

sweet potato casserole, halved

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/77242386) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/77242386>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov
Additional Tags:	POV Shane Hollander , Neurodivergent Shane Hollander , Eating Disorders , Mental Health Issues , Post-Canon , Married Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Light Angst , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov , One Shot , Domestic Fluff , Fluff and Angst
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-07 Words: 2,652 Chapters: 1/1

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Summary

Shane had made so much progress in the past year and a half. Between therapy and playing for Ottawa, he was in a much better place mentally.

And yet.

Yet, today, he felt like his body wasn't his own, like his bones weren't fit together quite right, like his muscle and flesh and all the bits underneath were just wrong.

"It's the," he started again, squeezing his eyes shut to block out the knowing look in Ilya's. "It's the idea of putting it on my plate, in my mouth. It's not good... For me."

Shane and Ilya host Christmas dinner for the first time, and Shane struggles with the sweet potato casserole.

Takes place following the events of The Long Game

Notes

Shane is in recovery following his disordered eating in The Long Game. If that is something you're sensitive to, proceed with caution.

Shane's eating habits were something that I really related to as I was reading that book. I suffered for years from the same type of disordered eating, which was tough. It's the type of eating that, on the surface, looks totally fine. I was always eating "enough," and I was always eating good food. I focused on lean protein and lots of vegetables. I cut out processed foods. I did everything you're "supposed" to do. So how could that be bad?

But, the way I thought about food was anything but good.

This is my attempt at writing Shane having a bad day even while he's in recovery.

What I write here is based on my own experience. It will not reflect everyone's.

Shane eyed the recipe—typed, with numbers crossed out and written over in Ilya’s messy scrawl—on the counter before him.

Sweet potato casserole.

Recipe originally for 16, but halved for their small gathering.

Ilya did the math for him. If it’d been up to Shane, he would have just made it for 16, excess be damned.

He considered the ingredients, a ball of tension coiling tighter in his stomach with each line.

Sweet potatoes

Brown sugar

Butter

Marshmallows

Pecans

The recipe online had included the calorie count and macros for each serving, he was sure. Ilya had left that off when he’d printed it out.

Shane took a deep breath in through his nose, held it until his nose tickled and jaw ached, then let all the air out, going a bit light-headed in the process.

He was interrupted by Ilya coming into the kitchen, phone to his ear and smile on his face. “*Da. Poka.*”

“Svetlana’s plane just landed,” he said to Shane as he typed something into his phone. “She will be here in an hour.”

He looked so *happy*, and Shane felt that tension settle more fully in his gut. He was going to ruin this. It was their first time hosting Christmas at their house, and Shane could barely make it through some stupid recipe his husband had requested—one of the WAGs had brought it to a holiday potluck when he still played for Boston, and Ilya’d been wanting to have it again since—without having a breakdown.

Ilya looked up from his phone, and his wide grin dropped immediately. “Oh, *Shane.*”

“I’m fine,” Shane said, but his voice cracked on the second word, and it was only then that he realized his cheeks were damp with tears. *Fuck.* He was *already* ruining this.

Ilya dropped his phone onto the granite countertop—Shane had picked it out because it was more durable and easier to clean than the marble one Ilya had liked—and took only three

long strides before he was pulling Shane into his arms. Shane went willingly, easily. *Happily*. Ilya's touch grounded him in a way nothing else could.

Ilya knew how much Shane liked to be squeezed when he was hugged. How light brushes of skin sometimes felt *wrong*, especially when Shane's stomach ached with anxiety. When he got like this, Shane needed to be held like Ilya was trying to meld their bodies into one.

Ilya's breath was warm on his neck. He didn't say anything, just held tight, the pads of his fingers digging into Shane's back. It was perfect.

Shane settled, and his mind drifted, unaware of how long they stood like that. He wanted to crawl into his husband's skin.

Finally, Ilya spoke, his voice low in Shane's ear. "Are you okay?"

He considered the question. His first instinct was always to say yes. *Yes, he was okay. Yes, he was fine. Yes, he was good.*

Yes. Yes. Yes.

When Ilya asked though, Shane always answered honestly.

"No, I don't think I am," he finally managed, the words spoken into the soft material of Ilya's flannel shirt. The shirt had actually been his at one point, but he liked how it looked on Ilya more, so he let him keep hanging it on his side of the closet.

Ilya pulled back, his gaze darting between Shane's eyes as he searched for something in his expression. Shane fought to keep eye contact. While he normally had no trouble holding Ilya's gaze—something he couldn't say for almost anyone else—he found it hard to look his husband in the eye at times like this, times when he felt *weak*.

"It is the food, yes?"

Shane nodded, his gaze dropping to the skin exposed by Ilya's open collar and the gold chain hanging there. He imagined how warm the crucifix hidden under the plaid must be, sitting against Ilya's hard chest.

"What can I do?"

Shane just shook his head, focusing on the mole dotting his husband's collarbone. He thought back to just two nights ago, when he'd run his tongue over that same jut of bone. It'd been their first time together in over a week after a string of road games. They'd celebrated the upcoming three days off, a mandatory holiday for all MLH players.

