Will You Love Me (At My Worst)

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/81037876.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV), Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, Hayden Pike, Svetlana Vetrova, Irina Rozanova
Additional Tags:	Omega Shane Hollander, Pregnant Shane Hollander, Insecure Shane Hollander, Bottom Shane Hollander, Mpreg | Male Pregnancy, Top Ilya Rozanov, Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander's Stretch Marks, Postpartum Depression, Explicit Sexual Content, Anal Sex, Alpha Ilya Rozanov, Kid Fic, Married Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, Male Lactation, Angst with a Happy Ending, Breeding Kink, Shane Hollander's Stretch Marks, Ilya has a lactation kink, Who said that? Not me!, Parents Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, Rimming, Knotting, Plot What Plot/Porn Without Plot, POV Shane Hollander, POV Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov, Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander, Shane Hollander Needs a Hug, Hurt Shane Hollander, Good Boy Shane Hollander, Jealous Shane Hollander, Jealous Ilya Rozanov, Possessive Shane Hollander, Possessive Ilya Rozanov, Ilya Rozanov is Obsessed With Shane Hollander, Shane Hollander Walks Ilya Rozanov Like A Dog, Post-Book 6: The Long Game (Game Changers), Eventual Happy Ending, Miscommunication, Misunderstandings, Slow Burn, Omegaverse, Alpha/Omega, Postpartum shane hollander
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-03-11 Completed: 2026-03-21 Words: 16,121 Chapters: 11/11

Will You Love Me (At My Worst)

by boredatuni

Summary

When Shane’s insecurities escalate after giving birth, Ilya decides to fuck him in front of the mirror.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All the mirrors in the cottage had been abandoned; it was the most unlikely thing in the world. There had been a time when these mirrors could not spend a second alone, reflecting Shane's chiseled body as he stepped out of the shower, Ilya's image as he twisted his tie into perfection, both of them as they fucked back and forth while glaring at their reflections. But now dust had settled over the curved edges. Their phones with limited screens had, apparently, offered a better alternative after Shane had given birth. It was unprecedented. But that's life.

The digital clock on his side table read 3:21 a.m. when Shane awoke with a start. Although it had only been a week since he had given birth, Shane could not remember the last time he had slept through the entire night without a shrill cry splitting his ears into two. Even now, when there was no wailing in earshot, his body had jolted him awake out of habit. It was his worst nightmare come to life.

When Shane blindly reached for the body next to him, his hand fell flat on the cold sheets rather than a warm torso. Ilya was not in the room. The cot next to him was empty, the blankets arranged in the shape of a baby. Shane knew exactly where to find them. He lifted himself from his bed with a barely stifled groan; his stitches were still raw. He did not know how they looked in their present state. The first time he'd seen them in the hospital bathroom was still fresh in his memory. Although Ilya had insisted on following him into the bath, Shane had firmly resisted with an outstretched hand and a grunt. He had not wanted Ilya to see him in his revolting state and realize the mistake he had committed by getting down on one knee.

After an internal battle that had lasted for five minutes, Shane had reluctantly lifted his hospital gown and almost puked into the basin at the sight. There had been an uneven line of pink running through his pale abdomen; it was the place where they had sliced him open to retrieve their daughter. The skin around the scar had been swollen and marked with deep purple stripes. The swell of his tummy, contrary to Shane's expectations, had not disappeared miraculously after birth to unveil the sharp ridges which had once adorned his body. Shane would never be the same again.

As Shane slipped his feet into the fur-lined slippers, Anya shot up from her position at the foot of his bed, awakened by the mere shuffling of his feet. She launched herself forward and nuzzled her ear against his ankle, a habit which signaled her desire to be lifted into her favorite human's arms. But Shane could not, not when his stitches made even the most mundane activities impossible. Postpartum had forever changed life as he had known it.

Outside in the hallway of their cottage, Ilya stood with a little bundle pressed against his bare chest. Ames was crying, which was nothing Shane had not seen before. Ilya's cooing, which got louder as Shane crossed over to him, was not doing anything to calm the distressed pup.

The moment Shane's eyes landed on her contorted face, his swollen pectoral muscles began to weep through his threadbare t-shirt.

