bridge over troubled water

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by lolwowgenetic

Summary

It wasn’t something he did on purpose. And he doesn’t remember exactly when he started. All Shane knows is one day, when he was 16, he got a bad grade on a math test, and his parents rule was that as soon as any of his grades dipped below a B-, he was off the hockey team.

He was still standing strong with a B+, and with only a couple months left of the year, chances are things would stay that way, but Shane still worked himself into a panic, and before he knew it, he was pinching his upper arm so hard that once he finally loosened his grip, it bruised immediately.

So yeah. That became a thing.

or

Shane doesn't mean to hurt himself. It just ... happens.

Set between 'Heated Rivalry' and 'The Long Game'.

Notes

tw: self harm

See the end of the work for more notes

It wasn't something he did on purpose. And he doesn't remember exactly when he started. All Shane knows is one day, when he was 15, he got a bad grade on a math test, and his parent's rule was that as soon as any of his grades dipped below a B-, he was off the hockey team.

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It's 7 am on a random Monday in December the first time Ilya notices.

It's a few days after Christmas, which means a couple days of peace together before their schedules pick up again and their only time with each other will be when they happen to be crossing through the same city at the same time, or when they fly to each other on an odd day off.

The last few mornings have been slow for them, neither leaving the comfort of the bed until well into the late morning. Shane still woke up first, as always, but instead of pestering Ilya awake like he normally would, he's been letting him sleep in.

This morning, though, Ilya is up first, and he spends some time admiring his boyfriend beside him. Shane's fast asleep, curled up against Ilya, soft puffs of air coming from between his lips. He's wrapped up under the covers except for one leg that is outstretched across Ilya's lap, and Ilya's is tracing up and down his outer thigh. Shanes always hated the stretch marks there, but Ilya loves the feeling of the ridges as his lips or fingers brush over them.

The sun is shining between the breaks in the blinds, creating stripes of warmth across Shane's outstretched leg. Ilya moves from under him a bit and shifts down on the bed until he can kiss across his outer thigh. Shane is just starting to stir when Ilya sees marks he's never noticed before.

Scattered across the side if his thigh are crescent moon shaped indents. They're light, whiter than his skin, and barely visible among the stretch marks, but this close up and with the sun accentuating them, Ilya isn't sure how he hasn't noticed them before.

"What's this?" Ilya asks, his finger running over them as Shane comes to. He rubs his eyes, yawns, and stretches as he sits up a bit.

"What's what?" he asks. He reaches down and takes the hand Ilya is using to trace the spots, lacing their fingers together as he moves it out of the way. He sits up further and bends down to get a better look.

As soon as Shane sees what he's looking at, he drops Ilya's hand, pushes it away, and pulls the covers over his leg. Ilya looks up at him, confused at the reaction, and tries to read his expression. He can't quite place it, but he looks a little panicked, frantically trying to busy himself with re-arranging the pillows, and then re-arranging the blankets.

"Oh, nothing," Shane says. His voice is a little higher pitched than normal." I don't think. I don't think it's anything. I don't see anything."

Ilya furrows his brow and he uncovers Shane's leg again, pulling it back across his lap. He's surprised that Shane lets him. "You don't see these little marks?" he asks, his fingers brushing over a few again. "They look like little scars."

Shane pushes himself up to a sitting position and swings his legs over the edge of the bed before reaching over to grab his phone off the charger. "Why would I have scars on my legs?" he asks quickly. He pretends to busy himself by opening his email, scrolling through the messages as Ilya sits up beside him.

"You're being weird," he says, a hint of hesitance in his voice. Ilya watches over Shane's shoulder as he switches to his Instagram app, scrolling so quickly that there's no way he's actually looked at a single photo.

"I'm not being weird," he says. He stands up now, grabbing his sweatpants off the floor, and goes to step into them. Ilya stops him.

Then, a realization comes to him.

"Wait…" Ilya says, shifting over on the bed to get closer to his boyfriend. He reaches out and grabs the backs of Shane's thighs, turning him slightly so he can look at the marks again. Shane tries to shift away, but Ilya has a tight grasp on him, keeping him in place. "Did you… do this to yourself? On purpose?"

