

the days can be so lonely

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the days can be so lonely

by [aioio](#)

Summary

When Hayden Pike's mother is diagnosed with dementia, the last person he expects to understand is Ilya Rozanov. Grief has a way of finding common ground.

Notes

Hi! I hope you'll like it. English is not my first language so sorry for eventual misspellings and mistakes.

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

Shane comes in quieter than usual.

Ilya is on the couch, half watching some game he doesn't care about. He glances over.

Shane looks weird. His shoulders are set too tight, his mouth pulled thin, eyes a little too focused on nothing as he shrugs off his jacket and hangs it up carefully. Like he's concentrating very hard on doing everything right.

"Hey," Ilya says. He smiles, easy, automatic. "You look like someone died. Should I be worried?"

Shane exhales through his nose. It sounds tired. "Don't."

Ilya tilts his head, studying him now. "Don't what?"

"Don't start," Shane says. He moves past the couch toward the kitchen, then stops, like he forgot what he was doing. He just stands there for a second, hands hanging uselessly at his sides.

Ilya's smile softens into something more alert. He sits up. "Okay," he says lightly. "Different approach." He pats the empty space beside him. "You sit. You tell me what Hayden did. If you want, I beat him up. I have been looking for excuse."

Shane turns to look at him then, and there's something in his face that makes Ilya's chest tighten unexpectedly.

"I said don't joke," Shane says.

The air shifts. Ilya lets the joke drop without comment.

“Okay,” he says again, quieter. “What happened?”

Shane comes back and sits, but not close. He leans forward, elbows on his knees, fingers laced together so tightly his knuckles go pale. He stares at his hands like they’re going to give him the answer if he looks long enough.

“I was at Hayden’s,” he says.

Ilya nods. He waits.

“His mother is sick,” Shane continues. His voice is steady, but there’s a carefulness to it now, like he’s navigating thin ice. “They suspected that something had been wrong for a long time.”

Ilya feels a flicker of something he doesn’t recognize right away, an unease, sharp and sudden, like his body is reacting faster than his brain.

“Today was the appointment,” Shane says. He swallows. “It’s official now.”

Ilya doesn’t interrupt. He doesn’t make a sound.

“Fuck,” Shane breathes. He scrubs a hand over his face, dragging it down slowly. “He’s not taking it well. I mean...” He laughs once, short and humorless. “Of course he’s not. How could he?”

Ilya shifts closer without thinking, their knees almost touching. “I’m sorry,” he says. It comes out rougher than he expects.

Shane nods, once. “Yeah.”

There’s a pause. The kind that stretches.

Ilya’s chest feels tight. Like someone set something down inside him and forgot to pick it back up.

“What...” He hesitates, just for a fraction of a second. “What is she sick with?”

Shane looks at him then.

It’s not accusatory. Just searching. Like he’s suddenly aware that this question might land somewhere unexpected.

“Dementia,” Shane says.

The word hits.

Ilya’s mouth opens, then closes again. “Oh,” he says.

He can feel it immediately. The shift inside him, the way his body goes rigid without his permission. His shoulders tense. His jaw locks. There’s a familiar pressure behind his eyes, like something trying to surface and being held under by force.

Shane sees it.

Ilya knows Shane sees it because Shane’s expression changes, concern sharpening into something closer to alarm.

“Hey,” Shane says quickly. “Hey, it’s okay. We don’t have to...” He gestures vaguely between them. “We don’t have to talk about it.”

Ilya nods. He trusts his head more than his voice right now.

“Yeah,” Shane says, already standing. “I’ll make dinner. You hungry?”

“Mm,” Ilya murmurs. He doesn’t know if it’s true.

Shane moves into the kitchen, opening cabinets, pulling things out, making noise on purpose. Normal sounds. Safe sounds. The clatter of a pan, the rush of water from the tap.

Ilya sits on the couch and doesn’t move.

The TV is still on, some talking heads arguing about nothing important, but he’s not really seeing it. His hands are clasped together too tight, fingers pressing into each other like he’s trying to anchor himself to something solid.

Dementia.

The word keeps repeating in his head, dull and relentless.

He hadn’t expected it to hit like this. He thought...he doesn’t know what he thought. That it was over.

But it’s back. Or maybe it never really left.

He thinks of Hayden's mom. Tries not to, fails immediately.

