

Please don't leave (I won't ever)

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Please don't leave (I won't ever)

by [17darwinism](#)

Summary

“What did you actually think?”

He can't help it. He looks at Ilya. Ilya only stares at him. “I say that now, in hindsight. Back then, I wasn't thinking. Not really. It would come to me in waves, the anxiety, the fear. Most of the time,” he says. “I was just...”

“Waiting for me to speak?” Ilya offers.

Shane shakes his head, “I was trying to make it to tomorrow with you alive.”

or,

Ilya and Shane work to find themselves, and each other, again after Ilya's suicide attempt.

Notes

hey did i or did i not tell you that part 2 is coming? thanks for the patience, i hope the fic (and that word count) makes up for the amount of time this took me to write

i'd like to dedicate this fic to some people: first my friend and uni colleague N. who helped me with the therapy scenes, to [joce](#) for being awesome during all of it and being my friend. and most importantly, this is for all the people who reached out and got help because of part one. i love you so much. you're so strong and so darling to me.

obligatory FUCKKK AI and if you support it, you are not welcome here.

► and some more notes:

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

Shane looked up from his book, pushing his glasses up to rest in his hair. Ilya was at the front door, taking off Anya's leash then kicking his shoes off. "How was the walk?"

Ilya looks at him.

"Hey, big girl," he says to Anya who had jumped on his lap to say hello. Then she jumped right off and went to take a big drink of water from her bowl in the kitchen. Ilya sits down next to Shane and turns on the TV. "Have you eaten?"

There was a pause, but then Ilya shakes his head softly.

"Are you hungry?" he asks, almost catches himself waiting for an answer, "I made pasta while you were gone, if you wanted some."

Ilya twitches his nose, then gets up and walks to the kitchen.

Shane goes back to reading his book as Ilya moves around in the kitchen getting his plate of pasta and warming it up. It's a few moments after the microwave dings, that there is loud sounds of clattering from the kitchen. Shane squeezes his eyes shut. He puts his bookmark in place, and gets up to the kitchen.

Ilya is standing next to the drawer when he gets there. His face is even. It gives no indication that he feels anything regarding the situation—positive or negative—though Shane was inclined to think that he was leaning on the latter even if he had no proof of it. Shane gets the keys from his pocket and opens the cutlery drawer, he hands Ilya a fork, then locks the drawer again.

Ilya takes the fork from him and heads to the living room again.

Shane stifles his sigh, and follows behind him.

Ilya—probably pointedly—sits on the opposite side of where Shane was sitting. Shane ignores the sting in his chest as he grabs his book and moves closer to where Ilya had sat.

Again, Ilya gives no indication that he feels anything about it.

Francine Stanton finished university at the top of her class, both on the bachelor's and master's level. She had been practicing her profession for about nine years. From the sound of it, she was the best person for the job.

It was only two weeks ago that Shane had joined Ilya in a therapy session with Galina. There, they had come to the realization that they might benefit from going to proper couple's therapy for a longer term than just one or two sessions with Ilya's therapist. Galina was supportive of the idea, and had even been the one to recommend Francine to Ilya in his next session.

“I’m Shane,” he started from next to Ilya. “I’m Ilya’s husband, I’m a hockey player.” Ilya heart squeezed at the deliberate ordering of those statements. “We have a dog together, Anya, Ilya rescued her some years ago.” Francine was sitting across from them, nodding and taking notes on her iPad. “We’ve been together... together by some definition since 2008, so, fifteen years. Married for two.”

Ilya feels Francine look at him. “I’m Ilya.”

Francine waits for him to keep going, he supposes he should. “I’m Shane’s husband, if you did not connect,” he sees her lip twitch up just slightly, “Anya’s dad. I retired from hockey.”

Ilya ignores his body clamming up when she starts taking notes. Galina, he was used to, but this was entirely new, and not even a little bit less scary.

“I would like to ask about the reason you’ve decided to start couple’s therapy. I don’t want to undermine how big of a step it is, and I believe it’s a good way for us to start out.”

He expects Shane to say it immediately. To tell Francine about what happened, maybe to even tell her how angry he *actually* is. But Shane doesn’t say anything. Ilya looks up from the spot on the floor he had fixed his eyes and looks at Shane. His husband had already been looking at him, his eyes swirling with emotion, asking him the question. Asking him if it’s fine for him to answer.

It’s at that moment that Ilya starts to calm down.

He nods softly, Shane smiles at him and puts his hand on the small of Ilya’s back. Ilya feels himself calm down further.

“Two months ago, Ilya attempted to commit suicide.” Ilya watches Francine. He expects pity, he expects *something*, but she keeps her face even and kind. “He has depression, and—”

“Like my mother did.”

He feels Shane’s hand move closer into him, an attempt to give him even more comfort. He leans back into it, and he doesn’t miss Francine following their movement with her eyes.

“And... it’s been really fucking hard,” Shane says with an amount of sincerity that shocks Ilya.

“I understand, Shane, it cannot be easy to deal with that. For either of you,” she assures, then looks at Ilya, “Ilya, do you have anything to add?”

“You can tell her,” Ilya says. He says it to Shane, and she seems to understand, because her eyes move to his husband next to him.

Ilya doesn’t need to look at him to know the look on his face. “Ilya didn’t speak a word to me for...”

“Six weeks.”

“For six weeks,” he repeats. Francine takes notes. “If anything, that’s not even the biggest problem.”

Ilya tenses up at the last word, Shane’s hand moves so it can wrap around his waist.

“Ilya,” Francine looks at him, noticing his reaction “Would you not agree with calling your situation a problem like Shane did?”

A lot of Ilya’s sessions were spent talking about this with Galina. She didn’t agree with him when he called it childish, but then again, she didn’t seem to agree with a lot of what he said nowadays. Always reminding him to rephrase, to rework what he was saying; Always reminding him that he had it wrong, somehow someway, even if she never worded it in that way. She says it’s because he’s in recovery from trying to commit suicide, that that’s the reason why his thinking is so lopsided. He didn’t feel like his thinking was lopsided.

Well, he does right now, but it was mostly unrelated.

He sat up and looked outside. The sun had started rising, if he had to guess, just a handful of minutes ago. He took note of the rustling behind him, signing that Shane was already awake, “Ilya? Where are you going?” he muttered from the other side of the bed. Ilya grabbed the cigarettes from his nightstand and waved them behind him.

His heart twisted when Shane mumbled that he would get his keys.

He didn’t show how hard it had been for him, how much he really hated everything that had been going on. He hadn’t in weeks. It was the only way he would get to be home, and he could tell that Shane already felt bad enough.

He watched as Shane turned the lamp on and used his keys to open the drawer on his nightstand, pulling out Ilya’s lighter then closing the drawer again. Quietly—expected from Ilya, but not Shane—the both of them made their way outside. Shane lit Ilya’s cigarette, “I’ll be right inside, okay?”

“Stay.”

It was already quiet outside. There was no one but animals and birds and plants for miles around them, but in that moment, Ilya felt it get even quieter. He could hear a pin drop.

Shane stared at him, “What?”

“Stay with me. Please,” he asked. A part of him had no idea why. Shane had been with him 24/7 for six weeks now. If anything, he should’ve told him ‘good riddance, leave me alone’. But there was that other part of him. The part of him that remembered what life was like before. The part of him that reminded him that, sure, Shane was glued to his side, but it wasn’t his husband that was there with him.

And God, did he miss his boring husband.

He watched as Shane hid his face behind his hands. He watched as he took a step back. As he took a deep breath, then took another step back.

Ilya had spent many sessions talking about the fact that he couldn't speak to Shane. He had spent all the time in between building up his courage to do it. Now, he thinks he might need even more. He feels his chest caving in, he feels himself grow embarrassed that he would even dare to speak.

"I'm sorry," Shane's voice shakes, one hand still hiding his eyes. "I'm sorry, I'll stay, I—"

Ilya doesn't know what to do. He's frozen in place. He has no idea what's going on but what he does know, is that he can't speak. His throat felt like it was closing up.

Then Shane says, "I can't cry."

The words shake him, a shiver going through him as he is hit with the weight of what his husband just said.

His throat hurts but he manages to get out a, "What?"

"I," Shane sits down next to Ilya, "I can't cry. I can't cry but please—" he clears his throat. From this close up, Ilya could see his eyes were red, but there was no tears in them. "Please keep talking."

"Shane,"

A sob escapes Shane but again, when his eyes open, there is no tears in them.

"Shane, what is going on?"

"I haven't been able to cry since we got back from the hospital. I've tried but... but I'm fine." he tells him, but it's halfhearted as he caresses Ilya's cheek with his hand, "I missed hearing your voice *so* much."

"You are not fine, Hollander, what do you—"

"God, Ilya, I missed you so much," Shane interrupts him.

It falls into place then. His behavior toward Ilya.

He realizes himself that he had been holding in so much more resentment for Shane. For treating him like he had, for walking around him like he was splintered glass and he was going to fall apart at any moment. But right now, as he looked into Shane—his husband's eyes, he realizes something else.

He's not the only one who's hurting. And he's not the only one who isn't okay.

Ilya pulls Shane into him, his face resting in the crook of Ilya's neck. "I'm sorry," he says. But he doesn't even know what exactly he's apologizing for.

Shane wondered if this is what it had felt like for Ilya too. When he started going to therapy for the first time, if he felt like he was peeling skin down to his bones in front of a person who didn't even know his favorite color.

"How have you two been doing since our last meeting?"

Ilya glances at Shane, then surprises him by taking the lead, "Is still weird. To me." Francine looks at Shane, he nods in agreement, "I know it has been time since I talked, but..." Shane feels his heart beating fast, he ignores that it doesn't seem to be the answer to Francine's question. "it's still weird to me."

"Why is that, Ilya?"

Ilya looks at him then. "It's okay, dorogoy," he assures.

"Is not because Shane is weird, he is but—" Ilya pauses, barely holding himself back from laughing when Shane hits his side and mutters *asshole* under his breath. "But he's not weird about this," he says to Francine, "there was a moment the first time I talked that I thought it was a mistake, that I should have kept not talking to him."

"Ilya—"

"Shane, let's let Ilya finish, okay?" Francine stops him. Shane nods.

"I did not want it to be a big deal—"

"It was a big deal, Ilya!"

"Shane—"

"No," he stops Francine, "he has to know. He has to know how big of a deal it was to *me*." The hand he puts on Ilya's shoulder is gentle as it pulls him back so Shane can look at him in the eyes. "Do you even realize how much it hurt me?"

"Shane, I understand that you have a lot of feelings about this, more than you think I do," Francine tells him, but he doesn't look away from Ilya. Ilya whose eyes were filling with tears. "But Ilya talking about *his* feelings, does not make yours any less important."

It made sense, what she was saying, but it felt impossible to stand down. But then. Ilya speaks, "I don't want to argue." He says it in the smallest voice. So small that Shane would've missed it if he hadn't been looking at his mouth as he said it.

He notices it then. Just how much Ilya had begun shaking. His hands swiftly reach out as he takes Ilya's hands in his, "Hey," he says softly, "Hey, I'm—" he hesitates. Just for a moment, he hesitates, "She's right. You're allowed to feel that way. I'm sorry for not letting you talk."

Ilya looks away from him.

"It's not argument. This isn't an argument. You're allowed to feel that way, Ilya," he continues.

Ilya nods, but Shane isn't convinced. When he looks at Francine, she seems to understand that she could intervene. "This is a very sensitive topic we are treating, and you both understand that." she pauses, Ilya nods and Shane follows suit. "We're not here to point blame about these big feelings we're having, we're here to listen to them."

"Work through them?" Shane asks.

She nods, "And with them," Ilya shifts, only slightly, toward Shane again. "No one is angry at anyone in this room, okay?"

"What if they are?" Ilya asks. Ilya asks and Shane's entire body feels like it's been plunged into ice water.

"Then we work through that too." She looks between them. Shane feels like he's under a microscope, and Ilya looks like he's fine next to him. Francine writes down a quick note, and then looks back at them. "Ilya," he looks up at her from where he was staring at the floor, "Why did you not want you talking to Shane again to be a big deal?"

He doesn't answer at first. Shane wants to interject, to tell Francine that maybe he doesn't want to tell Shane anymore. But he holds it in.

"It made it real," his voice was small when he finally speaks. Shane's heart broke as he tightened his hold on Ilya's hands. "Him having a big reaction would make what happened—what *I did* so real and I did not know if I could handle it."

"Ilya..." Shane whispered,

"There was a moment, after I told you to stay, that you stepped away from me. And I remember thinking... this is where he finally tells me."

Francine asks, "What did you expect him to say?"

"That he hates me."

The words feel like they were ripping Shane apart. Clawing into his chest and tearing a hole right where Ilya had nestled himself for the entire 15 years he had known him.

"I would—"

"Shane," Francine stops him, again. He has to get used to that. He promises himself to try.

Ilya lets go of Shane's hands and takes a tissue from the table next to him. He's deliberate in drying his tears. After minutes of silence, he says, "It has been really hard not to hate myself for everything that happened. Not just... *it*, but everything after," he rips the tissue in his hands, "I'm still not convinced I don't."

"Ilya, are you—"

"In therapy? Yes. I am on, how you say... double duty," he says. Shane knows it's in hopes to get Francine to laugh, but she keeps an even face as she nods.

She puts her pencil down, “And—”

“We talk about this. Of course we do.”

Francine nods again, “When you say you’re not convinced that you don’t hate yourself for everything that happened, does that have to do with Shane?”

He knows that it’s a valid question to ask. In any other room, he would’ve been the one to ask it. But the fact that *she* asks it, makes Shane’s hair stand on ends. Francine looks at him and he knows then that he did a horrible job at hiding it.

“Maybe.” Ilya answers her questions so easily, it almost makes Shane feel nauseous. “I don’t blame him. If he does it, I know is not on purpose.”

“You don’t have to defend me,” Shane finds himself saying.

Ilya laughs. “There is nothing to defend. You have not talked about it,” he says, looking at Shane, “I talked, you told me you cannot cry,” Shane sees Francine take notes behind Ilya. It makes him a lot more anxious than it should. “And that was it. I kept talking. You kept... being you.”

Being you.

“You want me to talk about it?” he asks and Ilya nods. “You not talking to me was the scariest thing in the world to me, Ilya.”

Ilya only leans back on the couch. Shane feels that he said something wrong.

Francine intervenes, again, “Shane,” he looks at her, barely, “What did you think during the time that Ilya didn’t talk to you?”

“That he hates me.” It was for only a slight moment but he sees Francine’s lips tip up. Before he continues, “That it was only until he was back on his feet and he would leave me. I couldn’t find a single other reason why he would not talk to me. He talked to everyone else. Only waited for me to leave.”

“That is never going to happen,” Ilya supplies, gently. It does only a little to calm him down. “I felt bad.” Shane glanced at him, for just a second. “That’s why I did not talk to you. I felt bad for doing that to you.”

“You didn’t do anything to me.”

“Yes,” he counters, “I did.”

“Can we— I don’t wanna—” he stutters, not knowing how to tell Ilya that he didn’t know how to answer that. He didn’t know how to tell him that he shouldn’t feel guilty, even if his attempt and everything that followed it was the most painful experience of his life. He didn’t know how to explain to him that it was *nice* to hear this. That it was nice to hear that it was awful for him too, that he wasn’t alone in feeling like that.

“Shane, you felt that Ilya being nonverbal had to do with him hating you,” Francine says, guiding the conversation back.

“Gal—His therapist assured me, when all three of us had a session together, that it had nothing to do with me,” he explains.

“Did you believe his therapist?” Shane shrugged, Francine hummed, “What did you actually think?”

He can’t help it. He looks at Ilya. Ilya only stares at him. “I say that now, in hindsight. Back then, I wasn’t thinking. Not really. It would come to me in waves, the anxiety, the fear. Most of the time,” he says. “I was just...”

“Waiting for me to speak?” Ilya offers.

Shane shakes his head, “I was trying to make it to tomorrow with you alive.”

Shane watched as Ilya walked out of their bedroom. He didn’t look happy, but there was an air of relief floating around him. He had just finished up another session with Galina, he didn’t know how many they had left but it couldn’t be that many. And he... looked like that. He looked comforted, like there was nothing even going on in his life.

That last part he knew that he was assigning to Ilya. He knew that it wasn’t true whatsoever. But he still thought it as he watched Ilya walk over to where he was.

“Oh,” Ilya says when he spots him sitting on the kitchen island, “I thought you had taken Anya on a walk.”

Shane gives a non-committal hum, holding back the comment that Ilya knew he couldn’t be alone yet. “Was waiting for you so we could all go together.”

Ilya nodded and walked past Shane, on his way to the fridge. For a fraction of a second, Shane thought he was going to kiss him. It was just a fraction and yet he felt his heartbeat flutter, he felt his breath hitch in his throat, like they were still meeting in an alleyway in Montreal.

He shakes himself out of it, and says, “My parents are coming over tonight.”

Ilya pauses, then nods, “Okay,” he replies, clipped.

“Do you not want them to?”

He takes a sip of water then bends down and pours some from his bottle in Anya’s bowl. She laps it up, the sound of her drinking the only sound in the house for a moment or two.

“No, right?”

Ilya grimaces, Shane feels bad for snapping.

“Is just... a lot,” Ilya says. “To talk to people, to pretend that nothing happened.” Shane notices himself making a face as well, “It is what they want from me, Shane, even if they do not say it.”

Shane jumps down from where he was sitting, “It’s my parents. They’re worried. You’ve been home for months and they still haven’t seen you.”

“I know. I know that, but I also disappointed them—” he stops when Anya brings him a toy to play tug of war with. Shane’s heart twists as he watches his husband pretend to lose to Anya, who wags her tail happily and runs off again. “They can still come, I just can’t—”

Shane shakes his head, “I can’t leave you alone.” He’s already picking up his phone to call his mom and let her know that they couldn’t do dinner like they had asked for. He knew both of them would be disappointed but there was no other option.

“Why? Because you don’t trust me?”

It’s a low blow, and both of them know it. It doesn’t make it hurt any less.

“Ilya, please,” he breathes, “You know there’s no other way.”

“There is other way! You could *trust* me!”

“The other way was for you to be admitted into a facility, Ilya, and you know that,” Shane knows he’ll regret it, but he says it anyway.

He had his phone in his hand, ready to dial his mom. They were probably already getting ready to come over and he would be disappointing them—again—by cancelling. Anya was running around with a squeaky toy. Ilya was in therapy with both Galina, and with Francine, and somehow Shane was only getting worse. He felt like he was only getting worse.

He felt like he couldn’t even voice it. He knew what people would tell him. It was early—and it was. They had just started—and they had. But there was no part of Shane that felt like being in therapy was helping. He felt like he was walking on thinner ice than he had ever been.

Ilya tries to walk away but Shane grabs his forearm, gently pulling him back in place. Ilya, having no choice, leans on the kitchen island and wraps his arms around himself. “God, go fuck yourself, Hollander.”

Shane’s practically quivers as an urge—one he knows well—appears inside him. An urge deep inside him to fall to his knees. He knows that it’s been months since he had last done it—too many of them—and he knows that he no longer feels like he can do it.

He knows there has been countless moments in the past week *alone* that he has wanted to drop to his knees, nuzzle himself into Ilya, and just *forget* everything that was going on. Pretend for even a minute that everything was okay. That Ilya was there, with his hands in Shane’s hair, and nothing was wrong. Nothing at all.

Instead, he dials his mom’s number and holds himself up with a hand on the counter.

“I know, sweetheart,” he says to Ilya.

Shane hated the feeling. Not being able to find himself between Ilya’s legs safe and, worse, not being able to cry about it either. He feels himself want to start crying but not being able to, like every other time for weeks now. It made him feel heartless. It made him feel like he didn’t care enough. It was moments like this that he deeply wished he could cry.

Maybe it would be cathartic. It wouldn’t fix any problems—like his mom always said it wouldn’t—but at least it would be something. It might release the feeling of nothingness he had brewing in his chest, even if just a little bit. It really would be *something*. Something real. Something that wasn’t just stewing inside him, where no one could see it.

“Ilya,” his voice feels like it’s scratching its way out of his throat. “Can I— Mom, hey!”

And the moment is over.

Ilya was... *hurt* but he wasn’t stupid.