"What? Of course not!" This time, Shane steps away roughly, and he slips from Ilya's hold. He finally steps into his sweatpants and pulls them up, hiding the evidence from Ilya's view. Then he sighs, running his hands over his face. "I just… when I get stressed or something, it just happens." He shoves his hands into his sweatpants pockets and shrugs, looking off to the side and refusing to make eye contact with Ilya. "It's like a weird tic, I don't know. I just… grab my legs, and it happens. I never notice until afterwards."

Ilya tries to keep his expression neutral despite the absolute heartbreak he is feeling. He wants to reach out to take Shane's hand, pull him closer to him, but he can see the anxiety on his face and knows that one wrong move will send him into fight or flight mode. But he also knows he can't say nothing.

For some reason, all he comes up with is, "Shane, that's… not good."

"Obviously, Ilya. I'm aware," Shane says. His voice comes out angry now. "Like I said, it's not on purpose. Can we drop it?"

The question goes unanswered, because Shane doesn't wait long enough to hear what his Ilya has to say. He turns on his feel and rushes out of the bedroom, and all he leaves behind is the lingering silence.

During the season, Shane and Ilya don't get much time together, so when a massive two day snowstorm hits Ottowa in February and postpones one of Ilya's home games, he's thankful for the extra few days In Montreal.

It's 7 pm and Ilya has spent a majority of the day lounging on the couch with Anya, switching between watching TV, scrolling on his phone, and napping. Shane had returned home from his own game a couple hours hours ago but immediately made his way down to his apartment buildings gym. Ilya could tell from his demeanor that he wasn't feeling great about his performance.

They *had* won, but Ilya had been watching, and he could tell it had been an off game for Shane. There were a few missed goals, a near fight, and a bad pass that resulted in the other team scoring. Nothing massive and to be honest, the internet and media didn't seem to notice too much, but Ilya knew Shane was beating himself up over it. He probably should have stopped him from going down to the gym, knowing he was using it to punish himself, but didn't want to be overbearing.

He does start to get a little worried when an hour passes with no word from Shane, and once it hits an hour and a half, he runs out of things to keep himself busy. They also hadn't had dinner yet, which meant Shane hadn't eaten since around 11 am. He decides maybe it's time to interrupt.

He slips off the couch, shifting Anya off his lap and putting her back in his warm spot, and makes his way to down the gym.

The door is propped when he approaches and he can hear Shane's grunts as he pushes it open. He peeks in to make sure no other tenants are in there before fully stepping inside.

For a second, he admires the scene before him. Shane is at the squat rack, the bar loaded with weights as he lifts his body up and down. The veins in his arms are visible, and the muscles in his calves are more prominent than they've ever been. His ass isn't looking half bad, either, and Ilya lets himself revel in the view for a second.

Eventually, though, his eyes drift up to Shane's face, and Ilya notices it's *red.* Not the usual, sweaty, red that it would normally be after an 8 mile run or a big game, but an angry, hot, nearly purple red. His grunts are getting more strained as he keeps pushing himself, his legs are shaking, and each squat he takes looks like it's going to be the last one he manages.

Suddenly, Ilya feels himself rushing forward, instinctively, like he can read exactly what Shane's body is about to do. He gets to him just as his legs give out and grabs onto the bar as Shane collapses to the floor.

“What the fuck?” Ilya yells, throwing the bar to the ground and pushing it across the gym and away from Shane so he has room so sit. His legs are outstretched in front of him, chest heaving as he struggles to stay sitting up. Ilya sits behind him and pulls towards him, his back pressed against Ilya’s chest. “What the fuck are you doing?” He tries not to sound angry, but it’s hard not to.