A mother getting sick feels wrong in a way he can't ever fully explain. Fathers are... complicated. They leave. They hurt you. They disappoint you. But mothers are supposed to stay. Mothers are supposed to be the constant thing, the soft place you return to no matter how old you get.

Ilya swallows hard.

He misses his mother so badly it still surprises him sometimes. It's not sharp anymore, not like it was at first. It's somehow worse than that. It's constant. It's waking up and realizing, again and again, that she's not anywhere in the world.

He had been a mama's boy. Unashamed. He used to follow her around the kitchen, talking nonstop, telling her everything, even things he probably shouldn't have. She used to kiss his hair and tell him to slow down, that the world wasn't going anywhere.

He wonders if Hayden is a mama's boy as well.

The thought settles in his chest, heavy and immovable.

Dementia doesn't take people all at once. That's the cruel part. It takes them slowly, piece by piece, and makes you watch. It makes you grieve someone who is still sitting right in front of you.

Ilya closes his eyes.

Moscow comes back to him without asking. Cold floors. Dim light. His father sitting at the kitchen table, staring at his hands like they belong to someone else. The way his father would ask the same question over and over, irritation flickering across his face when Ilya answered, like Ilya was doing something wrong just by existing.

Ilya remembers lying awake in his bed, listening for sounds. Waiting for his father to wander. Waiting for him to get angry, or scared, or confused. Waiting for something to happen because something always did.

He cried quietly then. Into his pillow. Into his sleeve. He thinks of the way his father changed.

How sometimes his father would be kinder. How dementia softened him in ways nothing else ever had. How he would look at Ilya like he didn't quite know who he was, but knew he mattered somehow.

How he would call him by his childhood nickname.

How he would forget the shouting. Forget the words he used to use. Forget calling him useless. Forget saying he would never be enough.

That had been the hardest part.

The kindness.

Because it came too late, and it wasn't real, and there was no way to tell if it meant anything at all.

Ilya presses the heel of his hand into his chest, breathing slowly. He can hear Shane moving around the kitchen.

Shane is worried about Hayden. Of course he is. Shane loves deeply and easily. He wants to help. He wants to fix things.

But Shane doesn't know.

He doesn't know what it feels like to sit in a room with someone you love and realize they're leaving you inch by inch. He doesn't know the guilt of wishing it would just end, even while hating yourself for thinking it. He doesn't know how lonely it is, how isolating, how people look at you with pity for a week and then move on because the world doesn't stop for slow grief.

Ilya knows Shane is aware that this is bad news.

Ilya knows it's *worse* than that.

And he really hates that Hayden is about to learn it the hard way.

He doesn't like Hayden. He never has.

But this? This isn't something he would wish on anyone.

Ilya exhales slowly.

It feels like everything is happening at once. Past and present collapsing into each other. Like he's back in Moscow and also here, now, listening to Shane cook dinner, knowing exactly what waits for Hayden and knowing there's nothing anyone can do to stop it.

He opens his eyes and stares at the wall.

Dinner smells good.

But the smell doesn't do anything for Ilya. His stomach feels closed off, like it's forgotten what hunger is supposed to feel like. He sits at the table anyway, twirling noodles around his fork, moving food from one side of the plate to the other.

Shane eats across from him, slower than usual. He keeps glancing up, trying not to make it obvious.

"You okay?" Shane asks eventually, gentle, like he already knows the answer.

Ilya nods automatically. "Yeah. Fine."

It's too quick. Too flat.

Shane hesitates. "You don't look..."

"I said I'm fine," Ilya cuts in.

The words come out sharper than he means them to. He sees Shane flinch, just a little, like he's been slapped unexpectedly.

Guilt hits immediately. Hot and ugly.

"I..." Ilya exhales, scrubs a hand over his face. "Sorry. I just... don't really want to talk."

Shane studies him for a second, then nods. "Yeah. Of course." He reaches for his water glass, gives Ilya an out without making it a thing. "We don't have to."

They finish eating mostly in silence. Ilya pushes food around until it feels rude not to stop pretending and just gives up.

Afterward, Shane does the dishes. Ilya offers to help, mostly out of habit, but Shane shakes his head and tells him to go shower. His voice is kind. Careful.

Ilya cries in the shower.

When he finally turns the water off, he feels hollowed out. Drained.