"Shane?" Ilya's voice rose slightly in an effort to pull Shane back into himself.

"Sorry," Shane muttered, dropping his forehead to Ilya's chest.

"What can I do?" He ran soothing hands up and down Shane's arms, kneading tightly into the muscles. Firm. Grounding. *Here*. "Maybe I help? Make casserole, I mean."

Shane looked back up into Ilya's stormy blue eyes, finding his husband's gaze so soft and full of understanding.

"It's not just the... Y'know. Making it. It's the—" Shane huffed, frustrated that it was so hard to explain himself. How could he explain to Ilya—who got his breakfast from a drive-thru window and rounded out his dinners with bowls of ice cream the size of a child's head—what it was like to have days like this, days where just the thought of putting something that was made up of carbs and fat in his mouth made him want to crawl out of his skin?

Shane had made so much progress in the past year and a half. Between therapy and playing for Ottawa, he was in a much better place mentally.

And yet.

Yet, today, he felt like his body wasn't his own, like his bones weren't fit together quite right, like his muscle and flesh and all the bits underneath were just *wrong*.

"It's the," he started again, squeezing his eyes shut to block out the knowing look in Ilya's. "It's the idea of putting it on my plate, in my mouth. It's not *good*... For me."

"No." Ilya's warm palm came to rest against Shane's cheek, and Shane melted into the touch. He couldn't open his eyes yet, but he hung on Ilya's every breath. "It is not. At all. But, it is delicious." His other hand came up to Shane's other cheek, and Shane grinned at the feel of his husband holding his face, like he was something precious.

"And you are able to eat it. Or not, if you do not want. But only *if* you do not want because you would rather have something else. Not because you are not *allowed*."

Ilya's lips pressed to Shane's forehead, soft and sweet.

"Come. I will help you with the casserole. Your parents will be here soon, and Svetlana and Rose."

Shane blinked, his gaze blurry for a moment until he came back into himself, able to focus once again on Ilya's beloved face.

"There you are."

"Yeah, here," Shane whispered.

Ilya pulled Shane along with him as he pulled out a cutting board, large pot, and baking dish. They stood at the counter, hips and shoulders lined up and pressed together, as Ilya peeled the potatoes and Shane watched, then Shane boiled them and Ilya watched, and then they prepared all the ingredients together and finally slid the dish into the oven.

Ilya popped the remaining marshmallows into his mouth.

Shane jumped onto the counter. Ilya stood between his legs, his hands gripping Shane's sides as Shane drank the ginger ale Ilya'd gotten him from the fridge.

“It’s still ridiculous that we’re the ones hosting dinner and are only making one side.”

Ilya hummed, and Shane felt the sound vibrate in his neck where his husband’s lips were pressed to his skin.

“Yes, well, you know your mother. She was worried it would be too much for us with the road games.”

“Oh, I know,” Shane said, his mouth pulled into a grin as he remembered watching Ilya and his mom text back and forth, planning the menu and fighting over responsibility for the dishes.

To no one’s surprise, Yuna Hollander had won.

“If,” Ilya spoke into Shane’s shoulder, “you get, um, overwhelmed, yes?”

Shane nodded, knowing Ilya could feel the movement of his head.

“If you are overwhelmed, just let me know. Touch my hand or something.”

Shane laughed, and the vibration in his chest felt good. He felt himself fitting back into his body again, slowly but surely.

“Ilya, we touch all the time. That’s not exactly a signal.”

The timer on the oven dinged, and Ilya pulled back, and Shane saw that his husband’s brows were knit in concern.

“Shane—”

Shane cut him off with a quick peck on the lips, determined not to worry him anymore. It was Christmas, only their second as a married couple. Shane wanted them to enjoy this time they had together.

This *freedom*.

For a time, it didn’t seem like they’d have this.

And now here they were, in their home. Shane’s parents were driving from their place a short distance away. Svetlana had flown in from Boston, and Rose from filming in Chicago.

He wasn’t going to let a stupid casserole ruin it, empty calories or no.

“I’ll be okay. Promise,” he murmured against his husband’s lips.

“If you are not—”

“I will be.”

“*Shane.*”

“*Ilya*. The sweet potatoes need out of the oven.”

Ilya bit at Shane’s jaw, pulling a yelp of surprise from him.

“*Asshole*.”

Ilya winked over his shoulder as he collected the oven mits—a nice dove grey that matched their kitchen perfectly, much more aesthetically pleasing than the red ones Ilya had wanted to match their Centaurs uniforms—from the drawer. “Only to you.”

“That’s a lie. You’re an asshole to everyone. It’s literally what you’re known for.”

“Ah. But I’m only an asshole in a *sweet way* to you.”

“Lucky me,” Shane mumbled as he dropped from the countertop. He still needed to finish setting the table. He’d let the casserole sidetrack him for too long.

The casserole, and his husband, but he didn’t mind the latter.