Shane is still huffing as he tries to catch his breath, letting his head fall backwards against Ilya’s shoulder. Ilya is freaking out slightly, trying to figure out where to put his hands. He starts on his Shane’s thighs, but can almost feel them pulsing beneath his palms, and that just freaks him out more. He moves them up to his chest next, but the rapidness of Shane’s breathing nearly convinces Ilya his lungs are going to burst out of his chest. He eventually settles on Shane’s shoulders, grabbing onto them and rubbing his hands up and down. He’s not sure who he is trying to comfort – him or Shane.

It’s a few more second before Shane is able to get any words out. He takes a big breath, coughs, then tries to stand up. Ilya stops him.

“I’m fine,” Shane snaps, trying to free himself from his boyfriend’s arms. Ilya doesn’t let up.

“Shane, stop,” he pleads as Shane continues to struggle against him. Eventually, Ilya wraps his legs around Shane’s, locking him in place. “Please, just… Just relax for second. Sit.” Shane gives in, finally, and slumps back against his chest.

It’s another two or three minutes before Ilya loosens his grasp. He stands up first, then grabs Shane’s hands and helps him up, too. Shane lets himself be led over to a bench and plops down, leaning forward and bracing his elbows on his knees. Ilya lets out the breath he’d been holding before scanning the room for Shane’s water bottle. He finds it eventually beside the squat rack.

“What were you thinking?” He picks up the water bottle and hands it to Shane, then stands in front of him, arms crossed over his chest. He knows he looks mad and he hopes Shane can tell. “You just played entire game. What makes you think is a good idea to kill yourself with a workout, too.”

Shane chugs down half the water bottle in one go. His chest is still heaving, but the redness in his face his dissipated. He shrugs, and it’s so nonchalant, that Ilya feels his anger grow. He wants to start a fight, can feel it brewing, but stays quiet and lets the silence sit between them.

“It’s not a big deal,” Shane says, taking another big swig until the water bottle runs dry. He drops it on the ground, then wipes some sweat off his face. “I just racked up too much weight. It happens.”

“You could have been hurt!” Ilya exclaims, throwing his hands in the air. It’s not like him to risk injury like this, especially over something as silly as a less than perfect game, and he's starting to feel like there's something deeper here. He runs his fingers through his hair, gripping it in frustration, before letting his arms fall back down to his side. “If I had not come down here, you could have been hurt.”

“Okay, well, good thing you were here then, I guess,” Shane says with another casual shrug.

And *what the fuck?*

Ilya scoffs and starts pacing the room, mumbling under his breath in Russian. He can't tell if Shane is picking up any of what he's saying, but if he is, he either doesn't care or is choosing not to respond.

"Is this like… like the marks? On your leg?" Ilya finally asks. His pacing has stopped, and he's standing in front of Shane again, looking down at him.

"What? What are you talking about?" Shane spits out. His face is getting red again, but Ilya thinks it's anger this time.

"Are you doing this to hurt yourself? Is that why you are working out so hard?" His voice is quieter now, a little sadder. "Like when you hurt yourself on your legs?"

Shane has the audacity to laugh at this, rolling his eyes. Now he's avoiding eye contact. "Stop trying to play therapist, Ilya. Stop trying to diagnose me."

"That's not what I'm doing!" he says. He tries to come closer to Shane, but Shane shifts down further away from him on the bench. Ilya feels like he could cry. "That scared me. When you told me that. I just am trying to understand."

"Well stop trying," Shane snaps. He reaches down to get his water bottle then goes to stand up but ends up wobbling. Ilya reaches out to grab his arm, steadying him, but Shane rips it out of his grasp. "I'm fine. Just pushed myself too hard. Let it go."

Ilya watches, devastated, as Shane limps over to the squat rack. Neither of them say anything as Shane puts the weights away and re-racks the bar before walking out the gym door, turning off the light on his way out, leaving Ilya in the dark.

It happens again a month and a half later.

Ilya had taken the red eye flight from Los Angeles to Montreal, making it to Shane's apartment just as Shane was leaving for practice. They weren't able to share more than rushed Hello, I Missed You, and a kiss before Shane was out the door.

Ilya received a text around 6 pm from Shane, letting him know he chose to stay behind at the rink to run a few plays alone.

