck in the stricture of his throat, pulsing so hard he has to swallow just to make space for any words.

"I'm- what?" His breath mists in the air. He scans the empty alley, spurred by the tang of anxiety numbing the tips of his fingers that convinces him Ilya will miraculously appear - he lowers his voice to a whisper, "Why would you need to come here?"

"Surgery." is the answer he receives, lightening quick, as if Alexei was just *waiting* for him to ask. "Is not possible in Russia. Because of special...uh...special-"

"A specialist?"

"Yes. Hard procedure."

Fuck. Fuck, fucking fuck - how did he get himself in this situation? He scrubs a hand down his face.

Why did he ever pick up Alexei's call in the first place? This whole situation feels like one of those woven finger traps; the more he pulls away, the tighter Alexei's grip gets on him. It coils around him like a boa constrictor when Alexei says, "My doctor, I tell him I have family in Canada, can stay with them during surgery. Or else he will not recommend me as um... candidate for surgery."

Shane blows out a breath but it doesn't relieve the pressure in his chest. The familiar weight of what he used to think was heart burn flattens him against the cold brick of the alley wall.

“Alexei-“

“And I-...” Alexei's voice is desperate where it shoulders its way through the speaker. “I want to make better.”

“Make what better?”

“Ilya.”

Ilya.

“No,” Shane says, the first decision he's made today that doesn't require a second thought. No, he's not going to be the reason the disaster that was Ilya and Alexei's relationship comes back to haunt them. No, he's not going to be the reason Ilya re-lives the hell on earth his brother has put him through. No- “No you're not fucking seeing him-“

“Please, Shane-“

“I said no.” He snaps and it's angry, bitter. “Do you even know the shit you've put him through? He's doing better now. He's *happy*, I'm not gonna let you fuck that up for him-“

“I know.”

“Do you care?”

“I do,” but Shane doesn’t want believe him - if he felt so bad all these years then why did he do it? If he didn’t want to hurt Ilya then why did he let himself? “I want-...I want to fix this, Shane. He is my *little brother*, and if-...if this surgery, it does not work...”

He leaves the statement open ended, as if somehow Shane needs any more time to ponder what might happen. And then,

“I do not want him to remember me only as someone who causes him pain.”

Bullshit, is his gut reaction. And then guilt for being so skeptical of a dying man, then shame, then the sour reminder that Shane is the reason Ilya left Russia in the first place; that Shane is the reason Ilya’s biological family will always be a world away from him, that no amount of loving Ilya will give him back the time he’s lost. And suddenly, all the righteous indignation that had filled the hollow of his chest only moments before is swallowed by emptiness.

He’s *dying*. Alexei Rosanov is dying, and if Shane doesn’t do this, Ilya might never know. Ilya might spend the rest of his life not knowing, wondering - he’s happy right now, choosing not to think about the life he left behind in Russia, relieved that it’s finally off his back, but how long will that last? Five more years? Ten? How long will it be before the glow of his new life fades and he’s left missing a piece of himself he can never get back?

God, Ilya has a *niece*, one he’s never met and never will and Shane is about to turn his dying brother away for what? To spare himself some discomfort?

He blinks away the sting behind his eyes and crashes his head back against the brick behind him, which makes his head hurt more than it already does but, at the very least, distracts him from the suffocating tightness of his chest; his skin feels shrink-wrapped to his body, the towering walls of the alley curling inward as if to swallow him.

By the time Alexei says, “Please,” the mental tug-of-war being waged in Shane’s mind has already come to an end.

How is he supposed to say no?

“And what do you need the money for?” He rasps instead. Alexei is quick to answer.

“Insurance. Will not cover surgery. OMS, will not pay for expensive procedure that might not work.” There’s a pause, as if he’s waiting for Shane to protest - he doesn’t have it in him; he’s already spent five months lining Alexei’s pockets, what’s a little more for the sake of making amends? “Free healthcare...not so free, you understand?”

—

“Watch it fag.” Another day another slur, this one murmured at barely a whisper, hidden beneath the fog of post-practice locker room chaos.

Ian McKinnely, for all his explosive talent and extreme height advantage, is as much of an intolerable prick off the ice as he is on it - more so, even, which Shane has gotten the privilege of finding out first hand thanks to some inopportune stall reassignments and more than a few accidental run-ins.

“You’re the one who bumped into me,” he points out uselessly and, if he’s honest, at no advantage to himself. With the amount of scrapes they’ve had just in the first two days of McKinnely’s arrival, Shane should probably have learned by now that fact and logic have very little bearing on his perception of the world.

He gets lucky today, the lackluster rebuke earning him little more than a withering look of disgust; he supposes with so many of their teammates around and Ilya only ten feet away, the defenseman can’t give him the same level of bigoted bullshit he’s gotten in the habit of tossing at Shane whenever things don’t go his way on the ice.

Maybe it's because he's the "gayest" one on the team (because apparently Troy has been awarded with the comparative title of "more straight passing", whatever that means), maybe it's the proximity, maybe it's Shane's fault, somehow. Either way, it only took two hours of their introductory team dinner for McKinnely to decide that Shane was going to be his little...project.

Ilya hadn't been happy about it - in fact, Shane would characterize his reaction to McKinnely's schoolyard bullying as borderline violent.

McKinnely finishes the tear down of his gear with brutal efficiency (thank god), slinging his towel over his shoulder and turning toward the showers, though not without the parting gift of, "Just keep your faggot hands to yourself next time."

Jesus Christ how did this guy get signed *anywhere*, much less Ottawa? If Shane were one for conspiracy theories, he would suspect McKinnely's just a plant by Crowell in an attempt to straighten out the team's PR.

Shane just rolls his eyes because there's nothing to be done but brush it off, only for a weighty *thunk* to sound beside him - the sound of Ilya's water bottle hitting McKinnely square in his egregiously blond beard.

"What the *fuck*, Rosanov--"

"Oops. Sorry," Ilya shrugs one shoulder, barely bothering to hide his contempt, as McKinnely massages at his rapidly bruising jaw. "Was aiming for your dick but I could not find it. Is a problem I assume you have often."

"I'mma fucking kill you--" McKinnely lunges at Ilya and Shane's own body reacts, but Wiebe is faster.

"Woah, hey," Wiebe is out of his office and into the fray in seconds, hands outstretched between Ilya and McKinnely, though the heat of his scorn is focused on the defenseman. "Both of y'all take a big step back."

“He is calling my husband fucking slurs. Again,” Ilya protests. His anger is barely concealed, bubbling up through the pores of his words and spilling over when his voice crests a shout, “He is a bigoted jackass-“

“Oh sit your pansy ass down, last time I checked Canada has free fucking speech.“

“Not for hate speech you fucking dumbass,” Evan jumps in, fingers blanching around his own bottle as if waiting for the coach’s exeunt to throw his own review of McKinnely’s performance.

Wiebe barely bats an eye at Evan, far more concerned with lobbing a venomous grimace of disappointment McKinnely’s way, “McKinnely, in my office now.”

The platinum blond looks at him, personally affronted, “Are you fucking serious?” But toddles after Wiebe, awkward and more naked than he’d probably like, as the coach ducks them both into their office - Shane feels a rash of vindication eat away at the discomfort of McKinnely’s scorn.

The locker room comes to life in chaos after that - much of the same criticisms (“what a fucking asshole”, “such a fucking dick”, and even one, “I hope that shitbag gets hit by a bus” - Neil again). But honestly, Shane is past caring about Ian Fuckface McKinnely and his bullshit takes on human sexuality. In fact, Shane would say that, despite the vaguely hate-crime-ish nature of their most recent scuffle, getting to see his shirtless husband looking good as fuck defending his honor makes him, objectively, a winner.

“I give him three more weeks,” Wyatt’s voice startles him from his reverie of Ilya’s strong arms and stupid tattoos and sweat slick skin- *do not get a fucking boner right now Shane Hollander-Rosanov. That would be fucked up.*

“That’s oddly generous,” Evan shoulders his was between them, smelling of sweat and obscene amounts of axe body spray, effectively killing the boner problem. “The way he’s been duking it out with Wiebe, I doubt he’ll make it to Saturday.”

We can hope, Shane doesn't say, because he still hasn't managed to school himself out of PR mode, even after months away from the crushing spotlight of Montreal. But he thinks it. He thinks it almost every time he sees McKinnely's horrifying haircut that makes him look like someone shoved him headfirst into a wood chipper.

Shane has never been a procrastinator - which he used to think was him being a good student, good player, but was made aware at some point down the line (about two months ago) was yet another manifestation of anxiety; apparently needing Benadryl to get to sleep because you're one day off your laundry schedule isn't something most people have to deal with - but this is a little different.

Honestly, if he could, he would skip this conversation entirely and press the fast-forward button to two weeks from now, when Alexei is back in Russia, lungs revitalized and financial needs met, while he and Ilya are back on the ice, worlds away.

But he can't.

Shane has had to have a lot of difficult conversations in his lifetime, but he can already tell this one is going to rank among the top five.

"Hey," is his grand opening line, spoken meekly into the silence from where he's been drifting in limbo between the kitchen and the living room, standing on the precipice for somewhere in the realm of ten minutes now.

"Hey...?" Ilya looks at him, oblivious to the seed of anxiety already beginning to plant itself in Shane's chest. "What is it?"

God he's so beautiful and earnest and he has no idea the absolute bullshit Shane is about to unload on him, and it takes all of Shane's courage to ask, "You know your brother?"

Suspicion haunts Ilya's voice when he murmurs, sitting up a little straighter, "Yes I know of my own brother, why?"

Why? No reason, I just invited him to our place, two days before one of our biggest games of the season, because he's dying of lung cancer. Oh, why didn't you know he was dying of lung cancer? Because he's been secretly calling me about it behind your back for six months and, just in case you don't want to divorce me yet, I've been sending him thousands of dollars a month to help with his procedures. Without telling you.

Not a single word of his inner monologue makes it through the 'I still wanted to be married after this conversation' filter. So Shane settles with, "How pissed on a scale from one to ten would you be if he was like...coming here?"

"What?" Is his husband's immediate response, followed by the longest stretch of silence Shane has ever been faced with in his life, before he says,

"This is...fucked up joke, yes?" But he's not smiling, which makes Shane think he's already cracked the code. Rather Ilya is just staring at him, gaze rigid and body following suit as he folds his book over his thumb and demands,

"Shane."

"Look we've been talking--"

"You've been talking. To Alexei." People think Ilya's voice is deadpan - "characteristic Russian stoicism", is how a reporter had once described it - but the truth is that they're just not listening close enough. In fact, the minuscule, "About what?" He tosses at Shane's feet is so brimming with poorly contained anger that Shane nearly chokes on his own voice when he tries to say,

“He’s going through something right now-“

“He’s always fucking going through something, most of it is bullshit-“

“Would you let me get a fucking word in?” He doesn’t mean to snap - he really has no right to. But if Ilya knew what Shane was about to tell him he wouldn’t be so flippant; a thought that makes his chest ache and his breath wane in his lungs and the corners of the room start to pull together as if yanked in by a drawstring.

“Fine,” Ilya says, and it’s cold, frigid where the single word digs beneath Shane’s skin. His jaw clenches around the dry sentiment, “Go ahead. You’ve been talking to Alexei. You invited him to our house. Explain. I am listening.”

And god, he can’t stand it. He knew Ilya would react poorly and maybe some, perverse part of him thought it would be easier to tell him when he was angry - that stamping out the flames of his anger with the unforgiving truth would put Shane’s mind at ease. But the truth is that the clip of Ilya’s voice, the frigidity of his gaze, the potent disappointment that sinks beneath Shane’s skin and begins to build roots, none of it makes it any easier for Shane to say,

“He’s fucking dying, Ilya.” His voice trips over itself, teeth grinding against each other as he tries and fails to swallow the burn climbing the back of his throat. “He has lung cancer.”

There’s a pause that’s too long and too heavy, sagging where it hangs in the air, before Ilya says,

“Lung cancer,” so flat and devoid of emotion that it sends a shiver down Shane’s spine - not a question, not even a statement - inhumanly hollow. Then he’s scrubbing a hand down his face, the ghost of a cruel smile flitting across his lips before his eyes settle on Shane with an antiseptic frigidity that has nausea churning thickly in his stomach. “No he fucking doesn’t.”

“And you’re so sure of that because...?” Shane tries to maintain the integrity behind his voice, but dread eats away at it until his words are little more than a hollow plea - *please don’t tell me what I think you’re about to*. Ilya either doesn’t hear his desperation or chooses to ignore it. Either way, he’s remorseless when he says,

“Because he used the same fucking lie on me three years ago.”

Then he waits, as if watching for the moment it really sinks into Shane - he hopes it’s all Ilya was hoping for; if not then the cold humiliation that trickles through him, a steady stream quickly burgeoning into an all out flood, and the crushing weight of guilt on his shoulders and the knot in his throat that chokes out any hope of him posing a meager defense for his actions are for no one but himself, the silent burn of his own shame.

Ilya stands then, dropping his book to the coffee table with an abrasive *thunk*, voice snapping where it’s brimmed in a shout. He turns to Shane, jaw tensed and shoulders squared, “Let me guess, his lung cancer, it has spread? Not long to live. He needs money for hospital bill, rent, his children.”

Don’t say that. Tears push up in Shane’s throat. *Don’t say that, please*. Because if it’s true then Shane’s best attempt at being a good husband hurt Ilya in a way that is worse, by far, than any argument they could have, probably will.

Again, Ilya waits. Stares. Watches. Opens his palms and tilts his head as if inviting a justification Shane doesn’t have. And when he gets tired of waiting he just laughs, a bitter, acrid thing that claws between Shane’s ribs and sinks teeth into flesh.

“Jesus Christ.” Ilya runs a hand through his curls, massages at the edge of his jaw, runs his thumb across his bottom lip. “He fucking played you.”

“He begged me, Ilya-“

“*He lied!*” This time he really does yell, and Shane feels it stick to him like a second skin, suffocating. *Fuck*. It’s getting hard to breathe again. “Do you want to know the truth?” Ilya turns to him and Shane can’t remember the last time he saw his husband this angry - maybe it

was the last time they fought, really fought, when Shane had been so selfish and oblivious to Ilya's struggles that they'd nearly fallen apart. He realizes with painful clarity that this time is just like the last. That once again, it isn't the rest of the world or even Alexei that's hurting Ilya. It's Shane.

"He is a shitty person, and a shitty brother, and a shitty husband, and a shitty fucking gambler, and a good liar! The only thing he's ever been good at is lying!" Ilya snaps him back to attention but the world around Shane is already beginning to bubble, the edges warping and distorting with Ilya standing at the very center. "He doesn't give a shit about anyone but himself and that will not change. Ever."

The last fragments of Ilya's voice die out, replaced by the sullen deadening effect of the nighttime snow piled high outside their windows, but the conversation isn't over. There are still crimes Shane hasn't gotten the chance to confess to - Ilya can sense it too.

"What?"

C'mon Shane, be an adult.

He swallows the knot of dread in his throat - or rather, tries, but it stays stubbornly lodged, and his admission comes out broken, "I've been giving him money."

"What? Fucking-..." Ilya sinks his teeth into his bottom lip so hard Shane can see blood bubble up where they bite into skin. Whatever indictment he had is swallowed, replaced with a placid, "How much?"

"A couple thousand a month, just to help with his-..." it feels stupid to say now; naive at best, at worst, downright moronic. "His hospital bills."

At that Ilya blows out a breath, tangles the fingers of both hands in his hair, and turns away from Shane as if he can't stand to look at him, "Jesus fucking christ. Shane what were you thinking."

The rebuke is harsh but it barely scratches the surface of the shame that surges through him when he defends himself weakly,

“I was just trying to help-“

“Well don’t! You do not get to decide how to deal with *my fucking family*.”

His family. Not Shane’s. Shane’s family is supportive, kind, loving. Ilya’s family is Alexei. That was supposed to change when they got married, two world’s colliding no matter how ugly the collateral damage. But Shane fucked that up.

He’s pathetic for the tears that burn behind his eyes when says, “Our family.”

“No. Mine,” Ilya harshes, and the way he looks at Shane as the words leave his lips is so far away that Shane has to bite down on his tongue until he tastes blood just to stop a sob from escaping his chest. What the fuck did he do? “I am the one who walked away from them. Not you.”

I walked away from them for you.

“How could you be so fucking-...”

“I-...” but his voice is too thick to mold into words. “Ilya I’m sorry-“

“Don’t.” Ilya sits down again, this time staring blankly at the TV, chin in his hand and palm over his mouth when he murmurs, “Not right now.” After a moment of strangled silence he asks, “When does he get here?”

Shane’s mouth feels numb when he forces out the words, “Tomorrow. He’s getting on a plane right now.”

“Yes well. He is not coming here.”

Silence stretches out between them - vast and seemingly limitless, pooling at their feet and leaving Shane feeling trapped, leaden, convinced it might eventually overtake him. It pours so thick into his lungs he can't be sure it's even his own voice saying, “I'm-...I'm gonna take a shower,” over the pounding of his pulse in his ears.

He needs to get out. He can't stay here, standing, waiting for Ilya to be ready to hear an apology.

“Yes. Fine. Whatever,” follows him down the hall as he heads for the stairs, counting each step just like his psychiatrist had told him. *1...2...3...4-* it's not the same number as usual. He's going too fast; everything is going too fast.

Five things you can see, he tells himself, but there's virtually no useful visual information being processed through the blur of his tears. And he can't remember if it's four things you *feel* or four things you *hear*, but neither of those matter much because by now he's making his way to their bedroom on muscle memory alone and even the sound of his own breaths is being swallowed by the ringing in his ears, the pounding of his heart.

And he's not grounded, like his psychiatrist said - he's not anything - his head isn't even his right now and neither is his body; all he can focus on is trying not to let a sob escape his throat before he gets to the bedroom. It wouldn't be fair, after all he's done, to put Ilya through the ordeal of having to worry about him.

He reaches the sanctuary of their bedroom but it's of little relief - the door closes behind him and the air leaves with the light of the hallway, suffocated by dark. Everything is suffocating; the t-shirt around his shoulders, the burn of the breath in his lungs, the steps between the door and the bathroom where his pills sit waiting - “for emergencies”, his psychiatrist had given him a smile that didn't quite match the tone of the session - it's all crushing him.