Shane had always treated his body as a temple. In his prime, he had sworn off the thickest hamburgers and the most precious delicacies planted on gold-trimmed plates at award shows. His body had been a soldier who had followed its commander blindly even when it had trailed off brutal orders and asked it to starve. It had only taken a week for his body to turn against him. Shane had never thought that it would be so easy.

"You are leaking." Ilya fixed Shane with a sympathetic look. It was the last expression Shane wanted to see on his face.

"You know why."

Ilya gestured at their daughter with his chin. "The dictator demands food. You mind?"

Shane looked down at the carpet, and began his inspection of the scruff marks as if they required immediate attention.

"I am not a cow," he said with gritted teeth; each word blew the air out of his chest.

Ilya blinked, clearly caught off guard. The look that crossed his face was similar to the one he'd worn the first time he'd heard Shane slip into flawless Russian. "Sorry?"

"You heard me, Ilya," said Shane, his voice low but exhausted. "I am not in the mood."

An awkward, thick, and unmoving silence settled in the air around them. Shane could feel it pressing against his skin; he wanted to slice it clean with a knife. After a quiet minute of reorienting himself, Ilya nodded slightly. Sympathetically.

"Formula it is then," he said gently, more to their daughter than to Shane, and left for the kitchen.

Left alone, Shane's eyes drifted onto the clear night sky. The sky was streaked with shades of blue and clouds which stood perfectly still. The stars hung there too, distant and dull, their usual shine lost to the wind. A tear slipped down Shane's cheek.

———

The clock had turned 3:48 by the time Ilya, who had a blanket clutched firmly in his grip, found Shane sitting on their couch. His husband's eyes were fixed on something in the distance and Ilya wished he could climb into Shane's skin and know exactly what he was staring at. Then, maybe, he could figure out where it hurt and fix him. Except Shane was not a thing to be fixed.

He propped down onto the sofa beside Shane, then proceeded to rub his knees and smack his lips loudly. When Shane still did not swing his eyes from where they were concentrated, Ilya pulled his body into his arms, wrapped the blanket around his shivering shoulders, and kissed his forehead.

“I love you, Solnyshko,” Ilya whispered into his ear softly. If Ilya had known the cascade of tears he would unleash by brushing his lips against Shane’s temple, he would have thought twice before doing it.

The moment Shane pulled away from Ilya’s embrace, a torrent of tears began to run down his twisted face. His eyes were squeezed shut and in a second, Shane began to have difficulty breathing. He opened his mouth and started inhaling big puffs of air as an alternative. It was the worst heartbreak Ilya had ever known.

In a desperate attempt to calm his nerves, Ilya pulled Shane back against his body and began to rub slow, deliberate circles along his upper arms. Although Ilya’s palms were warm and steady and an anchor for Shane to the life he had lost, it still took him another ten minutes to calm down.

Carefully, Ilya turned him around.

Shane’s face was a mess; his eyes were swollen and glassy, and his lashes were clumped together with tears.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” Ilya cupped Shane’s tear-streaked face with his palms and brushed the pits beneath his eyes.

“It’s nothing.”

“Then why,” he said quietly, “are you crying worse than you would at the loss of a Stanley?”

The words hung in the air between them for a minute. Then, Ilya knew with an odd certainty in his chest that there was no going back.

“I am awful at this,” murmured Shane. His eyes began to brim with tears again. “ What kind of dad keeps on blaming his child for the scars on his body? What kind of man constantly fantasizes about a life in which his daughter doesn’t exist? A life where he doesn’t have to think twice before climbing the stairs or loving his husband or…looking in the mirror.”

A choked sound clawed its way up Shane’s throat.

“And you didn’t even notice.”

Ilya’s entire world vanished from beneath his feet. Before he could even muster the courage to speak up, Shane resumed. “And that’s fine Ilya, it really is.”

A beat.

“I just wish you were the same boy who used to notice even my slightest grimace.”

There was another punctuation of silence. To Ilya, it tasted like despair.

“But it’s unfair for me to have these expectations, especially when you have sacrificed everything for Ames. I just…” Shane took a shuddering breath. “I just wish you didn’t have to choose between us.”

It was precisely at that moment that Ilya knew what he had to do.