Shane considered the two sets of wine glasses housed in the cupboard over the wine rack, unsure which to set out. He liked the taller ones because they had been a present from Hayden and Jackie, but he was pretty sure the shorter ones were the ones you were supposed to use when you served white wine. He’d picked out a Chardonnay for dinner because that’d been the most popular one on a Reddit thread about wines to serve with turkey. His fingernails dug into his palms as he considered the two options.

Ilya’s hands came to rest on Shane’s shoulders, squeezing and kneading as he spoke, almost as if it were instinctual. “I just let your parents in through the front gate. They will be here in a minute. How about we let your mother help set the table, yeah? She will know.”

Shane agreed. He bit his lower lip to keep it from trembling.

The following minutes passed in a blur as Shane’s dad, Shane, and Ilya made trips back and forth from the car, laden with a turkey, numerous side dishes and desserts, and beautifully wrapped gifts, while Shane’s mom finished setting the table.

She put out the shorter glasses.

And then Svetlana arrived, her and Ilya spouting rapid-fire Russian to one another that even Shane couldn’t keep up with, despite him learning Russian over the years. Ilya apologized to Shane’s parents when he realized what he’d done.

Then Rose was through the front door, giving tight hugs while letting off the floral scent of her perfume. When she hugged Ilya, he stiffened, but at least he placed his hands on Rose’s back this time, which Shane thought was progress.

He had once told Ilya he had no issue with Svetlana and didn’t see why Ilya was still weird around Rose. Ilya had said that Shane had never had to see Ilya and Svetlana’s picture plastered across every magazine, their perfect relationship shoved in his face. Shane hadn’t

wanted to admit how much he liked Ilya's jealousy and only finally did so after Ilya wrung it out of him following three rounds in the bedroom.

Not that Shane had been able to complain at that point. Both were satisfied by the night's end.

"I'm sorry Hayden and Jackie and the kids couldn't make it to your first Christmas dinner," Shane's mom said as they settled at the table.

"Yeah," Shane said before taking a large gulp of his water. He'd been too stressed to remember to drink enough throughout the morning. "Jackie wanted to skip seeing her family, but Hayden talked her out of it. He didn't want to deal with her parents guilt-tripping them all year."

"Yes, Hayden's in-laws are not so good as mine," Ilya said with a wink at Shane's mom. She rolled her eyes at her favorite son, a pleased grin on her face.

Ilya reached into the center of the table, grabbing the wine he'd opened while Shane had stressed over correct glasses and pouring some for everyone. He even offered Rose a genuine smile after she thanked him. Shane's fingers dug into his thighs as he worried he was messing up.

"A toast," Ilya said, settling back into his seat and dropping his free hand onto Shane's, stopping his fidgeting. "To my husband. Who shared his family with me when I needed one."

Shane felt his heart stutter as his and Ilya's gazes held. All these years, and he still had this effect on him.

"And to our friends." He looked at Svetlana and Rose. "Who are also our family."

Shane raised his glass to Rose, who sat to his right. "To you," he mouthed at her.

They drank, Shane's first sip of alcohol he'd had since pre-season began. He reminded himself to be careful since wine already tended to hit him quicker than anything else, and his tolerance was definitely down. He fought the urge to feel guilty for imbibing while in season.

It's only one glass.

Ilya nudged Shane's shoulder, and Shane focused for the first time on the baking dish in front of him. Ilya was holding up the casserole, an obvious question. *Do you want to try it?*

Shane studied it, the bright orange of the sweet potatoes, the deep brown of the pecans, the melty marshmallows, golden in places from the oven.

It looked revolting.

It looked delicious.

Shane's stomach started to knot as he tried to mentally calculate the calories and macros.

“Shane.” Ilya leaned into him, his breath warm on Shane’s neck. Shane looked up to see Rose talking to Svetlana and his parents talking to each other. No one’s attention was on him.

“You do not need to try it if you do not want. But you can.”

“Yeah.” His voice came out soft. More of a breath. “I want to.”

Ilya scooped a small serving onto Shane’s plate, making sure it didn’t touch the turkey or roasted green beans that he’d already put there. Shane hadn’t even noticed him serving him.

Rose and Svetlana were now talking to Shane’s parents, and Ilya joined in on whatever they were talking about. He thought it had something to do with the movie Rose was filming.

He cut himself a small bite of turkey and of green beans. Both safe options. Easy.

When Svetlana asked how Shane felt about the upcoming game against New York, he said fine. Now that Scott Hunter had retired, the Admirals were easier opponents.

Shane kept taking in small bites as he followed the flow of conversation, focusing on chewing slowly, his gaze darting back to his plate and the casserole there.

He took a small amount onto his fork, a little bit of the sweet potato and the marshmallow and a piece of pecan. Shane looked up at the feel of a gaze on him and found his husband watching him.

“Yeah?” Ilya asked around the large bite of food already in his mouth.

Shane nodded. “Yeah,” he said, and took a bite.

End Notes

Kudos and comments mean the world <3

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