Not now, not now, not now, he begs.

“No,” he says as if it will stop the panic from sinking its claws into his chest, the air from leaving his lungs. But acrid nausea is churning in his stomach and a knot is twisting in his throat, lurching upward, even as he wretches the word again, “No,” as if maybe this time his body will listen.

No, he is not going to break down over this. *No*, he’s not going to make this about himself. *No*, he’s a fucking adult and he can handle his problems like a fucking adult-

You’re not a victim, you’re not a victim. You’re a fuck up who can’t take responsibility for his bullshit decisions.

But god, his head is pounding - even his own inner monologue is blurred and broken at the edges, words splintering - and he can feel his control slipping through his grasp like so many grains of sand through the bottleneck of an hourglass, the boundaries of him unspooling, fraying, so that by the time he reaches the bathroom door he’s little more than an anxiously scribbled outline of himself, fumbling over his own hands as he desperately grasps at the door handle.

Once enclosed in warm light and soft gray tiles, he turns on the shower. Maybe because he intends to get in, maybe because he doesn’t want Ilya to hear the strangled noise that escapes his throat as the breath leaves his lungs all at once, or the thunk of his knees against the bathroom floor as they collapse under his weight, or the desperate breath he tries and fails to drag into his lungs as he claws their cabinet open and fumbles blindly around for his pills. There’s a barely there flare of relief when he manages to pry the bottle open and empty two - “no more than two” - into his hand.

He swallows them dry.

This can’t be fucking happening again. He was getting better.

He was getting better.

And yet his own body doesn’t seem to believe him. The gritty splash of the shower grates against his mind, the world pulsing with every painful pound of his head, with every barely

there breath- god he can't breathe. He yanks his t-shirt over his head but it doesn't relieve the pressure. And his chest hurts so he reaches for the Tylenol but *fuck, don't be fucking stupid Shane*. It won't help. It never does.

Shane has had the episodes since he was a kid, but he was never medicated for them. Not that he didn't want to be, at times, but what kind of look would it be for a hockey superstar to need pills to deal with big losses, large crowds, too many spot lights - that's part of the gig. And maybe, sometimes he wonders, maybe he thought it would change everything just a little too much. Maybe he thought his parents would look at him and realize how fragile he is, that the perfect son they had raised wasn't so perfect after all. Maybe he thought Ilya would look at him and realize that Shane is a pillar of his life that has been cracked and crumbling for so long now that he's beyond the point of repair, that he's outlived his usefulness, that he's barely strong enough to hold himself up most days, let alone both of them when things get rough.

Maybe he thought Ilya would leave.

Well he will now.

Shut the fuck up, he thinks. And then, somewhat less intentionally, *don't think that about him, what the fuck is wrong with you*, and, *he loves me*. The last part doesn't sink in quite as it should.

He takes a shuddering breath through his mouth and it doesn't help, in fact it only makes his head ache more and his skin feel tighter and his lungs feel smaller, so he says to himself again, *he loves me*. Over and over, he forces the words through the bottleneck of his panic; each time they're a little harder to believe.

Ilya had loved him through his worst moments. Ilya had helped him find a therapist when he'd collapsed on the floor of their hotel bathroom after losing a particularly brutal game, scratching at his chest. Ilya had held him, even when Shane yelled at him because there was panic crawling under his skin and he felt as though it might claw its way out. Ilya had told him it was okay; that it didn't make him a bad player to resent the spotlight sometimes, that it didn't make him a bad teammate to hate the team when they were too loud and too drunk and too physical, that it didn't make him a bad person to need space to breathe. Ilya saved him.

And look what you give him in return. You're a shitty husband, Shane Hollander.

You don't deserve his last name.

“God- fuck,” his eyes burn with tears as he checks his watch - five minutes down, five more to go before the nightmare ends; before the meds kick in and he can finally fucking breathe again.

His psychiatrist said that it's normal, ten minutes. Ten minutes of feeling like his chest is collapsing, ten minutes of drowning on dry land. But every single time, no matter how many rational thoughts Shane thinks or calming breaths he takes or seconds he counts, the pain lasts for eternities. The minutes slow down, nearly to a grinding halt, and he wonders if this time it's real; if this time he really is dying.

He checks his watch again. Four minutes.

—

He left his pills open. The bottle is abandoned on the counter while the cap is left stranded on the floor near the vent - for all his meticulous attention to detail, sometimes when Shane is fully tapped out, the rest of the world and all its rough edges he normally finds himself desperate to neaten are seemingly forgotten. It's as if he reaches a threshold, like there's only so much he can take before the sheer amount of *things* to control becomes too much and he gives up trying to manage even a single one.

Ilya picks up the cap and closes the bottle. He collects Shane's strewn clothes and puts them in the hamper. He hangs up the towel left scrunched up on the lid of the toilet, straightens out the misaligned shampoo and conditioner bottles the way Shane likes them.

It was a bad one.

It was a bad one, and he didn't say anything. Not a single word. Even though he'd told Ilya he would - he'd told Ilya he'd try, that he wouldn't pretend everything was fine when it wasn't. But he didn't.

And Ilya knows, he *knows*, the anger that flares behind his sternum is undeserved but he can't help the way it climbs his throat because he *told Ilya he would try*, that they were in this together and he *lied*. Just like he did about Alexei.

All over again Ilya is angry, the fresh wound of his husband's deceit not yet scabbed over and bleeding into his hands as he stares in the mirror and examines his own reflection - his eyes are tired and sunken, his lips drawn into a frown he can't seem to shake. And god, he looks just like his father, just like his brother. His eyes are a different shade of blue and his lips are his mother's and the bridge of his nose is different entirely, but beneath it all the resemblance is overwhelming, nearly sickening.

Is this what Shane saw? What he sees?

Ilya hopes not. It's ugly, his expression bogged down with anger and his gaze cold to the touch. Maybe that's why Shane ran this time. Maybe that's why Ilya didn't need to send him away, only to wait, because Ilya is ugly when he's angry. Maybe that's why Ilya wasn't surprised when Shane turned away from him.

Maybe there will come a day when he doesn't look back.

He's sleeping on Ilya's side of the bed when Ilya emerges from the bathroom, with Ilya's pillow between his arms, his own under his head, leaving the rest of the mattress barren - Ilya could wake him up and take his pillow back, and Shane would probably look at him with those enormous, guilty eyes, full of remorse, an apology on his lips. The part of Ilya that's angry and vengeful, the part of himself that he hates, the part of himself that's just like his father, wants him to.

But that aspect of who he is is so small and inconsequential in comparison to the whole of him, which stands over his husband now and can see biting November moonlight illuminating undried tear tracks and the ruddy flush of his cheeks and the protective curl of his body around Ilya's pillow; the whole of himself that wants to wrap Shane in his arms and apologize for being angry, even though he's not really sorry about that at all, and remind him that he's loved, no matter how pissed Ilya gets at him.

Though he finds, somehow, he can't do either. Instead, he compromises by slipping under the covers on Shane's side of the mattress, and tucks his arm beneath his head and studies the picture of him and Shane on their wedding day sitting on their nightstand - Shane is smiling so wide his perfectly circular freckles distort into ovals, some disappearing entirely into the crease by his eyes, the smile lines digging into his cheeks. And he thinks a lot, tries to fall asleep a little.

But mostly he misses his husband.

Chapter End Notes

college is cooking my shit so hard I need to write about the emotional torment of two gay men just for a moment of escape. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did, it gets worse in the next chapter

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: this is a work of fiction, the medical procedures depicted are not 100% accurate, some aspects have been altered for dramatic effect or narrative flow

who was gonna tell me I've been spelling rozanov wrong this whole time 🥲 also I need y'all to do me the hugest solid and ignore any spelling/grammar errors in here bc I barely had time to proofread this one

content warning for this chapter: depiction of violence, serious bodily injury, and invasive medical procedures. if either of these things are extremely upsetting to you, proceed with caution. please take care of your beautiful brains !!

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

Alexei Rozanov is nothing like Shane pictured. With little to go off of other than Ilya's passive, scathing remarks about his brother's character, Shane's mind had concocted and elaborate vision of him that bears little resemblance to the man sitting in front of him now. In truth, Alexei is far more average than Shane could've possible imagined.

He has Ilya's blue eyes, but that's about all they share. He has no curls, just disheveled, dusty blond spikes pointing every which way; the bridge of his nose is straight and flat, a far cry from the artistic crests and valleys of Ilya's; and when he smiles it's hollow. Ilya's smile is anything but.

'Brothers' seems a loose and fragile term for them.

"You lied to me, Alexei," the words wrench themselves from his throat as soon as Alexei slides into the seat across from him at the airport cafe - all the time he's spent obsessing over his first words to his brother in law gone to waste. His speech is little more than an after thought, anger suffocating it.

Alexei's smile falters and flattens.

His voice is an unconvincing deadpan when he says, “What are you talking about?”

“You have cancer, right?”

“Yes, we have talked about this. No?” Shane can understand it now - Ilya’s disdain for his brother. He’d always had a hard time conceptualizing hating someone you share blood with with such vitriol, but he sees it now, as he stares into Alexei’s remorseless gaze, only thinly veiled by the banal visage of his shit acting.

Shane has to grind a scream down with his back molars.

“Did you also have cancer three years ago when you asked Ilya for money and he didn’t give it to you?”

The accusation finds him face to face with a silence so expansive Shane could close his eyes and be convinced Alexei had disappeared entirely. Blue eyes pour into his but whatever lies behind them is out of reach to Shane - and this, too, is nothing like Ilya.

His voice cinches tight around the words, “Tell me the fucking truth Alexei, for once.”

“I suppose secret is...what do you say? Out of the bag,” he shrugs, the harsh material of his jean jacket bunching up awkwardly around his elbows. He gives Shane a look of acerbic apathy, “You know already.”

It takes all of Shane’s self control not to scream at him - or cry, or something equivalently humiliating - all of it being funneled into ironing the waver from his voice when he asks,

“Why did you need to leave Russia?”

“I owe money.”

Fuck. Shane drags a breath in through his nose, mouth too busy scraping the words off his tongue,

“So that’s what I’ve been shelling out for every month? Paying off your debt to your fucking bookie?”

“Not debt,” Alexei shrugs, unfeeling, and Shane is struck with the distinct sensation of staring into the uncanny valley - he’s almost human. He scrunches his nose, frowns a little, swipes his tongue across his teeth as if filing through a mental log of all the words he could say next. “Well...was not debt. But he was becoming a um-...*nuisance*.”

Shane is going to be sick. Already he feels nausea prickling at the base of his throat, and his anger is a solid mass, stuck behind his chest, compressing his lungs, and his eyes burn with tears. His voice creaks when he grits out,

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I start over in Canada. Will not bother you or Ilya-“

“No,” he snaps, sharper than necessary - he’s not going to fall for Alexei’s bullshit again. “No you’re not *starting over* in Canada. You’re going back to fucking Russia.”

In the blink of an eye his demeanor changes. He sinks back into his chair, puts his hands in his lap, stares out the floor to ceiling windows at the frigid gray of the November Ottawa morning; Shane might as well not be there at all. And there he is, the monster Ilya always talked about with a level of contempt that boarded on the mythical - but this is real. He’s real. Shane brought him to life by bringing him here.

“Ilya...” Alexei uses his lips, still not looking at Shane when his lips grimace around the words, “When they interview him - after game, he thanks his team. He thanks God. He thanks you, sometimes,” and it’s a bitter sentiment. Alexei grabs a napkin from the dispenser

on the table and starts to tear it into little flakes. “He even thanks our bitch fucking mother, even though she chose to be a coward instead of staying with her fucking sons.”

Jesus Christ. A protest lurches in Shane’s throat, but he doesn’t get the chance to voice it before Alexei is cutting it with,

“He doesn’t thank me.” A bitter laugh bleeds into his voice when he says, “You think, “why should he.” Yes? I am just...shameful secret. Alexei the fuck up.” The napkin in his hands is forgotten when he sinks his teeth into a borderline shout. “But who do you think paid for his hockey gear when mom could not work and dad got demoted? Who worked twelve hour shifts, and weekends, and holidays to pay for car to drive him to hockey practice. Who showed up to all of his *fucking* games because dad was a fucking prick and mom was fucking dead.”

Ah, there’s the real Alexei - the one whose cheeks are flush with resentment, whose gaze cuts beneath Shane’s skin like daggers, who never loved his brother, not really, and if he did it always had a clock attached to it. And suddenly Shane feels like he’s going to throw up or cry or forget how to work his lungs properly, so he squeezes his hand around the bottle of pills in his pocket but it’s no relief because he can’t use them, not here. It’s not safe here. There’s no Ilya here.

“He is Ilya Rozanov now, but once he was *my little brother*,” Alexei stabs the point of his index finger against his own chest, his voice rising with each syllable; but Shane can barely hear it. And he knows there are people staring at them, he can feel their gazes, but the world is beginning to blur at the edges again, the air is thick and viscous again, his lungs won’t breathe, his mind won’t settle- “This legacy, this *dynasty*, he builds it off of *my fucking back*-” *Shut up.* “-and now he wants to deny me money? *Entitled fucking brat*-” *Shut the fuck up- “He owes me everything!”*

“Shut the fuck up.”

He snaps and it feels good for the briefest of moments, like someone has punctured a hole in his chest and let the air back in, only for the pressure to return when Alexei looks at him with disgust,

“You are having fucking panic attack?” There’s a patronizing laugh slicking his words, thick and drowning in cruelty. He even smiles, sadistic in a way that makes Shane’s skin feel like there’s something crawling beneath it, chewing its way out. “Jesus christ I knew you were little bitch but-“

“You’re going to fucking listen to me.” He brings his hand down on the table harder than intended, the grating snap of it drawing the attention of what feels like the entire airport but Shane knows rationally isn’t. For once, Alexei doesn’t have a retort. Shane grapples his voice into submission, “You didn’t build jack shit. Ilya built himself. He worked his ass off. On his own. With no *fucking* help from you so don’t give me your bullshit speech about what he owes you. You don’t get brownie points for being a good brother decades ago.”

Alexei stares at him, dead eyed. Shane grits his back teeth so hard he swears they might crack, but it’s better than letting the sob trapped in his chest escape.

“I’m sorry you had it rough but if you really want to talk equivalencies, Ilya has spent his entire career supporting *you*, bailing *you* out of your *self-inflicted bullshit*, and the fact that he’s finally realizing you’re a parasite is long overdue.”

There’s silence when the last clipped edges of his words finally dissolve in the crowd noise of the airport, an entire world passing them by. The moment is an eternity.

“So you fly me all the way from Russia to give me this faggot fucking speech, hm?” He sucks on his teeth. “You and my brother are alike in that way. So...*da*, self-righteous.”

“Here’s your ticket back,” Shane fishes the boarding pass he’d bought on the way in from his pocket and drops on the table between them - and for a moment he can breathe. For a moment the crowd is just a crowd, the noise is just noise. For a moment he takes a breath in and his lungs don’t punch it out of him. For a moment he’s in control enough that his voice doesn’t break when he says, “Consider it your last handout.”

“Hollander...” Alexei studies it with cold indifference. Then with a minuscule frown and not so much as a glance in Shane’s direction, he’s tearing Shane’s control from his hands with the same, cruel candor as he’d used to first hook Shane all those months ago, “You should not fuck with a man who has nothing to lose.”

His throat is dry, “Are-... are you threatening me?”

“I don’t know,” Alexei shrugs, and all at once Shane knows it’s over - he needs to leave. Letting out the crushing tension in his chest as a burst of anger was just a bandaid. He’s not fixed, he’s not better, he’s not in control. His pills burn in his pocket; *not here*. As he stands up from his seat, the screech of it ringing in his ears, Alexei’s voice chases after him. “Maybe this is another one of my lies. Will find out.”

A fresh wave of anxiety crests the shore of his mind just as was beginning to manage the storm of his panic sweeping logic and reason up in its torrent, the illusion of his control folding in on itself like a house of cards in a hurricane; he needs to get out. His pulse races his feet down the terminal.

Not here. Not here. Not here.

As he’s walking away, he tells himself he’s going to wait until he gets to his car to take his pills. That he’s not going to be seen like this, not in public. But he barely makes it halfway through the terminal before having to duck into a storage closet left conveniently ajar because there were far more than five things to see and the only thing he could feel was his own pulse in his throat and he was hearing everything all at once.

There’s a pack of unopened water bottles on the shelf Shane wedges himself against, a layer of dust sitting so thickly across them that in a brief, fleeting moment of lucidity, he wonders how long they’ve been there; in the next, it hardly matters. He snaps one open and pours two pills into his hand - “no more than two” - and swallows them.

He downs the rest of the bottle because he’s overheating, but the water seems to get stuck in the bottom of his throat, welling like rain, pushing out against his sternum, the burn in his chest only intensifying even as he throws his head back against the metal scaffolding of the shelf over and over; anything to distract from the pressure.

“You’re not dying,” he says to himself, the words small and strangled where they fall off his tongue like loose change. But he doesn’t believe them so he says them again, “You’re not dying.” *Again*. “You’re not dying.”

He starts over.

“I can-...I can feel the floor. It’s concrete,” he says to the pitch black of the closet. He checks his watch, which he shouldn’t have done because there’s so much time left on the clock and the seconds pass at barely a sluggish crawl. “There’s dust. I can feel the shelf behind me. It’s metal- fuck.” Tears escape his eyes, a sob chasing them on a gasping breath. “I- I can feel the water bottle in my hand. I can feel my watch on my wrist.”

It’s not working - *you’re not doing it right*. But he can’t do it right, he can’t do anything right. He can’t breathe, and his psychiatrist said he has to breathe and it’d seemed obvious at the time but right now it’s impossible. So instead he prays, even though he’s never believed in god, he prays because at least he can’t do it wrong.

He prays that Alexei gets back on his plane and never comes back so that Ilya never has to suffer through his twisted version of love again. He prays that still loves him, even though he hasn’t managed to do a single thing about marriage correctly. He prays that Ilya eats breakfast, because sometimes when he’s under a lot of stress, he forgets.

He prays for time to move faster.

He doesn't like to see Galina before games.