Shane: *The place is empty if you want to come by.*

That's all it takes for Ilya to slip on his shoes and call an Uber.

Ilya loves to watch Shane skate.

Today, he can tell he's frustrated with himself, struggling to get a move down just right, but he loves watching the way he glides across the ice anyways, the way he handles his stick and the puck with such precision, precision Ilya could only dream of. Sometimes, it feels like foreplay.

He spends about 45 minutes just watching him from a seat a few rows off the ice, admiring the talent that is his boyfriend. The rink is closed for the night, no one else in the building except a janitor and a few cleaning staff, but Ilya makes sure to keep himself low in the seats anyways just in case.

Every time Shane skates by him, he spares a look, a subtle smile under his mask despite the somber mood Ilya can tell he's in. It's moments like this, spending time somewhere other than inside the walls of one of their houses or apartments, that they almost feel like a real couple. It almost feels normal.

Eventually, Shane exits the ice and takes the tunnel to the locker rooms, and Ilya stands to follow. He has the take the long way, through the rink lobby and the back hallways of the building, so once he gets there, Shane already has his helmet off and pads discarded and has changed into sweat shorts and a hoodie. He's sitting on a bench, skates in his lap as he removes the worn down laces from them.

"Good practice?" Ilya asks. He kneels in front of the bench and starts helping Shane pack his stuff up. Shane scoffs in response, his brow furrowed.

"Not really. Something felt off," he tells Ilya. He's finished up his right skate and moves to the left. "I've been struggling with this play for weeks. My skate keeps catching weird or something, I don't know." He pulls a fresh pair of laces from his bag and shoves the old, frayed ones in a side pouch. "It's the play I fucked up last week when I missed the goal. Some of the guys started giving me a hard time about it, because one of the rookies has it down perfect, but for some reason I just can't figure it out. And the more I keep trying, the more I keep fucking it up." Ilya can see Shane getting worked up, his words coming out faster and faster, but he lets him talk it out. "I don't know why it's freaking me out so much. Maybe it's because the playoffs are coming." He's started putting the new laces in now, aggressively, almost, tugging at them roughly.

Shane rambles on, Ilya has stopped paying attention to what he's saying at this point and is now watching how the blades of his skates are pressing into his bare thighs. The more frantic Shane gets, the harder he's pressing down, the more force he's using, and Ilya can see indents forming. He knows what's going on.

"Shane," he says softly, reaching over to place a hand on Shane's wrist. Shane's grip loosens immediately, and he lets out a loaded breath, a guilt ridden look on his face. "Let me?" Ilya asks. Shane doesn't put up much of a fight and lets him take the skates into his own lap.

Ilya takes over re-lacing the skates, but he keeps his eyes on Shane as he watches him pull up his shorts a little. On his thigh is a deep, angry red mark, and he's broken skin. It's not much, all Shane has to do is wipe the blood away once and it doesn't return, but Ilya can still hear his own heart beating in his ears. He realizes this is more serious than he thought.

Neither of them says anything while Ilya finishes up. Once he's done he puts the skate guards back on, then pulls Shane's bag towards him to pack them up. Shane is silent in front of him, fingers still rubbing over the marks on his legs. It's Ilya who speaks up first.

"Maybe there's something you can do to distract yourself when you get the urge to… do that," he says softly, tipping his chin towards Shane's thigh. He's trying to tread carefully. He doesn't want another fight, not when they're seeing each other for the first time in a over a month.

"I told you," Shane says softly, standing up off the bench and starting to shove the rest of his things in his bag. Ilya can tell by the way he's forgoing his usual precise organization that he's freaking out again. "I don't do it on purpose. How can I distract myself from something I don't know I'm doing."

"You must feel pain," Ilya bends down to try to help him pack. He reaches for a pair of discarded socks, but Shane pushes his hand out of the way. Ilya tries not to let the hurt show on his face and sits back on the bench. "There's blood."

"If I felt the pain, I would stop, obviously," Shane fights back. He zips the bag up forcefully then stands up, hauling the strap onto his shoulder. His hands are shaking a little bit, and he puts them in his hoodie pockets to hide it. "It's not like I'm taking a razor to my wrists. It's just a weird habit."