He knew that his and Shane’s exchange just a few days back had nothing to do with Shane’s parents. He knew that the things he said, and the things Shane said back were hurtful, but that they did not come from a place where either of them meant it. He knew that there was something Shane was hiding from him.

There was something that had been gnawing at his husband for the past week—maybe more, if he was honest—and he had not said a word about it. As Ilya watched him, rubbing his hand over his forearm, he had a feeling he was about to find out what it was.

Francine starts talking, “So, today—”

“Can I say something, before we start?” Shane interrupts. She nods, and motions for Shane to begin. “This is awful,” he says to Ilya, who had already turned to look at him. Shane’s eyes flit to Francine, who—Ilya imagines—assures him to keep going. “This entire thing is so awful for me, and... and I... Fuck, this is so hard to say.”

Ilya reaches his hand out and puts it on Shane’s leg, pulling it closer to him so their thighs are pressed against each other. He watches as Shane’s breathing starts to regulate.

“I’m doing it for you. This entire fucking thing, I’m doing it for you. And I don’t want to make you feel guilty, I don’t want you to feel like this is your fault for making me do something that’s... *horrible* for me,” he continues, Ilya just keeps watching him, “You know how private I’ve been my entire life, and it’s not because of you, even if you think that it is” Ilya shakes his head softly, *that* much he never questioned, “But... Fuck, Ilya, I can’t stand what we’ve become.”

Ilya can’t hold it in anymore—his eyes fill with tears. It was starting to feel a little cruel of him, knowing that Shane can’t cry, and knowing that he probably wishes he could.

“I can’t stand it, and I can barely stand being here... and I know that I don’t regret being here. I don’t regret doing this, as hard and unbearable as I find it.”

When silence reigns for a good long moment, Francine speaks, “I’m getting the feeling that you are expecting something from Ilya, Shane, can you help us figure what it is?”

Shane nods in her direction, “I’m doing it for you. All of this, I’m only doing it for you. I guess... I guess my question is, are you doing it for me?”

“Of course,” Ilya says in a millisecond. So easily, so simply. Shane breathes a sigh of relief. “Yes, I’m doing it for you. Is all for you, moy lyubov, there is nothing else it could be for.”

“Thank fuck,” Shane says, voice shaking.

“I’m glad—”

Ilya is the one to interrupt Francine then, “Close your eyes, Francine.” He leans forward and kisses Shane.

He can’t help it.

He hasn’t done it in weeks, and he cannot help himself any longer.

His hand comes up and holds Shane’s jaw. He swears he hears Francine laugh behind them. “Ya tebya lyublyu.”

It’s Ilya’s turn to laugh, “It is so cute when you speak Russian,” he whispers, in Russian. Then switches to English again to say, “I love you, too, sweetheart.”

When he starts to pull away, Shane threads his fingers in Ilya’s hair and pulls him back for one more kiss.

They both turn to Francine, who, for the first time, wasn’t hiding her smile. “Alright, that was lovely,” she says, and she really looks like she means it. “I’m glad you two found the space here to talk—”

“We did more than talk about it,” Ilya mutters. Shane hits his arm, shushing him.

“*To talk* about it,” Francine continues, still smiling, “It seems like it was really weighing in on you, Shane.”

“Truth be told,” Shane says, his hand reaching to hold Ilya’s, “You’re not all that bad, Francine.”

Ilya has to stop his surprise when Francine laughs—really laughs—and says, “Thank you, Shane.”

It was a week later and there was a space on the couch between Shane and Ilya. Shane doesn’t know when exactly it had appeared, but he did know that it wasn’t big enough.

“Shane, I understand your frustration, but Ilya has told us that the omission had nothing to do with you.” Francine tells him.

He rolls his eyes, “Sure, I heard him when he said that, but—”

“But you want me to have told you anyway because who cares what I think?” Ilya interjects. Francine opens her mouth to stop him but Shane’s already turning to Ilya. “Is that it?”

“You can have the day to yourself, I just don’t understand why me knowing is so awful—”

“You have not wanted to know in years, why is it so important to you out of nowhere?”

Shane stares at him, disbelieving why Ilya could even ask that. Could even wonder aloud why him knowing his mother’s anniversary was important ‘out of nowhere’. He huffs and falls back on the couch. The space between them is too small. “Can I stand up?” he asks Francine.

Ilya laughs in his own disbelief beside him.

“Why do you want to stand up?” she asks, direct. Shane was glad Ilya had asked for her to just be direct, even if he was questionable of it at first.

“I can’t be near him right now.”

Francine pinches her mouth to the side for a second, “I would much prefer it if you stayed seated then.”

He crosses his arms and shifts impossibly closer to the arm rest.

Neither of them speak, Francine watches both of them, then puts down her pencil, “Alright, how about we regroup a little?” she starts, “I’m sensing—more than sensing, that you two are not only not seeing eye to eye, but you’re almost refusing to.” Shane looks at Ilya from the corner of his eye. He was sitting on his hands, and Shane knew it was because they were shaking and he didn’t want to give it away. “And I haven’t known you two for very long, but I can say with certainty that this is unlike you.”

Shane felt himself nodding.

“You’re both charged on this topic, I understand that. But you have to come down and meet each other somewhere, and you know that.” This time, it’s Ilya who nods. “Now. If I may infer a little here, the problem doesn’t *actually* have to do with the anniversary of your mother’s passing.” Neither of them gives any indication, but Francine pushes, “Ilya?”

Ilya shifts, moving his hands so they’re wrapped around him, “No, probably not.”

“What do you think it could be about then?”

“He’s right here,” Ilya nods his head toward Shane, “Ask him.”

Francine glances over to Shane, checking for his reaction. Which was none. “I would like to hear your interpretation first.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what he wants from me,” he says, “Not anymore.”

“You.” Shane interjects. Ilya looks at him, “I just want you alive.”

“Do you?”

“*Ilya.*”

“Okay, okay. Shane,” Francine calls for their attention, Shane looks at her, “How does this lead back to your discomfort in not knowing his mother’s anniversary?”

“Because,” he runs his hand over his face. “God, it’s not even about knowing the date, it’s—” He hesitates. For just a moment, he hesitates, the words feeling like they’re stuck in his throat. “Galina has told you all that she told me while I was on my way the night you attempted,” Shane says to Ilya, recalling that Galina had wanted to start their joint session making light of everything she had told Shane about Ilya.

“She told you...” he stops.

Shane nods, “She told me that she suspected you were going to do what your mom did,” Ilya’s jaw tightens, as he tries to keep a straight face. “I don’t know. That has been sitting with me and... I don’t know.”

Ilya doesn’t say anything even after looking away from Shane. His eyes fix on the usual spot on the floor. He pulls at his fingers, and Shane knows from the pattern in his breathing that he might as well have been doing it manually.

Shane’s eyes move to Francine, who moves her eyes from Ilya to him. With a soft nod, she signs to him that he should just wait. He knew, too, that Ilya would talk eventually. Just when he leans back, he has to lean forward because Ilya opens his mouth.

“I wasn’t gonna do that.”

Shane looked at him, then. Francine tilted her head in Ilya’s direction.

“I wasn’t gonna do what my mother did,” he admits, “It was...” he uses the back of his hand to wipe his tears, voice shaking. “I was going to slit my wrists. That was original plan.” He lets out a laugh, it sounds morbid as it comes out of his lips, “I was thinking that it would get the job done. At least.”

Shane’s chest was tight. He suddenly was feeling like there was not enough air in the room. He might go as far as to say that his body—or his mind, or his soul, or his *something*—was starting to float, that his skin was going to start peeling away. Ilya’s legs were open just enough that he would fit between them, rest his head on his thigh. He blinks and looks away, looks anywhere but him.

“It’s okay, Ilya. You can keep going.”

He doesn't, and Shane realizes why when he murmurs, "Shane?"

Shane takes a deep breath, and nods. Stiffly enough that his neck aches. But he needed to hear this. He needed to hear it because Ilya wanted to share it with him. And they were way past secrets.

"Is true that it was either what my mother did, or that. But..." Shane hides his eyes behind his hand, feeling a deep ache in them as he continued to be unable to cry. If Shane felt like there was no air in the room now, that feeling doubled when Ilya said his next words, "I did it for Shane."

"*What?*" he says, moving to look at his husband, whose face was wet with tears. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"Shane, calmly, please."

He shakes his head, "Did you not hear what the fuck he just said?"

"I heard him, Shane, and your reaction is valid. But this is as much of a space for you as it is for Ilya. He's allowed to share things, even if they're hard for you to hear."

Shane opens his mouth to defy again, but then comes Ilya's small voice from beside him, "I didn't want to make a mess."

"Yes, Ilya?" Francine says, ignoring Shane. He put a hand on his chest and tried to regulate his breathing. He looked anywhere but at the space between Ilya's legs.

"If I had cut my wrists, Shane would've had a mess to clean," Ilya continues. "That's what I meant. I wanted to make it the least bit easier for him," he turns to Shane, "For you."

Shane opens his mouth. Closes it.

"I was thinking of you. Always."

He can't help but laugh at that, morbidly, just like Ilya had. "How can you say that? How could you have been thinking of me in that moment?" Shane asked, "Thinking of making it *easier* for me? Like it wouldn't have killed me too?"

"Sweetheart," Ilya's voice was still small, a whisper.

"There was no difference, Ilya, I'm sorry to tell you this. It didn't matter how I found you, it would've still killed me right along with you." Ilya wrapped his arms around himself, Shane found himself wanting to reach out to him, even in this time. "I... How—" he shakes his head, "What kind of a husband am I if I was your last thought and it still wasn't enough to stop you?"

Ilya's gaze snaps to him then, tears still running down his cheeks, head shaking furiously. Sternly, he said, "No. No, Shane. No."

"That's how I feel, Ilya, I'm sorry—"

His eyes widen when Ilya's hand covers Shane's mouth. "Ilya, maybe—" Francine starts, in an attempt to not have Ilya physically shut him up.

"No, he doesn't get to apologize."

Shane smiles behind Ilya's hand, especially when she sees the hint of one on Francine's face as well. "Okay, sure. Is this your way of telling him his feelings are valid?"

"Da," Ilya says, and Shane knows how serious he is. He looks at Shane, "They hurt, like a motherfucker. But you can feel like that. I understand *why* you feel like that."

Shane's eyes burn, but tears don't fill them.

"I know Galina told you that you were the only thing keeping me going."

Shane mumbles something behind his hand.

"But I told you in my letter," Shane shakes his head, not wanting to hear that it was ever addressed to him. Ilya moves his hand and holds his face, "I know, I *know*. But I did. I told you that nothing could have stopped me."

"It doesn't make me feel better."

Ilya frowns.

"It sounds like," Francine starts, "Ilya is only trying to tell you that it had nothing to do with how good—or bad—of a husband you are," Ilya nods in her direction, then turns around and looks into Shane's eyes again. "And I'm inclined to agree. This is something horribly traumatic for you two. It's natural for both of you," Ilya tightens his hold on Shane's face for a second then lets him go and turns to Francine, "to feel how you feel. With Ilya feeling that he was doing something for you, even in moments as critical as those ones, and for you, Shane, to feel that you're—essentially—not enough."

"But the truth is, from where I'm sitting, and have been sitting, you two have a tendency to always understand each other, meet each other where you are," she says, Shane remembers her words, pointing out how unlikely it was for them to refuse to understand each other earlier. "What do you think about that?"

Ilya looks at Shane, "I think we have grown up together. We understand each other a lot because of it. Or at least we used to."

Francine nods, in agreement, "A lot of today's session bled from that," she says,

"Because we want to understand each other?"

"Because you're not used to not understanding each other. And it's not that you can't anymore, it's just that with Ilya's suicide attempt, it created a rift between you where you both are coming from opposite ends. Something you maybe haven't experienced with each other for a long time. Does that make sense?"

Shane looks at Ilya, nods. Ilya looks at Shane, nods.

“But from what I’ve seen between you two, I honestly see a very little chance of not making it out together from this.” She looked between them, “And doesn’t it feel better now that you allowed yourselves to really *listen* to each other?”

Ilya looks at him, signing for him to go first. “Yes,” Francine’s head tilts only slightly, an invitation to keep going, “I think that I need a little more time, to come to terms with the fact that it has nothing to do with me. It’s hard not to feel like I could’ve stopped it, even though, rationally, I know it’s not true. But, I think,” he glances at Ilya, “that we can get there, like you said.”

She nods, “Very good, I’m glad to hear that.” she smiles, scribbles something on her iPad, then looks at Ilya, who doesn’t need much pushing to start talking.

“It feels like a...” he puts his hand over his chest,

“Weight.”

He nods, “Weight has been taken off of me. I never know how hard it is to keep it in, until I say it,” he continues, “Every time we get closer to becoming our old selves again, I realize how much I miss it.”

“Yeah,” Shane adds, not having much else to say.

“Well, that’s why we’re here, and why we’ve created this space.” Francine closes her iPad and places it on the table, “Well, we are done for the day. For next week, I want to talk a bit more about some of the events that led up to Ilya’s attempt,” she says, “How does that sound?”

“Awesome.”

Shane breathes a sigh of relief. Ilya moves his leg closer to him, pressing their thighs together. He didn’t know when the space between them had gone away, but he does know that it felt like it wasn’t small enough.

It was strange, Shane had found, to have someone in your house and still miss them.

Ilya—and him, in all honesty—had been home from the hospital for about two weeks. Maybe three. The days had started blurring together, after the first week. He tried to keep up, he tried to get sleep, and eat properly, and just be a person.

But it was unfathomable that he was even expected to be functional in the situation he’s in.

He rubbed his hand over his face, under his glasses. His vision had gotten blurry even with them, but he knew that he wouldn’t be able to sleep, so he tried to keep reading anyway.

It was around three in the morning when he gave up. He threw his head back on the chair. He had dragged one from the kitchen a few nights ago, knowing that he was unable to sleep like

a normal person anymore, so he would sit by the windows.

Sometimes he would feel the need to smoke. He had never smoked. Ever. But he missed the taste of it in his mouth from when Ilya would kiss him stupid. From when he would be just a little more annoying—his words, always, never Ilya's—than usual and Ilya would blow smoke in his face, then laugh and call him adorable when he would scrunch up his nose.

There was something so awful in missing the sweet nothings that your—still alive—husband used to do.

He turned his head. Ilya was ~~dead~~—was deeply asleep, his mouth slightly parted as he breathed. The moon was full—because why wouldn't it be?—and it was illuminating his beautiful face and sending flutters throughout Shane's body. His curls had gotten longer, and wilder. Shane had always told him that he loved when his hair would get longer, then Ilya would crack some stupid joke about how it was easier to tug at his hair when it was longer.

He had never been truly annoyed at the jokes, and Ilya knew that. But he had never expected to miss them so much. Or maybe it was that he preferred them to the silence that had, quite literally, reigned in their home since the day they got home from the hospital.

He watched Ilya freely when it was late at night, when he was already asleep.

These days, it was the only time that it was his husband that he was looking at, that it was his Ilya. During the day, he was on such high alert, on such an edge, that he forgot to admire him for what he was. Alive. Beautiful. His.

But here and now, with him sound asleep, and breathing, and safe, he had the space to watch him. To really admire him, even.

His eyes were tired.

He blinked.

Ilya's eyes, on the other hand, fluttered open, Shane felt himself stiffen up. Ilya raised his head, looked at Shane, looked at the time. Then he patted the empty space on their bed, inviting Shane to lay down. And because there was nothing he could say no to Ilya about—especially now—he got up, and he laid down. Seemingly satisfied, Ilya went back to sleep.

Shane was well-versed in all things Ilya. So, only when he knew he was asleep, he reached his hand out, and pressed it on Ilya's chest.

His eyes fluttered closed as he felt Ilya's heart beating under his palm.

Steady.

Strong.

There.

Tomorrow would be a long day, like all the days that had come before it, like all the days that were going to come after it. But as he felt Ilya's heart beating, as he was assured beat after beat that Ilya was okay, and next to him, and he wasn't going anywhere, he felt that he would be able to take on anything that the days were going to throw at him. Even without sleep, even with barely any food. He would make it, because Ilya needed him to make it.

Or so he was hoping.

"It sounds like you were in survival mode, Shane," Francine says, he nods in agreement, "That must've been very difficult for you."

Ilya watches as his husband covers his mouth with his hand. Shane's eyes flit across the room, as if he's physically looking for the words. "I've talked about this before. How much I was living under the.... just needing Ilya to make it to the next day alive."

"Is that the reason you couldn't sleep?"

To Ilya's surprise—maybe even Francine's, even though she had a killer poker face—Shane laughs. He laughs so much he throws his head back and Ilya has to jolt into motion and put his hand between Shane's head and the wall behind him. He puts his hand on Ilya's arm, thanking him silently. Then shakes his head, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's just" he puts his hand on his chest and takes a second to regain his breath, "When Ilya retired, I had already imagined I would spend this summer sleepless and tired."

"What?" the question had really slipped out. They both had gotten better at letting the other just talk, just as Shane had relaxed a lot more after they had talked out how difficult couple's therapy was for them. But if the laughing had surprised him, that admission shocked him a lot more.

"It never came up, really, because I thought you would be the one to bring it up," Shane says, now looking and addressing Ilya, "But I thought we were going to start adoption procedures."

"You—" he starts then he deflates as his mouth forms an 'oh', and he falls back on the couch along with Shane.

"Have you two discussed having kids?" they both nod, "And you want to have kids?" they both nod, "Alright, so, Shane, you saw Ilya's retirement as an... opening, for you to become parents?"

Shane nods, "I thought that with one of us being at home, or at least not being always busy with hockey, we would have time to... to have kids."

"Sweetheart,"

"It's okay." he says and he looks like he means it, "It's not your fault, you couldn't have known that that's what I was thinking. And, even though it was hard for me, I would stay up every night for you again and again. It hurt and it was really hard, but it was for you."

“I know. I know, but that still sucks.” he says, his accent thick and full of emotion. “That there’s this other universe where we have... *kids*. Would that make me a WAG?”

Shane laughs, “You’re *already* the sexiest WAG in the Cens.”

He hums, “You are supposed to say that.”

“But I mean it when I do,” Shane says, Ilya smiles at him.

“Okay, boys, before we lose the plot,” they turn to Francine, “I don’t want to skate past Shane’s expectation that you two are—or at least, were, at one point—ready for kids. It’s not my place to determine if you were ready or not, of course, but I want to point out that it’s a big deal whatever the answer is,” she says, and the more she speaks, the more Ilya is hit with the realization that she was right. “Shane, I know you were laughing, and I’m glad that you can, at the very least, find it amusing that the events that followed ended up being completely different,” she continues, Ilya slides deeper down the couch, he feels Shane watching him. “But I want to talk more about, maybe, other aspects of what the entire situation is making you feel?”

“Um, okay,” he stumbles, Ilya still feels him looking at him, “Ilya, are you okay for me to talk about this?”

“Yes, yes. Keep going.”

He hums, clearly unconvinced. But he complies, “Of course I was a little... I don’t want to say disappointed. It feels like I’m blaming Ilya.”

“Is okay,” Ilya says, but it sounds a little foreign to himself.

“Excuse me for interrupting you, Shane, but,” she switches to look at Ilya, “Ilya, are you feeling alright?”

He nods.

“It looks like there is something going on inside your head. Do you want to talk us through what you’re thinking?” Francine says, Ilya knows it’s because Shane had signed for her to intervene. There was still moments that he didn’t like having a mediator, even if she was a good one.

He sits up, wrapping his arms around his torso, “It’s just...” he feels Shane touch him and he, involuntarily, jerks away, “Shit, I’m sorry.” When he looks at Shane, he doesn’t seem the least bit hurt. He smiles softly at Ilya and takes the hand that he had reached for Shane to hold, “It’s so scary.”

“What is?” Francine says after a moment passes and it becomes apparent to her that he wasn’t going to continue.

“Having kids,” he says, quickly. “It’s so scary to be so responsible for every outcome a child has in the future.” Shane squeezes his hand. There is some distant part of Ilya’s brain that

recognizes that as a silent ‘but we’ll figure it out together’ but the rest of his brain filters that out completely. He shakes his head, “I can’t have kids.”