It's nothing against her, but therapy - no matter how helpful or healing it has been for him - always leaves him with more thoughts in his head than he knows what to do with, cluttering the shelves of his mind until hockey feels too peripheral to be of any real consequence. He plays worse.

But Shane was gone when he woke up this morning, which also makes him play worse, so he supposes adding another devastating break in his routine to the mix couldn't do too much excess damage.

Shane wasn't missing. Last Ilya had checked, his phone still placed him squarely at the airport, likely to turn Alexei around back to Russia, to fix things like he had promised Ilya last night at a whisper when he thought Ilya was asleep - *"I'm sorry. I love you. I promise I'll fix this."* But he was still gone, with little more than breakfast in the fridge and a note on the nightstand for Ilya to hang onto when the chill of an Ottawa November had begun to seep through the window with the sliver light of morning; and it's still Ilya's fault.

He'd called Galina before he'd even made it down stairs.

"Would you like me to get things started?" The gentle prompt comes on the heels of far too many minutes of silence, each one wasting the seconds ticking away on Galina's analogue wall-mounted clock as Ilya wrestles with the admission stuck in his chest.

"I made him...anxious," he hates the sound of it, the taste; bitter, dry. He had a lot more thoughts lined up, but the way his throat cinches the four, minuscule words tells him they'll have to wait.

Galina nods.

"I remember you telling me he was recently diagnosed with anxiety," a prompt for more. She's always doing that, asking him to vocalize what's in his head exactly as his mind says it to him - sometimes it's as frustrating as it is effective; because he doesn't like how he says things, he doesn't even like how he thinks them most days.

“Yes.” He decides on when the energy to fight his own psyche has worn thin. “He has anxiety. He also gets panic attacks.”

“And you think you were responsible for one of these panic attacks?”

Yes. Yes and if he was responsible for this one, who’s to say he hasn’t caused others that Shane just hid better? What if Shane is scared of him? What if Shane doesn’t feel safe talking to him?

What if he never did?

He struggles to fit his voice around the words, “He would not tell me, but I know,” and even then they’re small, broken. “He didn’t want me to. To know, I mean.”

He never does - or rather, never did before. But then Ilya had found him, sitting on the floor of their hotel after their first loss together playing for Ottawa, gasping for breath that wouldn’t seem to come to him and sinking his nails into his ribs and crying as he curled his knees protectively against his chest; and the secret had come out.

After that he hadn’t tried to hide it, and, blessedly, hadn’t needed to. He’d talked to a psychiatrist two days later, come back with two new prescriptions in hand by the third - one for the generalized anxiety Ilya had always somewhat suspected he had, another for the moments when he sank too far and too suddenly for Ilya to reach. They were helping. He was happier. And on the occasions few and far between nowadays when things got bad, the weight on his chest too heavy, he no longer retreated to the safety of a dark corner or closed door; he let Ilya hold him while he waited for his meds to take effect.

“We had an argument.” Or he did. The neurotic part of Ilya wonders that will change now. “I blew up at him. I yelled. I basically called him an idiot.”

Why? His mind folds in on itself at the thought - why did he yell? Why didn’t he apologize? Why did he let Shane suffer, completely alone?

“He went up stairs to take a shower. He took an hour, which is long for him. And when he came out I could see he had been crying.”

Maybe because he deserved to, the thought, coated in a thick layer of residual anger, makes him nauseous. So he tells himself to shut the fuck up but it's hardly any use, because the vengeful murmurings turn to something much worse; truths he doesn't want to hear - this is how you almost lost him the first time. This is why you would deserve it if you lose him now.

This is why he never sees Galina before games.

“Did you talk to him about it?” Galina hooks him from his head like a fish on a line, dragging him above the surface of his inner monologue.

“No,” he coughs up. “No I didn't.”

“Why not?”

“I was angry at him.”

“Are you still angry at him?”

“Yes.” But he doesn't want to be. That's why he came to her in the first place, so she could talk him out of letting his bullshit feud with his brother infect his decidedly not-bullshit marriage with his husband. “But even on our worst day he never stopped talking to me. But he was having a bad fucking day and I just-...” Tears sting in the back of his throat and dry out the confession, “I couldn't find the words.”

“What was your argument about?”

“He invited my fucking brother to our home,” he wishes she hadn’t asked. The fragments of his anger, scattered by nighttime and a cold bed and *missing*, begin to piece themselves back together. Like a leaking tap it drip drip drips; he can feel it on the precipice with each new question, with each barbed answer.

“Alexei?”

“Yes. And he’s been paying him, *our money*, for months, over a fucking lie.”

“What lie?”

Stop asking fucking questions. He chews on his lip until he tastes blood.

“He’s dying now, apparently. Again,” he says, and desperately tries to stop the anger swelling in his voice, bloating his words. “Last year my niece had measles, the year before that his wife had broken her leg and couldn’t work.” But he can’t help it, it spills over into a shout that drags him to his feet with adrenaline, “He’s a fucking liar, all he ever fucking does is lie and try to squeeze anyone who will listen to him for money!”

“And you blame Shane for falling for it?”

“Yes! Holy fucking shit it does not take a genius to figure out that Alexei is a selfish, lying, pig!”

His voice is too loud, too big for the space, and the walls of the office are shrinking around them and he’s screaming, he realizes too late. Screaming at Galina just like he did at Shane.

And suddenly he is every horrible, ugly shade of the Rozanov men that came before him, each one a failure as a husband, a person - and he’s crying, which makes him feel stupid on top of it all.

Galina waits for him to sit back down, to brutalize the tears away with the heel of his palm, before she says simply,

“Shane doesn’t have the same history with your brother that you do.”

“Yes but-...” *but he should’ve known*, sounds stupid where it’s perched on his tongue. So instead he says, “I *know*,” and hates himself for being childish.

Galina doesn’t so much as flinch at the pointed irritation in his voice, “Why do you think Shane was so quick to help him?”

Why? Because he’s kind and anxious and he thinks he can fix decades of a decaying sibling relationship with kindness and anxiety alone, like some sort of tender-hearted Canadian superhero. But he can’t.

Ilya and Alexei can’t be fixed. Maybe decades ago, when Alexei still loved him, when resentment and money hadn’t yet consumed the core of their relationship leaving everything else a hollow orbit. Shane - born into so much love - could never understand.

Or maybe you just haven’t explained it to him.

“He often feels like I have given up too much to be with him, I know this. But that isn’t how I feel. I didn’t have to *give up* my relationship with Alexei, I walked away from it. On purpose.” He wipes another tear away but they’re falling too fast for it to make any real difference. “He just can’t get that through his head because-“

“He loves you.”

Oh.

Right.

Sometimes he forgets - not because of Shane, because of himself. Because there are still bad days speckling the good ones, mornings where Ilya will wake up and look at his husband and silently wonder why Shane still chooses him, how he still chooses him. Because there are moments when he looks in the mirror and looks nothing like himself, which means he looks nothing like the man Shane fell in love with.

Which in and of itself is so nauseating a thought that he'd rather fill the silence with words that turn him inside out than have to linger on it a second longer, "He thinks he is hurting me. He thinks not having a home in Russia anymore hurts me but the truth is Alexei has only ever brought me misery. Suffering. My life *here*, with his family, with my teammates, with Anya, with *him*, that is what makes me feel complete."

"Does he know what your brother is to you?"

"I thought so."

"People often know less than we think they do." She pauses then, a momentary respite; sometimes, Ilya finds, therapy feels a lot like a firing range where he plays the role of target. "Why did you ask to see me on such short notice? Was it because of the argument?"

"I-..."

"Are you mad at yourself for being angry with him?"

Yes, is too difficult to say out loud, so instead he fills his mouth with the caustic admission,

"I am just like my father," its thorns sinking into his tongue and drawing blood. "Just like Alexei."

"You believe that?"

He shrugs.

“I don’t know. But sometimes I see a shadow of them in myself.”

At that she narrows her eyes, the first real expression from her he’s seen since the session started; it’s jarring against the gray of her pantsuit, the beige of her office. Even more so when she murmurs a tentative, “Explain it to me.”

“When I’m mad I’m just-...so *fucking* angry,” even now, he can still feel the bitter aftertaste of rage coating the back of his throat. “Every time I’m angry it feels like the first time I have ever been angry in my life and I just want to scream at something. Someone. I don’t know. I just want someone to feel-...what I’m fucking feeling,” he chokes on the words. “And then, when I’m not, I feel like shit about myself for ever getting there in the first place.”

She doesn’t say anything. The silence is unbearable.

“So I am like my mother who is depressed and my father who was a jackass, and my brother who is a jackass in a different kind of way- how the fuck is he supposed to love me?”

How is it possible that Shane looks at him every day and stays? When he knows all that Ilya is, everything he could become? Knowing that someone still loves him despite seeing the ugliest parts of him should be a solace but some days it only raises more questions than answers. Today is one of those days.

It’s in the moment of silence that proceeds his outburst that a horrible, sinking feeling drags his heart down into his stomach - maybe this is when she tells him that he’s right. That he still has as seemingly endless road ahead of him before he’ll ever be truly deserving of Shane’s love. Maybe this is where she tells him that he’s broken in a way that she’s not capable of fixing.

She doesn’t; she never does. She and Shane are just alike in that way, refusing to give up on him, even when he makes it difficult.

“You know, Ilya, emotional responses, including anger, joy, fear, are all, in some way, learned. Having the same emotional response to certain situations as a parent doesn’t mean you’re the same person as them, just that you grew up learning from them. And just because mental health issues have a hereditary component does not mean they aren’t unique to each individual,” she says with so much kindness that it makes him feel like a child again, coddled - it’s no relief.

It’s with a similar ineffectual compassion that she tells him, “You’re your own person. Look where you are right now. That’s proof enough.”

But it’s not enough, it never will be. He’s been in therapy for years now and he’s still no better than he was the first time - just medicated now.

When he doesn’t respond, she pivots, “How do you think Shane feels about your argument?”

“He blames himself. He always does,” Ilya peels at the dry skin of his lip until it tears free and blood bubbles up beneath the point of his nail. “It is hardwired into his little Canadian brain.”

Oddly the sentiment makes him miss his husband - and this too, feels like the first time. He misses his husband’s laugh, the slide of his calluses against Ilya’s palm, the tenderness of his gaze resting on Ilya’s shoulders when he thinks Ilya isn’t watching. And suddenly he hates this room and its curated beige perfection and its natural light, and he hates Galina and he hates therapy and he wants to go home. And he wants Shane to be there waiting for him, ready to forget they’d ever argued to begin with.

He presses his palms against his eyes until there are stars clouding his vision.

“And you said before that you blame him as well.”

“Yes, but-“

“Then you’re on the same page.”

No. Yes. He doesn’t know. He blames Shane but to blame at all feels pointless. And he’s angry but the more he lets himself feel it the more he hates himself for feeling it at all. So really he’s failing at therapy which means he’s failing at communicating which means he’s destined to fail at being a husband.

He scrubs a hand down his face, “That is a shitty thing to be on the same page about.”

“Yes, but shitty things happen in life,” she says as if he needs any more of a reminder than has already been forced down his throat by the past twenty-four hours. “You said you blew up at him, how do you feel now?”

“Better.” *What a fucked up thing to say.* Which of course means that Galina’s next course of action is to praise him for it.

“Good.” As much as she has the ability to turn his world upside down at times, she sure is predictable. “So talk to him about it. Let him hear your feelings when they’re not so hot, let him apologize when he’s not so anxious.”

—

“After. Okay?”

Ilya's voice had been kind but he hadn't looked at Shane. Not in the car on the way to the arena. Not when Wyatt had joked about "trouble in paradise" when he noticed they weren't holding hands and Ilya had smiled, cracking some one liner about how he knew Wyatt had been eyeing him, and Shane had to swallow a wave of nausea. Not when Shane had responded, "Yeah, okay. Okay," *after* still ringing in his ears, and purposely waited on the porch for Ilya to get the car despite his lack of proper attire, hoping the biting cold would numb the ache in his chest. It hadn't.

So now he's here, ten minutes before the start of the game, staring himself in the mirror of the locker room showers trying and failing to talk himself out of the idea that this might be the last conversation they ever have, that Ilya might decide Shane is a bad bet for the rest of his life, cut his losses and get out while he still has the chance to start over-

Shut the fuck up.

He shouldn't take a benzo before a game - it's a bad precedent to set. He knows this. He's not stupid, and he's not dumb, and he knows better than to mess around with medications that can lead to dependance. And yet the pill bottle on sitting on the sink is calling to him like... Golley? Gollum? Shane could never remember the name of the little freak in Ilya's nerdy fantasy movie series.

("How do I know American movies better than you? I was not even born on the same continent and I'm more educated.")

He pops the cap.

"The benzodiazepines are not a substitute for your everyday SNRIs" his psychiatrist had emphasized, her enormous green eyes and gaunt affect bolstering the severity of her statement. But, Shane justifies as he swallows one pill with a handful of locker room tap water, these are extenuating circumstances. He just needs to get through this game. Just three periods, and only enough to make up for the meds he missed this morning.

When he boils it down to its essentials, today is just one bad day. He can make it through one bad day.

He exits the showers in the middle of Wiebe's pre-game "for the glory of Ottawa" speech and dresses in a hurry, earning himself looks from the rest of the team and one withering glare from McKinnely, but Shane's eyes are stuck to his husband. Ilya's gaze doesn't stray from the opposite corner of the room, distant, lost; he chews on his mouthguard. He only does that when he's nervous.

"-lets play well, lets play fair, lets play-" Shane doesn't catch the last word before the locker room descends into noise - cheers, whoops, hollers; they all bleed together as Shane watches Ilya stand, join the fray, disappear to the front of the locker room.

And suddenly he misses the comfort of his ring. Wiebe always tells him to take it off, just so it doesn't get caught on his gloves - a sensible suggestion, but one Shane is regretting as he's shuffled out of the locker room by his teammates. The cool metal is a reminder that Ilya still loves him, still chooses him, even when Shane is fucking everything up, and yet right now it's shoved in the back of his stall in a box, a world away just like the man who gave it to him.

I love you, he wants to say. But Ilya's back is turned to him, and the voice in his head reminds him he hasn't done much the past few days to earn 'I love you'; that it doesn't matter how much Shane hates to be away from him, Ilya needs his space and Shane has to respect it; that he's not going to turn around.

For once the voice is right. He doesn't.

Shane is off his game - horribly so, in a way that's only happened a few times before; missing shot after shot, giving the puck away so often and so freely you'd think he was trying to fuck them over. The commentators are probably having a field day right now, jazzed at getting to see the great Shane Hollander-Rozanov buckle under the pressure of the most important game of the season; the last time he played this badly was the first game after Ilya's plane nearly plummeted into the ground from ten thousand feet-

Don't think about that right now.

He grits his teeth against the uncomfortable pressure of unease ballooning in his chest; not right now. *Not right now.* He repeats the mantra to himself over and over again until it morphs, changes shape and color - *why is this happening right now?*

Because you fucked up, his mind chirps at him, small, the memory of the puck skidding past the edge of the goal and hitting the boards on endless repeat as he tries and fails to beat back the burn of frustration behind his eyes. *You're letting your team down. You're letting Ilya down-*

"Shut up." He whispers to himself, as he lets his skates drag against the ice toward center line. But the voice nestled in the back of his mind, shielded by the impenetrable guard of his insecurities, refuses to listen. His broken mind takes the winding backroads that circumvent logic and reason and comes out the other side with,

He wouldn't even fucking look at you.

"Shut the fuck up." He blows out a breath and desperately hopes against reason for the period to end before he has to play again - his pads are too tight, his helmet suffocating, and he forgot his meds this morning, too anxious to intercept Alexei to do so much as eat breakfast. Lunch had gotten a similar treatment.

It's over, Hollander.

But no amount of rationalizing the acetic curl of dread in the pit of his stomach as a byproduct of missed meals and forgone pills is slowing it down.

That's not my name, he says to himself. *That's not my name*. Maybe if he says it enough times he'll believe it.

Don't kid yourself. It always has been. It always will be-

"The fuck was that, Hollander?"

The never thought there would be reprieve in the grating snap of McKinnely's scorn, and yet there must be something in the air today because Shane actually finds relief in his teammate's disdain for him - his psychiatrist had once said it had to do with the cathartic effect of someone confirming his preconceived notions about himself. Maybe. Or maybe Shane just needs someone to drag him from his own head, and it doesn't really matter if it's kicking and screaming.

He takes a deep breath to flatten the waver in his voice, "You know that's not my name, McKinnely."

He drifts toward the line listlessly.

"Jesus you're a fucking snowflake about everything," McKinnely spits at him, and Shane is beginning to think the "cathartic effect" is losing its efficacy. He rolls his eyes, which is evidently not the response the defenseman was hoping for. "It's gonna cost us this game--"

"Fuck you."

"Fuck me?" His voice is at once too loud and nearly mute, crowd noise clipping the ends of it as he shouts, "Fuck me? Fuck you for making this team a fucking laughing stock- we're the faggiest team in the league all because you couldn't keep your fucking dick in your pants."

Just ignore him.

“I’m fucking talking to you.”

McKinnely shoves at his shoulder, hard enough to bruise. Then he waits a moment, as if goading Shane to say something, before shoving him again, harder this time, and with the added sting of the end of his stick clipping Shane’s visor with jarring force; an ache crawls up his neck, planting itself behind his eyes.

“What are you doing?” Another shove; Shane tries to put some distance between him and McKinnely. “Don’t touch me-“

“Oh so you’ll let your archival put his dick in you but it’s a problem when *I* touch you?”

It’s of little use.

“What the fuck are you doing man-“ no sooner do the words leave his lips than McKinnely’s slamming against him so hard that he collides with the boards, helmet smacking against plexiglass and chest hitting the wall with tearing velocity, a sick *crack* ringing through the arena. The sound is splitting, but the pain is worse; the dull ache radiating across the left side of his chest only takes seconds to sharpen its edges into a searing stab that has a pained noise working its way up his throat before he has the sense to stop it.

Shit. Shit that’s bad.

“Faggot.” In the distant periphery of his mind, Shane can hear McKinnely’s voice, just a bubble on the edge of his consciousness, can hear the resonance of McKinnely spitting on his helmet when he says, “Shouldn’t have to share the fucking ice with you.” But it might as well be white noise compared to the panic suddenly setting the rhythm for his heart - too fast.