At that, Ilya winces, because that comparison makes it more real and scares him even more. He can tell right away that Shane regrets saying it, because his shoulders fall immediately and he steps forward, taking one of Ilya's hands in his.

"Sorry, sorry. I shouldn't have said that," he whispers. Ilya squeezes his hand and Shane takes a deep breath. "You're right. I'll… work on it. Distracting myself. That's a good idea."

Ilya isn't sure who Shane is trying to convince.

Summer comes and Ilya and Shane finally get a few weeks of peace and quiet. They decide to spend it at the cottage.

The first few nights are exactly what they needed. The weather is ideal, sun shining perfectly on the lake each day, and Shane and Ilya are like two teenagers in love. For the first time all year, there isn't an upcoming 6 am flight or a 2 hour drive back home looming over them. They can stay up late, sleep in, and there are moments when it feels like they're falling for each over again. It feels perfect.

But on a Monday during their second week there, Shane gets a phone call around 9 pm.

"Oh weird," he says to Ilya as he glances down at the caller ID. They're sitting outside by the fire, though the flames are starting to die down to nothing more than a dull, red glow. "It's my mom."

They'd had dinner over at Shane's parents' house earlier that night, so it is strange that she's calling when they just saw them a few hours ago, but Ilya shrugs. "Maybe we forgot something there?" he guesses as Shane answers the phone, immediately switching it to speaker.

"Hey mom," he says, putting the phone down on the seat between him and Ilya. He leans back, crossing his arms, propping his feet up on the fire pit. "What's up?"

"Shane," she says quickly, then she lets out a soft sigh. "I just got an email. From Gatorade."

"Okay…" Shane says. Ilya starts adding more wood to the fire but keeps his eyes on Shane, still listening intently. The flame re-ignites, bringing a soft, warm glow to Shane's face. "What does it say?" Shane asks. Ilya hears Yuna take a deep breath and then she waits a few seconds before speaking again.

"They're… Ending their endorsement."

At those words, Ilya feels Shane tense up beside him. Gatorade is his biggest sponsor.

"Wait, what? Is the contract up?" Shane asks.

"No, it's not…" Yuna says, trailing off. It sounds like she starts typing rapidly on a computer. "I need to look into this more tomorrow morning. I don't know if they can even do this. Or why they want to. But I just wanted to let you know."

Shane's never lost a sponsor before, Ilya knows, other when contracts have run out. He's always been a model hockey player, zero controversy or scandals, and barely even gets in fights on the ice. He's always at the top of his game, professional, great with the fans, and fulfills any obligations any of his sponsors ask him to. He can't figure out what could have changed. He looks back up at Shane's face and can tell he's racking his brain, too.

"Do you think…" Shane starts, his voice strained and quiet. Ilya moves a hand to Shane's shoulder, squeezing gently. Shane starts rubbing his hands against his thighs. "Do you think they found out that… I'm gay?"

That thought hadn't crossed Ilya's mind.

"No, Shane." His mom shuts him down quickly and confidently, and Ilya hopes Shane feels as comforted by that as he does. "There's no way they found that out. And even if they had, they would not and could not end a contract over it."

"But what if they did?" Shane asks desperately. "And they're trying to, like, subtly pull out. Or they're going to come up with an excuse."

"Honey, there's no way they know," Yuna reassures him again. Her voice has gone quieter, more comforting. It's always impressed Ilya how quickly she can shift from from manager mode to mom mode. "First of all, if Gatorade were to find out, the news would have leaked to the public by now, I'm sure. Other people would know."

Ilya winces. He isn't sure that was the right thing to say.

“What if they do?!” Shane is on the verge of panicking now and Ilya can tell he’s about to go over the edge. He watches as Shane starts obsessively picking at a loose thread on the cushion underneath them. “What if other sponsors know and they start emailing you, too? What if it’s Reebok next?”