“Ilya—”

He shakes his head again, stopping Shane, “I can’t have kids.” he looks at the face that Francine makes, it’s a small reaction, but he doesn’t miss the surprise that flashes on her face, “I mean, look, Shane was thinking of kids and adoption and procedures and what was I doing? I was planning how to kill myself.”

“That’s not your fault, baby—”

He looks at Shane again, his face had entirely changed from what it looked like before, “I’m sorry, moy lyubimyy. But I cannot have kids.”

Shane looks at Francine. Ilya doesn’t want a mediator, not about this.

“Ilya, to me, it sounds like you’re only overwhelming yourself, a bit,” he shakes his head, denying it, “I’m not saying it’s not okay to change your mind, that’s fine,” Shane’s hand stiffens in Ilya’s, like he hated the idea of that happening, “But it isn’t a decision that you make so impulsively, either.”

He shakes his head. He can’t stop shaking his head. “I can’t have kids, I would only fuck them up.”

Shane takes his hand away from Ilya’s and shifts so he forces him to look at him.

“If we fuck up our kids, Ilya, we would do it together.” he says. It’s not as comforting as he thinks it is. “But we *won’t*. There is no reason—”

“I would fuck them up, Shane, there is no way you would.”

“Why not? If you’re—”

“Look at you!”

Shane scoffs, “Look at me? What do I have that you don’t?”

“A mother that didn’t kill herself!” he shouts and Shane flinches backwards. “There is no reality where... where our child grows up and isn’t... isn’t like *me*. ”

“Like you?”

“What does ‘like you’ mean, Ilya?” Francine asks him. Reminding him that she was still there. She was still listening to their argument, one that he would rather not have in front of her.

“I can’t have kids.” he says, firmly.

“You can’t make that decision for me—”

“I’m not *making* a decision for you!”

Shane furrows his brows, “You kind of are, seeing as you’re my husband,”

Ilya falls back on the couch, hiding his face behind his hands, feeling that his cheeks were wet with tears. Shane keeps talking to him, keeps trying to tell him that this wasn’t something he could just decide and expect Shane to follow suit for. That this wasn’t something that he could just decide so fast, and then expect him to be alright with. It all becomes too much for Ilya too fast.

“I can’t do this right now,” he says.

He says and then he does something he had never done before.

He storms out.

Ilya wanted to cry.

He was subconsciously aware that the team dinner wasn’t held. I mean, he kind of fucked it up when he decided to attempt just a few days after the Cup had been raised over their heads.

What he wasn’t aware of, is that they had waited for *him* to start getting better.

“So it’s been moved this year,” Shane says, looking up from his phone. They were laying on opposite ends of the couch, Ilya nuzzled under Shane’s blanket and legs intertwined with Shane’s who was on the other end under Ilya’s blanket.

“Yes, I know, it is September.”

“No, I mean,” Ilya turns to look at Shane, “it’s being held at this arcade. Not a restaurant.” He furrowed his brows at that, Shane—on the other hand—smiled. “You wanna come?”

Ilya opened his mouth to say no.

But he closed it again.

Shane watched him, smile still playing on his lips, as he waited for Ilya to reply.

“They change it because of me?”

Shane shrugs. Which meant yes.

And Ilya wanted to cry.

He shifts to lay on his back. Then he asks, “Who is going to watch Anya?”

Shane laughs gently, Ilya’s heart flutters against his ribcage at the sound. “My parents already agreed to look after her, if need be.” Ilya hums, and nuzzles himself deeper into the couch.

“Should I tell Bood we are coming?” Ilya hesitates again, then nods, “Okay.”

Days later, Ilya feels embarrassed that he has to cling to Shane as they walk in, but Shane seems to be taking it in stride. He pulls him in even closer when they're inside, and Ilya is hit with the realization that there is a lot of people in the arcade. It was expected, and it was still better than sitting around a table in a quiet restaurant where the only activity available was people talking *at* him the entire night. Shane lets go of his hand and wraps his arm around his waist, "You're okay. I'm here."

Ilya nods, Shane kisses his temple.

Minutes later, he's already tucked away in a corner. "I never guessed you would be a pool player, Rozanov," Dykstra says from next to him.

Ilya rests his hands on top of his pool stick, "I do like it, but right now, it is not the reason I am playing" Dykstra looks at him, his question implied. Ilya looks ahead at Shane, bent over the table, playing his turn of the game. "Nice ass, Hollander!"

Shane does not break his concentration for a second as he replies back with, "Suck my dick, Rozanov."

Dykstra snorts, "Okay, that makes more sense." Ilya sets down his stick when he realizes that Shane is—as per usual with anything he picked up—way too good at pool, and his turn wasn't going to be for a little while. "How have you been?" Dykstra adds. Ilya feels his spine stiffen up, just a little. Dykstra seems to notice immediately, because he backtracks, "I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"I'm good," Ilya stops him, "We've been working on it," he motions between himself and Shane, "I've been working on it. I'm good."

Dykstra smiles, softly, "And you're not just saying that? Cait said you might just say that."

Ilya laughs, "I mean it," then he points to Shane, "You can ask him, he won't lie to you."

Dykstra looks over. For a moment, he looks like he's considering it. But then he seems to decide against it, shaking his head, "I trust you."

Ilya feels tears well up in his eyes. He looks away and blinks. He hates crying so much, he hates it even more when he knows Shane can't.

"Ilya, it's your turn—" Shane is cut off by Troy coming into their space by storm.

"Roz, come with me, I need a ping-pong partner." he tells him, reaching his arm out like it was a done deal.

Shane laughs, but doesn't say anything. Ilya points at him, "I'm playing pool with—"

Troy shakes his head, defiantly, not letting him finish at all, "Oh come on, you've had him for months"

"Dykstra can come with you, man, I am in the middle of a game"

“Dykstra fucking sucks at ping-pong, and Harris has already betrayed me, I need to win this.”

Ilya laughs at that, he even feels Dykstra relax next to him when he does. He looks over at Shane, who’s already motioning for him to get going with Troy, “I can play Dykstra. It’s alright.”

Ilya nods, and follows Troy.

They’re beating Harris and Luca 16-10 when Ilya first hears it. The whispers. “I mean, we all saw the statement, I just didn’t believe it at all.”

“Me neither,” the other person whispers, like they weren’t within earshot of Ilya. “They haven’t been seen together until literally right now. It’s been months of nothing from either of them. I smell divorce.”

16-11. He hears Harris teasing Troy.

“It’s weird because they’re at least acting like they’re still together,” a third person continues, “Stacy heard him tell Hollander he has a nice ass,” and they laugh. And Ilya’s entire body stiffens up.

“How much of that is just the Rozanov we know though? Plus it could be PR. Their star players divorcing after they win a Cup? I’d keep it hidden for a bit too.”

Vaguely he hears Luca and Harris celebrate again. 16-12.

“Hey?” Ilya shakes his head and looks at Troy next to him. Then his eyes flit over to Luca and Harris on the other side, both of which had discarded their paddles. “Is everything good, man?”

Ilya feels himself nodding before he can decide if he should lie or not. “I just need something to drink,” he decides to say.

“I’m coming with”

“Haasy...” Ilya says softly, almost like he was pleading for a moment alone.

“Roz,” he replied sternly. And that was that. Luca was following him to the vending machine. He supposed he didn’t *get* to have a moment alone. Not yet anyway.

He was at least grateful that Luca seemed to understand that he just needed to be alone, so he stayed quiet, and a few steps behind. He was quiet as Ilya paid and got his water bottle. He was even quiet as Ilya sat down on the ground, his back against the wall. He hesitated for a second before joining him.

“What happened back there?” he asks, softly, like he was worried to scare Ilya away.

“I heard some people talking. About me and Shane, how they think we are divorced.”

“Roz,” he says, this time his name sounds so much softer, but at least it didn’t sound pitiful.

“Shit thing is I cannot even blame them,” he plays with the label on his bottle, “I would maybe think the same.”

“Hey,” Shane’s voice sounded as he walked over to them. “What’s going on?”

“I needed a moment,” Luca lied.

Ilya smiled and patted his leg, “He is lying. It was me who needed a moment.”

Shane only smiles and sits across from him and Luca, resting his arms on his knees. “Something happen?”

“Assholes talking gossip.”

“Not *our* assholes,” Ilya clarifies, making Shane roll his eyes with a fond smile. “We’ll talk about it. As for now, I’ll be okay.”

Shane nods, simply, trusting. “Come here, I wanna kiss you.”

Luca pretends to gag as he stands up, making Ilya laugh into his kiss with Shane. “I love you, moy kover.”

Shane snorts, “Carpet? Really?”

Two hours later—and one win in ping-pong *and* air hockey against Bood later—Ilya is leaning against a wall in the back alley behind the arcade, with a cigarette hanging between his lips, as he chews the latest bit of gossip about himself and Shane he had heard. He looks up at Wyatt, “Stop wasting the—” he snaps his fingers in his direction “the gas?”

“Lighter fluid?” Wyatt says, still playing with Ilya’s lighter that Shane had given him.

“Da, that. Is expensive,” he waves his hand around, “Now that I am unemployed, I think about these things.”

Wyatt snorts, finally pocketing the lighter and not wasting Ilya’s money. “If you’re so worried about wasting money, you could quit—No, don’t you dare!” he exclaims when Ilya positions himself to blow smoke into Wyatt’s face. Ilya laughs and Wyatt rolls his eyes, only pretending to be annoyed.

They stand in silence until Ilya finishes his cigarette. He motions for Wyatt to give him another one.

“How is it?” he asks, once he’s lit his second cigarette. Ilya furrows his brows at him. “Being back. With us.”

“Good,” he answers. Wyatt waits. It’s a familiar feeling, the way he’s looking at him. “A little much. I have spent so much time with just Shane,” he rubs his eye, cigarette between his fingers, “But it has come time that I need to get used to... being a person again.”

Wyatt nods. Pauses, hesitates, then asks, “Do you want me not to ask about it?” Ilya shrugs, “I can not ask about it.”

His voice is so uncertain that Ilya looks at him.

And when he does, he can see what he had been missing.

Shane had mentioned it, when Ilya started talking to him again. He had asked who stayed with Anya while they were in the hospital, and Shane had told him that it was Wyatt who had driven him to the cottage when Ilya attempted. That it was Wyatt who had called the ambulance, and stayed with Anya, and cleaned everything up while Shane went to the hospital with prayers of Ilya making it alive.

Ilya had missed it completely, of course. So stuck in thinking of himself, and his husband, he had failed to consider something.

That Wyatt also saw him almost-lifeless on that bathroom floor.

“Wyatt,” he says.

Wyatt shakes his head, like he realized that he had crossed a line—one that he hadn’t but was clearly scared of crossing. “I’m sorry, I—”

“*Wyatt*,” he stops, looks at Ilya, “Can I give you a hug, man?”

“I know you probably want to talk about the last time we were here,” Shane says, when they sit down across from Francine and her iPad. Francine, being honest, nods. “We talked about it. It’s...”

“A work in progress,” Ilya supplies, Shane nods. “I am sorry for how I left. It was not good of me.”

“You were overwhelmed, I understand that it was not something you were able to control in the moment,” Francine says, “So you two have discussed it?”

“Work in progress, like Ilya said.”

“We have something else we want to talk about,” Shane says.

Francine hums, “It’s nice to hear that you discussed it, and are working on it on your own time. There’s a lot to talk about, I’m sure you already know,” she looks between them, “We will circle back to it again,” she says, “What would you two like to talk about instead?”

Ilya takes the lead in answering that, “We missed last week because of our team outing,” Francine nods, writing down something on her iPad. “Some... *things* happened.”

Shane laughs from next to him, and Ilya bumps his knee with his. “You got your ass beat at Mario Kart is what happened,”

“Hollander, you are delusional if you think I did not let you win,”

He scoffs, “What on earth would be your incentive to *let* me win!” Shane exclaims, looking at Ilya.

Ilya looks back at him, “So you would hold my hand and kiss me in public,” he says leaning in, Shane pushes his head away with his hand and Ilya laughs.

“Okay, boys,” Francine says, deciding it was enough fun for them to have. “It sounds like the team outing was fun for both of you?”

“It was,” Shane says, Ilya hums in agreement, “It was nice seeing the team, it was nice seeing *Ilya* with the team.” He hesitates for a second, “It was nice to not be the only person looking after him for a bit. I clued in the team on the basics of his suicide watch and so they could hold fort with Ilya even if I wasn’t there.”

Francine nods, look at Ilya, “How did that feel for you, Ilya?”

“Normal,” he answers. “Shane is making it sound so clinical. The boys were more normal about being my babysitters than he is,” Shane pushes his shoulder, Ilya smiles at him. But he also doesn’t miss that Francine takes the second to write something down. “I told Wyatt—a teammate—that it felt like practice on how to be a person again.”

“What do you mean when you say ‘being a person’?”

“Being *me* again, Ilya Rozanov-Hollander. Not Ilya, the guy who tried to kill himself.”

“Does it feel like that often?” Ilya shrugs, and nods. “Is it because of Shane?”

“No,” he replies fast, then slouches, “*Sometimes*. But, and I’m not defending your feelings here—”

“No, of course not, why would you?”

Ilya can’t help but smile softly as he continues, “Is not his fault. He was told to do that. And it is my fault too for...” he motions toward himself, implying that he means the attempt. “It’s weird that I have come to terms with suicide watch just as it is about to end.” He turns to Shane, “I’m almost gonna miss it,”

“Shut up, Rozanov.”

Francine hums, getting his attention back, “I don’t mean to be presumptuous—” she pauses when Shane leans over to Ilya and explains the word in Russian, Ilya nods, now understanding, “but the things you mentioned, earlier, did they have to do with something *between* you two?” she says gently.

“No, it didn’t.”

Ilya plays with his fingers. Doesn’t answer.

“I would answer,” Shane continues, “but I’m not sure of everything that happened.”

Francine hums again, Ilya doesn’t look up from his fingers. “We can start with what you know.”

Shane explains the events—not that there were many of them—leading up, “He said we’d talk about it later and that he was going to be okay,” he pauses, Ilya feels his eyes on him, “I know that something happened again later, but I didn’t talk to him then. He said we would talk about it and I assumed it extended to that. That’s all I know.”

There’s silence, after that.

Ilya knows it’s because they’re waiting on him.

The touch of Shane’s hand on his thigh is light as a feather before Ilya takes his hand, and holds it in both of his. “Sweetheart?” Shane asks.

“Okay. Sorry. This sucks.”

“That’s alright, Ilya. Take as much time as you need.”

He pulls Shane’s hand up, presses a kiss to his palm. “Some people were talking about us.”

“As in…”

Ilya shakes his head, quickly, “Not like that,” Shane relaxes just a tad, “I had a feeling people did not trust the statement that we’re still together and that it was a family emergency and everything, but…” He stops. He contemplates not even continuing the thought. But decides against it, decides to be honest, “When I, uh…” he rubs a hand over his face, “When I finally decided to actually commit suicide… it was after I heard some people on TV say we are divorced.”

Shane sucks in a sharp breath.

“With Galina, we figured is because I thought I could be losing the one person keeping me going,” Shane takes a breath, wanting to interrupt, “I know. I know.” he nods, “Hearing them made me panic because it felt like I was back there, like I was close to losing you again.”

“Scale of one to ten?” Shane asks.

“Five,” he answers, “then I took a moment, you showed up, and it was two. One and half.” Shane nods, Francine has a small smile on her lips, “Was not big deal. It just reminded me of… *that* and I did not know what to do with myself for a second. Is also why I did not bring it up when we went home.”

“Is that all they said?”

“Those people? Yes. They also said you had a nice ass.”

“Ilya,” Francine says. He looks at her and she raises her brows. *Too many jokes*, he thinks, *got it*. She doesn’t continue after that, letting silence linger as Ilya thought to himself how he could say the next part. For a brief second, he wondered how Francine even knew that he had more to say.

“We can release a statement,” he says quickly, “If you want.”

Shane has his brows furrowed in confusion when he looks at him, “A statement? What kind of statement?”

“Saying that the reason why we have been out of the public eye, and why you did not party, is because I tried to kill myself.”

Shane physically rears back, “No.” he says firmly.

“It would help—”

“You are not ready, Ilya.”

“But it would *help*,” he insists.

“I don’t care. They can talk, all they fucking do is talk. *You* are my priority, you always will be.”

Ilya sighs in frustration, “But then people would focus on you, and not if you divorced me or not. And they would not—” the words die in his throat. He sits back on the couch.

Francine, of course, noticed that something was up. “Was there other people you heard talk about you and Shane?”

He did not say anything for a while. A few minutes. Almost like he was hoping that the moment would pass, and he would not have to say it at all. Remembering, of course, that it did not work like that, he says, “It happened later, too. Some people talking about how Shane is going to miss the new season.”

“And, how would you feel if he had to do that?”

Ilya shrugs, looks up at Francine, waiting for him. Glances at Shane, who flexes his hand under Ilya’s hold. “I do not know if I would *call* it guilty,” he starts, “I wish he could go and do it, but...” he shrugs again, “I am not ready to be away from him so much either.”

“So, you know that—for lack of a better term—it is your fault that Shane is potentially missing the new season, but you want him to, for yourself.” he nods, and mutters approvingly. “Shane, have you considered this situation?”

Shane hesitates, Ilya tightens his hold on his hand. “I haven’t thought about it, not in that way. After we got home from the hospital, Coach Wiebe came to see me,” he says, Ilya looks at him with furrowed brows, “You were asleep in the living room and we talked in the kitchen,” he explains, “He offered his support, said he’d visit again when you got better—so we’re waiting on that—and... he suggested I take a year off.”

“What?”

“Yeah, he figured that I’d need to be with you. And that I’d want to be with you. He had talked to the team owners and administration and everyone was okay with me missing a season if it was for you. I thanked him, and he went on his way because you started to wake up.”

Ilya stares at Shane. He pulls his hand out of his grip and caresses his cheek, “You have known *all* this time?”

“Of course,” Shane smiles, “I didn’t hesitate for a second, it—God, I sound like a broken record, it was for *you*. Of course, I didn’t hesitate. I fucked up enough, didn’t I?”

“Shane,” Francine interjects, “First, I want to say that you didn’t fuck up, and I’m sure Ilya agrees,” Ilya nods in agreement. “And second, I feel inclined to think that Ilya’s only surprised because you made the decision so quickly, not that you made it to begin with.”

“You *love* hockey,” Ilya adds.

“I love *you*,” Shane replies. “And taking a year break, for *you*, is not abandoning it. But, for the record, I would do that too. For you.”

“I think he’d do it for me,” Ilya says to Francine, who drops her chin, warning him to be serious again. “Sorry. Thank you, Shane. I appreciate this and everything else you have done for me.”

Shane laughs, “You’re welcome, Ilya.”

“Ilya, don’t laugh at this next question,” she says, putting her pencil down, “So, what did we learn from the team outing?”

Ilya can’t help it, he laughs anyway. He physically feels Shane rolling his eyes next to him.

“I’m not answering that seriously, when I know he’ll laugh at me”

“No, I won’t,” Ilya says.

“Yes, you will,” Francine says and even that makes Ilya laugh. She sighs, but it doesn’t sound exasperated, “Fine, new play. Say Shane plays this next season, say that you join him for every away game and that’s how you make it work. Will you be able to do that?”

Ilya pauses to think about it, then shakes his head before he can think about it. “If people talk at an arcade, they talk much more at a hockey game.”

“And worse.”

“And worse,” Ilya agrees with Shane. “Is that what you want me to say?”

“I don’t *want* you to say anything, Ilya. Is that your answer?”

Ilya nods, "I couldn't do it. So is not only about being with Shane?" Francine nods once, "Is also about me not being ready?"

"Precisely," she confirms, Ilya feel proud of himself, "I do think that it was a really good idea for you two to go to the team outing," she says, "It showed Shane how to be away from you, even for a little bit. The same goes for Ilya, along with helping him realize that—"

"I should not get ahead of myself."

"You should not push yourself more than you can take just because you think you should be ready," she amends, dipping her chin, "Make sense?" Ilya turns to look at Shane, who was already leaning in and pressing a peck to his lips. "I'll take that as a yes."

"It's a yes," Shane laughs gently, kissing Ilya's cheek.

"Alright, I'm glad. I know you both said that you've talked about it," she continues, "But I would like to discuss the last session anyway."

Ilya could see Shane on the couch, reading his boring hockey book, with his glasses on his nose, from where he was sitting.