He dries off, pulls on sleep pants, doesn't bother with a shirt. He doesn't look at the mirror.

Shane is already in bed when he comes out. He's lying on his side, scrolling through his phone, glasses perched low on his nose. He looks up immediately when Ilya enters, sets the phone aside without comment.

Ilya climbs into bed and turns onto his side, facing away.

A moment passes. Then Shane shifts closer. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't ask. He slides an arm around Ilya's waist, pulls him back until their bodies fit together like they've done a thousand times before.

Ilya exhales shakily and lets himself lean into it.

Shane's hand is warm against his stomach, steady. No wandering. No suggestion of anything else. Just there. Solid. Anchoring.

Ilya lies still in Shane's arms and lets the dark settle around him.

He hates this feeling.

He hates how it comes without warning, how it doesn't ask permission, how it bypasses all the careful walls he's built over the years. One moment he's fine, functional, joking, present, and the next he's back here, chest tight, throat thick, like something vital has been knocked loose inside him.

Grief is the worst one.

Because grief is *lonely*.

Not in the obvious way. Not the way people expect. It's lonely because no one can really touch it with you. They can sit beside you, hold you, care about you, but the thing itself lives inside your body, and you're the only one who has to carry it around all the time.

Shane doesn't know this feeling. Not really.

And Ilya is glad.

He's genuinely glad Shane doesn't know what it's like to lose a parent, to lose both, to lose them in ways that don't make sense or don't come cleanly.

He can't blame Shane for not understanding. He doesn't want him to. Understanding grief means having lived through it, and that's a price too high.

Still, it makes nights like this harder.

Ilya is a grown man. He's strong. He's successful. He's survived things most people never have to think about. And yet here he is, lying in bed, breathing shallowly because he misses his mother so much it physically hurts.

It's embarrassing, sometimes. The way it sneaks up on him. The way a word, or a smell, or a piece of news can knock the wind out of him like he's still a child.

He misses her voice. He misses the way she used to fuss over him. He misses knowing there was someone in the world who loved him unconditionally.

That kind of love doesn't get replaced.

His father is harder.

Thinking about his father always feels like stepping into unstable ground. There's *love* there, tangled and ugly and unresolved. There's resentment. There's guilt. There's grief layered on top of grief, complicated by abuse, by dementia, by a version of his father who softened only after it was too late.

He doesn't talk about that.

Not with Shane. Not with anyone.

Because he doesn't know how to explain missing someone who hurt you. He doesn't know how to justify the sadness of losing a man he also feared. He doesn't know how to make sense of the relief, or the anger, or the way kindness at the end felt like a cruel joke.

So he keeps it to himself.

Locks it away.

Except nights like this, when it breaks loose anyway.

Learning about Hayden's mother opened something in him that never fully healed. He knows that. He can already feel it lining up in his head, ready to spill out in his next therapy session.

He'll sit on that couch and talk about mothers and dementia and Moscow and all the things he pretends are settled but aren't.

He can do that.

He's done worse.

But tonight, it just hurts.

Tonight he lets himself feel it without trying to fix it. Without trying to joke it away or outrun it or turn it into something sharp and manageable. He lets the grief sit in his chest, heavy and familiar.

Because it's still in him.

Because it's *always* going to be.

Shane shifts slightly behind him, tightening his hold just a little, like he can sense Ilya slipping somewhere far away. The pressure is grounding. Real.

Ilya focuses on that. On the warmth. On the fact that he's not alone in this bed, even if the grief itself belongs only to him.

His breathing slowly evens out.

And eventually, sometime in the quiet, Ilya falls asleep.

They don't talk about it after that night.

Not really.

Shane never brings Hayden up again, not directly. He still mentions him in passing, casual things. But anything that might drift toward his mom, toward doctors or appointments or the heaviness that comes with it, Shane carefully steers away from.

Ilya notices.

Of course he does.

At first it irritates him, just a little. The way Shane's voice shifts, the way he changes the subject too fast, like he's afraid of stepping on a landmine. Then Ilya understands what it is, and the irritation fades into something softer.

Shane is trying to protect him.

That's how Shane loves, by creating space. By keeping sharp things out of reach. By deciding, quietly and on his own, what might hurt and moving it out of the way before it ever gets close.

Ilya can't blame him for that. He doesn't want to.