“Shane, you need to breathe,” his mom tells him, less soft now, more firm, but still loving. “I’m going to deal with this. I will get on the phone first thing in the morning and sort this out. I don’t want you to get yourself worked up.” At that, Shane scoffs in response.

“Well, too late for that.” He spits out.

Then, Ilya looks down where the phone is sitting, and out of the corner of his eye he notices Shane has stopped picking at the loose thread and is pinching his arm. He watches him as he continuously tightens, then loosen his grip, his nails leaving behind marks.

Ilya feels his breath catch in his throat as he looks up at Shane's eyes. He can tell he is completely unaware of what he's doing and how badly he is hurting himself, his gaze set on the fire, his brown furrowed and expression filled with fear. Ilya wants to intervene, but the last few times, it sent Shane reeling and running off, and he ended up shutting Ilya out for the few days following. He’s not sure how to stop that from happening again.

Shane and Yuna are still talking through logistics on the phone and Shane looks like he's on the cusp of a panic attack when Ilya makes the decision to carefully, quietly, reach over. He gently pushes the hand Shane is pinching himself with out of the way and wraps his own hand around the spot instead. The area is warm, red, and irritated, and Ilya keeps a tight hold it. He looks up at Shane and their eyes meet, and Ilya is surprised when Shane gives him a pleading look, instead of the angry look he’d given him the last few times. Ilya gently squeezes Shane’s arm, then takes his hand in his, squeezing again.

The phone call last a few more minutes, and by the time they hang up, Shane’s breathing is nearly back to normal. Ilya keeps his eyes on him and the tension dissipate as he shifts closer, pressing a kiss to his cheek. Shane closes his eyes, letting his head fall back.

“Jesus, I’m pathetic," he says before letting out a self-deprecating laugh.

“Not true,” Ilya says quickly, followed by another kiss to Shane’s cheek. “Is just Gatorade. Onto the next electrolyte drink!” Shane laughs softly at that, then shifts closer to Ilya, resting his head on his shoulder. Ilya’s hand comes up and starts stroking the back of Shane’s neck. They’re both quiet for a second

“Not that,” Shane finally says, lifting his arm up, pointing to the reddened spot. “I mean… this.”

Ilya’s hand stills and he can feel Shane tense up beside him. The moment feels big between them, the first time Shane is admitting that something is wrong. Ilya wants to say so much, but he knows if he makes it into too big of a deal, Shane will retreat again and they’ll be back at square one. He starts stroking the back of his neck again.

“That doesn’t make you pathetic, either.” He tries to be reassuring but he has a feeling his voice sounds strained and nervous. He’s thankful when Shane lets out a sigh and starts talking.

“I’m just… usually so in control of things. I don’t know why I suddenly lose all control of myself when I get upset or anxious.”

“We all have things we can’t control,” Ilya argues. “I can’t control my anger on the ice. I never even realize I’m getting into a fight until my helmet is already off.” They go quiet again. “And Pike can never control his shots on goal.”

This one gets a real laugh out of Shane, even though it still sounds a little sad.

“Sorry I got so mad at you the other times,” he says, shifting body so he’s sitting facing Ilya. The fire is almost out again, but the glow of the ember brings just enough light to Shane’s face that Ilya can see his eyes are wet. He reaches out to wipe at them, stopping the tears before they can spill over. “It’s just… embarrassing.”

Ilya smiles sadly, his thumb staying to stroke Shane's cheek. “Don't worry, I won’t tell anyone,” Ilya promises, a hint of amusement in his voice.

Shane laughs again, and it almost feels like all the anxiety from the phone call is gone. Ilya reaches up to gently grip the back of Shane’s neck, then guides him down so he’s laying with his head in his lap. He starts running his fingers through his hair, comfortingly, and Shane curls up on the seat. There are a few more moments of silence and eventually, Shane’s eyes slip closed.

“We’ll work on it,” Ilya says eventually, simply, as if it’s the most obvious solution in the world. “Don’t be embarrassed. We will work on it.”

And that’s that.

The end of the summer approaches faster than either of them realized, and Shane’s been doing better.