He could see that Ilya's lighter was still between his fingers as he held the book open with one hand. His chest swelled with love as he saw him flip to the next page. It was so stupid, but he loved him the most in moments like this one. In moments that he thought he would never have ten years ago, and in moments that he thought he would never get to see again four months ago.

He puts out his cigarette on the ashtray. Takes a deep breath, bracing himself. And opens the door to step inside. Shane looks up at him briefly, then goes back to his book. It gives Ilya one more moment to gather his thoughts.

"Shane?" He hums in reply. "Can we talk?"

Shane looks up again, this time noticing the seriousness lingering between them. He closes his book and takes his glasses off, "Of course." he sits up, lighter still between his fingers, and Ilya takes a seat next to him, "Is everything alright?"

"I, uh," he stops. "I think maybe I need to apologize."

Shane furrows his brows, "What for?"

"For when we talked about kids, with Francine. But after that too."

Shane tries—and fails—to hide the fact that the words are so surprising to him that they take the wind out from underneath him as he nods, "Okay. Apologize to me." he repeats, like he didn't quite understand what Ilya was referring to, or like he didn't know why he would even have to apologize for. Ilya didn't know what it meant really. If he really didn't know, or if he was pretending not to because he was still pretending that the kids thing did not bother him.

"I am sorry. I was being a dick," he admits. Shane waits for Ilya to continue, still seeming confused by the entire situation, but seeming to take the apology... well? "I've been thinking a lot, and I know we talked about it after it happened and again a couple days ago. And you said you were okay with it," Ilya pauses, watching Shane's face. "Which I know you were lying, by the way. But I was being a dick."

"Dorogoy," Shane says, tenderly.

"I have been thinking. I don't think I have changed my mind." Shane furrows his brows, searching Ilya's eyes. "I do want kids, still. I want them with you." He pauses again. Still waiting for Shane to react, to do something, or say something. But he waits patiently again. "I was just... scared. Really fucking scared," he sighs, "Is not been so long since I tried to commit, and of course, there is still times that I feel like that.... um, *khрупkiy*?"

"Delicate?"

He nods, "Da. I let it get the best of me, for too long, maybe." he admits, "But it was unfair of me to make that decision. And make it for you too, even if I was right to be scared."

"I think you were," Shane finally says, then adds, "Right to be scared."

Ilya nods, reaching out to hold Shane's hand, "I just... I'm scared. Still. There is a big chance I fuck our kids up, that I will not be the best dad, that I will make mistakes" he says, honestly. "But like you said, we would do it together."

Shane laughs, Ilya hopes he hides his surprise well. "It sounds so *morbid* when you say it."

"Doesn't it?"

Ilya's heart rate increases as Shane laughs again.

"So, you do want kids?" Shane asks, "With me?"

"With you. I want them really fucking bad. I want everything with you."

Shane smiles, he leans forward and kisses Ilya, soft. So softly that Ilya's bones feel like honey by the end of it. "Good."

"Just good?"

He rolls his eyes, "Yes, Ilya, *just* good," he says, "because I want them really fucking bad with you too."

Ilya's smile basically splits his face in half with how big it is. Shane throws Ilya's lighter on the table, grabs him and pulls him over, hovering over him on the couch. "Does that mean you forgive me? For being a dick?" he asks, voice shaking, he's not sure why.

"You've been a dick most of our relationship."

"Hollander," he rolls his eyes.

"Yes, *Rozanov*, I forgive you. I just wish you had *talked* to me back then, too." he admits, "But I can understand that you needed a little time."

"I needed time." Ilya nods, agreeing.

Shane kisses him again.

Ilya puts his hands on Shane's face and kisses him back.

When Shane pulls back and goes back to reading his book, this time with Ilya's legs on his lap; Ilya closes his eyes, and tries not to panic for what he knows tomorrow is going to be.

It had been only three days since Ilya's reevaluation, and three days since he was officially declared off suicide watch. Both Shane and Ilya had expected it to feel like a big change, like a roar, or a scream of ecstasy. Instead, it felt more like a sigh.

Quiet.

A breath of relief.

It partly made Shane realize just how tired of the constant responsibility he had gotten. He was tired of the constant state of dread and fear he had been living in since being appointed Ilya's caretaker. He started willing it away within hours of Ilya being released off suicide watch, just needing it to be gone, needing just a single moment of mental rest that he had arguably not enjoyed in weeks. As of right now, he didn't know where Ilya was, and he would be truly lying if he still didn't feel the entirety of the apprehension he felt continuously for weeks. It was only three days.

Still, he ignored all those thoughts as he pushed his underwear down just enough to free his hard cock and wrap his hand around it with a heave of relief. He clutched the counter of the bathroom sink, hanging his head down as he stroked himself.

His entire body felt like it was on fire. He closed his eyes when immediately, like second nature, Ilya materialized on his senses. He could almost feel his breath against Shane's ear, whispering. *So good for me. So needy. Just like that.*

He questioned the part of his brain that wanted Ilya there, questioned it further when he decided that that wasn't true.

Just as he feels himself get close—which didn't take long, it had been weeks—someone opens the bathroom door. *Ilya* opens the bathroom door.

If his body was on fire before, it was on high alert now. Some distant part of his brain recognized the look on Ilya's face as one of pure arousal and hunger for him, as the one that could barely wait to either tell Shane to get on his knees, or get on *his* knees for Shane.

"What is it?" he asks, pulling his underwear back up again, turning to Ilya, "Did something happen?"

Ilya's face falls.

He looks down, then looks back at Shane as Shane puts his hands on Ilya's shoulders. "Is everything—"

"Fine," he says, dejected. "Everything is fine." And walks out.

Shane looks around the room, feeling himself going soft. A deep breath, and he follows behind Ilya.

Francine had been eyeing them. Ilya couldn't tell that they were acting any different than they usually did, but he supposed that's what made Francine good at her job.

It had been only two days since the incident, only five since he was released from suicide watch. But Ilya still flinched every time that Shane would try to touch him. And it was killing him. It was probably killing both of them.

"Okay..." Francine says slowly, "How are we doing today?"

Neither of them answers.

She waits, she waits but neither of them want to talk. Ilya sure as hell doesn't. "Ilya, you had your reevaluation this week?"

Ilya nods, "Off suicide watch," he says, voice even. If you'd asked him before, he would've told you that he was going to be excited, that he was going to celebrate. Right now, he could barely muster up the courage to admit that it was over.

"How does that feel?"

He shrugs, "Fine."

"Does it feel like anything has changed?"

"Not really."

After some silence. She continues, "Forgive me for being blunt," she starts, "Did something happen between you two in the past few days?" Ilya folds his arms and raises his eyebrows. Francine looks between them. "Shane?"

"No."

Ilya can't help but snort. "That is rich coming from him. Excuse me."

"Sorry," Shane touches his back and Ilya jumps. Francine's eyebrows shoot up for just a second before she schools her expression. "Is there a problem?" he asks, Ilya knows he's asking him, judging by Francine's expectant look.

“Two days ago,” Ilya shuffled, to push Shane’s hand away from his body. Shane takes the hint. “I walked—” he shakes his head, “I *caught* Shane masturbating in our bathroom.”

Shane makes a squeak behind him, Francine only nods, “Okay. You caught Shane masturbating. Is there a reason that we are using that word?”

“Well, seeing how he acted, there is no other word to use.”

“How did he act?”

He looks at Shane. Shane doesn’t look back at him.

“Can I—?” he asks, reaching for the water on the table and pouring himself a glass. He takes a sip, looks at Shane—who doesn’t look back—again. “Like he was doing something wrong,” he answers, “Worse, like *I* couldn’t see him. Like it would be the worst thing in the world if I saw him like that” Ilya shakes his head and takes another sip of water, this one coming with hints of his salty tears. He wipes his face with the back of his hand.

Francine nods, her eyes soft. “Shane?”

Ilya turns to look at him, his cheeks were pink under his freckles. “Are you done pretending that nothing happened?”

“Ilya, please.” He turns to Francine again. “Shane, at your own pace.”

Shane sniffs. Ilya snaps his head to him, thinking that he’s crying. Shane looks at him, for the first time, he looks at him. No tears in his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not about apologizing,” Francine says, “We’re just trying to figure out what caused you to react the way you did, okay? Walk us through.”

When Shane is silent for a moment, Ilya can’t help but speak again, “Did you really not want me there that horribly?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” Shane buries his face in his hands. Ilya feels more tears sting his eyes. Shane mumbles something behind his hands, then looks up at him, repeating it. “I was thinking of—” his eyes flit to Francine, and he stops.

“Shane, I am not here to judge you. Sexual intimacy, I gather, is important to your relationship,” she assures, “I’m not thinking you’re wrong, or that Ilya’s wrong, or that the fact that it’s important itself is wrong. Because it’s not,” she looks at Ilya, “This is just something—a situation regarding your sex life that has caused a problem between you two. I want to help you figure it out, like we have countless things before. Okay?”

Shane nods. “I was thinking of you,” he says, looking at Ilya, “God, I can only ever think of you.” He puts his hand on Ilya’s face, softly. Ilya doesn’t flinch. Shane breathes a soft sigh, relief, and he pulls his hand back, “I don’t know why I reacted like that. I mean we have done that together before. A *lot*.” he adds, and Ilya almost feels proud that he barely even flinches at his own words—ones he was saying in front of someone else.

Ilya ignores it, and asks, “You immediately asked if I was okay. If something was wrong.”

Shane purses his lips. So, Francine speaks instead, “Is that all he said to you?”

“Before I left, yes.”

“And after?” He only shrugs. They hadn’t really talked since then. Ilya hadn’t wanted to. Francine hums, “Shane, can you think of why that would be the first thing you’d say to Ilya?”

Shane looks at Ilya again. He reaches his hand out, caressing his thumb over Ilya’s cheek before moving his hand up and burying his fingers in Ilya’s curls. Ilya can’t help it. So, he grabs Shane’s hand and removes it from his hair. Shane sucks in a breath, “In June... When they finished your evaluation, they called me in the office. Alone.” He looks at Francine, then back at Ilya, then back at Francine, “Sorry, I’m trying to figure out if it’s easier if I say this to you.”

Ilya grabs Shane’s chin and makes him look at him, “Tell me.” Shane’s eyes flutter closed just for a moment, before he opens them again, nodding.

“They told me that it was procedure to put you on suicide watch. But since your evaluation had come out... *well*,” he said the word like it was stuck in his throat, like he couldn’t imagine that it was well if they still had to put Ilya on suicide watch. “They asked me if I want to put you in a facility or if me or someone else was able to take care of you at home. I said that I would take care of you.” Ilya nods, “They walked me through the rules. Not let you out of my sight, lock the cutlery, lock the meds...”

Ilya closed his eyes. He had joked about missing it last week, but it was only that. A joke. Armor.

“They also told me a few things about you.”

“About *me*?”

“About people who attempt to commit suicide,” Shane amends. Ilya whispers a soft ‘oh’. “They said...” he takes a deep breath, “They said that because you had attempted once, that your chances of attempting again are higher. Way higher than they were before.”

“How much higher?” Ilya asks before he can think.

Shane throws his hands up, “Fuck if I remember, Ilya!” Ilya raises his hands, attempting to apologize. “I just know that that’s all I think about when I look at you now!” he raises his voice.

“Shane,” Francine said softly. Reminding both of them that she was still there. Shane took a breath, the reminder of her seeming to give him a push. To give him courage that he could say everything he felt, that she was there to fix it when it broke.

“I could only let you out with Anya, which I’m not even sure that was *allowed*,” he looked at Francine, who didn’t react, then back at Ilya, “Because I knew that you wouldn’t put her at

risk. But that was it. That was the only moment of rest I got. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't fucking eat. Every time I turned my head, I feared for your life, for *my* life too."

Ilya could tell. Shane didn't have hands on the steering wheel anymore. It was just pouring, and pouring out of him.

"And then, like what feels out of fucking nowhere, you're off suicide watch. And I can let you leave on your own. And I can give you your lighter. And I can unlock the cutlery and watch you open the drawer and smile at me like a kid because you can get your own stupid fork and—*Fuck!*" he hides his face in his hands. He was shaking like a leaf. Ilya was crying so much that he could feel the wet spots from tears on his legs. But he didn't take his eyes off of Shane, not for a single second. Shane looks up again, "It has felt—It *feels* like playing a stupid fucking waiting game! Am I going to lose you today? Am I going to lose you tomorrow? The day after?"

"Shane—" Ilya tries.

"And the stupidest fucking thing about all of it is I would do it all over again. Gladly."

"Oh, moy krasivyy mal'chik..." Ilya knows that Shane understood that the words meant my beautiful boy, judging by the slight softness that enters his expression.

With a second of hesitation, Shane continues in Russian, "I mean that, Ilya. If it means you're alive, I would do it a thousand times over."

"I know you do, Shane," he replies in Russian, his heart fluttering. Caresses Shane's cheek, his fingers brushing over his freckles. He continues, still in Russian, disregarding that Francine couldn't understand him, "I know. I'm sorry. I had no idea."

Ilya notices it. He notices the lingering look Shane gives between his legs. He notices the hazy look in his eyes, the parted lips. He waits for Shane to ask. But then, he shakes his head, and pretends nothing ever happened. Ilya's chest hurts.

He parts his lips, wanting to ask himself. Wanting to offer his Shane that comfort. But almost like he notices, he turns away and pours himself water like Ilya had earlier.

"Before I continue, I'm afraid I have to ask for a translation." Francine asks, and Shane does it for him and Ilya feels proud as he hears his husband show off his now near fluent Russian. She nods, thanks him, then continues, "Shane, what you were just describing is not easy to go through, and I am so glad you could find it in yourself to tell Ilya, and me, how overwhelming these past few weeks have been for you." he nods into his sip. "I want you to know that this feeling you describe, is not something that goes away overnight."

"I know."

"It's something you—both of you—work on. That is why I'm glad you've shared it with us." Shane nods. Francine pauses. Then, "Ilya, do you have something to add?"

He thinks for a moment. He looks between his own legs, feels an emptiness that he had not anticipated. He takes a deep shaky breath as emotion hits him all at once. He swears under his breath, “I have always known that it would change a lot between us. I just had not.... *ozhidayemyy?*”

“Anticipated,” Shane answers, easily.

“Ah, yes. Good job.” He should be a little ashamed but he does it to test Shane, to check if it still brings a glint in his eye like it used to. And it does. “I had not anticipated it would be this much.” Francine nods, taking note of something, “I guess I can see how fast of a change it all was.”

“But that’s *good*, though,” Shane says.

“For me, yes. It is nice to light my own cigarette, and close the door when I pee, but—”

“But nothing!”

“Shane, Ilya is trying to meet you halfway.”

Shane closes his mouth and nods, looking at Ilya, “But, I do not like that you are starting to feel useless. Maybe we can figure something out?” he continues, his voice hopeful.

“I think...” he starts. Then stops. Shaking his head. Retreating. Ilya notices it immediately. He moves his thigh flush against Shane’s.

When he looks at him, he smiles gently, “Tell me, sweetheart.”

“Um,” he hesitates again, Ilya’s thigh presses closer, “For a lot of our relationship, you were the one who was... taking care of me?” Shane cringes through the words. Ilya’s heart hurts. “And now I’m sort of used to it being the opposite. If I can—”

“It’s okay,” Ilya says, reflexively. The relief that washes over Shane’s face is subtle, but Ilya catches it. He catches it and he holds on to it.

“It’s not that I feel useless. More like... a fish out of water.” Ilya scrunches his nose and Shane promptly takes to translating it to a Russian equivalent.

“Maybe,” Francine helps, “Help him start feeling like he is useful in different ways.” Ilya nods. Francine notes something down. “Would you like to talk about ways we could do that?”

“How are we doing today?” Francine asks.

“Better,” Ilya answers, “Right, moy lyubov?” Shane nods, his head leaning on the back of the couch. Francine looks at Ilya, questioning, “He is fine, Anya was sick all night last night and we did not get any sleep.”

She nods, “What was wrong with her? I hope nothing serious.”

“No, no,” Ilya shakes his head, “She has a thing for eating the grass in our backyard, but yesterday she was bad and ate too much, then threw up. All night.”

“She did more than throw up,” Shane said, eyes still closed. Ilya smiles at him, unguarded. He taps his leg against Shane’s who—even without looking at Ilya—mirrors the smile on his husband’s face.

Francine purses her lips and nods, “How is she doing now?”

“Good. We dropped her off at Shane’s parents.”

“Okay, I am glad to hear that.” Shane shakes his head and tries to force himself to snap out of his drowsiness. “Are you okay to continue, Shane?”

“Yes,” he answers and she waits for a little longer, so he adds, “I’m good.”

“It’s alright if you need a little more time, I can imagine that last night was stressful.”

He nods, not seeming able to deny that it was, “It was, but we had each other.” Ilya feels his heart warm, he rolls his lips into his mouth and looks down.

That answer seems to satisfy Francine. “As a refresher, last time, we talked about your first few days after Ilya was released from suicide watch, and how it has changed your dynamic for the weeks it has been in effect,” she says as she prepares her iPad to take notes for that day’s session, “And because, like I said last session, it’s a pretty difficult experience for both of you, I have planned for us to discuss it today as well. Maybe from a different perspective, or the same one, that part is up to you.” She pauses, gauging their reactions, then she continues when she gets all she needs, “How does that sound?” Neither of them say anything. “Ilya?”

He hopes that Francine doesn’t notice the way panic shoots through him. “No, thank you.”

And he supposes he shouldn’t be surprised when she doesn’t just let him get away with that answer. Galina never would’ve either. “Alright, is there something else you’d like to talk about?” he shakes his head, “Do you only not want to talk about your suicide watch?”

“We have talked enough about it,” he says, rather defiantly, rather aware that that wasn’t true.

“Ilya,” Shane says softly, Ilya closes his eyes, “Do you not want to talk about it because you don’t want me to hear it?” he only turns to look at him, Shane’s gaze softens further when he meets his eyes. “Ilya...”

“Last night was shit,” Ilya starts, “it was so much stress, but you said it. We had each other.” Shane reaches out, putting his hand on top of Ilya’s, who flips his hand around and threads his fingers between Shane’s. “It is *so* hard. It is so hard to know that we are okay, and we were okay last night, and then have to... ruin it.”

“You wouldn’t—” he starts, then stops, “Why do you think you would be ruining it?”

“It has to make you tired, Shane.” Ilya says, Shane tightens his hand around his. “Hearing about all the ways I am broken.”

“Oh, my Ilya,” Shane whispers. He pulls up his hand, pressing a kiss to the back of Ilya’s hand. Then he flips it in his hand, pressing another to Ilya’s palm, then to each of his fingertips. “You are not broken, baby,” he tightens his hold on his hand when Ilya opens his mouth to object, “And even *if* you were, I would sit here with you and help you put yourself back together.” Ilya can’t help it, he looks down and hides the tears that slip from his eyes. “Tell me everything.”

Ilya squeezes Shane’s hand one last time before letting him go.

Shane lets him, and when Ilya looks up at Francine, he notices a fondness over her features.

“I have been thinking about this,” he says to her, she shifts in her seat, moving closer and signing to him that she was listening, “What you asked me. What suicide watch was like, what I felt,” he continues, “When I was still in therapy with Galina, she used to tell me that naming what I was feeling would help, and then we could go on from there,” Francine nods once, “So, I googled it.”

“You googled it?” Shane says from next to him, amused.

“Not now, Hollander, we get that you speak four languages.”

“Three.”

Ilya rolls his eyes, Francine’s lips twitch. “Helpless,” he says, to which she nods. “Not helplessness. I learned that too. It was very mean what Seligman did to those dogs,” she can’t help but laugh softly at that, Shane seems confused next to him. “I feel helpless.”

“What do you mean when you say you feel helpless, Ilya?”

“For a long time, I could not do anything without Shane over my shoulder. Is weird that now he is not there,” he pauses, “*Gospodi*, am I that mean man’s dogs?”

Francine purses her lips for a moment, “When you want to do something, do you wait for Shane to do it for you?”

“No,” he shakes his head, grimacing.

“You try and do it yourself?”

“Of course.”

“You are not that mean man’s dogs, Ilya.”