And then they're at Hayden and Jackie's house for dinner.

Everything looks normal.

That's the strange part.

They sit around the table talking about hockey. Trades. Injuries. Some stupid controversy from last week that everyone has already half-forgotten. Shane laughs at the right moments. Hayden plays his part, nodding, chiming in, making jokes that land but don't quite reach his eyes.

Ilya watches him.

Hayden looks tired in a way sleep won't fix. His shoulders are slightly hunched, like he's bracing against something invisible. He listens more than he talks. When he does speak, it's careful, measured, like he's choosing every word on purpose.

No one mentions Hayden's mother.

Not once.

Ilya understands why. Shane is trying to protect Hayden. Trying to give him a night that isn't about hospitals and paperwork and the slow dread of what's coming. Jackie does the same. She keeps things light, refills glasses, steers the conversation when it starts to drift too close to anything real.

But pretending takes energy.

And Hayden looks like he's running out.

After dinner, plates are cleared. Wine is poured. The air loosens just a bit.

Ilya stands.

“I’m going to smoke,” he says casually, already reaching for his jacket. Then, like it’s an afterthought, he looks at Hayden. “Got a minute? Get some air?”

The table goes still.

Hayden blinks. “Uh…”

It’s weird. Everyone knows it’s weird. Ilya and Hayden don’t do this. They don’t have quiet conversations.

Hayden glances at Shane.

Shane meets his eyes, reads the moment for what it is, and nods. Just once. A silent go ahead.

“Yeah,” Hayden says slowly. “Yeah. Sure.”

They grab jackets and step outside.

Jackie watches them through the window. She raises an eyebrow at Shane as she refills her glass.

“Should I be worried?” she asks, half-joking. “I feel like I should be worried.”

Shane snorts softly. “Probably not.”

She tilts her head, curious. “That didn’t sound very convincing.”

Shane hesitates, then shrugs. “Ilya lost both his parents. His father had dementia.” He says it simply. “I think... I think it's important for him to show support.”

Jackie’s expression shifts immediately. “Oh.” She swallows. “I didn’t know.”

“Yeah,” Shane says.

“God,” Jackie murmurs. “He’s so young.”

Shane nods. There isn’t much else to say.

She takes a sip of her wine, eyes still on the window, thoughtful now.

Ilya and Hayden stand there awkwardly for a second once the door closes behind them.

The night is cool, quiet in that suburban way where everything feels too calm for what’s happening inside people’s heads. A porch light hums softly above them. Somewhere down the street, a dog barks and then stops.

Ilya pulls a cigarette from his pack and lights it without looking at Hayden. He takes a drag, exhales slowly.

Hayden crosses his arms. He doesn’t lean against the railing or the wall. He stays upright, defensive, like he’s bracing for impact.

“What do you want, Rozanov?” he asks.

It’s sharp. Familiar. Easier than whatever else this could be.

Ilya keeps his voice level. “Shane told me,” he says. “About your mother.”

Hayden’s jaw tightens immediately. “Fuck off,” he says, already turning back toward the door. “I’m going back inside.”

“I’m really sorry,” Ilya says.

Hayden stops, halfway through the turn. He lets out a short, humorless laugh. “Yeah,” he says over his shoulder. “I’m sure you are.”

Ilya doesn’t rise to it. He doesn’t snap back. He just says, quietly, “I mean it.”

That gives Hayden pause. Not enough to soften, but enough to look back.

“My father had dementia,” Ilya adds.

The words hang there.

Hayden turns fully now.

He knew Ilya’s father was dead. Everyone did. The missed games, the sudden trip to Moscow, the brief, tight-lipped explanations that never offered details. But this... This is new. This fills in a blank he never thought to ask about.

He realizes, all at once, how little he actually knows about Ilya Rozanov.

Hayden's shoulders drop a fraction. He doesn't say anything. He just stands there, staring at the ground, processing.

Ilya takes another drag, then stubs the cigarette out against the concrete.

"I know it is hard," he says after a moment. His voice is steady, but there's something underneath it, weariness, maybe. Or recognition. "Very hard."

Hayden swallows.

"You cannot be hard on yourself," Ilya continues. "It will make it worse."

That finally gets a reaction.