Shit.

Did he break ribs? God he can't breathe. The pain is overwhelming. He can't think, he can't think, he can't think but *holy shit he can't fucking breathe*. Each breath he bullies into his lungs has diminishing returns, only serving to worsen the pain throbbing in his chest.

This can't be happening now.

Not here, he begs himself because the last thing he needs on top of getting fouled by his own teammate and breaking his ribs is to have a panic attack on the most public possible fucking stage. *Not here*. But it doesn't matter how authoritative he is with himself, nothing is stopping the protest of his lungs as he just tries to get them to *breathe*.

"Do not fucking touch my husband." He hears Ilya's voice through the chaos of crowd noise and the fighting of his teammates and the screaming of the referee and the pounding of his fucking head, and without his permission tears spring to his eyes - *Ilya*. He needs Ilya. The fogginess blurring the lines between rationality and insanity convinces him that if he could just find Ilya, feel Ilya's touch against his spine, Ilya's hand in his, that everything will be fine.

"What're you gonna do about it, *Rozanov*."

"That is not my *fucking* name."

"Alright break it up. Everyone up," the ref's voice is a distant prospect - Shane can hear what he's saying but the words have no meaning. "McKinnely you're done. Off the ice now. Rozanov and Hollander to your bench."

"What did I say?" Shane doesn't know, he wasn't listening. Though he hears it with glaring clarity when the ref shouts, "Hollander, up."

And he's trying - can't he see Shane is trying? - but even using his stick to push himself onto unsteady skates is making his chest feel like its caving in and he can't, he can't, he can't-

"Hollander."

"I can't." He says, breathless. And then, panic overwriting reason and mind too bleary to stop himself from getting himself pulled off the ice before the first period is even over, his voice works around the words, "I can't fucking breathe."

"Shane, what's wrong?" Ilya's voice is fleeting and pulsating, and the fact that Shane is struggling to hold onto it is only making the fear he'd been desperately trying to tame spiral out of control. He says something else, another question drowned in fear, but Shane can't for the life of him process what it is.

And *god*, he needs his meds, but they're shoved away in his locker and his voice isn't working and even if it was he's not sure he'd be able to string together a coherent thought beyond *I can't fucking breathe*.

He just needs some of the pressure to go away.

So he drops his gloves, but the cold, scarred ice does nothing for the pain so he claws at the strap on his chin, desperate for just one, good breath. If he could just get one real breath- but it's no use.

"I can't- fuck, I can't," Without thinking he's taking his jersey off, then his pads, but the pressure isn't going away and the pain is getting worse and the air is solid in his lungs, unusable, until eventually his body refuses to keep moving. His head falls to the ice and his knees curl to his chest and it's all he can do to dig his fingers into the left side of his chest. And he's crying - the desperate, gasping sobs of a terrified child.

Because this is different from all those times before. The pain won't fade, the fear isn't dissolving, and Ilya. Ilya's there but he's not; Shane can't see him, can't hear him, can't tell where he is. At least last night he could feel the mattress dip with his husband's weight. But this time it's all blank. This time he really is dying.

The moment he realizes it, all he can think to do is reach for his husband.

“Ilya.”

—

“Shane, what’s wrong?” He doesn’t receive an answer. “*Zolottse* what what’s wrong?”

The gloves are the first thing to come off after Shane’s knees hit the ice - then his helmet, flushed fingers clawing at the strap until it shakes loose and falls with a sickening crack.

“Shane.”

“I can’t,” it’s a cascade; his jersey, his pads, strangled breaths barely finding their way to his lungs as his wheezes fall silent between the sound of his gear scraping against beaten ice. It isn’t enough. Even when he’s stripped down to his thin undershirt, collapsed to his side and pressing his forehead against the ice, free of the prison of his uniform, he can’t seem to get enough air to fully form the words, “Fuck I can’t-“

“Shane what is happening.” Ilya can hear the urgency in his own voice, grating razor-sharp against his words, bleeding as anxiety shreds at the inside of his chest. He can barely feel his skates against the ice as he follows the horrifying magnetic pull of his husband’s labored breaths; they drag against the rink as if pulling through molasses.

“Shane.” He calls out and it’s desperate and maybe he’s begging.

No answer. Just horrible, desperate gasps that make Ilya's own chest feel too small for his lungs. Panic rises in his throat like bile, tears behind his eyes burning just as hot.

“Shane-“

“Ilya.” His right hand sinks into left side as if he can relieve some of the invisible pressure if he just tears some flesh away. The other reaches out for Ilya.

Neither of any use.

“Everyone off the ice!” The authoritative voice rings loud and clear, resounding through the stadium and leaving little room for argument, but Ilya barely hears it. It's practically mute. If there weren't hands on his shoulders to put the words into action, he might not have heard them at all. And in a split second he's farther from Shane than it seems he's ever been, a horrible, paralyzing dread encroaching on him.

“No- no that's my husband-“ he protests to no one in particular, the desperate need to be closer tearing at his chest as he shoves and twists, his body trying to pry itself from the grasps of his teammates. “I need to see him-“

“You need to stand back.“ A medic with slick black hair pulled into a bun at the base of her skull appears in front of him, the outline of her jarring and severe against the blinding expanse of the rink. She puts a hand on his shoulder, “I need you to stand back and give us some space.”

Stand back? But he's in pain and Ilya needs to be there to hold him, and love him, and tell him that everything will be okay - because it has to be okay - and why is she getting in his fucking way-

“What is happening to him? Is he okay-“

“Mr. Rozanov-“

His fear crests into a shout, “*That’s not my fucking name!*”

Her stoicism doesn’t waver, “I know you’re worried but I need you to give us space.”

“Ilya let them do their jobs,” someone’s voice is in his ear - Wyatt, maybe. Whoever it is, its of little consequence. All he can think about is his husband and the last thing he said to him; *after*.

And Ilya isn’t a beggar - never has been, never will be - but Shane isn’t saying anything; he’s barely moving, his body at once rigid and pliant as a swarm of medical personnel surround him, laying him out on his back and poking and prodding and why isn’t he *saying anything*. It feels like his heart ripped out of his chest through his throat and all he can do is watch, and all at once the thought of a life without his husband drags him to his knees, and the air is too dry to breathe, and the ground is falling apart beneath him. So he begs,

“Please.”

It falls on deaf ears.

The dark haired medic kneels beside Shane before quickly being joined by a blond one, who drags his shirt up his chest.

“Shane? Hi, Shane my name is Beth, can you talk?” She asks him and receives no answer. A new tidal wave of fear bubbles up in Ilya, blood spilling from a fresh wound.

“That’s okay, that’s okay,” she cradles his face with one palm, feeling at his chest with the other. She looks up to the blond beside her as she unhooks the stethoscope from her neck, “Intercostal retractions.” She presses the head of her stethoscope to his chest before flatly declaring, “Nothing on the left side. We’re dealing with a tension pneumothorax, I need scalpel and forceps.”

“Ambulance is four minutes out.”

“Shane, we’re going to get you to a hospital okay? But I need you to hang with us. I’m gonna cut into your chest which is gonna hurt like a bitch, but it’ll help you breathe.” She nods toward her teammate, “Making incision for finger thoracostomy now.” She presses the point of the scalpel between his ribs until it digs in; blood is viscous where it overruns the edges of the clean incision, pooling in the crease between Shane’s skin and the ice - Ilya feels sick. Sick when the paramedic presses finger into the wound, sick when they force pointed forceps into the open slit and push until something gives way, sick when the forceps are tossed aside, dragging a trail his husband’s blood with them.

But then there’s a gasp into the white noise of the arena and Shane’s body strains against the ice as he twists in the paramedic’s hold; Ilya never thought he’d be so relieved to hear his husband’s cries of pain - at least it’s not silence. At least he’s alive. Ilya can hear that he’s alive.

“Good, good job, Shane you’re doing real good.”

The moment of reprieve is short lived - by the next, he’s gone again.

Silence - real, actual silence - lays thick across the rink, across the crowd, slopping through the ceiling and pooling beneath the bleachers.

“*Fuck.*” Makes Ilya’s heart drop into his stomach. “Shane?” Has frigid fear crawling up his spine, burning tears building behind his eyes. The paramedic grabs at his jaw, shakes his head, taps him across the cheek, receiving nothing in response. “Shane can you hear my voice?”

“No pulse.”

No pulse.

Two little words to turn an entire world upside down. Ilya is paralyzed with them - this can't be how they end. Ilya can't lose him; it's not fair. Shane promised him forever, he *promised*, and now-

"Who has the fucking AED?!"

"Starting compressions."

"Ilya don't," Wyatt's voice is in his ear, his arms crushing around Ilya's chest. "Don't watch."

But if he takes his eyes off Shane and he looks back and he's gone, Ilya will never get him back. And Ilya doesn't know how to live in a world without him - doesn't want to.

So he watches. He watches as the blond paramedic, sweating through her T-shirt despite the cold of the rink, sinks the heels of her palms into Shane's chest over and over, never letting up even when she pushes hard enough to crack his sternum and a sickly *pop* saturates the air. He watches as blood trickles from the wound in his chest and bleeds and bleeds and bleeds until the ice is stained inhumanly red. He watches as the seconds stretch into hours stretch into eternities, as the crowd noise dies to a deafening whisper, as his husband's body stays terrifyingly still.

He watches even as the world blurs and falls apart, the edges crumbling. A sob drags its claws up the back of his throat, leaves his tongue strangled, but he can't even feel it.

"How long has he been down for?" His teammate's voices bubble around him, peripheral, endless, dragging Ilya down down down into the viscous depths of cold, unforgiving fear. He wishes they would just shut the fuck up, wishes they would go away, wishes it was anyone else lying stagnant on the ice - a horrible thought but one he can't seem to tame.

Because why didn't he stop McKinnely? He saw frigid blue eyes fixate on Shane long before a punch was ever thrown, so why didn't he get there faster? Why was he so far away from

Shane? And why was he so angry? How much of the past two days did Ilya spend not holding him for the sake of his own stubbornness?

Why didn't he kiss him before getting on the ice?

Did Ilya tell him he loved him today?

I love you, I do. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I'm sorry I didn't say it.

He sinks into the ice, pulling against the restraints of his teammates hands on him as he watches them work Shane's chest until it bruises.

I love you, I promise I'll never yell again. I promise I won't be angry anymore.

He cries when they shock Shane's heart and the line lays flat, and he realizes their years are measured in minutes now slipping through his fingers. And "after" seems so sweet in comparison to the bitter, devastating desperation clawing at his chest. He would give anything for them to have an after.

I love you. Please don't leave me.

They strap Shane to a board and drag him off the ice before they get his pulse back. They take him away while hands drag Ilya back, and his coach and the ref and his teammates are all shouting things at him but it's just noise. Meaningless noise. His own voice is little more, even as he screams and curses and begs - in Russian, English, whatever will get them to listen.

But it doesn't make a difference.

I love you.

Chapter End Notes

I'm kissing you all on the mouth for sticking w this fic i know it's getting mad
depressing

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: this is a work of fiction, the medical procedures depicted are not 100% accurate, some aspects have been altered for dramatic effect or narrative flow

y'all I was gonna post this chapter right after the drop of the final episode but I got distracted watching edits and reading real life lore of actual hockey players. some of them are so good it's actually sickening, please forgive me.

anyway, content warnings for this chapter: we get into the weeds a little bit with mental health stuff and there is a scene of like, abject violence, so, as with the rest of this fic, please keep your hearts and heads safe, and proceed with caution if these topics are distressing for you ! <3

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

They play out the last ten seconds of the period, but Ilya isn't there to see it; once his skates had left the ice, he was done. Because the truth is - whether or not his team or his management or his fans want to hear it - hockey has never been his first love. That's been Shane from the very first moment. It'll be Shane for the rest of their lives.

He dresses quickly, snatching only the most essential items from his stall - his phone, his keys, the only two things that will get him to Shane faster. Even his jacket is a forgotten bystander as he shoulders his way past Wiebe in the locker room doorway; if he's saying something to Ilya, Ilya can't hear it. The world - the locker room and Wiebe and every fucking doorway, so many fucking doorways - is little more than an obstacle to push through.

It takes him five minutes, if that, to get to his car, but each one is a life time, time slowing with fear and sorrow and resentment as the cheers of the crowd bubble through the cracks of polished parking garage concrete - how can they cheer when Ilya's world is falling apart? How can his team play out the game when their teammate, Ilya's husband, died on the very ice they skate upon only minutes earlier? How can they not fucking care?

Doesn't it gut them? Isn't it paralyzing?

It's not fair to be angry, he knows that. It doesn't stop the bitter acrimony from carving into his chest as he starts the car and pulls out of the parking lot too fast, nearly clipping a cement pillar on his way.

He pulls out onto the street, caked in snow and squeezed on either side with hastily done parking jobs. He's being reckless when he bullies his way down the short stretch of the one way road, because going around the block would take too long - Shane will be angry with him.

If he's still alive.

"Shut up," he crashes the heel of his palm against the steering wheel as he merges onto a main road, faster than he should and earning himself the harsh rebuke of a horn as he nearly sidelines the car kind enough to let him in. He should care, but he doesn't; he can't seem to care about anything right now if it isn't Shane.

Shane who can't sleep if Ilya isn't in bed next to him. Shane who made Ilya breakfast this morning and left a note to make sure Ilya ate, because Ilya doesn't eat when he's stressed. Shane who loves Ilya when it seems Ilya does everything he can to make himself unlovable.

Shane who doesn't like it when he drives fast; when he cuts yellows that bleed into reds, always reminding him what the speed limit *actually* is, as if maybe he can train Ilya to be more careful when he's not in the car with him. Ilya gets it - Shane is terrified of a lot of things, but losing Ilya most especially.

At least he used to be.

Shut up.

But he can't help it tonight - maybe some part of him thinks if he drives fast enough he can outrun the memory of Shane's body, still against the ice. Maybe the blur of the street beneath his wheels will distract him from the idea that the last thing he said to his husband was "After. Okay?". Maybe if he collides with the guard rails at a high enough speed he won't have to be the one who identifies his husband's body-

He crushes his foot against the break just as the light above him glares red, and suddenly the world is falling apart again, his tires sinking into the asphalt, air paralyzed in his lungs as he imagines the rest of his life with an empty passenger seat, a home devoid of warmth, a bed that's too big; a life spent remembering. Remembering isn't enough, he needs Shane. *He needs Shane*. He's not paying enough attention to the road, he knows that, but it's such a trivial, peripheral concern because what if Shane is-

Stop.

He drags a breath into lungs too small to hold it.

Don't think that. Never think that.

But his mind can't stop churning. The road is blurry.

What If he's gone? Then none of it would really matter - the reckless speeding, the snow-drenched streets too slick to drive on, the knot of earnest fear pushing at his husband's voice when he reminds Ilya that "I'll never forgive you if you get yourself killed going one-twenty down the highway, jackass". What if he's gone, and Ilya doesn't know because he has his phone off because Shane always makes him turn his phone off when he's driving and now he can't kick the habit? What if Ilya gets to the hospital and they tell him-

The scream of a horn behind him splits his mind in half, just in time for him to see green spilling through his windshield. He lays on the acceleration.

It's a miracle he makes it to the hospital without bending his car around a telephone pole or skidding off the side of the road, and it'll be a miracle if he doesn't get a ticket for parking at a haphazard diagonal in the hospital's roundabout drive way, but neither miracle matters in the slightest.

—

The emergency ward of the hospital, like the ice, is bleak and colorless and blinding, the fluorescent lights overbearing as Ilya shoulders his way through the overcrowded waiting room to the front desk. He earns himself pointed looks and sharper words, but they're all meaningless, just like the jeers of the fans as they'd watched him duck out of the stadium, just like his reckless driving and shit parking job and everything else that isn't Shane.

A nurse steps out from behind a computer, stray hairs fraying from a bun hanging at the base of her neck, bags sinking deep under her eyes - and she smiles at him but there's blood on her shoe that she doesn't seem to have noticed. And it's fresh because it's red- Shane once told him why old blood turns brown, but he can't seem to remember a single word of the process right now and *fuck-*

Is that his husband's blood? He can't breathe.

"Hi, how can I help you?" The nurse's voice is soft and jarring. His eyes snap to her but refuse to focus for a moment.

"My husband, Shane Hollander-Rozanov, he is here?"

"Are you Ilya Hollander-Rozanov?" He nods because a 'yes' isn't coming easy, his heart blocking its way where it sits, beating in his throat. She touches his shoulder lightly, "Hi, my name is Diwa, I was just about to give you a call, actually."

"Is he okay?"

She gives him a smile drowned in sympathy.

“He is doing stellar.” But he doesn’t know what the fuck that word means, which only makes his heart beat faster and his panic rise higher. She looks at him a moment, eyes scanning his face before she says, “He’s okay.”

He’s okay.

The words are so small and yet they take up so much space behind Ilya’s chest that it gets hard to breathe for a moment, an eternity; relief swells, clogging up his throat when he tries to speak, so overwhelming that he has to press both palms to the cool granite of the desk in front of him and force a breath into his lungs to keep the rapidly crumbling pieces of himself held together.

He’s okay.

“Ilya,” there’s a hand on his shoulder that pries his burning eyes open - he hadn’t realized he’d closed them. Diwa is looking at him, warm brown gaze and earnest frown peering up at him when she asks with an insurmountable compassion, “Are you okay?”

“*Da*, yes,” there’s impatience rimming his voice and he doesn’t mean it, it’s just that the moment she said it - *he’s okay* - it felt like the whole world was coming together again and now all he can think about is seeing his husband; hearing his voice, feeling his heartbeat. “Where is he?”

Blessedly her feet start moving.

“They moved him to the ICU about ten minutes ago.” Ilya follows her tiny frame through the antiseptic white of the hospital hall, into the chilling steel and glass of an elevator, down another barren corridor, as she launches into a spiel about what happened to Shane, a disastrous speech full of medical jargon Ilya couldn’t hope to parse even if overwhelming relief weren’t blurring the edges of her clipped English, “I don’t know how much you know

about the situation, but your husband suffered what's called a tension pneumothorax-" none it really matters anyway - his husband is alive. Shane is okay. *Shane is okay.*

Tears are already singing trails down his cheeks and it's embarrassing but he barely has the mind to care.