Chapter End Notes

Got any remarks? Let me know at @boredatunii on twitter <3

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ilya had not even held his daughter when the doctor had prohibited him from sexual intercourse for the next six weeks. She had been a Korean woman in her mid-thirties who had fixed him with a stern look. To Ilya, it seemed as if she had discerned his dirty intentions through X-ray glasses. Now, with his husband lying next to him, he let out an internal grunt at the realization that only a week had passed since that day. Needless to say, the next five weeks were the most atrocious of Ilya's life.

To him, it seemed like time had slowed down to a crawl and deliberately stretched over the cottage so that he could not execute his plan. It was worse than the time he had spent holed up in his room in Russia. Back then, at least there had been a light at the end of the tunnel in the shape of Shane. When he looked at his husband, with his dark-circled eyes and freckled face, his light of soul seemed near extinguished. Ilya would rather die than let it snuff out completely without one last-ditch effort.

Shane's stomach had shrunk considerably over the past few weeks. What had once been a bulge occupying his entire middle had now reduced to a gentle swell which dipped below his happy trail. His shoulders, however, were still tense from the hours spent holding their daughter against his swollen pecs. More often than not, Ilya found damp circles of milk leaking through Shane's t-shirt at unconvincing hours. It was the hottest Shane had ever looked; it was the most turned on Ilya had ever been.

On most days, Ilya tried to rush the time by helping out his husband with the most mundane tasks: washing the dishes, ditching Ames's diapers into the bin, dry cleaning their dirty laundry and at one point, even brushing Shane's teeth while sitting lopsidedly on the sink. It had been a failure; his brush had constantly kept on hitting Shane's foamy gums. But his husband had not been bothered by Ilya's disaster. Rather, he had smiled and unfortunately, Ilya had risked hoping again.

The sun had almost dipped below the horizon when the opportunity finally presented itself. The sky was painted with remnants of blue, pink, and purple. The view stole Ilya's breath away. As he tread back to the cottage with his feet light on the ground, he was a man possessed with only one desire: the desire to make his husband feel worthy again. It seemed as if the sun itself had granted him an unprecedented power to conquer the world.

Except Ilya did not need to conquer the world, not when his world was a six-foot-tall man slung half across the couch, with his upper body flat on the stomach and his legs dangling to the floor. If Ilya didn't know better, he would have thought that Shane had gotten blacked out drunk and made a decision to jump face-first into the embroidered cushions. Ilya half-raced to his side. Shane's face was only half visible, his right cheek concealed by a web of hair.

"Shane," said Ilya, slipping his fingers in between the soft raven strands. "You okay?"

“Yeah,” Shane grunted sleepily in response. His voice was a low timber that insisted on extra sleep. But Ilya, being Ilya, was not going to have his scheduled adventure doused with water.

He leaned down to rub his lips against Shane’s ear. “Is okay if I take you to bed?” Eight words and Shane was a goner. With his realm of dreams abandoned in a second, he turned around and threw his arms toward Ilya in a childlike manner, gesturing to be lifted up. Ilya stooped down and lifted him bridal style with effortless ease; he decided to make a beeline to the guest bedroom. Up close, Shane’s face seemed to be cut out from the softest fabric. And the freckles? They were going to be the cause behind Ilya’s downfall once again. Shane smiled shyly and his heart seemed close to giving out.

Although he had lifted Shane infinite times before, Ilya knew this time was going to be different from the second he had pinned his hand beneath the small of Shane’s back. Shane was heavier now, but Ilya barely noticed the difference. It was only evidence of the gift he had been granted by his husband. And now it was time for Ilya to show his gratitude.

When Ilya drifted into the guest room carrying Shane, his husband lifted an eyebrow.

“Five years and you have already started losing the directions,” smirked Shane.

Ilya locked the door behind them with one hand.

“Not lost.”

It was then that Shane noticed the huge mirror that had been propped up in front of them, tall enough to reflect their bodies from head to toe. In its polished surface, their reflections stood perfectly still. Ilya let Shane slide to his feet and watched as realization dawned on his face.