Hayden looks up at him, really looks this time. Ilya's face is open in a way he's never seen before. There's no smirk. No edge. Just a tired sadness Hayden recognizes instantly, because it looks a lot like his own.

"You're... being really nice," Hayden says, incredulous. "This is weird."

Ilya huffs out a quiet breath. "Yeah. I know."

Hayden hesitates, then gestures awkwardly at the cigarette pack in Ilya's hand. "Can I?"

Ilya doesn't comment. He just hands it over with the lighter.

Hayden fumbles with it. He hasn't smoked in years. He takes a drag and coughs immediately, bending forward with a curse.

They stand there for another beat. Then Hayden slides down the wall and sits on the ground, legs stretched out in front of him. He looks exhausted suddenly, like the fight has gone out of him all at once.

Ilya follows a second later, sitting beside him, shoulder brushing the wall.

Hayden stares at the cigarette burning between his fingers. His voice is quieter when he speaks again.

“How bad is it going to be?” he asks. “Like... just be honest.”

Ilya doesn't answer right away.

“Everyone keeps telling me it's gonna be okay,” Hayden continues, frustration bleeding through now. “That we'll manage it. That medicine is good these days. But I know that's bullshit. I know it won't fucking be.”

He finally looks at Ilya, eyes searching.

“Just tell me how bad,” he says.

Ilya leans his head back against the wall, staring up at the dark sky.

“It is bad,” Ilya says.

He doesn't look at Hayden when he says it. He flicks ash off the cigarette instead, watches it scatter on the concrete.

“It depends,” he adds after a moment. “Obviously. Everyone is different.” A pause. “But... it was weird. Seeing my father like that.”

Hayden nods. He doesn't interrupt. He doesn't know what to say yet, and somehow that feels right.

“He was lost,” Ilya continues. “All the time. Like he woke up every day in the wrong place.” His jaw tightens slightly. “He was different.”

Another pause. Ilya shifts his weight, leaning his head back against the wall.

“It was probably different with my father,” he says. “Than with your mother.”

Hayden glances at him, unsure if he should respond. He settles for a quiet, “Yeah.”

“My father used to get angry,” Ilya says. “A lot.” He exhales through his nose. “With the dementia, he still got angry. But it wasn't the same. It wasn't... controlled.”

He makes a small, vague gesture with his free hand, like he's trying to find the shape of it.

“It was scared angry,” he says finally. “Confused. He didn't know why things were wrong, only that they were. I could not blame him.”

He goes quiet after that.

Just smokes.

Hayden feels something twist in his chest. Not pity, something heavier. He understands what Ilya is saying without him having to spell it out. The way he distinguishes before and after.

The carefulness around the word *angry*.

It tells Hayden more than Ilya probably intends.

He hesitates, then asks, softly, “Did he forget you?”

The question hangs there, fragile. Hayden almost takes it back the second it leaves his mouth. He’s not sure he has the right to ask it. He’s not sure he wants the answer.

Ilya doesn’t react right away.

“Sometimes,” he says eventually. “Not completely.”

Hayden lets out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

“He would confuse me with my brother,” Ilya adds.

Hayden turns to him. “You have a brother?”

Ilya’s mouth curves into something that might be a smile if it reached his eyes. It doesn’t.

“Yes. He is not worth mentioning,” Ilya says.

Hayden nods, immediately regretting the question. The way Ilya said it, dismissive but tired, tells him it’s not an invitation to ask more.

“I didn’t know,” Hayden says instead.

Ilya shrugs, like it doesn't matter.

Hayden takes another drag from the cigarette and coughs again, harder this time. He bends forward, hacking, eyes watering.

Ilya watches him, expression unreadable. He doesn't laugh. He doesn't comment.

"Mostly," Ilya says after a moment, "he was confused about time. What year it was. What was happening." He stares out into the dark yard. "He would forget that I was away."

Hayden's throat tightens.

"He would call me," Ilya continues. "Tell me to pick up groceries on my way home." His voice drops a fraction. "Then he would get angry when I didn't come."

He exhales heavily, like the memory still takes something out of him.

"That was hard too," he says. "Being away."

Hayden nods slowly. He knows that feeling already, and he hasn't even lived it yet.

"The guilt," Ilya adds. "It eats you." He pauses. "But you don't feel guilty. You can have your life. Your work."

Hayden frowns. "That doesn't feel true."