She finishes her monologue as they stop in front of a room, "-he tolerated the procedure well, and is healthy with strong lungs so, if he stays stable, we can discharge him by tomorrow." The warm glow of low lights spills from the windows, a curtain drawn within; Shane is behind it, and Ilya doesn't think he's ever felt so paralyzed with the desperate need to see his husband before. Diwa draws his attention again with, "Do you have any questions?"

Only one.

"Can I see him?"

Diwa gives him a small smile, "That's a popular one, and yes. Actually he was asking for you." She puts a hand on the door knob. "Just be mindful if you guys are huggers, he has his chest tube on the left side. It shouldn't hurt much but you'll wanna leave it alone so it doesn't become painful."

He nods, she opens the door, he draws back the curtain - it all seems to take a lifetime. But when it's over there's Shane, dressed in a hospital gown hanging loosely from broad shoulders and squinting at his phone without his glasses. And he's perfect; breathing and here and perfect.

"Shane," his husband's name has never tasted more sweet in his mouth than when he calls out and Shane turns his head, settling a soft, tired gaze on him. He smiles. Then he cries.

"Ilya."

“Moy lyubimyy,” the dam breaks and suddenly all the fear and the anguish and every horrible, gut wrenching ‘what if’ he’d tortured himself with driving too fast down the highway spills out in a sob that’s as painful as it is blissful. The burn of tears behind his eyes is insurmountable. *“Prosti menya, lyubimaya, prosti.”*

The door shuts out the world behind him with a heavy click but the silence Ilya had so feared is nowhere to be seen - instead there is the incessant beep of a heart monitor and the mechanical buzz of an IV pump and Shane, who releases a noise that sounds halfway between pain and relief and makes Ilya’s heart feel too big for his chest. He’s beautiful. He’s beautiful and alive and he reaches out to Ilya and this time when Ilya reaches back he can actually touch him, feel him, settle himself on the edge of the bed and hold him - god Ilya can hold him; holding him is heaven.

He presses his face into the crook of his husband’s neck and breathes him in, the sweet smell of his shampoo mingling with the sharp tang of hospital disinfectant. Underneath it all he still smells like Shane; like pine trees and summer rain and home.

He’s still in pain - Ilya can tell by the way he winces when he tries to lean forward, by the injured murmur leaping off his tongue when his smile splits around an off-kilter laugh - but he’s breathing. He’s breathing when Ilya wraps him in his arms as delicately as possible and Shane melts against him like it’s the first time he’s ever been held; breathing when he presses a kiss against Ilya’s temple and cards gentle fingers through his hair, Ilya’s name scraping its way from his throat.

"Ilya."

“I love you,” is all Ilya can manage to say in response. He can feel Shane’s tears on his skin. “I’m sorry, I love you. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

He doesn’t know exactly what he’s apologizing for, mind too much a mess to sort a coherent origin for the sorry’s leaving his lips from the chaos of the day, he just knows he is; that he never should’ve let Shane spend a single minute not knowing how much Ilya loves him, that Ilya never should’ve let McKinnely get close enough to touch him, that he shouldn’t have let Shane be taken off the ice without Ilya by his side. His words are frenzied, incomprehensible Frankensteins of English and Russian, but through it all, somehow, Shane understands.

“Stop- stop, Ilya,” he says softly as gentle hands pull Ilya’s face away from his shoulder. Tender palms cup his cheeks, Shane’s thumb pressing over his mole, tracing his bottom lip. “Stop that. Take a breath.”

Ilya does - or he tries. He drags air into his lungs but it’s broken and shuddering, only made worse when Shane looks at him with a love so earnest it burns. Shane drops his hands to his lap and takes one of Ilya’s in his own, turning his palm over, mapping each knuckle with the pad of his thumb.

“Look, I’m the one who should be apologizing, okay?” He murmurs, looking at Ilya. Always looking at Ilya. His gaze never strays, not even on their worst night, at their lowest moment; somehow he keeps his heart open. He even smiles - a fleeting, heart breaking thing - when he says, “I’m the one who fucked up, I’m the one who should be sorry.” Ilya hates it when his smile splits around another apology, “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“No.”

“I made you give up everything for me,” he’s crying now, full, heavy tears that pool at on his lips and turn his eyes glassy, and Ilya hates this too, hates when he says, “I made you give up everything and all I do is hurt you.”

Because that’s not true, it never has been. A lot of things in this world hurt Ilya - his mother’s death, the sting of his father’s disappointment, the burn of his brother’s disdain for him - but Shane has never been one of them. And he wants to say that; for once he wants to say what he’s thinking, exactly as his mind says it to him, but in his desperation to do so all that comes out is a teary,

“What the fuck are you talking about right now, Hollander?”

“That’s not my name.”

“You did not *make* me do anything.” He finally finds the words and they’re blissful to say after so long spent relegated to implication and subtext. But Shane just looks away, one of his hands detangling fingers from Ilya’s so he can wipe indelicately at his tears, and Ilya is

saddled with the pressing need to remind him, “And the argument, Alexei, none of this matters right now.”

Ilya drags Shane's hands away from his face, presses his knuckles to his lips, and doesn't close his eyes, not even when Shane breaks down in another sob, because some small part of him still wonders if he'll open them again in Shane will still be laying on the ice a world away from the safety of Ilya's arms. “Shane you-...you died-“

“Dying doesn't fucking change anything-“

“It changes everything.” More than he could ever possibly know.

To Shane it was barely the blink of an eye, but to Ilya it was an entire lifetime lived between the moment Shane's heart stopped and the moment Ilya first heard him breathe again. To Ilya it was a very real future where he left the hospital for a house that could remember Shane Hollander-Rozanov but could never recreate him - a set of spare keys left in the bowl, a closet half full of clothes that don't fit him, two tooth brushes, two pairs of shoes, two pillows, two rings; a life with a hole carved out of the middle. To Ilya it was everything.

Can he not see that?

Ilya's chest feels like it's full of shrapnel when his voice breaks around the words, “I lost you.”

Just saying them makes Ilya feel like the walls are closing in on him, the ground crumbling beneath his feet; all over again, he is reminded of how close they came.

“Only for four minutes,” *four minutes*. Four minutes of living in a world without Shane in it. “We've beat worse odds.” Which makes him cry more, because the last aftershocks of fear still haven't dissolved from his system and imagining what might have happened if they hadn't is as painful as it is paralyzing. Shane must see it on his face because he says, “I'm sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me.” He feels the need to remind his husband. Because sometimes, it seems, he forgets that Ilya had never known how deep happiness could really root before Shane entered his life. He cups his husband’s face gently and revels in the way Shane leans into his hold, even pressing his own hand over Ilya’s to keep it in place. His voice is so full with love it barely manages to scratch a whisper, “I will always love you more than our worst day.”

Shane sighs against his palm, cracks one, tear-flooded eye open, voice soft and ruined and perfect, “Think this is a strong contender for the worst?”

“Well. There was also the time your mother walked in on us fucking.”

There’s a ghost of a laugh resting where Shane’s smile meets his lips, “Shit you’re right, that one might take the title.”

To which Ilya finds he can only respond, “I love you, *zolottse*,” the feeling gripping him with such fervency that he wonders if he’s even capable of remembering a time when he didn’t love Shane, when Shane wasn’t the one; it’s been so long now, he realizes, he must have forgotten. “So much.”

Fresh tears glisten on his husbands cheeks, “I love you too.”

There’s a pause, a momentary quiet - peaceful, finally - before another thought strikes him.

“You cannot ever scare me like that again.” Ilya traces the angles of his husband’s face with the pad of his thumb, “I will divorce you.” The flat bridge of his nose, the deep crease of his cupid’s bow, the soft curve of his cheekbone. “Not good for my mental health.” And then, far more earnestly, the admission, “It was the most terrifying moment of my life,” claws its way out of his chest from where it sat, weighing down his heart.

“Mine too,” Shane responds, almost too quick, as if something fell lose with Ilya’s confession and he can’t stop himself from saying, “I- I was so sure I was going to die, I just kept thinking...not now.”

And he's already cried so much today, but Ilya couldn't stop the fresh wave of tears burning behind his eyes if he wanted to. They push out against his chest, claw their way up his throat, dissolve into ugly, strangled sobs that make him feel small and desperate as he collapses against his husband's shoulder again, relief and fear and an odd sense of grief that has long outlived its usefulness swelling so big in his lungs he struggles just to get a breath in.

I love you.

"I love you," he says again, this one falling off the edge of desperation and tumbling into something darker. Shane hears it - he always does.

"Ilya I'm okay." He manhandles space between them, which Ilya doesn't like, but he does like seeing his husband - likes seeing how alive he is, how he smiles as if to prove it. "Look. I'm okay."

Ilya does look. He looks at Shane's soft, disheveled hair and tired eyes and the bruises that spill across the left side of his face like watercolor, drowning out his freckles. He looks at the adoring curve of Shane's smile, the bow of his heart-shaped lips, the rise and fall of his shoulders as he sighs - as predicted, he's the most beautiful man Ilya's ever seen.

"You look like shit."

Shane laughs, Ilya's soul comes to life all over again; a familiar dance. "Asshole." Then he threads the fingers of one hand through Ilya's curls and with the other grasps at Ilya's own, pulling them together until their foreheads are resting against one another. Ilya pulls their joined hands up to his lips and kisses each, flushed knuckle.

He's okay.

“How is he doing?” Wiebe has always done a good job of schooling a grating optimism into his voice, even when Ilya’s world was falling apart the first time - and the second. Even when his team was dragged against the rocks for choosing to love its players more than its PR. Even when Ilya was dragging a shirt over his head and grabbing his keys and storming past him in the locker room doorway with tears streaming down his face and a shout bleeding into his voice when he’d announced he was going to the hospital.

And yet right now optimism is nowhere to be seen. His voice is dark, weighed down with worry, “Is he okay?”

“He is alive,” Ilya relays, the words sweet on his tongue, heavy in his chest. There’s an audible sigh of relief ballooning into static on the other end of the line. “They gave him chest tube. He is breathing, talking. Smiling.” He clears his throat of the tears staining the back of his tongue. “They say he cannot play for four weeks.”

“I wouldn’t expect any less,” Wiebe says and it’s obvious he’s trying to sound disappointed, but there’s a laugh in his voice belying his relief. Ilya leans his head back against the door frame of Shane’s hospital room and tries desperately not to cry when Wiebe reminds him, “He had a real bad spill.”

Yeah. He did. Ilya sees it every time he closes his eyes and now is no exception. He can’t help the heaviness of his heart that drags him down against the door or the residual burn of all-consuming fear that has tears spilling over; he can barely stop the words, “Jesus fuck,” from being wrenched from the back of his throat as he presses his thumb and forefinger against his eyes.

A sob finds its way out of him, which is humiliating, because now that the storm has settled he’s keenly aware of the fact that he’s having a meltdown in the middle of the hallway. But he

supposes it's a small price to pay - he doesn't have to attend his husband's funeral. He has a lifetime of coming home to Shane in his future.

He takes a shuddering breath.

“And how are you doing, Ilya?”

“I am fine.”

Wishful thinking - *I should be fine*. But the reality is that there is still something sour and scared pitting in his stomach; they're back from the cliff's edge now, but he can still see how far they stood to fall, can still feel the plunge of his heart when he thinks about what would've happened if they had. What might've been is so heavy a memory and he just can't seem to shake it, even after hours of watching Shane's chest rise and fall with steady breaths.

“You sure?” Wiebe asks, so much suffocating kindness blanketing the question that Ilya can already feel the lie falling apart on his tongue.

“No,” he confesses, and even the single word is a Sisyphean task, English so hard to come by as exhaustion collides with relief so palpable it's painful. “I cannot sleep. Keep thinking... what if he stops breathing while I am asleep and I don't notice.”

Wiebe makes a noise of understanding in the back of his throat, but he doesn't understand, not really. Which only becomes more glaringly obvious when he asks, “You need someone to come down and keep an eye on him so you can get some rest?”

If he understood, he wouldn't even ask.

“No,” Ilya's voice reacts for him, too quick. He wrestles the urgency from it, “No they only let one visitor in at a time and I want to stay.”

“Figured you’d say as much.”

There’s a ghost of a laugh on the back of his tongue, a dry, colorless thing, but Ilya latches onto it, forces it to breathe some levity into his voice when he sighs out,

“I am about to go kick my mother in law out, actually.”

“You’re gonna separate Yuna Hollander from her son?” Wiebe gives an empty chuckle of his own. “Good thing you’re in a hospital.”

There’s a pause - Ilya should laugh at that. But he doesn’t have it in him and Wiebe doesn’t demand an explanation for his silence, so he lets the minute tang of guilt roll off his shoulders.

“I am going to go now.”

Wiebe nods, smiles, presses a thumb against his lips. Ilya can’t see it but he can feel it.

“Tell him the team is pulling for him, and that we’ll be there tomorrow.”

“I will.”

“Hi, Mr. Hollander-Rozanov?” It’s ten when the door to the hospital room opens and Diwa’s round, moon-shaped face and gentle eyes make yet another appearance - though he can tell from the droop of her tone this visit isn’t to check Shane’s oxygen level; visiting hours were over an hour ago. He’d seen her pass by the room at nine, she’d done him the courtesy of pretending she hadn’t seen him back. He supposes he’s used up the kindness of her blind eye.

“I’m sorry but visiting hours are over,” she says at a murmur, careful not to wake Shane as she shoulders her way behind the curtain. “Shane needs his rest.”

Her words hold the weight of logic behind them, and realistically Ilya knows that it can’t be the most comfortable set up, him curled awkwardly on his side, head resting on the uninjured side of his husband’s chest, palm pressed over his heartbeat; he should go home.

But he’s not ready yet.

Going home means spending the rest of the night in an empty bed, awake and anxious. Going home means being scared of every phone call. Going home isn’t going home at all, just back to a cold, lonely house hollowed out and dark, miles away from Shane if something goes wrong - the thought is nauseating.

“I do not want to go.” *Not yet.* He presses his cheek against the murmur of Shane’s heartbeat. “I want to stay.”

“And if it were up to me I would let you,” Diwa says, tone not unkind, which only makes him feel guilty; she probably deals with a hundred family members just like him every day. He’s only making more work for her. And yet the notion doesn’t make him anymore eager to leave than he was a moment ago.

“Please. Do not make me,” he feels childish, but he’s too tired to care - he hasn’t slept. Not yet. There were times when he thought he might, when Shane took a deep breath and Ilya almost let himself be carried to sleep by the lulling rhythm of his heart. But then his chest would settle and still and a familiar, acrid dread would nest itself in the pit of Ilya’s stomach

and he would have to wait, eyes fixated on the heart monitor, for Shane to breathe again; Ilya's not sure exactly what he'd do with himself if he left.

But Diwa is standing over him now, and she places a gentle hand on his shoulder, a silent bid for him to get moving, and he knows what she means to say - Shane doesn't need him right now. He needs to sleep without Ilya stuck to his side like a two-hundred pound barnacle.

"I guarantee Shane is in good hands, okay?" Her voice is soft, just outpacing a whisper. She offers him a meager comfort, "I'm on shift for six more hours. If *anything* happens, you'll be my first call. Promise."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

He nods; he's an adult, he can do adult things. It's time. Shane is okay. He'll continue to be okay, even after Ilya stops tracking every breath and heartbeat with obsessive attention to detail. He hooks his chin over Shane's shoulder.

"I love you," he says, stretching up to press his lips to his husband's forehead, half hoping Shane can hear him, half hoping he's too deep in sleep to feel Ilya leave. He doesn't want to leave. Even as he sits up, he can feel the chill of his husband's absence seeping against his skin in a way that has a knot climbing high in his throat again. He whispers again just in case, "*Ya tebya lyublyu.*"

"I love you too," Shane murmurs, groggy, creaking where it scrapes from his throat but heavy with adoration. He cracks his eyes open, reaching up with his right hand to caress Ilya's face with a touch so tender Ilya feels as though he's melting into it. "Go home. Sleep in an actual bed." Which is not what he wants - in fact sleeping in a bed without Shane is so far from what he wants that the urge to shed tears over it feels leaden in his chest. But he doesn't cry, that would be stupid, childish, and the last thing Shane needs to worry about right now.

Instead he presses a kiss against Shane's palm, his knuckles, the pulse point of his wrist.

“Da.”

He stands up then, exhausted body protesting the movement, only for a gentle tug at his hand to pull him back. Shane looks up at him with wide, soft eyes.

“Also Ilya, it’s snowing-“

“I will drive slow.” There’s a few more goodbyes after that, a few more parting kisses. Ilya promises in Russian to return first thing the next morning, because somehow it feels less overbearing than the broken edges of his English. And when he gets in his car and eases out of the hospital driveway, miraculously un-ticketed, he keeps good on his promise, the ring on his chain heavy against his chest as he keeps his speed at the limit all the way home.

The drive back goes faster than he expects - which could be a function of the fact that the drive *to* the hospital felt like eons, or it could be his tired mind losing track of the monotonous moments between leaving and arriving. Everything seems to be slipping through his fingers; his energy, his thoughts, his mind. Except Shane. Shane is okay.

He holds onto Shane, even when he parks the car at an ugly slant in their driveway and turns off the engine and just sits a moment, staring at the dashboard and feeling more tired than he’s ever felt in his life. Not tired enough to sleep but tired enough that the mere task of dragging his feet to the front door feels Herculean, let alone everything that comes after - god he’s crashing. And it sucks and he’s tired and fuck, maybe he could just sleep here.

He tips his head back and closes his eyes experimentally.

Ah, but no one fed Anya.

The thought strikes him bluntly in the back of the head - Anya will be hungry for dinner. She’ll be missing Shane, and she’ll be hungry for dinner, and she’ll want to sleep in their bed tonight because Shane has fallen into the habit of letting her lay on his stomach while he reads at night and she, like Shane, is a creature of habit.

So he summons the energy from...somewhere, he doesn't know exactly where, to meander listlessly out of the car to the front door. He types in the code, turns the handle, waits for the weighty *thunk* of a lock sliding out of its notch. It never comes.

"What the fuck?"

He presses his weight down on the handle - it opens easily. Too easily.