Ilya sighs, some relief washing over him. “But it feels weird. Doing things myself.” Francine tilts her head, prompting him to explain, “Is making me realize how much I hated it when Shane had to do it for me.”

“It’s because Shane had to do everything for you, that now you feel helpless?”

Ilya nods, “And I do not want to hate him for it, but it is so hard.”

“So,” Shane interjects, Ilya winces, “you *are* angry with me.”

That, Ilya realizes, is not what he was expecting. He turns to Shane and looks at him with confusion. But Shane was only staring blankly back at him, if not for a swirl of—what looked like, to Ilya—his own anger in his eyes.

“Shane, has Ilya said that he is angry with you?”

Shane is nodding but Ilya is the one to answer verbally with, “No, I haven’t.” The both of them look at each other in confusion.

“Okay,” Francine interjects before either of them bursts, “Seems like some miscommunication has gone on. Shane, when did Ilya say that he is angry with you?”

“I didn’t—”

“Ilya.”

Ilya sat back and folded his hands in his lap. Then unfolded them and wrapped them around himself. It occurred to him that this was the first time that Shane was, at least seemingly, angry with him during their time in therapy together. He didn’t know what to do with himself.

“Weeks ago, Ilya asked you what we would do if someone here was angry with the other person.” Shane answers. It takes Ilya a second, but then it comes rushing in. “And it left me wondering if he resented me for being the one to save him.”

“Wait, *that* is what you mean?” Shane glares at him, “I am not angry with you!”

“Then why would you say that?”

“I was talking about you, Hollander!”

He scoffs, “Fuck you, Rozanov, why would *I* be angry with you?”

“I don’t know, because I tried to fucking kill myself?”

“Why would I be angry at you for that?”

“Because,” he starts, ready to keep shouting at him. And then he took a breath. And then he realized that somewhere during that, Shane had intertwined their fingers together again.

“Because I knew how scared you were of losing me, and I still did it.” Shane’s lip wobbles then, “And then I did not talk to you for six weeks, and I made you think that I was angry with you”

Shane lets go of his hand, putting both of his on Ilya's face and leaning forward. He kisses him softly, Ilya downright melts. "I am not angry with you, Rozanov. I never fucking was."

"Do you promise?"

His laugh sounds like a sob, even if his tears were nowhere to be seen, "I promise. Were you?"

"God, no. Never. Not for a second." Shane nods.

He tries to move away, but Ilya leans into him, signing that he needed him more. Just a little more. Just needed to breathe him in. Remember that he was his Ilya, and he was his Shane.

"You okay?"

Ilya nods in response, "Okay," he says then turns to Francine, "Go."

"So we are on the same page," she begins, "What you, Shane, thought was Ilya implying he was angry with you, was in fact the opposite. Ilya thought you were upset with him because he tried to kill himself, and then neglected to talk to you for six weeks," they both nod, Shane scoots closer to him, "But none of that is true, when it comes to you being angry with one another," they nod, humming in agreement, "I'm glad we could get that cleared up, it seems like it was bothering both of you. If we could, I would like to go back to Ilya's feeling helpless, again?"

"Yes, I am open to questions," Shane elbows him in the side but Ilya only smiles at him.

"Well, my question is for Shane. What do you think about what Ilya shared?"

He clears his throat, "I understand it," he starts, "I maybe expected him to be more angry with me," Ilya bumps his knee, hoping that it conveys the warning to not talk about Ilya or himself like that, "I know it's not my fault, but it still felt..." he trails off. Then he shakes his head, and looks at Francine, "I realize I don't trust him anymore."

Ilya's body stiffens.

"You do not trust him?"

Shane shakes his head, "I want to. I know that I should. But..."

"But you spent two months locking half the house away from me," Ilya finishes for him, Shane frowns, "I can see why that would make you not trust me," he says, and does very little to conceal his feelings on the matter.

"You know that I hate it as much as you do, Ilya, don't be upset."

"I am a little," he admits.

"I understand being upset that Shane does not trust you, Ilya, especially after you expressed to us that you have been feeling helpless," Ilya holds back a shudder as Shane moves away from him again, "But as we have discussed before, this—not being on the same page at

practically every turn is the hard part of up-keeping a relationship after going through a suicide attempt.”

“I had a feeling,” Ilya interrupts, “that he did not trust me.”

“Am I that transparent?”

“I know you.”

“I have a feeling I don’t need to ask if you are ready to take some steps in rebuilding trust, and removing Ilya’s helpless feeling.” Both of them nod in agreement, “We have not talked about this until now, but have either of you heard of behavioral experiments?”

“No,” Shane says.

“Galina mentioned them once but then I…” he trails off and shrugs.

“Alright, that’s okay,” she says, “we can learn together, and then we can create some of them together. How’s that sound?”

“Yes, Shane, I know why I’m here,” Rose says for the third time, “I’m here to help you babysit your husband.”

“Oh fuck off, Landry!” Ilya says from where he was leaning on the kitchen counter.

Rose only turns her head and smiles brightly at him. Shane’s chest warms. They had decided, with Francine, that the best course of action was to start with Rose. It was a safe place to start. Despite the jealousy that Ilya harbored for Rose in the very beginning, it was not long after that he met her. And then realized that Rose was actually really cool and they’d become faster friends than her and Shane had.

And so, she was the first person to test the waters with. Francine had decided that they needed something small to evaluate if they could even handle the other experiments in the first place—what Ilya started calling trial runs, proudly showing off that he *did* know some of the weird English terms—and they landed on spending the day, together, with Rose. Shane found it a little silly, at first, the experiments were so simple in their nature. But he had been buzzing out of his skin with anxiety all of yesterday, and thus, he realized it wasn’t that silly.

“Can I ask? I’m gonna ask. And then we can pretend that nothing happened,” she says, walking over to where Ilya was standing.

Ilya pushes off the counter as she approaches, “You don’t have to pretend nothing happened, Rose. You can ask, and you can keep… not pretending that nothing happened. Is point of today.”

Even from where he was standing, Shane notices the ease that comes over their body languages. “I was very sorry to hear about your attempt. I was even more sorry that I was filming and I couldn’t visit you in the hospital—”

“I am almost glad that you did not. Ask Shane, I was a nightmare,” he looks over Rose’s shoulder at Shane, who was already shaking his head even though she couldn’t see him.

She pushes his shoulder gently, “*And* I hope you are doing better,” she says, “How are you doing these days?”

He gives her a crooked and soft smile—that admittedly, had Shane’s heart fluttering—and says, “I’m working on it.”

“Can I hug you?” Rose says. Ilya nods, and Shane very has no time to warn her before his husband swerves at the last second and grabs Rose by the waist and throws her over his shoulder. She squeals, “You idiot, put me down!”

“Do you like swimming, Rose Landry?”

“Don’t you fucking dare, I have my phone in my pocket!”

Ilya laughs and twists her around so that he’s carrying her in his arms. She wraps her arms around his neck and, despite the cursing at him as he flipped her in the air, she laughs at him, “Good to know that trying to kill yourself did nothing to make you less of an asshole.”

“Asshole?” Ilya pouts, looks at Shane, “Am I being asshole?”

Rose looks at him, glaring, and threatening for him to be on her side. Shane raises his arms, “Don’t bring me in the middle of this.” He shrugs his jacket on, “You said the food is in your car?”

“Backseat, should be unlocked,” she answers, still in Ilya’s arms. “Do you need any help?”

“I’ll be okay, no worries.” Shane walks outside, leaving his husband and best friend to do—what he could only describe as—what menaces do with one another.

A few minutes later, he’s walking back into their house with his arms full. He pauses right before turning the corner when he hears hushed tones. “I’m proud of you,” he makes out the words from Rose’s voice, “I know we fuck around a lot, but, I am really proud of you. And Shane.”

“Yes, and Shane,” Ilya repeats with a laugh. He knows that Rose shot him a look of pity when he hears him clear his throat.

“It must have been really scary for you,” she continues, and Shane recognizes the same comforting tone in her voice that she had when Shane first came out to her all those years ago. He leans his shoulder on the wall. “You must have felt so alone.”

Ilya sucks in a breath, “Yes,” he answers simply, “And maybe it was silly because I had Shane, and the team, too, probably. It did not *feel* like I had them.”

“I don’t think that’s silly.”

After a pause, Ilya continues, "It was scary. And is weird because I do not regret it." Shane closes his eyes, "I am very glad I am still here, and that I survived, that part I do not regret." A pause, "Shane said once that he thinks I resent him for being the one to save me," he hears a soft hiss. Rose. "But I don't. I do not think I ever did, and if I did, it was when I was not thinking clearly. What I really regret is making him feel like that."

"Of course."

"But everything else... Feels wrong to..." he can almost see his husband gesture with his hands as he reaches for the word in English.

"Chastise. It means to punish yourself."

"Yes! It feels wrong to chastise myself for being in a dark place. It was all I felt that I could do, and because of it, it was what I did."

"That makes sense," Rose replies, "I am also very glad you survived."

"And I'm crying *all the time*. It is so embarrassing." Ilya adds and Rose laughs.

That's when Shane decides to turn the corner, feeling icky for having eavesdropped even thus far. Rose was sitting up on the counter and Ilya standing next to her. "Hollander, ask for help, one time in your life." Ilya says, already walking to him to help him carry the things in his arms.

"Can I go call Anya? There's food for her too."

Ilya beams at the notion that Rose had remembered to get something for Anya as well, and then he nods. Rose jumps off and walks away and up the stairs. Ilya turns to Shane, "Okay."

"Okay?"

"How much did you hear?"

Shane smiles, "Not a lot." When he looks up from what he was doing, he sees that Ilya is flitting his eyes across Shane's face. He puts his hand on his face, and leans in to kiss him, "It's *okay*. I am glad you felt you could tell her those things. I really am. And it's also why she is here."

He nods, still tense, "You are not hurt?"

"Not at all."

"You heard that I do not resent you?" he asks, seeming to hope that the answer is yes.

He nods, Ilya's shoulders sag in relief. "I knew you do not resent me. I have known for some time." Ilya smiles, nodding again, and resting his chin on the crook of his neck.

Seconds later, Rose comes back with Anya twirling around her feet. "So what is the plan?" she asks as she digs into the bag where Anya's food was and Ilya disconnects himself from

Shane, “We just eat and... talk?”

Ilya opens his mouth, Shane uses his hand to close it, “Yes. After we can do whatever you want.”

Rose nods, then looks at Ilya, “I wanna hear what Ilya had to say, though.”

“Nothing good—Ah!” he yelps when Ilya bites his hand. “Hey!”

“You are such a pervert, Shane Hollander.” Ilya says and Shane’s hair stands on ends. “I was not going to say anything dirty”

“Are you sure?”

There’s a look on his face then, “Positive.” Shane stares at him, and he really does believe him when he says that. Which was weird. Because there should be no way that his husband wouldn’t just have insinuated something sexual there. Right?

Rose clears her throat. They both look at her, “How about we eat first, and then we think about what to do later?”

“Sounds good,” Ilya says, his smile small. He walks over to the fridge and peers inside, “We have Shane’s ginger ale, Coke... Shane has a well?”

“I don’t even want to know what that means.”

“It means I have a well!” Shane says defensively.

Ilya laughs, his head still inside the fridge, “It means he has a well.”

“He just said ‘stop texting me and go be boring with Pike and his angel wife and kids’,” Shane reads off his phone. Jackie laughs, “Do you think he hates me?” he asks, knowing that it will make her laugh again.

And it does, she lets out a loud laugh, “You are so ridiculous, Shane, just leave the poor guy alone. He’s fine!”

She was right. Ilya was fine, he had given no indication that he wouldn’t be fine. Shane was in Montreal, which was already hours away, *and* Ilya was all alone at their cottage. Well, he was with Anya. But it didn’t really do much to calm Shane’s nerves. Part of him supposed that that was the point, that the entire day was an exercise—no, an experiment—in getting used to being... his own person again. Remind Shane what it’s like being *Shane*, not Ilya’s caretaker, on a level other than conscious.

Ilya and Francine had made him promise not to call his parents to check up on Ilya. And he had promised them, even though he knew even before that that he wouldn’t. That wasn’t the point.

“Uncle Shane, uncle Shane!” he is brought out of his thoughts by Jade and Ruby running up to him and grabbing his hands. “Come look at the deer! He’s so cute!”

“She!” Ruby argues, “It’s a girl deer!”

Jade blows a raspberry at her sister, “No, he’s not, he’s a boy!”

“Uncle Shane!” Ruby whines.

Shane laughs, “If you promise not to fight, we can see the deer *and* we can decide who wins together.”

“You’re going *down!*” Jade says at her sister, before Shane tuts her for fighting again, “Sorry, uncle Shane.”

Later in the day, when he pulls his phone out to look at the time, he feels like ice is poured over him. He had listened to Jackie—and then Hayden—who both pointed out that there was no use in their experiment if Shane was obsessively checking that Ilya was okay every few minutes. He had agreed, because it was true, and pocketed his phone for the last forty three minutes.

Which he now was seeming to regret a little bit. “Shit,”

“Swear jar!” Arthur says, then laughs.

“You’re right, buddy,” Shane says, “Hey, Jackie!” he beckons her over and she joins them, Amber holding her hand and lapping up the ice cream cone in her other hand, “Can you take over for a sec? Ilya called me earlier and—”

“Sure, go for it,” she smiles and immediately shares her attention with Arthur.

His phone rings for all of two seconds before Ilya picks up, “Finally, he remembers he has husband!”

“Shut up, asshole, you’re the one who told me to go be boring.”

He tuts on the other end of the line, “I called *Pike* boring. You and his angel family were not included in that message.”

“Sure, I wasn’t,” he replies with a hum, “What’s up? Why did you call me?” he asks, restraining himself from asking if something was wrong and directing the conversation to a negative space.

“I am looking for my knife.”

It’s an inconspicuous question. Shane knew that Ilya had a favorite knife that he preferred to use, but that knife was still hidden away along with all the other ones. “I am okay, moya zebra. I am making you dinner!”

“Really?” he expresses surprise, skipping over the fact that he had called him a *zebra* of all things.

Ilya scoffs, “I am a good husband, Hollander. You forget.” Shane hums in response, “Now tell me where you put my knife. I am already behind and it’s... four o’clock.” Taking a deep breath, Shane rattles off where *that* knife and the other—sharp—cooking utensils were. “It is unlocked?” he asks, and Shane hears him rummaging on the other end of the line.

“Of course, no locked doors and cupboards in the house. Your request.”

“Good boy.”

Shane closes his eyes, “Fuck, Ilya, not the time.”

His husband has the audacity to laugh, to—he would argue—taunt him, “I am stating the truth.” he says simply, “Ah! Found it! Thank you, sweetheart, tell Jackie I love her!” and the line goes dead.

Despite his earlier anxiety, Shane laughs as he puts his phone back in his pocket. Jackie looks at him quizzically as he walks back, “Ilya says he loves you.”

“So, he’s okay?”

“Couldn’t find the cooking knives. They were still in a cupboard, we haven’t really used them.”

She puts her hand on his shoulder. He expects her to say something pitiful, to sympathize with him, but instead she says, “Take Amber, my arm is tired and I wanna go see the snake habitat.”

“Mommy, no snakes!” Amber says.

Shane grabs her head and pulls her closer into him, “No snakes for you, lovebug, you’re staying with me and Artie.”

“Oh,” she says, wrapping her arms around Shane’s leg, “Okay. Bye, mommy!”

Jackie smiles and blows them a kiss, “Bye, Bambi, bye, Artie,” she says as she walks away. “And bye, Shane!”

Shane smiles as he watches the kids wave goodbye at their mom. “Okay,” he says, “Who wants to see the giraffes?”

“Well, this is fun,” Troy says as he walks into the bathroom where Wyatt was sitting on the toilet as Ilya kneels beside the bathtub and washes his hair. “Is this what a girl’s night is like?”

“That is exactly what Lisa said when she called me earlier” Wyatt answers him.

“Can’t be away from your wife for *one* day?” Troy teases.

Ilya can almost feel Wyatt’s eyes roll, “She called to talk to mop-head over there.” Ilya kicks his leg back and Wyatt kicks *his* leg back. “Dick.”

“Hello, Barrett,” Ilya says, head hanging and fingers lathering up his hair with shampoo. “Nice drive?”

“Stop being weird,” he says as he walks over and leans against the sink.

“Am not being weird!” he says, “I heard you got engaged and did not tell me” Troy seems to stumble over his words behind him. Ilya twists to look at him, “Happy for you, man.”

His shoulders relax, “Thanks,” he smiles, “It doesn’t feel like it’s true.”

Ilya smiles at him again before turning back and continuing to wash his hair, “I felt the same when Shane proposed to me.”

Wyatt taps his leg with his own, “I wish you had felt like you could tell us, back then too.” he says. Instead of answering that, he moves the handheld shower head to rinse out the last of the shampoo. Sensing that Ilya didn’t want to answer his comment, he says, “You done over there?”

Ilya grabs the towel that he had outstretched over at him, “Troy, mind feeding Anya? Her food’s in the far left cupboard in the kitchen.”

“Mix wet and dry? Just like Chiron?” he asks, Ilya nods.

After Ilya dries off the excess water in his hair, they join Troy in the main area. Ilya tries to explain how he wants his hair to Wyatt, he feels almost bashful at how choppy and full of ‘um’s his explanation is but Wyatt seems to understand. “You had it like that the year you left the Bears, no?”

Ilya twists around in the chair they’d set up in the middle of the room, to look at him, “Why do you know that?” Wyatt hesitates, Ilya smirks at him, “Did you have crush on me, Hayes?”

Wyatt grabs his head and turns it back around, “Lisa did,” he whispers, low enough that Ilya almost misses it. He throws his head back as he laughs and Wyatt pushes his head down again, “And then she met you and realized you are a fucking dickhead”

“Oh, you are lying. Your wife loves me. She called you to talk to *me*,” Ilya teases and laughs when Wyatt smacks the side of his head.

“Sorry I’m late!” Luca says, basically barreling into the house. “Stupid Canadian roads, I got a flat like one hour out and turns out I don’t know how to change a tire.”

Troy snickers, “Did you watch a YouTube video in the middle of—”

“Yes!” he says exasperated. Troy laughs loudly. A few seconds later when Ilya hears Anya’s release command and her bark, he knows that Troy had put down her food for her.

“Haasy,” Ilya says, when Luca sits down on the couch, he opens his arms. Luca rolls his eyes but doesn’t seem to hesitate as he walks over and hugs him. Ilya grabs his face and kisses his cheek with a loud ‘mwah’, to which he groans, “Did you get new glasses?”

“Yeah,” he answers, then looks at Wyatt, “Since when can you even cut hair?”

“Don’t sass me when I’m holding scissors, pretty boy,” he teases, snipping the scissors at Luca, who only rolls his eyes. “Okay, Cap, no more moving or I shave your entire head.”

“And your husband is not going to like that,” Troy laughs, sitting on the backrest of the couch and falling backwards to lay down.

“Who knows? Maybe he will!”

“I do not want to be the one to test that theory,” Wyatt positions Ilya’s head again, “Stop moving”

Ilya, despite all odds, behaves after that. Letting Troy, Luca and Wyatt fill the room with conversation—read also: gossip—of everything that happened at the summer camp.

He remembers Shane talking with, or rather, *at* him about it, in the weeks that Ilya was nonverbal. He remembers Shane rambling on and on about how everyone was telling him that it would be okay to cancel it, but that he didn’t want to, and felt that Ilya didn’t want to either. That he felt bad that this would be the first time they couldn’t go, but it was the reason of *why* they couldn’t go that was also why he didn’t want to cancel it.

He remembered agreeing with that, reaching out and squeezing his leg, to sign that he did. How could you miss your own summer camp that raises money for suicide prevention because your husband was at home on suicide watch after attempting? It made no sense. Shane had understood what the gesture had meant, so, the camp went on as planned. Harris, Wyatt, Scott and Yuna were placed as acting leaders of the camp activities. Shane had said all went well.

Or, at least, went about as smoothly as it usually did.

“This poor kid, went up to Hunter afterwards, and told him that she was scared that it would get her kicked out.”

“What?” Ilya said, finally, “She thought that getting caught kissing a girl would get her kicked out of the camp created by the queer hockey players?”