"It didn't," Ilya agrees. "It took time." A beat. "Sometimes I still doubt it."

He flicks the cigarette away, crushing it under his shoe.

“But it is true,” he says.

Hayden stares at the ground, trying to absorb that. He feels exhausted. Scared. But also, strangely, lighter. Like someone finally said the quiet part out loud.

He glances at Ilya again.

Rozanov looks nothing like the man Hayden argues with. There’s no sharpness to him now. No arrogance. Just honesty, laid bare in pieces.

It makes Hayden uncomfortable in a way that feels deserved.

He realizes, with a sudden pang, that he never really cared about Ilya before this. Not as a person. Not even when his father died. It was just a fact. A missed game. A headline.

He never once stopped to think about how it might feel.

Sitting here now, he feels ashamed of that.

They sit in silence for a long time after that, the quiet stretching without feeling empty.

Hayden is the one who breaks it.

“And what about...” He stops. Clears his throat. Tries again. “After?”

He doesn't say the word. He can't. It feels like if he does, it becomes real in a way he's not ready for.

"I don't know how to," Hayden continues, voice low, careful. "Prepare for that."

Ilya knows exactly what he means.

Death sits between them like a third presence, unspoken, unavoidable. Hayden's hands are clenched together now, knuckles white. His leg bounces nervously.

Ilya takes a slow breath in through his nose.

"It was different with my father," he says. "Because of our... past."

The pause before the word matters. It lands heavy.

Hayden nods. He understands enough. He doesn't need details.

"You cannot prepare for it," Ilya continues. "Doesn't matter if you know it is coming. Or if it surprises you." He shakes his head once. "You are never ready."

Hayden's eyes sting. He blinks hard, but it doesn't help. His breathing goes uneven.

Ilya watches him for a moment, then asks quietly, "Did Shane tell you about my mother?"

Hayden freezes.

“No,” he says quickly. Too quickly. “He didn’t.”

He shakes his head again, like maybe that will stop whatever Ilya is about to say.

“I lost my mom when I was twelve,” Ilya says.

The words hit Hayden straight in the chest.

Ilya swallows. His jaw tightens. “I know it is terrifying,” he adds. “When Shane told me about your mom... I get that. I know most people don’t.”

Hayden stares at the ground, tears blurring his vision.

“It is important to hear the truth,” Ilya says. “It will be hard.”

Hayden lets out a shaky breath.

“But,” Ilya continues, softer now, “it isn’t impossible.”

He pauses, choosing his words carefully.

“I thought it would be impossible to live without my *mama*,” he says. The word slips out before he can stop it. He doesn’t correct it. “I didn’t think I could survive that.”

Hayden’s chest aches listening to him.

“But I did,” Ilya says. “I left Moscow. I built a life. I won the Cup.” His voice drops. “I belong somewhere now.”

He turns slightly, looks at Hayden fully.

“You have your wife. Your kids,” he says. “You already belong somewhere. That matters. It helps. I promise.”

There’s so much sadness in his voice it hurts to hear.

And that’s when Hayden breaks.

He cries.

He cries for his mother. For the inevitability of losing her. For how this conversation makes it real in a way nothing else has. He cries because the world is unfair and cruel and takes things it has no right to take.

But he also cries for Ilya.

For the man he thought was an asshole. For the man he never bothered to think about. For the orphan sitting beside him, offering comfort he never received himself.

Hayden can see it now, between the lines of everything Ilya has said. How alone he must have been. How hard it must have been to find a place where he fit. How no one was there to tell *him* it would be survivable.

He wipes his face roughly with his sleeve, sniffing.

“I’m so sorry, man,” he says, voice thick. “I had no idea. I’m really sorry.”

Ilya nods once, barely.

“Was she sick?” Hayden asks quietly.

The question makes Ilya tense instantly. His shoulders stiffen. For a second, it looks like he might shut down completely.

He doesn’t want to talk about this. He never does.

But lying feels wrong now.

“She was,” he says slowly. “But... different kind of sick.”

He swallows hard.

“She was sad,” he adds. “Depressed. Too tired to fight it.”

He stops there. He can’t say more. He won’t.

Hayden’s stomach churns. He understands anyway. The implication is clear, and it makes him feel sick.

“*Oh,*” Hayden whispers.

The night feels heavier than before.