A knot of dread sizes in his throat, burns in his stomach, and suddenly the exhaustion evaporates, replaced with something primordial and grim and sickening.

"Hello?" He asks to the darkened silhouette of the foyer. No one answers, which should be a relief, but somehow only ignites the spark of his panic, fanning it into an all out flame.

For a moment he considers calling out again, then he considers calling Shane. He does neither, because both would be equally ineffectual and the last thing Shane needs to be thinking about right now is the possibility that their home was broken into while he was busy dying. Instead Ilya checks his phone - they have a security system, it should've gone off-

"*Fuck me.*" He swipes up only to be met with hundreds of notifications from his security app, one every ten minutes and not a single one opened because he *had his fucking phone off*.
"*Shit.*"

He scrubs a hand down his face, an ugly amalgamation of unnamable emotions - each one cutting with serrated edges - ballooning in his chest as he recalls the conversation they'd had when they first moved in, Shane wanting to pay to have the police dispatched automatically, Ilya arguing it wasn't necessary.

("*Relax Hollander, we live in the middle of a fucking forest. No one is driving down shady back road to break into our house.*")

Worse still is the silence, the alarm probably having died hours ago while Ilya was- *Anya*. Where is Anya.

“Anya?” There’s no reciprocal bark or patter of paws, just silence for a moment so long it has panic crashing through him a tidal wave that burns behind his eyes, in his chest, down his throat. “Anya? *Idite syuda*.” He doesn’t think as hard as he should before crossing the barrier of the doorway - glass crunches under his shoes, and the moment he realizes what it is the moment he realizes the entire floor is covered in it. Fear swells in his chest, “*Anya-*“

He’s seconds away from tearing through the house, glass or no glass, when the tell tale jingle of Anya’s collar comes sparkling from the silence; relief crests so high in his throat it nearly drags a sob with it.

“Anya, Jesus Christ.” Moments later she’s in his arms, barking like it’s the first time she’s seen him in years and licking at the residual tear tracks on his cheeks as he channels all his energy into not crushing her in the swells of his relief. He kisses between her ears, buries his face in her fur, “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Time moves quickly after that.

Ilya calls the police while he inspects Anya’s paws for cuts - he thought he might be out of miracles, but if god exists, he’s taking mercy on Ilya tonight. Despite the ocean of glittering fragments of windows, mirrors, vases, she is unharmed.

When the police arrive, Ilya treks into the house with them, slipping into the kitchen and hoping to get Anya a bowl of food before they ransack the place for evidence. He retrieves her a bowl of kibble, filled twice as high as normal (an apology for his absence, for the fear she must have suffered, how scared she must have been - he wonders if she thought they abandoned her, then silently banishes the thought before it has a chance to grow roots). But a half empty bag of dog food and a single bowl miraculously left unscathed aren’t the only things he finds.

There’s also a note.

It's written on scratch paper, sloppily folded, pinned to the refrigerator all by its lonesome; the rest of the photos they'd had on there - pictures from their wedding night, some with their team, others with Rose and Svetlana and Hayden - are nothing more than scraps laying scattered with the glass.

They're just pictures, he has to remind himself when bitter rage makes his stomach churn. They can be replaced.

He plucks the note from its perch and exits the house before he has a chance to get himself yelled at or, worse, start crying, all the while the flimsy piece of paper burning a hole in his pocket. It's only when he reaches the sanctuary of his car that he releases the breath he'd been holding - and opens the note.

It's short, not sweet, scrawled in handwriting that sparks a rancid nostalgia in Ilya, so acrid it borders on hatred.

I hope Shane enjoyed his stay at the hospital. I paid good money for it.

Tvoy brat.

P.S, congratulate McKinnely on a job well done.

Each word digs beneath his skin, frigid, sickening, an awful cocktail of anger and guilt and sorrow sinking into his stomach and turning him inside out and he screams-

"Fuck." But it doesn't help so he screams again, hits the dashboard, over and over, anger spilling into rage spilling into resentment so thick it feels as though it might drown him - *why?*

Why now? Why Shane? Why couldn't Ilya have had anyone else as a brother? Why can't Alexei love him, why can't Ilya force him to, why did Ilya let this happen? Alexei was always dangerous, always unpredictable, and Ilya's solution was to turn a blind eye and hope he went away, but he'll never go away. And he'll always be angry and he'll always be selfish and he'll *always be dangerous, and Ilya knew that*. He knew that and he didn't stop him and it got the man he loves hurt.

He can barely breathe as his anger pours out of him in a tidal wave, dragging every ugly thought he's ever had about himself, every last shard of self-loathing and vitriol and hatred, into the spotlight - this was his fault.

You let this happen.

How could Ilya have let this happen-

The sharp cut of Yuna Hollander's ring tone startles him just enough that his downward spiral takes a momentary pause - he picks up too quickly, answers in a similar vein,

"Yes?"

"Are you okay?!" Yuna's voice fizzles at the edges with a tangible worry; oddly the tang of it calms Ilya's racing mind, cutting through the noise enough that he can just barely hear her voice over his pulse racing in his ears when she says, "David was listening to the police scanners again and he heard your address--"

"I'm okay," he assures her, partly because Yuna has a tendency to spiral even faster than her son, which is a feat in and of itself, and partly because there's a cathartic effect in affirming it. Though the sentiment is not without the heavyburden of guilt weighing it down - he feels it pull at the back of his throat as he drags the words from his mouth, "I'm okay, so is Anya."

He's okay, but Shane is in the hospital. Shane is in the hospital and Ilya's fucking brother is the one who put him there - Ilya who's supposed to be his husband, who's supposed to protect him but he didn't. He couldn't. He failed.

How is he supposed to tell them that?

She's saying something as he presses his forehead into the steering wheel and sinks his teeth into his tongue to bite back a sob, but his mind can't keep up with the words, too much of his thought process being used to wipe away tears as they burn down his cheeks; she can't hear him cry. If she hears him cry she'll ask what's wrong, and if she asks what's wrong he won't have it in him to lie.

Instead he drags in a breath so deep it makes his lungs hurt, pulling the speaker away from his face when he sniffle, breathing desperately through the still searing embers of his anger.

When he presses the phone back to his ear, he catches the tail end of a sentence,

“-what happened?”

What happened? He doesn't know, really - at least that's the lie he sells them on in the best impression of normalcy he can muster. He tells them someone broke in, that he called the police, that he's sitting in his car with Anya.

He tells them about the missing electronics, jewelry, clothes. He tells them about the broken vases and windows and picture frames, about the sea of shattered glass he'd come home to. He tells them about the safe Alexei - the unnamed thief - hadn't quite managed to break into, only to destroy everything surrounding it until their closet had become an unrecognizable heap of splinters and drywall.

He doesn't tell them about the note.

Shane is awake when his phone rings at three in the morning - not through any fault of his own, mind you, but he's awake. The nurse, Diwa, had told him to get some rest; an easy request but not as easily done. Shane has a hard time sleeping without Ilya by his side these days now that he knows what it feels like to come home with him every night.

The ring tone is garish, some horrible early 2000s American pop monstrosity Hayden had called him uncultured for not knowing, but it's oddly a relief - he was missing Ilya's weight against his side and there's nothing worth watching on three-am cable, so his mind has basically been eating itself alive for the past five hours.

He picks up the phone and doesn't get so much as a word out before Hayden's voice is spilling through the speakers, too bright,

"You really thought you could escape me by dying?" Crowd noise bustles behind him, his energy seeping through the speaker and diffusing in the relative sedation of the hospital room. "First of all fuck you, and second, don't do that shit again."

A smile stretches Shane's lips.

"Hi Hayden."

"Hi jackass," is fond, and Hayden, too, is smiling; Shane can tell because his voice gets round and warm and the barest hint of a giggle chases it through the quiet. "How are you feeling?"

“Tired. But honestly not that bad. My chest hurts...fucking a lot, and there’s a tube coming out of me but I’m alive,” he shrugs, watches the 24/7 SpongeBob re-run marathon on channel fourteen with passive apathy. “Not to sound cliché, but the dying part was the worst of it.”

“No shit man.”

There’s a pause incongruent with Hayden, whose ADD generally sees him going a mile a minute - he’s holding something back. Shane wants to tell him to just spit it the fuck out, because he’s been sitting in silence for hours now and he thinks one more second of it might make his brain explode, but Hayden beats him to the punch,

“If you’re cool with me asking...what does it feel like? Like...what even goes through your head?”

What did go through his head? The question is too hard to answer. So many things were on his mind, a horrifying menagerie of all his worst fears. When he was on the ice, laid out on his back while they poked a hole between his ribs, he was thinking about how Ilya had to watch, how horrifying it must have been for him. And when he woke up in the back of an ambulance with a mask over his mouth and one of the paramedics said, “welcome back from the dead”, he was thinking he needed his phone so he could call Ilya, so he could tell him he was okay. When they arrived at the hospital, he was thinking he didn’t want to be there - he wanted to go home. He wanted to see his husband.

Maybe the question isn’t hard to answer at all.

“Ilya, mostly. When I was in the ambulance and they kept fucking saying “touch and go”... like what the fuck,” he says, voice light, but truth is that he was scared; and he didn’t want to die without his ring on, and there are pasta ingredients sitting in their fridge that would’ve gone bad if he’d died because they were supposed to make dinner together, and it’s been snowing and Ilya drives too fast and who would be there to remind him to go the speed limit? And thinking about it all again is making his throat burn with the effort of holding in tears. “I was-...you know, thinking about all the time we were gonna lose-“ his voice breaks against a sob. He thumbs tears away from his eyes, clears his throat, “Sorry.”

“No, man, it’s okay I shouldn’t have asked,” Hayden says, too quiet, nothing like his normal zeal. “I’m sorry.” His voice catches on the apology, wavers around the sentiment, “Look,

we're all just-...we're all just glad that you're alive, okay?"

Shane wipes at the last remnants of tears clinging to his cheeks, a smile stretching his words when he asks, "Hayden are you crying right now?"

"No," the lie is immediate but it lasts about as long as every other Hayden has told. "Yes. Shut up, you did it first." Compulsively transparent and earnest to a fault have always been some Shane's favorite qualities in his best friend - one day Shane will tell him that. For now, he lets the matter of tears and heartache drop as Hayden snuffles his way through the words, "Anyway save your fucking tears. I'm in Florida right now but I'll be there in four hours."

What?

"What?"

"Well- okay more like five because I have to get an uber from the airport--"

"Are you flying here?" Shane's body reacts before his mind does, sitting bolt upright in his bed so quick it has a shockwave of pain rippling through his chest. Though the ache is a peripheral afterthought. "Wait don't you have a game in two days?"

"So fucking what? Your best friend only dies once."

"And coach approved this?"

"He let me take it out of the goddamn travel budget. Can you believe that shit?" No. Not really, considering Shane's fall from grace with Montreal management was an event so cataclysmic and caustic it made number three in a 'NHL's Top Ten Worst PR Moments' video with three million views (not the highlight of his career). But Shane won't turn down league-sponsored visit with his best friend. "I think he feels bad about letting the team drive his star player away. Anyway, J.J is having a fucking conniption because he didn't think of it fast enough and coach isn't willing to sacrifice two players against Boston, so I expect you to rub

it in his face when we FaceTime him- oh also, Jackie and the kids want to video chat too, so expect tears.”

“From you or them?”

“Are we even best besties if it isn’t both?”

Shane grins into the dim light of his room and picks at a fraying thread dangling off the paper-thin blanket they gave him, excited energy already beginning to build behind his sternum - maybe he’s being a child, maybe he’s being embarrassing, but in the solitude of his room behind the protection of the privacy curtain, neither matters in the slightest. With the ramp up of the season, he hasn’t really gotten to see Hayden since summer; if he knew all he had to do to get himself a meeting with the man was die then he would’ve done it a lot sooner.

He doesn’t say any of that though, because he’s still a thirty-year-old man born and raised in the hockey circuit. Instead he says, “You’ll have to compete with the team then. They only let one visitor in here at a time for some reason- oh, and Ilya’s coming back tomorrow.”

Hayden makes a noise of exasperation in the back of his throat, “That fucking guy, does he always have to be around?”

“I married him for that express purpose so...yes.”

“C’mon man, aren’t all married couples supposed to like...hate each other a little bit?”

“I think that’s a straight people thing,” Shane huffs and receives a ‘what the fuck ever dude’ in response that has a giggle bubbling in his throat. “Why? Do you hate Jackie a little bit?”

“No but Jackie’s perfect, Ilya is extremely unlikeable.”

Yeah and it's extremely hot, Shane doesn't say because one of the first things Hayden had told him when he first found out they were together was that he never, under any circumstances, wanted to be put in "the unnerving and deeply unsettling position of thinking about Ilya Rozanov sexually" - and because Shane is, quite possibly, the world's greatest best friend, he's going to refrain from putting the idea in Hayden's head before his five hour flight.

"I'm gonna ignore you shitting on my husband and remind you that Ilya is like a cat, he only hates you if you hate him."

"That's like ninety percent of the league."

Shane shrugs, "Well he used to hate me and now I'm married to him, so..."

He can practically see Hayden's disgruntled expression, halfway between a grimace of disgust and a confused sneer, "So what you're saying is that all I have to do to get him to like me is to fuck him."

"Try it, I dare you," he says, but it's rasping from his throat and coated in a laugh and probably holds none of the bite it's supposed to. Hayden's grandstanding is similarly ineffectual,

"You really think you could take me?"

"I'm legally a zombie. I think that puts me in a different weight class."

"Yeah, dude, a lower one," he snorts, and Shane is struck with an odd swell of emotion knotting in his throat, ballooning in his chest so large and solid and forceful that he nearly misses it when Hayden says, "Zombies are literally rotting corpses who hunger for brains because they don't have any of their own."

"Yeah that doesn't feel scientifically evidenced to me."

“It’s a vibe thing, man, not everything needs to have a research paper written on it to be true—oh shit, they’re calling my gate. I gotta get on the plane now. Do *not* die before I get there or I’ll be so fucking pissed.”

Shane smiles into his phone and stares up at the TV screen where SpongeBob and the pink star guy are dancing, arms interlocked, “Yeah no promises.”

“Fuck you man,” the sound of shuffling feet and voices squeezed through airport microphones takes up residence in the silence for a moment before Hayden says, “Shane,” with far too much weight for the levity of the conversation.

“Yeah?”

“I love you dude.”

Shane’s heart swells so big in his chest it nearly chokes out his voice, “Love you too, Hayd.”

There’s a pause, the sound of a ticket being scanned, and the rhythmic roll of suitcase wheels as Hayden presumably makes his way onto the plane, and it hits Shane with not small amount of fondness that he must have forgotten to hang up - not an uncommon occurrence with Hayden. He once spent six hours on FaceTime with J.J because Hayden forgot to end the call and J.J fell asleep.

Gently, he nudges, “Hayden you know you have to hang up the phone to end the call, right?”

Hayden huffs at him, “I was waiting for you to hang up first. Duh.”

“Uh, no,” Shane is the one who just died, he dares say he shouldn’t also have to be the one to end the call first. That’s just science. “Nose goes.”

“What?” Hayden’s voice is affronted. Shane derives no small amount of joy from imagining what he must look like, a thirty year old man standing in the aisle of an airplane, arguing with another thirty year old man about the technicalities of a children’s game, “That’s not fair, I didn’t know we were playing.”

“Sucks to suck.”

“Man fuck you,” Hayden says but it’s bubbling with a smile, dangerously close to falling apart into a laugh. “Good fucking bye.”

Shane is the first to hang up in the end.

—

Ilya is in a shitty mood when he visits the next morning - which feels like it shouldn’t be a shock, and yet Shane finds himself saddled with a sharp unease as Ilya sits down in the chair next to the bed and leans his chin against his palm, knuckles blanching where they press against his lips; something is wrong.

Something was wrong when he said good morning and he didn’t smile - he tried but it hadn’t turned out exactly right and, as such, he’d given up on it, scrapping the whole thing in favor of a fleeting grimace. Something was wrong when he’d kissed Shane and it felt like an apology. Something was wrong when he’d lingered by the foot of the bed, just staring, eyes

so blue with melancholy that Shane had almost jumped the gun and pried his own anxieties away with clumsy words instead of waiting until Ilya was ready.

Sometimes he needs a moment.

Shane waits until Ilya finally looks at him again, his gaze ripped from the heart monitor after an eternity of silence, “Ilya, what’s wrong?”

He doesn’t answer immediately. Rather, a throaty sound bleeds from behind the protective cover of his fist; he scrubs a hand down his face, thumbs at his lips, shakes his head once, twice, then he’s saying,

“Alexei he...” and avoiding Shane’s eyes in a way that has dread spilling down his spine like ice water. “He’s did not leave Canada. When you went to talk to him.”

What?

His body feels numb with a quiet unease that bleeds through him slowly at first, then all at once when Ilya pauses, chewing on his next words as he pulls his bottom lip between his teeth.

“Actually he came back to the house.” Shane can tell he’s trying to keep his voice light, but it’s not working. His forced levity is fragile, each word tenuous and trembling when he murmurs, “You would say he “cleaned us out”.”

It takes Shane’s tired mind a moment to process the words, another for them to sink in - but oh, when they do-

“He-...he fucking robbed us?”

“Yes.”

The single word feels like it's gutting him - a nauseating wave of shame tides through him with such velocity that his stomach lurches with it; shock souring into guilt that has tears springing to his eyes and his lungs forgetting their purpose.

"What did he take?" He asks on reflex before an altogether more terrifying thought punches a gasp from him- "Oh god- Anya-"

"Anya is okay. She's at your parent's house." Ilya is quick to talk him down, hands finding his waist, his face. He swipes a thumb under Shane's eyes, collecting tears as they fall, even when they overrun his knuckles and pool against Shane's cheeks. "He took laptops, a monitor, some other bullshit, mostly he broke things. TV, vases. Some windows. Nothing that cannot be fixed."

Nothing that cannot be fixed. But how can this be fixed? Shane invited Alexei back into their lives and he *broke into their fucking house*. Maybe Ilya doesn't blame him but he should - it's his fault. *Everything is your fault.*

"Shane, this was not your-"

"It was." And the thought is crushing. It cracking open bruised ribs and yanking at the strings of his heart until the whole, bleeding organ sits trapped in his throat. He chews on his guilt to get small enough for words but it hardly helps at all, steadying his voice is still an impossible task, "It was my fault. I let him back in and that is my fault."