“Oh, I – ”

Shane barely managed to get the first syllable out before Ilya bridged the distance between them.
One moment Shane was mid-protest, breath sharp with surprise, and the next his words had vanished against Ilya’s mouth. His entire face was smudged against Ilya’s, his bottom lip caught between Ilya’s teeth. His want almost made Shane cry out with relief.

As Ilya began to run his hands down Shane’s body, a string of whimpers began to claw their way up his throat. They only came to a standstill when Ilya began to hike his t-shirt and bare his belly. “Wait!”

Ilya’s hands stopped abruptly. In the mirror’s reflection, his eyes seemed pained. “What’s wrong, Solnyshko?”

“I – ” Shane’s gut felt liquefied by the blistering sadness that had suddenly torn through him.

“It’s disgusting,” he finally managed to choke out.

And then all hell broke loose. Ilya was only aware of the last remaining control bleeding out of his skin as he pushed Shane against the mirror and forced him to seek purchase against its

curved edges. A wrangled moan slipped out from under Shane's tongue. Up this close to the surface, he could count the freckles on his pale skin.

"Look at yourself," Ilya said slowly, a tinge of indignation lacing his voice. Shane did not. Could not, not when it was the one thing he had not confronted since that terrible day in the hospital bathroom. Ilya would hate you, a voice had whispered at the forefront of his mind. It had made him curl further into his hardened shell.

Meanwhile, Shane's resistance unleashed something free in Ilya. Before he could stop himself, his hand bolted forward and grabbed Shane by the frail strands clinging to his damp scalp, making him release a loud whimper at the sudden pull on his neck. Shane's face had turned the brightest red in the mirror. Ilya's breaths were leaving him in rattling wheezes, leaving his entire body in the throes of vibration.

"I have wanted you since that day in the freezing Saskatchewan, Hollander," Ilya's voice came out as a breathless whisper. "Who are you to deny me the man I love?"

"Ilya," growled Shane. "You don't want this!"
In response, Ilya got down on his knees. "Oh, yes I do."

Down below, the smell of Shane's arousal was unmistakable, a deep scent which overwhelmed Ilya's senses and made him bare his teeth. Boldly, he reached and stretched the flat of his palm over Shane's boner through the fuzzy joggers. The gentle touch almost sent Shane tumbling into the mirror.

"Ilya, fuck – " panted Shane as his hips bucked desperately to gain friction against the mirror. Ilya pulled him back by the elastic at his waist and then ripped his bottoms down to the ankles.

Screaming and scurrying to maintain balance, Shane let his legs be pushed apart and almost went limp with pleasure when he craned his neck to look behind and found Ilya pressing open-mouthed and sloppy kisses over the back of his thighs. It was his first time seeing them after six dreadful weeks. Although they were still marked with thick stretch marks which Shane was sure would look awful in his short shorts, he couldn't find himself to care about them when his disastrous husband was sucking wet trails over the sharp white color of them.

"God, they are beautiful," said Ilya, caught in the midst of reverence for his husband's tiger stripes. Shane's lust-addled mind thought his words a figment of imagination.

Wheezing for breath, he found himself pushing his hips back into Ilya's face, unbothered by how this moment would forever register in his husband's memory as the best of his lifetime. In a second, Ilya had pried Shane's hips apart and dug in with his expert tongue, painting his asshole with sloppy wet strokes like rimming his husband was the greatest gift life could ever provide him.

Shane, in turn, couldn't help but whine like a man caught in the grasp of death, gasping and cussing and licking the polished surface of the mirror he was pressed against. His body thrashed wildly as Ilya bit down on the frail skin of his moistened rim and he blindly reached to grab at his man's blonde curls.

Then suddenly, in the span of a single second, Ilya had scrambled to his feet and unrobed himself.

“What the fu – ?” Shane, still panting wildly, reached for the question, but not before his husband slipped a finger right down to the last knuckle in his ass.

“Fuck me!” howled Shane, his toes curling, thighs shaking, hips moving in time with Ilya’s fingers.

“Fuck, baby, look at you,” Ilya murmured with his eyes fixed on the prize, angling his finger so that it brushed right against the deepest part of Shane’s body.

“Yes, please, please!” Shane sounded like a man on the edge of a cliff, and when he reached down and grabbed Ilya’s wrist, Ilya knew he had teased enough. Grabbing Shane firmly by the ass, Ilya adjusted himself, positioned his tip, and lunged forward in one desperate motion till he was fully seated inside him.