They’re tried a few techniques to help, but nothing has stuck so far. Ilya bought him fidget spinners, but Shane said they made him feel like a misbehaving kindergartener. He bought him a book of crossword puzzles and word searches, thinking they might keep his mind busy, but instead, Shane’s perfectionism resulted in him getting even more overwhelmed every time he got stuck on the last word. Ilya tried simply keeping his eyes on Shane and intervening when he noticed him acting on an urge, which *did* work, but he really wanted to find a solution that Shane could control on his own.

Especially since pre-season started next week.

The stress of that comes to a head 2 days before they leave the cottage.

It’s just after dinner and they’re both in the bedroom, packing their suitcases and duffel bags.

There’s a sadness lingering in the air, and it’s accentuated by the frustrated sighs they both keep making. They aren’t saying anything to each other, but there’s a million thoughts floating between them.

Shane finishes packing his stuff first, aside from his toiletries that he’ll need over the next few days, and he moves to lay on the bed and starts scrolling on his phone. He could make himself useful by going into the kitchen and getting started on the dishes or going outside to start cleaning off the grill they’ve been using all summer, but he doesn’t want to spend a second away from Ilya. Not when they’re about to go back to being apart so much over the next few months.

“When did you say the next time I’ll see you is?” Shane questions. Ilya has a color-coded schedule on his phone, as well as a hard copy printed out for both of them, specifying every day off they’ll be able to spend together throughout the rest of the year. “3 weeks, right?”

“Right,” Ilya confirms. He finishes up folding up a pair of pants and shoves them into his suitcase before picking up his phone, pulling up his calendar. “Then 2 weeks until we can meet up in Ottawa, but then I’m shooting a commercial in Los Angeles in October, so it’ll be a month before we see each other again after that.”

Shane breathes out a soft sigh, letting his phone fall to his chest and closing his eyes. He's jealous that Ilya seems to be handling this a lot better than he is. The last few nights Shane has been consumed with anxiety, trying to memorize Ilya’s body, scents, and sounds, trying to force himself to stay awake just a little bit longer, or wake up a just a bit earlier, hoping for a few extra moments with his boyfriend before they’re separated again.

Shane feels the bed dip, then, and senses Ilya lay next to him. “What's wrong?” he asks. Shane opens his eyes and sees Ilya’s soft, adoring eyes staring back at him. “You look like you’re thinking too hard.” He lifts a hand and brushes a finger across Shane’s cheek.

“Summer just went so fast,” Shane says. He shifts over on the bed a bit to give Ilya more space, and Ilya quickly takes the invitation, curing up against Shane’s side. “Feels like we got here yesterday.”

“Yes, I know,” Ilya says, pressing a kiss to Shane’s shoulder, then to his neck. “But we did this before last season. We can do it again.” Shane nods and tries to cling onto the hope that Ilya seems to manage to have a grasp on, but it isn’t working.

“Okay,” he says anyways, his voice small and unsure. He smiles and ignores the weight on his chest and the hole in his heart, because he can tell Ilya is starting to worry. Ilya presses another kiss to his shoulder.

“I’m going to make tea. You want?” he asks.

“No, thanks.”

Ilya takes a few more minutes to throw a couple more things in his suitcase before making his way to the kitchen.

Now that Shane is alone, his thoughts begin to race.

They *had* made it through last year, but it hadn't been easy, and Shane isn't sure he'll be able to manage it again. Being apart was impossibly hard, and every rare moment they spent together was weighed down by the lingering realization that they only had a few days before they were apart again.

And this summer was perfect, of course, but it only amplified the fact that *this* is what life could be like if things were... Different.

The hardest part, though, is the fact that they're still a secret. The inability to fully show Ilya off, to be able to embrace their relationship the way they want to, and the way they deserve to, has been the root of a number of fights. Shane isn't sure why, though, since they're both still fully aligned on the fact that they absolutely can not come out yet. He doesn't know how people can fight over something they agree on. But they manage to make it happen.