"Shane." Ilya's voice is soft, his hand cupping the side of Shane's face gently, but to lean into his touch, to accept his love, feels profane bordering on the sacrilegious - this was Shane's fault. This was his fault and Ilya knows that and still, somehow, Shane is making himself the victim and it's sick. It's fucked up.

Shane can't look at him; all he'll see is haunting devotion he'll never deserve and love he hasn't earned - and he doesn't mean to cry but it happens anyway as he closes his eyes and dips his head and tries desperately to avoid the humiliating burn of knowing Ilya is seeing him as he is in this moment, the worst he's ever been. But he can't. He can't escape it.

Maybe he's not meant to.

"Sweetheart look at me." Ilya coaxes gently, so he does, because as much as he tells himself he doesn't deserve Ilya, Shane can't convince himself not to want him - his kindness, his comfort, his love. Ilya pulls himself onto the edge of the bed, and from there it only takes a tender hand soothing circles into the base of Shane's spine for him to collapse against his husband's side, exhausted and sobbing. "Shane are you-"

"No," No - he can see five things and Ilya is one of them, and he can feel Ilya's hand at the base of his skull and he's here; Shane is here, and his mind is here and Ilya is here. He's okay, even if okay feels pretty fucked up right now. He scrubs a hand down his face which doesn't help with the tears, only slicking them across his cheeks, probably making him even more of a mess, but his voice is steady enough to reply, "No I'm fine. I'm just sorry. Ilya I'm so sorry."

"I'm not," Ilya murmurs where his lips are pressed to the crown of Shane's head. "I-" his voice catches on whatever he intends to say next, but he doesn't let it stop him from fumbling through the words, "I am just happy you're alive." And he's holding Shane a little too tight but it feels good, safe, like maybe he'll be okay just so long as Ilya doesn't let go. "I just need you alive."

Shane loves him so much sometimes that it's painful, that it feels like someone is flaying him open and turning him inside out, all the worst parts of him on display.

It takes a minute for Shane to calm down, for the gasping breaths to even themselves out and the tears to dry themselves up; Ilya gives him that minute, holds him through it, traces an imaginary line from the base of his spine to the crest of his neck and back again, a steady tempo for Shane to breathe to, while he soothe his free hand through Shane's hair and whispers to him in Russian; *'it's okay'* mostly, *'I love you'* a few times, *'we'll be okay'* once when *'I love you'* only makes Shane cry harder.

When the storm passes enough that Shane can pull himself away from his husband's embrace and not feel the crippling shame of tears tracking down his cheeks, Ilya looks at him softly, thumbs gently at his bottom lip before he says,

“Also...McKinnely.”

Shane clears his throat to make space for his voice, “Yeah?”

“Alexei paid him. To pick a fight with you,” Ilya struggles with the words. They're ragged, tail-ended in unfinished silence he fills with a simple, “*Da*.”

“Oh,” *so that's what he meant*. His thoughts escape with his voice, “So that's what he meant?”

Ilya draws back, and the bob of his Adams apple tells Shane the simple, “What?” that leaves his lips is hardly the full extent of what he's feeling - Shane almost gives in to the urge to back track, a 'never mind' ready and waiting on his tongue.

But he doesn't - he told Ilya he'd try.

“When I met him at the airport. He kind of like...vaguely threatened me? He said I shouldn't fuck with him now that he has nothing to lose.”

“You did not tell me this,” is strained, barely straddling the line of steadiness. Ilya won't look at him.

“We weren't exactly talking...”

There's a moment of silence that's horrible and heavy and Shane wishes he hadn't said anything at all because Ilya is avoiding his gaze, and there's no way this hurts less than if he'd never said anything at all. He opens his mouth to take it back - “*but it's okay, I'm sorry, it's not a big deal*” - but Ilya beats him to the punch with,

“I know, I know I’m sorry,” so bogged down with sorrow that it makes Shane’s urge to reach for him go from sedate to desperate. He shifts forward on the bed and curls both his hands around one of his husband’s.

“You don’t need to be sorry, it’s not your fault. We were both-“

“No, no that part is my fault,” but Ilya’s voice resolute, heavy with the weight of his guilt but solid where it sits on his tongue - fighting him on it is a useless battle; they both had a hand in the shitstorm that has been the past few days. If you ask Shane, his part was a little bigger than Ilya’s, but he supposes arguing semantics at this point is a fruitless battle; Ilya doesn’t need him to wrestle fault from him.

So he says,

“It’s okay.” And he means it. Just like he means it when he reminds his husband, “If it’s okay for me to need space it’s okay for you to need it. No double standards, right?”

Ilya scrunches his nose at that, brows furrowing, and Shane can practically see the gears turning in his head, churning as they spill all the reasons his heart is worth sacrificing while Shane’s is worth protecting into his expression - there’s an army of protests lined up on his tongue. Shane can very nearly hear them.

But they never see the light of day. Instead he says,

“*Da*,” and then softer, “Yes.”

And for the first time in days Shane can feel solid ground beneath their feet.

Ilya is still crying when he curls awkwardly onto his side, laying his head on the uninjured side of Shane’s chest, but the tears are sated, remnants of sorrow; the last memories of a nightmare now past. Shane fits Ilya’s shoulder into the cradle of his arm and cards his fingers through soft, golden curls with his free hand - and somehow, despite the antiseptic sterility of

the hospital room and the frigid gray of November outside their window and the perpetual buzz of machines drowning out the silence, this moment is perfect. Ilya's perfect; everything he's ever wanted, and somehow he wants Shane back.

The thought makes tears well on his bottom lashes as he leans his head back against the stiff hospital pillow - he lets them fall. And it's okay, because he's safe. Ilya's here.

—

Ilya doesn't know what he was expecting when he stepped into practice today. Maybe he was on autopilot, mind too caught in the brambles of his brother's cruelty, too focused on *finishing* practice so he can pick Shane up and take him home officially, to remember what he would be walking into. Or maybe he wanted this to happen - this moment, right here.

The moment where he sees McKinnely and reason and rationality go suddenly mute, the rest of the locker room with them. The moment where his anger, his rage, his grief, and every other bitter emotion that had underscored his fear as he watched his husband's lifeless body be dragged off the ice on a stretcher, overwhelm logic. The moment where revenge becomes the only word that means anything.

The moment where he's discarding his bag and closing the distance between him and McKinnely and asking, "How much did he pay you, hm? To hurt Shane," as if he actually expects a straight answer.

The chatter from the team that crops up from his accusation is little more than a slurry of white noise as his heart pounds in his ears.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” McKinnely swallows, turning his gaze away from Ilya as he slips his pads over his head in an anxious hurry. He’s a shitty liar - if only he knew the caliber Ilya was used to, he wouldn’t even bother trying.

“My fucking brother. How much did he pay you.”

“I don’t fucking know your brother, man-“

“You do not want to lie to me right now.”

But he’s not getting it, not getting how deeply Ilya feels rage, how deeply he feels love, how far he’s willing to go in service of those feelings. It’s the only explanation for the way he turns to Ilya with a defensive righteousness, a scowl printed across his washed out features when he barks a pointed,

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about-“

“I told you not to *fucking lie to me!*”

Ilya shouldn’t put hands on him but he can’t help it - his body reacts for him, shoving McKinnely back against the lockers lining the wall, his back hitting wood with a dull thud. Which is, apparently, enough of a threat for his pitiful excuse for an act to fall apart at the seams.

“Woah woah woah stop-“ McKinnely’s voice breaks as it shoulders its way between their bodies, his hands following suit. He looks up at Ilya with inhumanly blue eyes begging for sympathy Ilya doesn’t have to give, “Stop- look, man, I’m three hundred-K in the whole because my financial manager fucked me over and both of my kids need braces, and then there’s the house and the cars and fucking private school-“

“I do not give a shit. How much did he pay you.”

“You don’t understand the situation I’m in- plus if I’d known it was gonna go like that already I never would’ve-“

“How much did he *fucking* pay you?”

Silence. It’s deafening, punctured only by the rush of blood in Ilya’s ears and the labor of his breaths in his lungs. McKinnely’s gaze flits around the room as if he’ll find a number high enough to appease Ilya hidden in the corners of the room.

But he can’t. There isn’t one. And the moment he seems to realize it is the moment he relents,

“Ten grand just to push him around a little.”

Ten grand?

Ilya almost lost the only man he’s ever loved...over ten grand?

“Ten grand was worth my husband’s life to you?”

The thought sparks hatred so tangible it burns, searing as it sinks its teeth into his chest and tears flesh from bone, reason from action. And in a moment of failing rationality he realizes that nothing is going to stop what happens next.

“I didn’t know it was gonna happen like that-“

His rage is a storm as it plunges through him, but this time he doesn't bother trying to stop it, even when his fist collides with McKinnely's face and a sickening crack rings around the locker room. McKinnely crumples like a paper doll into the protective shell of his stall, too-large frame folding in on itself - and maybe Ilya should feel wrong for the shock of sadistic satisfaction that rashes through him at the sight of McKinnely's blood fountaining from his nose, spilling down his shirt, though his fingers were his hand comes up to shelter his face as if it will protect him from Ilya's anger.

It won't. And he doesn't feel bad. He doesn't feel anything except the burning, twisting, grotesque need to make McKinnely pay.

"Stand up."

"Fuck- *you broke my fucking nose!*"

"Fucking stand up."

His ascent is slow, broad shoulders hunched as he uses a blood-stained hand pressed against the bench to push himself to his feet only for Ilya to hit him again, this time in the eye. It's swift, and clean, and just satisfying enough that it manages to tame the beast of Ilya's anger long enough for him to get the words out,

"You are a fucking coward." And there's blood running down Ilya knuckles and he doesn't know if it's his or McKinnely's but it hardly matters. McKinnely is molded into his stall, body contorted as if he thinks he can bleed into the wood and avoid Ilya's scorn, looking all parts the pathetic excuse for a human being he is. "You are weak, and you are a coward. Your children deserve a better father. Your wife deserves a better husband, and *my* husband deserves a better teammate." In the back of his mind, Ilya wonders if maybe this is all too much, if he should calm down, take a step back, if his actions will have a price he's not willing to pay - but such insipid notions evaporate as the memory of Shane's body comes back to him, bruised and bleeding and lifeless against scarred ice.

The consequences of his battered knuckles are meaningless because Ilya hates Ottawa management for signing him and he hates Alexei for paying him and he hates Ian fucking McKinnely and more than any that he loves Shane. Loves him so much that the thought of him having to come back to a team with McKinnely on it is sickening.

Taking a breath too deep to be comfortable, Ilya cinches his voice tight around the words, “You will not talk to him, you will not fucking look at him, and you will not touch him. *Ever.*” but it doesn’t stop a shout from bleeding into them. The side of his closed fist colliding with the plywood divider of the stall has McKinnely flinching but it’s not enough, it’s not enough, it’s not enough. Ilya doesn’t know what could be.

He doesn’t know what to do with the heavy burn sitting on his sternum, crushing the air from his lungs, he doesn’t know what to do with the bleak desire to see McKinnely suffer like Shane suffered. He doesn’t know what to do with the nauseating dread curdling in the pit of his stomach when he thinks about Shane having to play with McKinnely, share a locker room with him, call him a teammate.

It’s too much and not enough all at once.

“Ilya, I need you to calm down,” Wiebe’s voice is soothing where it shoulders its way beneath the deafening silence settling thick across the team, anchoring Ilya back to reality just enough that some of the fog clears - and suddenly he is back in the locker room, surrounded by his teammates who all just watched him beat McKinnely until he bled and it’s shameful and it’s ugly, and he’s glad Shane isn’t here to see it.

But he’s still angry.

He’s still angry and he doesn’t know what to do about that so he grits out, “I will not share a rink with him.” He grabs his bag, thanking himself for not unpacking it, knowing that a second longer spent in the suffocating squeeze of the locker room would see him losing his white-knuckle control on his rage. “I am going home.”

“Ilya-” Wiebe stops him in the bottle neck of the doorway, and Ilya can see a whole speech of words lined up on his tongue written in the crease of his frown, but he never get the chance to say them.

“What the fuck are you doing, he just fucking broke my nose!” McKinnely burbles, still tucked in the safety of his stall. Wiebe doesn’t so much as look at him.

“Can you breathe, Ian?”

“Yeah but I-“

“Then I’ll deal with you later.”

“I wanna press fucking charges-“

At that Wiebe snaps, “Son after what you’ve done I’d think twice about puttin’ yourself under the scrutiny of the law,” his voice sharp and bitter and so unlike him as he turns his head to regard McKinnely with a disdain Ilya would find comedic if he didn’t have bigger things to worry about. Wiebe’s jaw clenches around words that never take shape. Instead he turns back to Ilya, an inexorable kindness in the gentle furrow of his brow when he places a hand on Ilya’s shoulder and says, “Okay. Go home, be with Shane-“

“Update us frequently so we know he’s still kickin-“

“Not now, Neil.” Wyatt gives him a tap upside the head.

“-and come back to practice when you’re ready.”

The car ride home from the hospital is bathed in silence, heavy and weighed down by the morose gunmetal gray of early-evening cloud cover - all in all a sullen affair. It shouldn't be like this; he should be happy. Shane should be happy. But they aren't. As Ilya drags the car down the quiet backroads of Ottawa, all he can think is the sinking feeling in his gut he thought would've dissipated once he was clear of the arena. Instead it had stayed, stubborn, stuck in the bottom of his throat.

It's Ilya's fault.

Shane hadn't asked about the bruises on his hands, the raw cracks in his knuckles, the blood staining his skin he hadn't quite managed to scrub off. He hadn't asked and Ilya hadn't told but both of them knew the truth - Ilya lost it. Like his father would, like his brother did, and not just with words and raised voices but with fists and blood and violence.

But he deserved it - he deserved it. Ilya keeps saying it to himself but everyone thinks that, don't they? That their anger is justified? That the pain they cause has reason beyond their own desire for sadistic retribution? Most people are wrong.

And his hand, god his hand, a physical representation of the control he lost, or maybe never had. He can't stop looking at his knuckles as they grip the steering wheel, can't stop seeing the fear pooling in McKinnely's eyes as he held his weeping nose, blood cascading across his skin. It's awful, sickening, and his throat feels tight and his eyes burn with the effort blinking away tears and the worst part of it all is Shane, loving him despite the evidence of his cruelty sitting front and center as plain as day.

Shane who murmurs lightly, "I'm willing to guess you didn't tell my parents your brother ordered a hit on me?" It's an attempt at compassion, he's trying to cheer Ilya up, and yet it only makes Ilya feel hollow, desperate, raw. "Ilya I'm joking. It's okay--"

"No it's not fucking okay," his voice unfurls in a shout and he doesn't mean it, he doesn't mean it, he doesn't mean it but his own mind is an unfamiliar creature packed too full of thorned emotions, each one indistinguishable from the next and *no, it's not okay*. He's not okay. He's just like his father and his brother, he is hideous and vicious and angry - god he's so fucking angry.

The tears are inevitable, and with them the road ahead blurs, snow meeting asphalt in a mess of monotone gray. It's only Shane's voice that holds any color.

"Ilya pull over."

A warm palm meets Ilya's shoulder, guiding as he brings them to a stop at the side of the road.

The moment the car is in park the bubble bursts and his breaths are shallow and his tears seem endless and he presses his head against the frigid window but it still doesn't tame the chaos. Only Shane manages to find solid footing through the torrent of Ilya's emotions, "Ilya. Talk to me."

But what is he supposed to say?

I think I might be like my father, who tormented my mother until she chose death over another day with him. I think I might be like my brother who can't even bring himself to love his own child, much less his wife. I think you love me now, but wait ten years and see who I become.

Who will I become?

All of those thoughts are terrifying, intimidating with their serrated edges; they would sting too much coming out so he settles for, "How...how do you still love me?" And watches with shame as a hurt confusion settles into his husband's expression. "After all of this. How do you not fucking hate me?"

Shane purses his lips, eyes searching for a moment before he asks, "Do you hate me? I'm the one who brought him here." His hand finds Ilya's but he *can't*, he can't touch that one. That one is bloody, bruised, dirty. Ilya will ruin him; he pulls his hand away and the way Shane draws back makes him feel sick, the plea in his voice nauseating when he says, "Ilya I'm the one who fucked up, okay--"

“Yes but he is in *my* blood,” it’s horrible to admit. He feels like he’s drowning when he sobs, “He is *my* brother.”

“Okay? And apples and oranges both grow on trees. Alexei is your brother and he’s also a piece of shit. This two things have nothing to do with each other.”

“How can you say that's true? He never would have been in your life at all if I hadn't-”

“Hadn't what? Been born?” The thought seems to hit Shane at the same moment it hits Ilya, the only difference being that Ilya collapses under its weight while Shane hacks his way through it with the bitter edge of sarcasm, “Oh yeah that would've been way better for me than a few bruises-“

“They are not just few fucking bruises, Shane!” He’s yelling - *why are you yelling?* - and it feels like his heart is being carved from his chest and he’s just- “-sorry. I’m sorry, Shane I’m so-”

“Ilya,” his husband’s voice is sharp where it cuts through his panic. And for a moment the world stops - the cars passing them on the road are just disembodied lights, the street noise fades into silence, and the only two people in the world are him and Shane. Shane’s voice is a murmur, “Look at me?”

He doesn’t shy away from taking Ilya’s hand again, nor does he flinch when he wipes away Ilya’s tears and more fall in their stead - the love that takes purchase in Ilya's chest makes him brave enough, just for a moment, to ask,

“What if I’m just like Alexei? What if I’m just like my father?”

“You’re nothing like them, either of them,” Shane shakes his head, and he’s smiling and it makes Ilya cry, even more than he already has, somehow. There is an inexorable adoration to his voice when he says, “Listen to me, you are so full of love. And compassion, and humanity. And I married you because you make the world a better place just by being in it.” Shane squeezes his hand, a gentle reminder. “You make my world a better place, okay?”

Okay, he wants to say because he wants to believe it, but even *okay* would be a lie - because he doesn't. How could he? Caught in limbo between the repulsive monster of his self-loathing and the hazy image of himself through his husband's eyes that he can't see yet but desperately wants to, the best he can do is lean into the hand cupping the side of his face, carding gentle fingers through the curls at the base of his skull.