Something inside Hayden cracks wide open then. The fear he's been holding in with clenched teeth finally spills out.

He lets himself cry, ugly and uncontained, shoulders shaking.

"I'm so scared," he says, barely able to get the words out.

Then it all comes apart.

"Fuck. What am I gonna do?" His voice cracks hard on the words. "Who am I gonna call when the kids get sick? When they wake up with a fever at two in the morning and Jackie's exhausted and I don't know what's normal and what isn't... fuck."

His hands come up to his face. He drags them down hard, like he's trying to pull himself back together by force. It doesn't work.

"I don't know how to do this," he says, breath hitching. "Everyone keeps talking about her like she's already gone. Like she's already dead. And I'm the only one standing there thinking... No, she's right there, she's still here, and this is really fucking happening."

His shoulders start to shake.

"She's so confused," Hayden chokes. "She's scared. She keeps looking at me like I'm supposed to know what to say, and I don't. I don't know how to talk to her. I don't know how to be..." He breaks off, a sob ripping out of him. "I already know I'm gonna regret everything. Every time I wasn't home. Every call I didn't answer. Fuck, I was never there and now she's terrified and..."

He bends forward, completely collapsing in on himself.

“Oh god,” he sobs. “I’m so scared.”

He cries openly now. Loud, broken, ugly. No restraint left. His whole body shakes with it, breath coming in sharp, uneven gasps that sound like they hurt.

Ilya doesn’t say anything.

He sits there, frozen for a moment, chest tight enough that it almost scares him. He feels it rising in himself, the familiar pressure, the burn behind his eyes. He swallows hard, grounding himself, letting Hayden have the space.

He understands every word. Too well.

“Fuck,” Hayden says through tears, a miserable, breathless laugh trying and failing to break through. “I’m sorry, man. I can’t... I can’t stop fucking crying.”

“It is okay,” Ilya says quietly. His voice is steady, even if his chest isn’t. “Let yourself cry. That helps.” A beat. “I cried a lot.”

That does it.

Hayden’s breath stutters again, and suddenly something else hits him, hard and sideways. An image he didn’t let himself fully see before. A twelve-year-old boy, alone, grieving a mother who didn’t make it. Crying without anyone to tell him it would be survivable.

“Rozanov,” Hayden says hoarsely.

Ilya looks at him.

“Ilya,” Hayden corrects himself. His voice breaks again. “I’m so, so sorry. About what happened to you.”

Ilya stiffens slightly, instinctive.

“I was a real asshole,” Hayden continues, words tumbling out. “I didn’t think. I never... I’m sorry. I’m glad you have Shane. And his family. I mean that. I’m really glad.”

Ilya shakes his head gently. “Shh. Don’t worry about it.” He means it. “It is not on you.”

Hayden folds in on himself again, face buried in his arms, resting against his knees. His sobs quiet a little, turning rough and uneven instead of explosive.

Ilya hesitates for half a second.

Then he reaches out and gently places a hand on Hayden’s back.

He rubs slow, steady circles.

They sit like that for a while. Time stretches. The night air is cool against their skin. Hayden’s breathing slowly evens out, though he’s still crying, tears soaking into his sleeves.

Eventually, Hayden straightens up, embarrassed but too tired to hide it. He wipes his face roughly.

“Sorry,” he mutters again.

Ilya lights another cigarette. The flame flares briefly in the dark.

After a moment, he says, “You should talk to a therapist. Maybe.”

Hayden looks at him, surprised. Not offended, just caught off guard.

Ilya shrugs slightly. “I have one. About a year now.” He exhales smoke. “I wish I had one earlier. It helps. Sorts things out in your head.”

Hayden nods slowly. “Yeah.” A pause. “Jackie suggested that.” He huffs a tired breath. “I told her no. But... I think it might be an idea.”

Ilya nods. “Yeah.”

They sit quietly again.

Hayden wipes his face one last time, takes a deep breath that actually reaches his lungs.

“Thank you,” he says. “Really. I needed that.”

Ilya inclines his head. “If you need anything, you can call me.”

Hayden blinks at him, then nods. “Thanks.” He hesitates, then adds, “You too, Rozanov. I mean it.”

Ilya’s mouth curves into a small, sad smile. “Yeah.”