“Ilya,” Troy said. Ilya immediately understood. It had nothing to do with him and Shane and all the other queer players that were there. It had to do with everything that happens in the fucking world.

“You’re right,” he relents, “I just wish I could have been there too,” he explains.

Wyatt squeezes his shoulder once before going back to snipping at his locks. “Scott talked to her parents and set her up with a therapist that works with the Foundation.”

“And as shitty as it was, it seemed to at least help them clear their heads, she told Haasy that they were, her words, *finally* girlfriends three days later.”

“Yay for lesbians!” Ilya pumps his fist in the air.

“I’ll allow that, now *stop* moving.”

“I have not moved in twenty minutes, Hayes,” he rolls his eyes.

“Then,” he answers, “stay still for just five more. I’m almost done.”

“Hey, Wy?” Troy starts. Wyatt just points to the direction of the bathroom, seeming to immediately know what he was going to ask. “Yes! You’re the fucking man!” he gets up and runs to the bathroom.

Wyatt moves to the front of Ilya, beginning to cut the hair that’s framing his face. “Stop looking at me like that,” Wyatt says, not looking away from his hair. “You don’t have to thank me, Ilya.”

“How did you know?”

“I know that look.”

Ilya hums, “Therapy’s good for you, Hayes.”

Wyatt snorts, cutting more of Ilya’s hair. “Has nothing to do with that,” he says softly. Then rolls his eyes when Ilya pinches his fingers between them, signing that it did a little bit.

“Luca, mind grabbing a broom so we can clean up this mess?”

“You act like I know where it is,” he says standing up.

But he’s already walking in the direction of where it is, Ilya smiles and looks at Wyatt again, “He knows where it is.”

“Of course, he does. Shane would never change the organization system in this house.”

Ilya laughs, “I am lucky he even let me move in.”

Like they had willed him into existence, Anya bolts it to the front door when it opens. “Hello, big girl!” he hears Shane voice carry as he walks into the room, surely with difficulty as Anya jumps up at him. He had been gone for hours now, but Anya always acted like she had been abandoned forever when either of them spent any time away from her. “Oh, what is going on here?”

“If you hate it, it’s because he kept moving,” Wyatt says, Ilya gasps in offense, “And if you love it, it is only because I’m good at what I do.”

Shane laughed as he leaned over and kissed Ilya’s cheek then reared back to look at him, “You are good at what you do, Hayes.” He heads to the kitchen to leave the bags of groceries he had bought on his way back. Ilya, admittedly, had no idea where he had been all day, but

that was a little by design. “Luca,” he hears him say and then hears a big loud kiss on the cheek and Luca groaning again. “Didn’t know you were here too.”

“Yes, I am here, can you two stop acting like my mother?” he complains. They move into Ilya’s view and he sees Shane grab his jaw and squeeze, making him swat his hand away. “Troy is asking for towels in the bathroom, go deal with him, please.”

Shane looks at Wyatt and him, “Since when is my home the private Centaurs hairdresser?”

“My home?” Ilya says and Shane rolls his eyes, flipping him the bird.

“One time only, Hollander, one time only,” Wyatt answers, grabbing Ilya’s chin and moving him around to admire his work. “Do you have a hair dryer? Of course you do, you pampered diva,” he answers before Ilya can, “Dry your hair and tell Troy to get his ass in my chair before I change my mind.”

“There’s already articles about you being here,” Dykstra skates up to where Shane was with Bood. He had his glove tucked under his arm and was holding his phone. “*Shane Hollander makes first appearance to Centaurs preseason practice, after weeks of being a no-show.* Creative.” He rolls his eyes and opens his mouth to continue.

He interrupts before he can keep reading, “Why do you have your phone?”

Bood rolls his eyes, “Lighten up, Cap.”

“It’s literally my job”

He ignores that, and continues, “And I figured those vultures would immediately assume shit. Can you believe they still think Roz and Hollzy are divorced?”

Shane goes to speak again but Coach Wiebe cuts in, yelling across the rink, “Dykstra! No phones during practice!” Dykstra turns to them to wink and then skates away to hand off his phone.

“Bood,” Shane starts, “Just gonna say it now since Ilya isn’t here yet,” he says, Bood furrows his brows, “Try to not talk about the divorce rumors,” he pauses, “*Touchy* subject,” he says, throwing him a look that he hopes Bood can interpret just how touchy it all was.

“Oh, shit. Sorry,” he cringes, “I’ll let the team know too.”

“Thanks.”

“Of course, man. You’re family, you know that.” Shane smiles.

Then, turns his head when someone whistles (loudly) at him. Coach Wiebe is standing by the entrance to the rink, already beckoning him over when he looks. “Hey, Coach?”

“Haven’t gotten the chance to talk to you all day,” he starts, “You feelin’ alright, kid?”

Shane breathes out a laugh, “No need for that, Coach.” he tells him but Wiebe just looks at him. “I’m alright. Today was good. Fun. It was nice to train with the team again.” he nods, “And Ilya’s coming to pick me up and you can talk to him too, if you want.”

Wiebe keeps looking at him, “You lyin’? About bein’ alright.”

“No, sir. I’ve got no reason to.”

“Skates off, I wanna talk to you,”

Shane sighs and nods. He turns back to the team while Wiebe walks away. “Rookie!” he calls out, “Stop weighing too much on your left knee!”

He can barely hold his laugh back when Chouinard taps his stick on his helmet and chides, “Told you!”

About ten minutes later, he’s out of his gear and into his normal clothes, and walking into Coach Wiebe’s office. He’s already in there, leaning on his desk, arms wrapped around himself, “Coach.”

“Hollander. Please, sit.” He complies and sits on one of the arm chairs. A few seconds later, Wiebe sits opposite him. “How is Ilya?”

He purses his lips, “He’s doing better. Really,” he adds when Wiebe raises his brows, “We’re in therapy together, he finished his solo sessions a while back. We’re working on it every day and...”

“Be honest with me, Hollzy.”

“It’s fucking hard, Coach, trust me. But we really are working on it.”

He nods, believing him, “I hate to ask this question. Can you start the season?” He doesn’t hesitate when he shakes his head. “Okay. I expected that, but management—”

“I understand,” Shane tells him, “It’s possible I can come around end of January. Depends on Ilya. But I am not counting on it... It’s... a lot.”

He nods, “Okay.” Then he adds, “Don’t feel pressured. You can take the entire year off. To hell with playoffs.”

Shane laughs, “The boys can make it to playoffs even without me.”

“Oh, they can make it without you,” he says, then smiles, “But we’d love it even more if it was *with* you.” he pauses, for a second, then adds “And Rozanov.” Shane can’t hide his surprise, and it makes Wiebe laugh. “It would be, probably, one of the only times it has ever happened, but seeing the special circumstances of Ilya’s retirement, he can come back to the team. If he wants to.”

“Next year?”

He nods his head with a roll of his eyes, “Yes, next year, Roz is good, but he’s not *that* good. He would take this season to prepare, and he could be back by next year.”

“That.... holy shit.”

Coach laughs, “It’s why I asked you here. You can bring it up to Roz yourself. If you think it’s a good choice, if it’s something he’d want.”

“Okay. Thanks, Coach. For...” he thinks, “talking to me first. Even just proposing that Ilya could come back if he wanted to.”

After leaving the office, Shane hears Ilya before he sees him.

Harris looks up from where Ilya is blabbering Russian love poems at Chiron, “Your husband keeps talking Russian at my dog, Shane.”

Ilya looks over too, a smile breaking open on his face, “Moy uyutnyy mishka!” *My cozy bear.*

Shane rolls his eyes, “He’s waxing poetic, is all,” he says to Harris, who furrows his brows, “Seriously. He was rattling off a love poem.”

“You know poems by heart?”

Ilya ignores him, “Wax poetic?” he repeats at Shane. “Your language is so weird.”

When he stands up, Shane notices that he already had his bag on his shoulder. He grabs Shane’s face and kisses him before he can say anything. When he pulls away, he says, “How was practice? Fun?”

He nods, “So fun.”

“My hockey obsessed husband got to play with his friends.”

“They’re your friends too, asshole.”

He pecks his lips again, “We are getting ice cream on the way home.”

“It’s October,”

“We are in *Ottawa*,” he rolls his eyes, “Plus, is good for immune system. Make lungs strong.”

Shane laughs, “And people thought this country would make you less Russian.”

Sometimes, it didn’t take much to push you over the edge. Sometimes, you couldn’t help *but* cry over the spilled milk. Even if you knew it was useless, that it wouldn’t fix anything. Shane knew that feeling well, he had experienced it more than a handful of times in his life. He, hesitantly, would even say he missed it now that he wasn’t able to cry.

But, that didn't mean he also hated it any less when he found Ilya sitting on the floor of their kitchen, back resting on the cupboards, crying.

"Ilya?"

He snuffles and shakes his head.

Shane takes a seat on the floor next to him, "What's going on?"

"Nothing. Is fucking stupid."

"It's not," he says softly. "Tell me what's wrong."

Ilya huffs in frustration, "I dropped my spoon."

"Okay..."

His husband looks at him, tears streaming down his cheeks, "That's it. Dropped my fucking spoon."

"Oh, Ilya," Shane says softly, wrapping his arm around him and pulling him close. "It's alright."

"Is not. Is a fucking—" he stops, taking a breath, "Is not about the spoon."

Shane shakes his head, "No. It's not about the spoon."

Ilya nuzzles himself closer into Shane's collarbone. He moves the leg closer to Shane so it's laying over Shane's. Periodically, he raises his hand to wipe at his tears. Shane could see the infamous spoon about a bit away from Ilya.

"I'm sorry, Shane."

"Don't apologize."

Ilya hums dismissively, "It has been months, and for so many days, I thought..." he takes a breath, "I thought I was doing better. Finally. It is over," Shane rubs his arm up and down Ilya's bicep, "And today. Today, I drop a fucking spoon." He turns his head towards it and kicks it away with his leg.

Within seconds, Anya is skidding across the floor and taking the spoon in her mouth. For what it's worth, it makes Ilya laugh, "Anya, drop it." Shane says, she whines but obeys. She walks over, sniffs around Ilya, then sets down her chin on his lap and lays down.

"Moya khoroshaya devochka," he mutters. *My good girl*. He takes a deep breath, "Is pathetic, yes? Nothing happened. Was a good morning."

"Mmm," Shane shakes his head, "I think—I *know* that it's very normal."

"Very," Ilya repeats, disbelieving .

He nods then, “Galina told you, did she not?”

Ilya doesn’t answer that.

“Do you want me to tell you that it’s alright to feel like this? Do you want to hear it?”

Ilya shakes his head, moving closer into him, as if to say that he already knew. He already knew because Shane hadn’t reacted in any way but understanding him and welcoming his feelings. He keeps stroking Anya’s ears with his thumb. The tears stop a few minutes later, judging that he stops raising his other hand to wipe them away. Shane sits in silence with him. It’s not a task by any margin or measure. He had already mentally cancelled everything else he had to do today so he could sit with his husband.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Shane turns his head and presses a kiss to his curls.

He sniffs a few moments later, “I am better.”

“You sure?”

He leans forward, Anya moves her head and looks up at him. “No,” he answers. The honesty sends flutters through Shane, even if the answer is not ideal. “Is just today.”

Shane smiles.

“You know?” Ilya says after a pause, one that was imaginably filled with an explanation.

“Yeah. You dropped a spoon.”

Ilya takes a deep breath, nods, and smiles warmly at Shane.

Ilya vaguely recalls the first time he met Shane’s parents.

It was a day with so many emotions that it didn’t take long for it to become a blur in Ilya’s mind. Especially with the contrasting experience Shane had had that same day. He imagined it felt a lot like he felt right now.

Under scrutiny.

A breath held tightly inside, with trepidation.

“Ilya?” he hears Yuna say. He raises his head from where he was resting it on top of his car, needing to take a moment before facing Shane’s parents. She was standing on the steps of their cottage—which was still not a cottage, but more of one than Ilya and Shane’s—and she had her hand over her mouth. “Oh my god, *Ilya*.”

Then, followed the understanding.

A breath let out slowly, with relief.

“Yuna,” he replies, already walking over to her. She all but stumbles over the stairs and crushes him with a hug.

“Oh my god, Ilya, you’re here,” she says, and it sounds so much like she’s saying it to herself that he doesn’t feel obligated to answer. She pulls out of the hug after a few moments, putting her hands on his face. “You’re... God, you look so beautiful, Ilya,” she laughs, “I don’t know if it’s just because I am so happy you’re here.”

“You are?” he says, containing the need to cringe at how small his voice sounds.

She blows out a startled laugh, “Of course I am, darling. I am so happy,” she pushes his curls back. And Ilya realizes he’s crying just as hard as she is. “I am so sorry. I’m so sorry that I was not there for you.”

He’s already shaking his head before she can finish her sentence, “No, you do not have to apologize. I did not *want* anyone there for me.” She frowns. And Ilya is overcome with more need to cry, “I thought you were so mad at me,” he whispers through a broken sob.

“Oh, Ilya,” she whispers, pulling him in for another hug, his head resting on her shoulder. His neck and back were bent at an awfully uncomfortable position but he did not want to move. Not ever. “I was never mad at you. I promise, I was never mad at you.”

He sobs, “I let you and David down,”

She hugs him tighter, “You did not let us down, Ilya, I promise. On my life. On Shane’s.”

At that, he pulls away quickly. Needing to look into her eyes as he said the next words. “I did not want to hurt him. I never want to hurt him. And—” he sobs again, “And I did when I—”

“Shh, stop it. You were hurting. Okay?” she pauses until he nods once, “Don’t apologize for Shane, don’t apologize for anything. You did not let me or David down, you did not disappoint us. I promise we are only happy that you are here, you are *alive*, you are doing better,” she tells him, “Hear me?” he nods, “You’re our son, too, Ilya. You know that.”

He nods again.

She smiles at him, wipes his tears. “No more crying. We got it out of our system. Right?”

He snorts at that, shaking his head, “A little longer.”

“Sure, but only a little,” she pinches her fingers between them, “I made your favorite for dinner.” He hums in thanks, closing his eyes and moves closer to hug her again.

A few minutes later, she wipes his tears again, and together, they walk into the house.

David is engulfing Ilya in another hug within seconds of them walking in. Ilya had believed Yuna when she assured that they were not mad—tentatively, but she, of all people, wouldn’t lie to him—but with David’s arms around him, he was *sure* that they were only happy.

“Ilya—” Yuna starts, David pulls back to look at his wife, “thinks that we are mad at him.”

David whips his head to look at him, brows furrowed, “What ever for?”

“For...” he trails off, and it seems to be enough for David to understand what he implies. He frowns. “I am sorry, for what it is worth.”

David scoffs, but it doesn’t feel scrutinizing, “Son, you don’t have to apologize. I appreciate it but,” he squeezes Ilya’s arms, “You are still part of this family. You always will be. *This?*” he pauses, putting his hand over Ilya’s heart briefly, “does not undo that.”

“Starting to see that.”

“Good. Because it’s true.” He says it with so much finality that he has no choice but to nod in agreement. Then, he’s being hugged again. This time, by both of them.

“We only have a bit because the food is getting cold.” Ilya laughs softly, “I love you, and that is why I will not have your first dinner back with us be *cold*.”

It was a strange feeling, he realized as he followed them into the room, but he welcomed it with open arms anyway.

Moments later, they’re sitting around the dining table and talking. Actually talking. They didn’t talk about his suicide attempt, or Shane, or their therapy. They talked about hockey, and David’s job, and the puzzles he had finished recently, and more hockey. Ilya was relieved. He was even more relieved because he knew that Shane did not instruct them to do so, because if anything, he would’ve done the opposite and encouraged them to bring it up if they wanted to talk about it.

After Ilya helps clearing the table, David all but pulls him to his study. “What is—” he stops when he sees what is on the table.

David smiles softly at him, “Do you want to continue it, or do you want to start a new one?”

He could barely believe his fucking eyes. On the table, laid out like it had not been touched in months—which it probably hadn’t—was the puzzle that Ilya and David had been doing together last time they saw each other.

“David, what... you...”

He seems to understand what Ilya is trying to say, because he shakes his head, “I did not finish it, no. We started it together.”

“But you...”

“I could’ve,” he nods, “But I didn’t want to. Not without you.” Ilya feels his eyes burning, and it only takes one blink of his eyes for the tears to roll down his cheeks. “So, what do you say?”

He nods before he can muster up the power to talk, “We can finish it.”

“Good,” David wraps his arm around him, pulling him in for a quick but tight side hug, “Let’s get started, eh?”

Svetlana Vetrova was a force to be reckoned with. She always had been.

That’s what Ilya told Shane. And Shane believed it, based on the everything about her. She had smiled when telling him not to get on her bad side, to not hurt Ilya, and it made the threat all the more scarier.

Shane *loved* her.

He really did adore her, and having her in their lives. He was unbelievably happy that Ilya had someone like her. Ilya deserved someone who loved him so fiercely, Shane only wished he could hold a candle to the example Svetlana set—and it wasn’t even a wish made in jealousy, nor one made in insecurity. It was just the truth. Svetlana, according to Shane, was the best person in Ilya’s life.

He wasn’t surprised when Ilya had asked that whatever he ends up doing with Svetlana is last. He wasn’t surprised because, sure, Sveta was *very* protective of him, but that meant that she also handed his ass to him more than anyone else. But it wasn’t about that, even if he said so. It was about the fact that he hurt her.

When Shane walks inside, he leans down to pick up Anya in his arms. He takes a deep breath, thankful that Anya was tired enough that she didn’t thrash in his arms.

“Husband?” he hears Ilya say. He rolls his eyes fondly as he walks into the main room of the house.

Then.

He stops dead in his tracks.

“What...” he looks at the amount of things in the kitchen, spilling over into the living room. “What is going on?”

“We are making—” he motions around with his hand, looks at the kitchen.

Svetlana stands up, her hands covered by yellow rubber gloves, “Pickled vegetables, Ilya!” she says, her accent thick as she waves annoyedly at Ilya.

“Da, that!” he points at her and looks at Shane.

“And... okay.” he looks around at the plastic barrels, the bags of various vegetables—namely cucumbers, peppers, cauliflower, unripe tomatoes, carrots—and then at the kitchen island where another two plastic bags sat. Shane realizes as he looks that he has no idea how you *make* pickled veggies. “Do you need help, or?”

“Nyet,” Svetlana says, opening the bag and pulling out jars of black pepper and two bottles of vinegar, setting them on the counter, “We had a very good day, Shane,” she says, and he

smiles widely. “Very fun. And Ilya mentioned he misses pickled cauliflower. So, we went out, we got things. We are making pickled cauliflower. This is us activity.”

“You’re making way more than just cauliflower,”

Ilya rolls his eyes, “Ay, solnyshko, go give Anya bath and let us do the work!” Shane doesn’t argue with that.

About an hour later, Anya is washed and dried, and had already tucked herself under the sheets on his and Ilya’s bed. He could hear her snoring softly as he changed. He could also hear the clamoring and chaos in the kitchen.

When he walks into the main area, he does so quietly enough that neither of them notice him. He can’t help but stand there, arms wrapped around himself, and watch them as they moved around the kitchen. Svetlana making the water concoction for the pickled veggies, Ilya walking around and carefully picking out what veggie to put next into the plastic barrels; occasionally going over to Sveta and teasing her about doing it wrong, muttering about how his mom did it, followed by her muttering about how *her* mom did it. They were discussing in Russian, they spoke comfortably, they laughed, they had visible no stress inside their bodies.

And Shane.

Shane felt it brewing in his stomach.

There was no part of him that ever was jealous of Svetlana. The night when Ilya had offered to marry her had been the first and last time he had done so, and even then, it was not real. Ilya’s offer was not real. It was the perfect offer to walk the line they were toeing.

But he could see it now. Ilya and Svetlana. The Rozanov’s. Whatever that meant.

It is juvenile and he knows it. He knows it is, because Ilya had told him that Sveta and him were never *romantic*. They were *convenient*. They loved each other deeply but never the way that Ilya loved him, the way Shane loved him back. Shane was not jealous. This was not about thinking that Ilya would ever choose Sveta—or *anyone*—over him. This was about the life that Ilya could’ve had. And it just so happened that Shane was seeing a life where Sveta got him instead.

And Shane spiraled.

And spiraled further.

Further.