Shane doesn't realize he's starting to panic again until he feels a sharp sting in his upper thigh, the familiar sign of him losing control. He looks down and notices the tight grip he has on his skin. He wishes Ilya was here.

This thought makes him panic more, though, when he realizes Ilya won't be with him most nights over the next couple months. Shane will be back to being alone, in unfamiliar cities and dark, uninviting hotel rooms. Ilya won't be there to notice the slight change in his demeanor like he always does in moments like this. The way his breath hitches, or his hands shake, or his palms sweat. Shane will have to fix it himself.

And maybe this moment is good practice for that.

A few nights before, an Amazon package had arrived on the porch, addressed to Ilya. It was strange for him to order something when they would both be leaving the cottage in a few days, and that piqued Shane's interest as he watched him open it from his spot on the couch.

He watched as Ilya tore through the tape and pulled out a huge bag of assorted stress balls. There were at least 20 of varying colors, sizes, and shapes, and Shane almost snorted at this idea. He knew what they were for. And he knew they wouldn't work.

Ilya didn't say anything about them, didn't even spare a glance at Shane as he discarded the trash. He didn't say anything as he started placing them in the spots of the house they frequented. One in the coffee table drawer, one in the side table drawer, then he opened a few kitchen drawers and placed them in there, too. He went outside next, and Shane watched him through the floor to ceiling windows as he placed one by the fire pit, then came back inside and placed one in the center of the kitchen island.

He made his way into the bedroom, next, and Shane heard him opening drawers, then the bathroom door, then the closet. He heard zippers opening and closing, and assumed that Ilya was putting a few in his suitcase as well.

It was a couple more minutes before he came back out of the bedroom, a few of the brightly colored balls still in his hand. He placed one in the drawer of the entryway table, then joined Shane on the couch, holding one out to him. As much as Shane wanted to roll his eyes, he took it. Ilya smiled as he accepted it, then kissed the top of his head.

“In case you want to try it.”

So as Shane sits on the bed, the anxiety clawing its way up his throat and through his limbs, and his nails digging into the skin of his thigh, he rolls himself over to open the nightstand drawer. He reaches in and feels around a bit, past the lube, condoms, and handcuffs, until his hand comes in contact with something soft, round, and squishy.

He sits himself up, leaning against the headboard as he looks down at the ball. It’s a terribly overwhelming bright red color with a company logo on it that he doesn’t recognize. He can tell it’s meant to be a sphere, but it’s a bit lopsided and resembles more of an oval. The outside of it is cool and soft, and it feels like it’s burning a hole in his palm, but the shape of it feels nice in his grasp.

He rolls his eyes before he squeezes it the way he’d been squeezing his thigh.

And it doesn’t feel the same, obviously, but it does feel strangely comforting. His nails dig into the ball in a way that feels familiar, and he can squeeze harder than he’s ever been able to squeeze his thigh. The more pressure he puts on the ball, the more his heart rate drops, and the clearer he is able to think.

He wants to curse Ilya for being right.

Shane closes his eyes and takes deep breaths and he continues to squeeze the stress ball as he counts down from 10 in his head over and over again. His mind starts to calm down, and eventually his thoughts are quiet enough that he starts to find it silly that he was getting worked up over his and Ilya’s relationship, the most constant, comforting, safe thing in his life.

He isn’t sure how long it is before he finally opens his eyes, but when he does, Ilya is standing in the doorway, a mug of steaming tea in his hand and a gentle expression on his face. He makes his way to his side of the bed, placing the mug down, and joins Shane. Ilya takes the ball and places it on the bed between, before bringing Shane’s hand up to his mouth and kissing across each knuckle.

“Proud of you,” he tells him, and Shane rolls his eyes at that.

“I’m playing with a toy,” he argues, a hint of vulnerability in his voice. “Nothing to be proud of.”

“Be quiet and let me be proud of my boyfriend,” Ilya agues back fondly. “And let me gloat about my good idea.”

At that, Shane rolls his eyes and chucks the ball at Ilya’s head.

End Notes

Really hope I got the continuity and timings right (if I didn't, shhhh).

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!