“You are your own person, Ilya, and the person that you are is the best I’ve ever known. I love the person that you are.”

Ilya doesn't have the words to describe the weight of all he feels for Shane in this moment - not in English, not even in Russian. He's not sure he'll ever have them. And in his ruined state he finds that words at all, whatever they may be in whatever form they take, are an insurmountable task; he hates himself for it, a little bit, for not being able to reciprocate verbally. But Shane doesn't, and that's enough to get him through the next moment, and the moment after that.

It's enough to get his hands back on the wheel and the car out of park when Shane says, “So...can you please drive? Because I'm hungry and mom is making soup,” a laugh skirting the edges of his voice. “We've had our hazards on for like fifteen minutes, people are going to think our car broke down.”

They drive in silence a few more moments, Shane's hand never leaving his, before his voice breaches the quiet,

“Hey, Ilya.”

“Mm?”

He thumbs gently over one of Ilya's knuckles when he asks, “You take your meds this morning?”

Ilya nods, “Yes.”

“Okay good, just checking.”

It would be just like him to worry. Somehow, the thought makes Ilya fall in love all over again - with the relieved sigh that settles Shane’s chest, with the small half-smile he gives to the mirror that he thinks Ilya can’t see, with his freckles, which have little to do with crises of identity and death and heartache, but which find Ilya staring at him anyway under the guard of a red light. He’s beautiful. Ilya would give Shane the world if only he would ask for it.

“Sorry.” The apology finds its way off his lips, misplaced - neither of them know quite what to do with it. Shane responds,

“You know my parent’s are gonna find out eventually right? No good scandal goes unaired.”

“I know,” it won’t be long now that he’s aired out his grievances with fists against bone - a smarter man might have waited or called a lawyer or done...just about anything other than what Ilya did. But what’s done is done. Shane doesn’t seem half worried about it; Ilya latches onto the anchor of his quiet. “I just dont know how to tell them. I don’t want them to hate me.”

“Good luck with that,” Shane snorts, then laughs, and suddenly the weight of the world doesn’t seem so heavy; Ilya has missed his husband’s laugh, more than he thought was possible. “They love you more than me at this point. If you want them to hate you you’d have to murder me yourself.” The words leave a sour aftertaste in Ilya’s mouth, which must show on his face because in the next moment Shane is asking him, voice thick with compassion, “Too soon?”

He nods. It might always be too soon.

“I’m sorry.” It’s okay - it’s okay because Shane is okay. Because no matter how many times they put death into words it will always just be that, words. He didn’t lose Shane. He’s taking his husband home. He’ll fall asleep with Shane in his arms tonight. So it’s okay.

Not good, not yet. But okay.

“Shane I love you,” he says, a place holder for every thought he doesn’t have the vocabulary to express, and hopes Shane knows what he means.

“I know. I love you too.”

—

They tell Shane's parents over dinner - everything, about Alexei, McKinnely, McKinnely's subsequent ER visit - and it's not easy. It's not easy for Shane to watch his parents faces contort with horror when they realize the horrible “accident” that the league has been selling to the media wasn't accidental at all; it's not easy to see the crease of his husband's brows and the gloss of his eyes when Yuna says, “Alexei, you mean your brother Alexei?” It isn't easy walk them through every horrible thing that's happened in the past two days. But it isn't the cataclysmic disaster Ilya had predicted on their car ride there, not even close.

In fact as much as his parents' anger flares at the thought of their son being targeted on the ice, their voices swell with an equal magnitude of love when they ask if Ilya is okay and Yuna reaches across the table and grasps at his hand and Ilya doesn't cry, but he does squeeze Shane's hand where their fingers are intertwined under the table. He does chew on his bottom lip and swallow and look at Shane with a reverence that spills into gratitude - *I should be thanking you*, Shane's mind says in response, a thought for another time.

It's not perfect, and his mom cries, and when Ilya says, “I'm sorry,” Shane's dad cries too. But the four of them fumble their way through it together, and by the end of the night Yuna is already spouting off a plan to them with steps and check lists and numbers to call; she asks them if they need help booking their next therapy appointments (“No, mom, we're adults), if

Shane needs her to call the hospital and schedule a follow up visit (“Again mom, thirty years old”). And his dad, voice silent to Shane’s ears beneath the hurricane of his mother’s worry, says something to Ilya that has Ilya digging the heels of his palms against his eyes and blowing out a breath and crossing the room to press a kiss to Shane's temple - “*ya tebya lyublyu*”.

And it’s okay. Not good, not yet. But it’s okay.

“Shane,” Ilya says when they’ve finally collapsed into bed, Shane lying on his uninjured side, Ilya morphing his body around him, face-to-face so close the tips of their noses brush.

“Ilya,” he responds, though doesn’t quite manage the motivation to drag his eyes open from where they’ve fallen closed until Ilya murmurs,

“I want you to tell me,” partly a command, but more so a plea. Shane blinks into the dim light of the room.

“Tell you...?”

“When you have your panic attacks,” Ilya’s voice is fragile, barely fitting around the words, “Please tell me.”

Oh.

“I will. I mean, I do.”

“Not all of them.” And it sounds like he’s begging and Shane knows - he knows he said he would, he knows he said he’d try. But this was different.

This was different because this time it was self-inflicted, this time he deserved the pain in his chest, the burn in his lungs, the horrible, gnawing of shame as sank teeth into his mind -

though, he wonders as he searches his mind for the right response, maybe he feels like that every time.

Maybe he always deserves it, even though he never does. However such a thought is too broad and abstract for his mind to wrap around with exhaustion wearing it thin from too few hours slept and too many emotions felt.

“I just-...” he starts but *‘I didn’t want you to worry’* and *‘I deserved it anyway’* sound so selfish and immature that he has to scrap them both for parts to come up with, “I had already fucked up. Badly.” Even after all the tears he’s cried the past few days, somehow his mind draws more from the well; they bleed into his voice, staining his words, “I had already put you through so much shit, you didn’t need one more thing to worry about. It was kind of my karma anyway.”

“No. Do not say that,” Ilya presses the words against his hairline. He wraps his arms around Shane, holding him so close that Shane can feel the mismatched beat of his heart and every, shuddering breath. He whispers, “Never say that.”

And maybe Shane is crying too much, maybe he’s being a child, but he can’t help it; the realization that the gutting loneliness he’d felt after their argument was little more than a horrible blip on an otherwise beautiful map, that Ilya hasn’t forgotten how to love him, that he never will, hits Shane full force in the chest.

“Shane I am not your husband only when it is convenient. I don’t give a shit how angry I am I want to hold you when you’re in pain.”

So he lets himself cry, allows love to expand in his chest, push tears up his throat, and Ilya lets him hide from the humiliating burn of being seen in the juncture between his neck and his shoulder. Ilya cradles him in strong arms and doesn’t let go, even when silent tears turn to ugly sobs, even when Shane says *I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry*, over and over until the words lose their meaning.

When he finally fights his way through the storm enough to look Ilya in the eye, Ilya says,

“You want me to tell you when I crash so you need to tell me when you do, that’s the deal,” not coddling, just practical. He wipes Shane’s tears with the backs of his knuckles, smooths the awkward fray of his hair, thumbs over his freckles as if checking to make sure they haven’t been washed away in the flood. “Promise me. Please.”

“Okay.” He says it and he means it, even though it’s hard - because he knows he’ll feel like this again some day; they have so much time left that there will, with near certainty, come a day when Shane in all his self-centered immaturity is too swept up in the dregs of self-loathing to fathom burdening Ilya with its weight, and it’ll be hard then, harder, even than it is now to say, “Okay I promise. I’m sorry.”

But he supposes that’s what it means to love someone.

Ilya nods, “Apologize one more time and I will never suck your dick again.”

“I think you would die,” Shane laughs, voice still watery but steady enough to make it through the turbulence of his exhaustion. He lets his eyes fall closed again, just for a brief moment, safe in the sanctuary of Ilya embrace. “Also you haven’t forgiven me yet. That means I still have apologizing to do-“

“What the fuck are you talking about? Obviously I have forgiven you.”

Shane snorts, “No, I died and you were like, “everything is fine, feelings do not matter”,” only to realize with mortification that his best impression of a Russian accent is even worse than Evan’s. He swallows it back down and pries his eyes open, “Dying doesn’t constitute repentance.”

The look of sheer affront Ilya gives him makes Shane’s chest ache with the effort of holding in laughter, “Doesn’t *what*? What the fuck?”

“You can’t forgive me just because I died, which wasn’t even for that long, by the way-”

“Stop talking about dying, please?”

“I’m-“

“And do not apologize,” Ilya presses an index finger to his lips to silence him before sweeping his hand under Shane’s chin, bidding him to look up. “Look at me, *zolottse*, I was angry. Yes, this is true. But I have forgiven you. You have been forgiven for a long time. You did kind of a shitty thing out of love and I forgive you. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Just no more secretly funding my...-“

“Estranged?”

“Yes. No more funding my estranged family members without talking to me first.” He pokes Shane lightly in the pec, just over his heart. “Add that to the deal.”

Shane has to scrunch his nose to stop adoration from pouring out in more tears, “Wait that’s not fair you have two things in the deal and I only have one.”

“Jesus Christ Hollander-“

“Not my name.”

“-add something to the fucking deal.”

“Don’t give up on me. Please.” It’s the first time he’s ever asked - maybe because all the other times he’d contemplated it, there had been a non-insignificant part of him that thought

the answer would be no; that maybe it would plant the idea in Ilya's head, that maybe he would realize it was an option and set himself free.

The notion seems stupid now when Ilya answers,

"Never," with such earnest devotion that Shane feels his world settle. "After all the fucked up shit we have been through, if I was going to give up on you it would have already happened."

"I know," he does, deep down at the sensitive core of him, he knows. "I'm- sometimes I'm just--"

"I know." Ilya murmurs, and this, too, makes Shane feel stupid for ever doubting him, for ever assuming he doesn't know exactly what Shane is feeling, probably because he's felt it himself a million times over - and don't the make quite the pair, thinking back and forth at each other without ever saying any of it. He won't let it happen again; it's a promise he makes silently to himself as Ilya taps a gentle finger between his brows and rasps in his sleepy, nighttime voice, "Tell mini-Shane Hollander-Rozanov to shut the fuck up. He is such a bitch. Always doubting me even though I have repeatedly proven that I am both the best at hockey and at being a husband--"

"Oh so you think your husband game is better than mine," Shane can't help the the lovesick smile that bleeds across his lips any more than he can help the way he leans into the ephemeral dance of Ilya's touch against his cheek, tracing the angles of his face. He kisses Ilya's thumb when it flits past his lips.

"I do not think, I know."

Shane knows too, has known, he thinks, since the first time he ever saw Ilya. The words, "I love you so much," find their home on his lips.

"I love you too," Ilya says, leaning forward to kiss him - gently at first, then with urgency, a desperation that is sweet like his toothpaste and his chapstick and *I love you*. Ilya kisses him like it's the first time and the last time all at once, hungry and homesick and in love. Even

when Shane ruins it by smiling, all he can seem to say is, “God I love you, Shane,” a reverent whisper. “More than life. More than air.” He presses his lips to Shane’s cheeks, his temple, the bridge of his nose, unrelenting while the love swelling in Shane’s chest only burns hotter.

When he finally seems to deem Shane kissed enough, he settles back against his pillow, one arm curling around Shane’s shoulders, the other at his waist, careful to avoid the injured flare of his ribs - he loves it when Ilya holds him like this; like he’s precious, something worth protecting. Though, now that he thinks about it, he’s not sure Ilya knows any other way.

After a moment of silence, Ilya starts, “And-“

“If I have any trouble breathing I promise I’ll wake you up.” They’d had an extensive conversation during their nightly routine about the ‘plan’ if Shane were to experience respiratory difficulties - which was as bizarre as it was charming, because Ilya is the farthest thing from a planner. It seems, in his short tenure as Yuna Hollander’s son-in-law, she has already managed to rub off on him.

Shane is lucky, unbearably so.

“Da. Yes, good. I have trained you well.”

“Shut up,” Shane murmurs with no real bite, only a smile on his lips and a fullness in his heart and peace draped across his shoulders.

Ilya pinches him lightly on the cheek, “Sleep.”

The morning is kind to Shane.

It's sunny for the first time in days - still heinously cold and otherwise miserable, but it's sunny, and golden sunlight spills through the windows of his parents' house, tainting everything it touches with a glow that feels like hope against Shane's skin when he steps into the light of a stray beam; And his parents are out, meeting with Harris about brand management and PR and what people online are saying and what Crowell thinks - all things Shane doesn't have to think about right now, but probably will later when the hazy afterglow of a good night's sleep finally wears off.

Ah, and there's Ilya - fresh out of the shower and standing shirtless in the dining room.

Ilya who is more golden and radiant than the sun could ever hope to be, aureate light dancing across mole-dotted skin, illuminating the ethereal blue of his eyes, getting trapped in unkempt curls; he's perfect, and real, and human, and here. And so much more than Shane will ever deserve - adoration thickens his breath, fondness crackling in his chest like pop rocks.

Ilya picks up a cup of coffee on the table - Shane's coffee, black with no sugar, little more than a vessel for caffeine - sniffs it, shrugs, takes his pill with it only to immediately recoil in disgust and set the mug down on the opposite side of the table.

Shane bites his tongue to hold in a laugh, but a smile slips past his guard, "Yeah that one's mine, yours is the one in the blue mug."

Ilya smiles at him mockingly, "Yes thank you for telling me before I drank it."

Reverence and devotion can't begin to scratch the surface of what Shane feels for him.

Ilya picks up his own coffee - blue mug - and takes a revealing sip, “Now this is fucking coffee.”

“*That* is mostly milk and sugar. I only put one shot of espresso in there.”

Ilya rolls his eyes but it’s achingly fond, “Oh you are so impressive drinking your battery acid and your disgusting vegetable smoothies.” Then he stills for a moment, looks at the bottle of pills in his own hand before asking, “Medicine?”

“Firs of all, this is mostly fruit, the vegetables are just for amino acids and micronutrients-“ Ilya raises his brows in the way that says ‘I’m mocking you in my head right now’. Shane relents, “And yes, I took my meds, Anya reminded me.”

“*Khoroshiy mal’chik,*” Ilya murmurs then, low in the way he knows Shane likes and with a half-smile that says he knows exactly what he’s doing.

“Don’t start. It’s too early.”

Shane half-heartedly throws a blueberry at him, which misses its mark by an embarrassing margin only to be scooped up by Anya before it even hits the floor. Ilya observes the interaction from beginning to end with a smile so wide it’s practically begging to be kissed off his face, before setting his coffee down and coming to stand behind Shane, wrapping strong arms around his waist and hooking his chin over Shane’s shoulder.

He presses his smile against the back of Shane’s neck, trailing his lips down his spine, a kiss for each vertebra and then one more for the underside of his jaw; affection so deep it honeys into heat trickles through him at the gentle pressure of his husband’s hands on his waist, the teeth against skin as he nips at the sensitive spot behind Shane’s ear and *god*, Shane would love to play hooky from therapy and spend the day in bed with his husband but-

“Quit,” he says in favor of his better judgement but against the burn of want simmering in the pit of his gut - he’s still injured, and he has therapy in an hour, and they’re still in his parents house, even if Yuna and David have graciously blessed them with their absence, so it feels a little wrong.

And yet none of those rationales are making it any easier to resist the lurid heat climbing his veins as Ilya slips callused hands under the fabric of his shirt and traces the dips and ridges of his abdomen with reverent fingertips. It takes all his self control to summon the words, "If you make me walk into therapy with a boner we're going to get divorced."

Ilya just murmurs against his skin, "I will be giving you more therapy material."

Shane tangles his fingers with his husband's and gently pries them from beneath his shirt as he turns around to face Ilya, "Right because your brother conning me out of thousands of dollars, trashing our house, and paying McKinnely to kill me just isn't meaty enough for a full hour."

Ilya presses the weight of his body against Shane's, something so invariably soothing about it - about hard muscles and soft skin and arms that fit perfectly around his waist pinning him to the counter; it's safe. He's home.

Ilya kisses him slowly, and Shane lets himself surrender to it as Ilya murmurs against his lips, "I don't know. Your summary was pretty...*succinct*."

"That was a good one," he praises, and revels in the way Ilya leans into his palms when he brings his hands up to cup his husband's face. He presses his thumb over the mole on Ilya's cheek, then uncovers it - five years ago, Ilya told him he once thought about getting it removed back when he was eighteen and still building his brand; every day Shane is grateful he didn't.

(*"But then I realize, you always kiss me there. I think you like it. Would not want to take that away from you."* - Shane never told him how close he came to saying 'I love you' that night.)

"Shane," Ilya pulls him from his thoughts, voice so soft it almost gets lost between the silent hum of the heater and the quiet of the early morning, tender and fleeting, the opening line of a question he leaves unfinished.

Shane finishes it for him,

“I’m okay.”

“What about good?”

“Getting better,” *because of you*, he doesn’t say - he doesn’t need to. Ilya can hear it. But he does say, “Thank you, Ilya. For loving me.”

Ilya shakes his head, “Do not thank me,” and sighs in a way that sounds like a prayer as he presses a feather-light kiss to each of Shane’s cheeks, the bridge of his nose. “Is not difficult and I will be loving you for the rest of our lives so every morning it will be like ‘thank you, thank you, thank you’. Very *redundant*.”

“You’re on a roll.”

There’s a pause in which Ilya just looks at him and purses his lips and shakes his head in response to a question only he can hear before saying simply,

“I love you, Shane Hollander-Rozanov.”

Shane smiles, leans into his embrace, smooths his thumb across Ilya’s bottom lip and melts as Ilya presses his cheek into his palm; soft and tender and wonderful, so full of love that Shane is reminded once again of just how lucky he’s gotten.

They’ll be okay.

“I love you too, Ilya Hollander-Rozanov.”

Chapter End Notes

thank you all so so so much for sticking with this all the way through, I am obsessed with all of you. there are two wolves inside of me and one of them loves you and the other one loves you also, and so i shall henceforth be keeping you all in my pocket. get in there's plenty of room. mwah

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