Until he got to the point that felt inevitable in hindsight. The point where he wondered if Ilya would’ve even attempted to commit suicide if it had been *Svetlana* instead.

It is a horrible, disgusting, no good thought. And Shane knows it.

“Sweetheart, can you—” he stops. Shane can only hear him, he’s deeply aware that his eyes are still glossed over. That his head is still reeling from visions—or rather, imaginations. Ilya mumbles to Svetlana to give him a moment and then he’s in front of Shane. “Moy lyubov, what is going on?”

“I—” he shakes his head.

“Breathe for me,” he says gently, hands hovering over his arms, scared to touch. Shane reaches out and loops his fingers under Ilya’s shirt, an invitation for him to touch Shane. His body relaxes when Ilya’s hands grasp onto him. “You are okay. I love you. You’re okay.”

Shane nods, closing his eyes, his lungs opening up, “I am okay.”

“Is this about—”

Shane doesn’t let him finish before he says, “I don’t know.”

He does know.

Svetlana is right there.

“Sveta does not care, Shane, tell me.”

He shakes his head. “It is a bad thought. I will not say it.”

“Bad,” Ilya repeats, “What does bad mean?”

“Not true. Brain being mean to me. Not fucking true.” Ilya squeezes his hands on Shane’s arms, “I’m fine, I promise. You’re here,” he looks at Ilya, directly into his eyes, even if it makes his skin crawl just a little, “I love you, and you’re here.”

Something clicks for a second in his eyes. Shane isn’t sure if it’s the right thing, if Ilya understands, if he *could* figure this one out. But his heart still flutters at the softness that enters his eyes. “Is it…”

“Kind of. It’s bad.”

Ilya huffs a breathless laugh, “Yes, you said that. Tell me anyway. Brain is mean to me all the time.”

“It really is stupid, Ilya, I’m not just saying that,” Shane tells him, Ilya throws him a look. “Okay, fine, fine. I was thinking how maybe you wouldn’t have attempted to commit if it hadn’t been me. If it had been someone else.”

“If it had been Sveta,” Ilya adds, Shane shrugs, “Wait, this is about being jealous?”

Shane can’t help but laugh, even as he sees Svetlana walks up to them, her yellow gloves gone. “No. God, no.” He notices her shoulders slump in relief. “I was just thinking that if a life with someone else—with Sveta—meant that it would’ve been easier for you, I would’ve gone back and picked that life for you.”

“Easier,” he breathes, “Wow.” Svetlana attempts to hide her smile behind her hand. “Wow, Hollander. You are so romantic.”

“Shut up, Rozanov,”

“Sweetheart, you know it doesn’t work like that?” Shane rolls his eyes and nods, “What if is not good for you. For us.”

“I know that. I said it’s stupid.”

“Honestly inclined to agree.”

“Sveta, pozhaluysta,” *Please*. He glances at her, but she only smiles, amused. “Who I am with had—*You* had nothing to do with it, you know this. I am *sick*. That is it.”

“No need to dwell,” Svetlana adds. Ilya glances at her, “What? I’m helping!”

He’s rolling his eyes as he looks back at Shane, which makes him smile, “You’re right. *Both* of you.”

“Don’t give her credit.” He laughs when she leans forward and hits his arm. “You are okay?” He nods in reply. Ilya leans forward, pressing a quick kiss on Shane’s lips, then another on his cheek. “Love you,” he says softly, “Now come help us make pickles.”

“Pickled *vegetables!*” Sveta corrects, visibly annoyed.

Shane laughs, “She’s right, there’s way more than just pickles there.”

“Oh, whatever, English is so stupid,” he rolls his eyes, “Come help us pour water over first batch.”

Shane was looking at him.

They had briefly gone over each of the experiments, discussed all they had learned, all the trust they had rebuilt. Shane told Ilya that he was sorry, scratched that, then said he was glad that he felt like he had their relationship back. Their *real* relationship back, not just a flimsy excuse of one, a facade that was waiting to break at the first sight of an obstacle. Ilya mirrored the sentiment, told him it was nice to feel like them again, too. To feel that there was trust again, and not just *say* that there was. It was lovely; it was darling, even.

And then Ilya turned to Francine and said the magic words.

“We’re not having sex.”

So, Shane was looking at him. His eyes were wide, and his lips were slightly parted. He had not seen it coming, and to Ilya, *that* was surprising. Their entire relationship had been built on sex. They had a different foundation now, sure, a better one, definitely, but that didn’t mean that they could *ignore* this. They could and did ignore it for a long time, but it had gotten to a point.

“Alright,” Francine said, evenly, “When was the last time you had sex?”

Ilya looks at Shane. He knew his answer, but he knew that Shane needed a push. And if he didn’t push, Shane would spend the better part of the conversation denying that it was an issue at all. “Ilya, I hardly think—”

“Answer the question, sweetheart.”

Shane pouts but he obeys, falling into thought. Ilya could point out the millisecond that it occurs to him. “I don’t remember,” he says in horror, looking at Ilya, glancing Francine, “Fucking hell, Ilya, I don’t *remember*, what—?”

Ilya puts his hand on Shane’s thighs, “I don’t either. It was less than year ago, but more than six months. It is all I know.” He says then turns to Francine, “It is very weird for us. Sure, I was on suicide watch, but...”

“Even with that, it’s been a while. You were taken off suicide watch almost four weeks ago,” Shane points out.

“And it is not that we don’t go that long without having sex, we have gone longer,” Ilya explains, pausing briefly when Shane brings his other hand and starts to draw patterns on Ilya’s palm, “For seven years, we were.... casual”

“We were hooking up. Non exclusively.”

“You were exclusively,” Ilya points to Shane, who rolls his eyes, “What? You were!”

Francine was gentle as she cleared her throat, “So, for a lot of your relationship you were only having sex with one another,”

“After we started dating—”

Shane adds, “And you moved to Ottawa.”

Ilya nods, “We did not go more than... two months. Three, at most.”

Francine picks up her pencil and writes what Ilya assumes is the timeline down, then she looks at them again, “And when Shane moved to Ottawa?”

“Three days was abnormal. There was at least something.”

“That changed when Ilya retired.”

Ilya clears his throat, “A lot changed when I retired.”

Francine’s mouth twitches, nodding gently. “This situation is something that is concerning to you because it’s unusual for you. Being together, back under normal parameters, if we can call them that?” she says, they both nod, “And not having sex. Is it a complete absence of—”

“Nothing.” Ilya finishes for her.

“Alright,” she writes something down again, “Is there a reason you can think of for this absence of a sexual life?”

Shane leans back, he is frowning when Ilya looks at him. He squeezes his hand around one of Shane’s, feeling him relax under the touch. “Okay?” he asks, gently. He nods. “Words, Shane.”

“Okay.” Ilya squeezes his hand again, then looks at Francine. “Our.... *dynamic* during sex is a little more complicated than...” he trails off

“Safe space, Ilya, remember that.”

“I am in control,” he says quickly, “I take care of Shane. He does what I ask.”

Shane drops his head in his hand, “It’s a little more nuanced than that, Ilya.”

Ilya looks down, pulling at his fingers. He doesn’t notice his own leg bouncing until Shane taps him on the thigh to stop him. “Okay well. It is weird to be so...” he motions with his hands, searching for the word in space, “clinical.”

“Does this feel clinical?”

“A little bit.”

She hums, shifting in her seat, “Anything we can do to help with that, Ilya?”

“I think,” Shane speaks instead, and he notices Francine look at him for permission for Shane to takeover. “It’s the wording that’s tripping you up.” Ilya looks at him. “You saying you have control, that I do what you ask. It’s oversimplified and it makes it sound a little harsh. But.... I’m gonna use the same wording?” Francine nods at his question, before he looks back at Ilya. “But I want you to be in control, baby, I *love* it when you are. When I don’t have to think, because I know you’re there.” Ilya softens. “It makes me feel safe. *You* made me feel safe.”

Ilya nods, taking a second to hide behind his hands and compose himself. “You are right,” he says finally.

When he looks at Francine, she takes it as the invitation it is to speak. “We’re good?” she asks, they nod, “Alright, awesome, I’m glad. It sounds like the dynamic you two share in your sex life requires a lot of trust.” She says it and Ilya is sure by the look on her face that she catches both their surprise. “Have you considered the aspect of trust?”

“I know we trusted each other,” Shane says, Ilya feels him looking at him but keeps his eyes on his hands in front of him, “I had never thought that it was the reason why we had the sex we did...”

“It was so immediate,” Ilya supplies.

“Yes. Yes, I agree. It was so intrinsic to trust Ilya, for me at least,” Ilya raises his hand, seconding that it was the same for him with Shane, “that it never... occurred to me that you

take that away and...”

Ilya expects Francine to say something after Shane trails off. There wasn't much to say anymore. They weren't having sex because they didn't trust each other.

Now they did. Problem meet fix. There was no problem.

Then, Shane speaks. And he realizes that, as per fucking usual, it's not that fucking simple.

“It was the second week, I think, that you were back home. You were still not talking to me but I was watching you as you sunbathed,” Shane starts, playing with his fingers. Ilya reaches his hands out. Shane smiles as he takes his hand and plays with Ilya's fingers instead. “You were so beautiful. There was also that feeling that you were *there*. Two weeks ago you were getting IV drips to clean up your tox screen and—” he shakes his head, like he was shaking the thought out of his brain, “And then you were naked, on the lawn in our backyard, Anya was with my parents still, and you were...” Shane doesn't finish the sentence but Ilya feels him shiver, “Sorry, Francine” he says to her, she only slightly raises her hands, signifying that it was all okay, “It was the first time that I felt like I wanted to have sex with you after the suicide attempt.

But as soon as I had the thought. The thought that—” he looks over at Francine, Ilya snorts softly. He'd have to ask about it later. Sometime. One day. “I realized that... well how were you going to take care of me when you couldn't take care of yourself?” he says. It's such a truth, it's the whole entire truth. It feels so refreshing to hear that Ilya doesn't even notice that Shane feels bad for saying it. “I'm sorry, I—”

“No, no,” Ilya stops him, “You're right. That is a real thought.”

Shane smiles briefly, “God, this is gonna sound so fucking mean, but you weren't all there. You were still recovering and... I knew for certain that my brain wasn't going to trust you to take care of my body the way you used to before.” Ilya nods, certain, agreeing. “It didn't feel safe for me. And I didn't want to do something and half-ass it.”

“Shane, have never half-assed anything, especially our sex life,” Ilya says, making him blush. “Makes sense why you pushed away that thought. You would not have felt safe to drop, I would've felt inadequate,” he pauses, looking at Shane.

“Big word,” he says fondly,

“Right? But yes, I would've felt inadequate, we would have fought, boom, it's shit.”

“Even more shit,” Shane corrects.

Ilya motions to him with his hands, “Exactly.” He reaches out, cradling Shane's jaw in his hand. Shane melts into his touch, “It must've been really hard for you, malysh,” he whispers.

“Right, so, Shane,” they both turn to look at her, “you did not feel safe enough to be taken care of by Ilya because of the events that preceded and it was a big reason why you haven't initiated having sex with Ilya in the past weeks. Ilya, it seems you're pretty okay with this?”

“Da, I want him to feel safe with me,” he answers, “and it is valid why he did not feel that he would be safe.”

“This past week or so, I think you...” Shane trails off.

Ilya cradles his jaw in his hand again, “I have noticed,” he says softly, “Is okay?” Shane nods. “Because our trust has been coming back, Shane has been... getting close to dropping.”

“Dropping?”

“Totally different headspace when we have sex,” Shane says, motioning around his head.

Francine nods, Ilya continues, “I do not want to get graphic, but there is certain things I say or do, that make Shane feel a little hazy because it implies that I take over.”

“Okay, I understand. This has been happening more during your behavioral experiments?” She hums when they both nod, “What does this mean for your sex life?”

“I think it means that we want to,”

“I agree that this means you two both want to, especially since nothing has happened to cause you to turn away from having sex categorically. But just because you want to, it does not translate to both of you being ready. Shane, since this seems to have been a bigger subject with you, what do you feel?”

“And it is okay if you are not ready.” Ilya assures.

After a few minutes of silence, Shane answers, “It stresses me out.”

“What does?” Francine asks. Ilya almost commends her for how gentle she sounds.

“This. Thinking about the next time we’re going to have sex.”

Ilya puts his hand on his leg, “why?”

“Because it feels like a big deal,” he admits. “It feels like when you came up to my hotel room for the first time and I had never been with a man, and you *had* and—” Shane shakes his head, “I don’t like how big of a deal it feels like.”

“I will not lie,” Ilya starts, Shane meets his eyes that were brimming with tears, “it is a big deal.” He puts his hand on Shane’s face, then drops it down to the side of his neck, “But you are not going to be alone. You were not alone back in that hotel room either, and you’re even less alone now.”

Shane nods, seeming more relaxed, then turns the other way to pour himself some water.

“Ilya,” Francine says, while he does that, “Do you feel ready to have sex?”

He pauses.

In theory, of course she would ask that. But he had never considered that he's also part of this conversation. The 'are you ready to do this' conversation. And he realized, he didn't *know*. "Are you okay?" Shane asks, and it makes him realize just how long he had been silent for.

"I don't know."

"If you're okay?" Francine asks,

He shakes his head, "If I'm ready."

"Okay," she nods, smiling warmly, "That's okay. I have a proposition," she starts, "And it might seem obvious, but, you don't *have* to have sex." Ilya furrows his brows and rears back. "You do not have to go 'all the way'," she mimics with air quotes, "You can start slow. It might—and I suspect it will—remove the apprehension. You will take small steps, we can discuss those specifics as well, if you would like, but the major outline is to take it one step at a time, one little thing at a time, and communicate."

"So," Ilya starts, "If I am understanding, we do not have sex. We start with, I do not know, making out. Hand stuff. Whatever."

"Yes, precisely."

Ilya looks at Shane. "That sounds good to me."

Shane hears Ilya walk into the house. He had gone out on the back garden with three blankets a few hours ago, telling Shane that he wanted to watch the stars and moon for a while. He had walked over, kissing Shane fervently before leaving.

Since then, Shane had started watching his second movie of the night.

"Oh, *Pride and Prejudice*?" Ilya asks, walking around to sit next to Shane. He nods in reply, "This was first film I watched when I came to America."

"Really?" Shane turns to look at him, the scene of Jane being invited to visit Netherfield Park plays in the background. "This is one of my favorite movies," Shane admits. Ilya smiles, shuffling closer to kiss him.

He shifts, moving to rest his head on Ilya's shoulder, and Ilya rests his cheek on Shane's head.

And Shane. Shane *really* tries.

But he has seen this movie so many times.

"This scene is very romantic," Ilya says. Shane nods.

Ilya was drawing patterns on his leg with his fingers. And he has felt him starting to inch upwards for a few minutes.

“It’s subtle,” he murmurs as Mr Darcy flexes his hand, walking away from a confused looking Elizabeth.

He keeps turning his head, planting kisses on Shane’s head. Occasionally dipping his head for a kiss on his temple, his cheek.

Shane can’t exactly pinpoint the moment he started feeling hazy. But he knows that his entire body shivers when the crowd around Mr Darcy and Elizabeth dancing disappears and it causes Ilya to mutter “*Gospodi*,” and take in a deep breath. And he knows that Ilya notices. “Shane,” he whispers.

He hums in response, seeming to have lost his words.

“Can I touch you?”

“Fuck,” he breathes, “*Please*.”

Ilya shifts, pressing kisses to his cheek, and down his jaw, hand palming Shane’s already hard cock over his pants. His kiss is soft, slow, Shane can feel his hair standing on ends. His fingers snap the band of his sweatpants, he lifts his hips and slides them down just enough. Ilya hums. “Already so ready for me,” he mutters against Shane’s ear. He shivers again.

Almost immediately after Ilya wraps his hand around his cock, Shane feels his spine tingling. He throws his head back, “Not gonna last.”

“It’s okay. You’re okay,” Ilya soothes immediately, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek, “I will not either.”

Shane brings his head up again, meeting Ilya’s eyes, and nodding slowly. “Hand stuff?”

Ilya laughs, it’s sickly sweet, “Yes, sweetheart, hand stuff.”

He starts working his hand over Shane, squeezing tighter when he gets closer to his tip. Shane closes the space between them, basically crashing onto his mouth. Ilya moans into him, the pace of his hand not deterring as Shane kissed him feverishly, like he would evaporate from existence if he didn’t kiss him like this. He pulls away just slightly, “Wanna see you too,” he whispers, “Please.”

“So polite,” Ilya murmurs. He swipes his thumb over the tip of Shane’s cock, making him breathe out in a hiss, and then, *moan* when he licks the pre-cum off his fingers and kisses Shane. He could taste himself on Ilya, and he—bashfully—realized that he had missed it. Or, maybe, he missed *this*. All of this. He could distantly hear the movie, still playing, but all he could do was bury his fingers in Ilya’s hair and pull him closer.

“Mr Collins!” Elizabeth scrambles off her chair on the screen. Ilya snorts. Which causes Shane to laugh.

Shane’s head falls against Ilya’s shoulder, he can feel him shaking as he laughs along with Shane. “I don’t know why I’m laughing so much,” he admits, while Ilya takes the pause in their kissing to pull his own sweatpants down.

“Because Mr Collins is silly, Hollander” Ilya replies, and that causes Shane to throw his head back and laugh even harder.

After the moment dies down, Ilya holds the back of Shane’s neck, “God, you’re so beautiful when you’re laughing,”

“Ilya,” Shane whispers. “Please,”

“Please, what?” Ilya prompts, he whines in response. “I know, I know it’s a lot,” he says and Shane thinks distantly, how uncharacteristically kind of him it is to be so in *this* moment, “Tell me what you want.”

“Touch me, make me cum, *please*.” Ilya leans over, kissing down Shane’s neck. And then, because he wants the Ilya he knows and loves back, he says, “You know what I like, don’t you?”

“Already being a brat, Hollander?” Shane smiles and Ilya blows out a soft laugh. “How are you feeling?” he asks as he wraps his hand around Shane and resumes stroking.

“Um, fuck,” his head falls, forehead resting on Ilya’s shoulder, holding back his orgasm by sheer will, “Good. Here. Not fully but— *Fuck*, I’m gonna come”

“Good,” Ilya whispered. He captures Shane’s moan, pressing a deep kiss on his mouth, tongue delving in as Shane comes—quite literally—all over himself. “So good for me, baby,” he whispers against him.

“Can I touch you?” Shane says, still breathless, Ilya smiles, kissing him briefly again, “I would also like words, please.”

Ilya laughs, Shane would feel more embarrassed if he didn’t also laugh. He felt weightless, in a different way than he ever had with Ilya. “Yes, Shane, I want. Please touch me, please make me come.”

Shane hums.

He kisses Ilya’s mouth instead. “I can’t be away from you. Not for a second,” he whispers against him, feeling Ilya let out a shuddery breath as Shane uses his hand to work over Ilya’s dick, “I cannot believe I ever did, I—” Ilya tilts his head, almost like he wants to lodge himself into his mouth, like he can’t get close enough, “Does this feel different for you too?”

“Yes,” he replies with no hesitation, his voice breaking, “Yes. Better than—*Fuck*, like that, Shane, good boy.”

Shane doesn’t speak again until Ilya is coming all over himself and his hand, “We have to change,” Ilya laughs at his comment, “Shut up,” he turns to the TV, “and we have to rewind the movie.”

Ilya hums, “That, I agree with.” Shane laughs softly, Ilya smiles, kisses him again.

“This is nice,” Shane mumbles, his hand skating on top of the bubbles in the bath. Ilya smiles to himself, his hand threading through Shane’s hair, his chin resting on Shane’s shoulder from behind.

Judging from his voice, Shane was still a little *gone*. Ilya uses his other hand to kneed the outside of Shane’s thigh. Again, if his dreamy sigh is anything to go on, his judgment was correct. “It is nice, my love,” he says softly, “Are you okay?”

“Bet-ter.” he says, splitting it into two syllables. “A little— Oops!” he exclaims—cutely, according to Ilya—when the quick movement of his arm up causes for him to splash Ilya behind him. “Sorry,” he says softly, using his hand to, awkwardly, wipe away the bubbles. “I am a little sore. But good.”