Hayden stands. His legs feel shaky, but he’s steadier than before. He looks down at Ilya. Looking at his posture, he guesses that he doesn’t intend to go back inside.

“I’ll tell Jackie goodbye for you,” he says.

“Yeah,” Ilya replies. “Tell Shane I’m gonna smoke and wait in the car.”

“Okay,” Hayden says. “Take care.”

As he heads back inside, Hayden feels exhausted down to his bones. But lighter. Less ashamed. Less alone.

He realizes something important as he reaches for the door: needing his mother doesn’t make him childish. Talking to a therapist doesn’t make him less of a man. Crying doesn’t make him a failure.

Seeing Ilya Rozanov, someone everyone fears on the ice, sit on the ground and talk so honestly about his experience did something to him.

It made the pain feel survivable.

The drive home is quiet.

Shane is the one behind the wheel, one hand resting loosely at the bottom of the steering wheel, the other on his thigh. Ilya sits in the passenger seat, shoulders slumped, staring out the window. He smells like cigarettes, strong, sharp, clinging to his jacket and his hair.

Shane doesn’t say a word about it.

At the door, Shane hugs Hayden goodbye. It's brief, careful. He can tell immediately, Hayden's eyes are red, his face looks tired. Shane doesn't comment. He doesn't ask. He already knows enough.

He also knows how long Ilya and Hayden were outside.

He knows that whatever was said out there wasn't for him. Not because any of them doesn't trust him, but because some feelings don't need an audience. Shane understands that. He respects it.

When they pull out of the driveway, the house disappearing in the rearview mirror, the silence stretches again.

Then Ilya's breath catches.

It's quiet at first. A sharp inhale that doesn't quite make it all the way in.

Shane glances over once, just enough to see Ilya's face crumple.

"I really miss my mom," Ilya says. His voice is small. Almost embarrassed by how small it sounds.

Shane doesn't hesitate. He reaches over and takes Ilya's hand, threading their fingers together, squeezing gently.

"I know," he says.

He holds on tighter, grounding, steady.

Ilya turns his face toward the window, tears sliding down silently now. His shoulders shake, but he doesn't make a sound. Shane keeps driving, keeps holding his hand, keeps them both moving forward.

When they get home, it's late enough that the house feels still. Quiet in that safe, familiar way.

They sit on the couch, shoes kicked off, jackets abandoned. Ilya curls in slightly, leaning into Shane without really thinking about it.

"You okay?" Shane asks gently.

Ilya nods. "Yeah." He exhales. "Just... too much in my head."

Shane rubs his thumb over the back of Ilya's hand. "It was really nice of you to talk to him," he says. "I think it means more than anything I could've done."

Ilya looks at him then. His eyes are tired, red-rimmed, but soft.

He smiles, a real one, even if it's small.

Shane smiles back.

"Enough thinking for today," Ilya says quietly. "I'm happy I'm home." He hesitates, then adds, "Distract me?"

Shane feels the weight in that sentence. He knows what Ilya means. Not just this home. But home as a concept. Belonging. Staying.

He just nods.

“Okay,” Shane says. “So I saw this really stupid video earlier...”

Ilya listens to Shane talk.

Shane’s voice is steady. Familiar. Safe.

Ilya leans back against the couch, shoulder pressed into Shane’s side. He lets himself exist there. Lets himself be quiet.

Being home helps.

The weight doesn’t lift. But it doesn’t drown him either.

Because Shane is there. Because someone cares. Because there’s warmth and laughter and stupid stories and a hand resting on his knee like it belongs there. Because home is no longer a place he has to earn.

Shane keeps talking, and Ilya keeps listening, and that’s enough to keep his head above water.

Across the city, Hayden lies in bed beside Jackie.

The lights are low. Jackie’s reading, one leg hooked over his, absentmindedly squeezing his calf every now and then. Hayden scrolls through his phone, not really reading anything, just grounding himself in the quiet normalcy of it.

They’re close. Comfortable. Holding each other without talking.

It feels... okay.

The fear is still there. The future still terrifies him.

But tonight feels steady. It feels human. It feels real in a good way.

Being home helps.

It was a hard day. It ends nicely.

That's something that matters.

End Notes

Thank you so much! If you liked it, I'd be very happy if you left a comment. Let me know if I supposed to leave it as a one shot or maybe write the continuation. Lots of love <3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!