“Good,” Ilya echoes, “Wanna drink more water?” he asks, already reaching for the water bottle that was on the floor outside of the bathtub. Shane puts his hand on Ilya’s arm, shaking his head. “You sure?”

He nods then, “Just want you.”

“You have me.”

Shane sighs dreamily again, “Yeah?”

“Yes, solnyshko. you do.” Ilya moves to take Shane’s left hand and runs his finger over Shane’s ring where he would see, too. He makes a noise of contentment and slides down lower on Ilya’s chest. “Does anywhere hurt? Other than sore.”

“No, I’m good. Hips a little achy but it’ll go away. You’re so good to me, always.”

Ilya snorts, “Wow, you really are gone.”

He scrunches up his face and nuzzles impossibly closer into Ilya. Ever since they had started having sex again, Ilya had found that Shane required a bit more coaxing to come to. He didn’t mind, in fact, he reveled in it. But it made him realize that it was definitely a good choice to have held off on it for so long. It was a risk they were right not to take.

“Love you,” Shane says, Ilya hums and presses a kiss to his hair. “My fingers are all pruneey,” he says, looking at his hands.

“Ah, so you are back to me, sweetheart?”

“Think so,” he mumbles, rubbing at his fingers like the neurological response that causes it *personally* offends him. “Can I get some more water? And then can we get out of here?”

“Of course,” Ilya says, under his breath, already handing him the bottle of water. He reaches out to his phone as well, checking the time, “We have like an hour until Hazy and Lisa show up.”

“An hour?” Shane says in surprise.

Ilya can't help but laugh, "Yes because you made us spend like four hours cleaning this place, dorogoy."

"*Dorogoy*," he whips around, "we haven't been in this apartment in like a year, of course we had to clean!"

Ilya hums, leaning forward to kiss him. He can feel the annoyance melt away as he kisses. He even smiles when Shane's lips follow him as he pulls away, "Could've had more fun if we did not clean though."

"You are insatiable," he mutters as he gets up and leaves the bathtub.

Ilya scoffs, mocking offense, "You cannot call me names I do not know the meaning of!"

Ten minutes, and a kiss ban, later, Ilya is laying on the bed in their Ottawa apartment, watching as Shane—almost neurotically—skitters around as he tries to find what to wear. "Why are you so nervous about this, solnyshko?"

He shrugs, still skittering around. Ilya climbs to the end of the bed and catches his arm to stop him from pacing. He pulls him in close, bodies pressed together, "Kiss ban still in place, Rozanov."

"Yes, but I did not hear about a blowjob ban"

He rolls his eyes, "You're not giving me a blowjob, we just got out of the bath."

"But it would help you calm down."

Shane rears back slightly, and Ilya takes the hint, also leaning back on his knees and giving him space. "I'm not nervous about... this," he starts. Ilya nods, encouraging, "I want another dog."

His jaw drops. "What?"

"I want—"

"I heard you. Did I hear you right, though? You want another dog? You want to give Anya a brother or sister?"

Shane laughs, nodding, "A sister," Ilya falls back further, and on his ass, stretching his legs out around where Shane was standing at the edge of the bed. "The other day when I went to Montreal with Mom, we went to a shelter," he says, smiling, "And I met with this adorable girl who was rescued off the street after her mom was—" he pauses to swallow harshly, shaking his head, "She's called Jellyfish. And I thought she was the most—" he growls, motioning with his hands to signify just how cute he found her.

"Do you have a photo?"

Shane nods, walking to where his phone was on the dresser and shows Ilya a picture of exactly what he had described—the most adorable puppy in the fucking world. Title shared

with Anya.

“And she already knows her name, and how to sit, and roll over and—”

“Yes. When can we go pick her up? Now?” he says, still staring at Jellyfish on Shane’s phone. “Oh my god,” he exclaims when he swipes and it’s a photo of Shane with her in his arms, and she’s licking his face, and Shane’s nose is all scrunched up, “Do you think Hazy and Lisa would mind coming to Montreal with us for this double date, so we can pick her up *right now*?”

Shane laughs, rolling his eyes, “Yes, they would mind.” He hands the phone back and a few moments later, Shane is pulling it up to his ear.

“Who are—”

“Do you want Jellyfish or not, dorogoy?”

Ilya smiles widely then mimics zipping his lips shut.

Shane was trying to not catastrophize. He had learned that from Francine. He had a tendency to assume that the worst thing in the world was going to happen all the time, so he was trying to *stop doing that*. It was harder than it sounded, in his defense. It’s just that he had this sinking feeling.

Their session that day had consisted of a lot of bits and pieces, and it was, for some reason even he couldn’t name, convincing him that something was about to happen.

They’d discussed things they had never addressed directly, like Shane’s guilt for saving Ilya, and the conclusion to their conversation about having kids—which had been addressed between them but not with Francine as well—and then Francine had stopped bringing up points. So, Shane thought, *this is it*.

“There is one more thing I would like to discuss in today’s session with you two.” He tries to decide if her eyes lingering on him is on purpose or not, but she continues before he can. “It was the very beginnings of our sessions together that this was first mentioned, and it has continued to be a factor to some degree.”

When Shane looks at Ilya, he seems to look like he knows what’s coming. “I think I know what you are going to say,” Ilya interrupts her. It wasn’t unheard of him to not be in the loop with something going on around him, but this specifically was making him feel on edge. Like they were about to share a joke that Shane was not in on.

Francine seems relieved by this on the other hand, but Shane was off base today, “Yes, Ilya?”

“Shane,” he answers, simply, “Right?”

“What?” Shane asks, when Francine nods at his answer. He looks between them. “What do you mean me?”

“You can’t cry.”

Shane breathes a soft *oh*, his shoulders slumping. “I forgot about that,” he says with a soft laugh, rubbing at his eyes. “I guess, we really should talk about it.”

Francine hums, with another nod, “Are you okay to talk about it?”

“Sure, yeah.” Francine raises her brows, “I am, I promise. This is just... not what I was expecting.”

“Were you expecting something else?”

He shakes his head, “I hadn’t considered this as a problem. It makes sense that it is, I just never...” he grimaces, “put it together.”

“It’s not something you’ve thought about?” he nods his head. It was the truth. It had come to his mind a few times—more than a few, if he was *fully* honest—but he had never really considered voicing it. Not to Ilya, especially, but to himself either. Now that Francine, and Ilya, were looking at him, he could *maybe* admit that he had just been... ignoring it. Francine pulls him out of his thoughts, “How long have you been unable to cry, Shane?”

Shane starts to squeeze each knuckle in his fingers, “Around when Ilya was let out of the hospital.”

“He was crying just fine when we were in there,” Ilya adds. Shane nods at that, looking at him. Ilya looks back at him, and smiles softly. It’s a gesture so small that even he is surprised at the amount of ease it brings him.

“Shane, you said you haven’t thought about it,” Francine starts, “but, right now, what would you say is the reason that you unable to cry?”

“Quickly,” Ilya says, a devilish smile on his face.

Shane rolls his eyes and pushes his shoulder, “Shut up, asshole,” but he only laughs as he falls back on his side of the couch. “Is this how you were with Galina? Because she is an angel for putting up with you,”

“Hey, you are the one who married me!”

“Boys,” Francine says, reeling them back in.

They both clear their throats and Ilya lets Shane think about his answer to her question. He shrugs, after a while, “I don’t know. Maybe because I was so busy with everything else?”

She nods, striking something out in her notes, without looking away from him, “Does that sound like the answer to you?”

“It sounds like a factor,” he answers, honestly. “Because, sure, at the start I was doing *everything*, but after a while... the responsibilities started to go down. Ilya started doing better, and shit.” Ilya snorts at that, “Stop it.” He raises his hands, feigning innocence.

“Mhm, for a while you were so preoccupied that you felt like you had no time or space to let your feelings out. May I ask,” she starts and he motions for her to ask, despite knowing that she was going to anyway, “What do you mean exactly when you say you can’t cry?”

He furrows his brows, “Sorry, I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“That’s okay, let me rephrase my question,” she soothes gently, “Do you not want to cry, as in there’s an absence of a need to cry, or is it...” she stops when he shakes his head.

“No, I want to cry. A lot. I maybe wanted to cry all the time at the beginning,” Ilya reaches out his hand and places it on his thigh. Instinctively, Shane puts his hand on top. “It’s just that I *couldn’t*. No tears ever come. Like I ran out.”

“I understand,” she nods, “Well, first of all, this is a normal trauma response. There is no reason for you’ve done something wrong with experiencing this.” Shane relaxes just slightly, Ilya seems to notice because he squeezes his thigh softly, “Ultimately, this is just a matter of time, and it’s especially helped because you’re now aware of it.”

“I’ll cry again,” Shane says. When he hears his own voice, he hears the disbelief. Logically, of course he would, but—and he didn’t know this either—there was a part of him that had almost come to terms with him never crying again. Ilya squeezes his thigh again.

“Of course. Whether it’s tomorrow, whether it’s longer than that.”

And it’s those words—funnily enough—that make him aware of the burning sensation in his nose. He sniffs, and it makes Ilya look at him. Shane thinks about how it freaks him out how well Ilya knows him, sometimes. “I think,” he starts, voice shaking, “I think the reason I haven’t been able to cry is because it feels like I’m making a joke.”

“Shane...” he whispers, but it’s not in attempt to stop him.

“There’s a part of me that realized how much fucking worse Ilya was doing and maybe that part of me is what’s stopping all this.”

“Shane—” He stops when Shane pushes his hand off of him.

“That’s probably the reason,” he looks at Francine. “I don’t want to be selfish.”

“Is there something about the situation that makes you feel like you’re selfish?”

He curses under his breath, “Ilya—”

“This is not about Ilya, Shane, not really,” she says gently, “Say that it was Ilya. Something happened to you, and as a result, he couldn’t cry. He’s expressing to you—or us—that he feels like he’s selfish, like you have it worse, and it doesn’t feel right for him to express his emotions like that,” Shane cringes at her words. “Would you think he’s selfish if he did cry?”

“No,” he answers, immediately. Francine looks at him and he realizes that that’s his answer. He falls back slightly, letting out another soft *oh*.

“Even in the beginning,” she starts again, “There was and is nothing selfish with you... letting it *out*.”

“Even if—” he stops. He doesn’t know how to say this, with or without Ilya there, it made no sense to him to even say it. Even if Ilya is the one who tried to kill himself. Francine told him, this had nothing to do with Ilya and everything to do with Shane bottling up his feelings.

Shane really should know better. He did that for years, and it only stretched out the inevitable, every time.

Francine seems to get it, “Even if.”

He must have been quiet for longer than he thinks, because he startles when Francine speaks to him next.

“Are you feeling alright?” he nods, slowly. She tilts her head, “Would you mind letting us in on what you’re thinking?”

He snuffles again, the burning in his nose was not going away. “I was thinking of that day you dropped a spoon,” he says, glancing at Ilya.

“What—” Francine starts to speak.

“The week we did our experiments, I had a bad day. I broke down when I dropped a spoon,” Ilya explains, and Francine nods.

“You were so... brittle,” he says softly. “I was not really thinking about myself in the moment, but after, I felt like...” he laughs, it seems to shock Ilya a bit, “I just said it felt selfish to cry but now I’m saying it was heartless of me to not.”

“Did you feel heartless?”

He nods, immediate, “A lot, since we got home from the hospital.”

It wasn’t always that he felt heartless. Sometimes, he found himself feeling almost numb. Like his feelings were presenting to him behind a thick layer of plexiglass. That was maybe the first time that he had noticed this, but it had opened his eyes to the fact that it was what he felt too often for comfort.

It’s that realization that finally snaps it into place.

Sure, he might’ve been fine with never crying again. But he shouldn’t have been.

“This isn’t...” he says, out loud. “This isn’t okay, is it?”

Francine softens, “What isn’t?”

“This. Me.” Neither of them says anything. Ilya letting the question of what that means hang in the air. Francine probably waiting for Shane to continue, like she knew that he always did. “*Me*,” he replies, like it answers the question any better. “I’m not helping anyone, am I?”

Ilya wipes at his tears with the back of his hand, “Shane, will you listen to me if I tell you to do something?” Shane hesitates, but then nods, “But you have to promise me.”

“Ilya, I—”

“Be selfish,” he says. Distantly, Shane hears Francine let out a breath. “Please, for the love of God, be fucking selfish. For one time, be selfish.”

“But—”

He shakes his head, Shane snaps his lips shut. And Shane almost feels the disappointment at how quickly he obeys that, and maybe it’s telling of what Ilya is asking of Shane in those moments. “Yell at me if you have to, whatever you have to do. Just... be selfish, moy lyubimyy. You deserve it.”

Shane is stunned for a second.

The words sound like Ilya had meant them to come out in quicker succession. Like he had meant to sound more convincing. But his voice shook the entire way through. His tears ran down his cheeks.

Surprisingly, even to him, it worked in packing a harder punch.

Because it clicked something else into place. He was right when he said that this was not helping anyone. But the worst part wasn’t that, it was the part that it was making things worse. His dismissal of his own feelings, his repression of his own needs was *killing* his husband.

And, God, if something else didn’t already fucking kill him.

Shane would be damned to be the one to hurt him further.

“Holy shit,” Shane says to himself, resting his head on the back of the couch. He could almost feel it coming up his chest, up his throat. He felt his eyes burn. Then he felt his throat close up, just moments before the first sob broke free.

He falls forward, burying his face in his hands and feeling nothing but relief when he feels his palms wet from his tears.

“Shane,” Ilya barely starts before Shane practically throws himself into him, resting his forehead on his shoulder, sobs rattling his entire body. Ilya wraps his arm around him, the other making its place in his hair, like he was born to know what to do. It only made Shane cry harder. He feels reality becomes hazier, he feels his body start to feel lighter but his bones feel... like they’re too big for his body. He feels almost lightheaded. “Talk to me?” he asks, gently. Shane shakes his head. “Okay, you’re okay.”

Ilya barely lets up when Shane tries to pull away from him. He opens his eyes, probably doesn’t hide his surprise when he sees that Ilya had stopped crying.

He smiles, reaching his hand out and wiping Shane's tears from under his eyes. "Pretty even when you cry."

The *shut up* dies in his throat as his eyes fall to Ilya's parted legs.

When he meets Ilya's eyes again, he doesn't even have to ask the question.

He's so desperate to feel safe that he doesn't even think about the fact that he's doing his in front of Francine. Doesn't even think about what *she* thinks of him. He all but slides off the couch and sits between Ilya's legs. And if he wasn't so in his own head, he would think that his sigh of relief is mirrored in Ilya, the same relief washing over both of them. He rests the side of his head on Ilya's thigh and just closes his eyes, tears still running relentlessly.

He feels Ilya shift, moving forward and threading his fingers through Shane's hair.

"He is okay," Ilya says, it's soft, Shane assumes it's to Francine. "Right, baby?"

"Tell her I'm sorry?" he mumbles. He looks up and sees Ilya looking at him softly. He runs his hand over his cheek.

"She doesn't mind," he says, glancing over at Francine behind Shane. "It does not matter even if she did, Shane," he continues, thumb running over his lip. "You need to come back on ground. This helps you, da?" Shane nods, nuzzling himself closer into Ilya. "Good. Stay there. With me."

Shane flutters his eyes closed.

Ilya feels like his heart is going to explode out of his chest.

He moves his hand again, gently holding the back of Shane's neck, then moving it up and losing his fingers in his hair again. After a few moments of just soaking him in, he looks up at Francine. She almost looked solemn. He smiled at her, and her shoulders eased softly. Shane's hands squeezed the back of his calves. "I hope it is not weird," he says, holding eye contact with Francine.

He had been serious when he told Shane that it did not matter, but he still wanted to ease the situation. Himself, maybe.

Francine shakes her head, "To my understanding, this grounds you both. Makes you feel comfort."

"Da, yes," he says. Shane moves impossibly into him, he slips his hand under the collar of Shane's shirt, gently kneading at his shoulder muscles. "Is because he feels safe. I think," he pauses, smiling down at Shane when he nods against his leg. "And because I feel good for making him feel safe."

He mumbles something. Ilya does not ask what he said, just moves his hand back to Shane's hair.

When he looks at Francine again, her iPad and pencil are on the table next to her. “I’m glad you both feel comfortable to do this in here.”

Ilya nods. He doesn’t say anything for a long time. Long enough that Shane stops crying. Long enough that Shane shifts his position to look at his face. “This feels big,” he says, finally. Shane raises his brows. Ilya can’t help it. “Behave, Hollander, we are in front of people.”

He rolls his eyes. He’s sure that if he looks up, Francine’s just waiting patiently for him to explain what *big* means. He meets her eyes, and just like he predicted, she’s only watching him—and Shane—with her hands folded in her lap.

“This almost feels like the end. Of this. Of, um...”

“Everything that broke us,” Shane supplies. He presses a kiss to the inside of Ilya’s thigh and pushes himself to sit upright. “It feels like we’re finally looking at it in the rearview mirror instead of... driving through it?” He turns around to look at Francine. Ilya could cry—again—at the bravery he knows it takes him. Francine had been understanding and cool about it, but it did not remove the fact that it was a very *vulnerable* position they were just in. “I don’t know, I tried a metaphor.”

“I understand,” she nods, comforting. Shane slowly sits up from his knees and sits on the floor, his back resting against Ilya’s leg as he faced Francine, “Do you guys want to put more words to the feelings?”

They look at each other. Ilya helps Shane to take his seat back on the couch.

They keep looking at each other and it feels like words are too small for the feelings. It feels like they already know all the things they’re going to say. That this felt like the bookend to the last few months. That this was in no way the end but they were at least equipped to handle the future now. That this felt like...

“No,” Shane shakes his head. Looking back at Francine just as Ilya does as well. “I think we got it.”

Francine raises her brows slightly. She picks up her iPad and pencil again, “Well, I’m glad you feel you’re on the same page. I would still like to voice those thoughts.”

Ilya snorts, “Sure. Why not?”

For the first time since that fateful night in June, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov feel like they can breathe.

“It has been wonderful working with you both,” Francine says, clasping her hands together after shaking both of their hands. “I will not say we had a blast, but Ilya is probably thinking it.”

He hums, “No, I was thinking that I never told you how nice your waiting room is.”

She laughs, a real unguarded one, “Thank you. I hope you never get to see it again.” He meets her eyes at that, and smiles. He hopes he never gets to see it again either. She looks away and at Shane, “I also hope you both have a wonderful rest of the day. And week.”

“And life?”

She shrugs, “Yes. And life.”

Moments later, she closes the door to her office and Shane and Ilya say their goodbyes to her receptionist before walking out into the parking lot. Ilya sees Shane run his hands over his hair and face the sky. He takes a deep breath and lets it out with a groan. Ilya smiles at the relief he sees all over Shane’s body, “I agree.”

His husband looks down and smiles back at him, “I’m glad you do.”

Ilya hums in response. “You’re letting me drive.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Shane rolls his eyes. Hands him the keys.

“Did you remember to pick up the grocery list?” Ilya asks as they walk to the car. Shane nods, patting his pockets until he finds the one where he had put the list. He holds it up, “Did you double check it’s got everything we need to pick up?”

“Yes, Ilya.”

“Triple?” He groans again, this time annoyed, “Hollander, you know I hate making store runs from the cottage. It takes three hours to reach human civilization. And Jellyfish always insists on coming and she always pisses on the seats.”

“That is entirely your fault,” he counters, climbing into the car at the same time as Ilya. Once they’re inside and closed the doors, he continues, “She would be fine without you for a few hours, she always is. You just love her and can’t say no to her.”

“She has puppy eyes!”

“She’s a *puppy*! Of course she has puppy eyes!”

Ilya groans, pretending to be annoyed, “This is a very long answer to my question, Hollander.”

Shane doesn’t answer until they’re pulling out of the parking lot. “Yes, I triple checked. You forgot to add eggs and dental treats for the dogs after using the last of them this morning.”

“Knew I was forgetting something,”

He scoffs, “Oh, you mean other than forgetting to hang up the laundry last night like I asked you to do a million times?”

When Ilya looks over at Shane, he sees nothing but unbridled happiness all over his face.

End Notes

oh my god youre done already?!?! ?this took me two months and two exams to write and you're DONE???? wow okay. thank u sm for reading love uuuu <3

ps jellyfish the dog i love you.

catch me on tumblr [@darlinghollanov](#)

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