Shane let out an extended moan as Ilya felt the first incredible, slick tightness of his ass around his cock. When Shane’s insides began to clench and milk his cock immediately, Ilya knew he had thirty seconds before he let out the longest held release of his life.

Holding his breath, he began to move inside Shane with a measured control at first and then with the desperation of a starved man as his balls slapped loudly against Shane’s white skin. As Ilya drove his cock over and over again into Shane’s heat, his husband’s back continued to bow low with each unforgiving blow to his prostate.

When Ilya reached and wrapped his fingers around Shane’s cock, he twisted the tip exactly in the way he knew Shane loved. With a shattered cry, Shane spilled his release all over Ilya’s knuckles as his ass began to convulse around Ilya’s cock.

It only took Ilya a distressed shout before he stilled and pulsed his release inside of Shane, grabbing onto the latter’s pale thigh for leverage.

Later, as their faces shone with perspiration, Ilya glanced at his side and noticed that while he had been caught in the ecstasy of having his husband back again, he had forgotten to take Shane’s shirt off.

There was yet more to come.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Please leave kudos and comments if you enjoyed my work!

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Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sun was bright and relentless that April afternoon and so were Shane and Ilya. Even beneath the cafe's bony awning, the heat clung stubbornly to their skin and sucked beads of perspiration out of it. Outside the small vegan cafe, they sat facing each other on the metal chairs arranged around a round table.

Shane sat slouched comfortably in his chair, one leg hooked under the other, a large bowl of salad cradled in his hands. Ilya watched him devour the concoction of roasted chickpeas and cherry tomatoes with a glint in his eye.

A week had passed since that day in the guest room, and Shane still had not allowed Ilya near him. It was making him lose control at hockey practice. Barrett had almost asked him if he wanted a break one day, but backed off when Ilya had fixed him with his unflinching eyes.

Ilya had even told Galina about his anxiety regarding Shane's boundaries. The soles of his Nikes had tapped impatiently against the gleaming tiles of her office. She had pretended not to notice and pushed her drooping glasses back to the bridge of her nose.

"Have you tried talking to him about it?"

"No."

"And why do you think that is?"

"Because we are," Ilya'd said with a hint of impatience in his voice. "Because we are Ilya and Shane. We don't have boundaries!"

Galina had sighed. "And you are scared that talking to him about it would make the contrary come true."

Ilya had been silent then. It had taken him a minute to confess how Shane had not let him into the shower with him for nearly two months now. He left out the part where he had hidden behind the doorframe one day in an egregious attempt to sneak a peek at Shane's pale spine who had, unfortunately for Ilya's plan, left the bathroom in his maroon robe. His raven hair had dripped onto the floor, and the unblemished skin of his neck had been exposed to the air. It had made Ilya want to chomp down on the bare knob of his skin.

In the bright light of Galina's office, he'd felt scared to confess his sin. Confess that his husband had shunned him. Confess that his husband didn't need him anymore, not like he had needed him once. Most of all, he was scared that once he let the words out into the air-conditioned air, there would be no going back. He would be forced to accept the truth and that would be the end of Ilya's life.

“Postpartum is difficult, Ilya,” Galina had said. “It messes with your brain and makes you believe that your loved ones don’t care about you anymore.”

“Is bullshit!” Ilya had half yelled.

“It is,” Galina had agreed. “But it is your job to make him realize otherwise.” She’d smiled. “To not make it bullshit for him.”

After that, their session had ended.

Now, the sun filtered through the edge of the awning and brushed Shane’s bare shoulders with hues of gold. In another world, Ilya would have reached across the table and pressed a lingering kiss to those sun-warmed shoulders. But Shane had abandoned that world long ago and Ilya had had no choice but to follow suit.

Now he simply sat across from him with his fingers wrapped around a glass of orange juice. A cool droplet slid down the frosty surface and onto Ilya’s hand.

“Here’s your ravioli, love.”

They both looked around as the waitress shuffled over to their place and placed a steaming plate of the dish in front of Ilya, who immediately grabbed his fork and began to dig in.

“Would you like anything else?”

“A ginger ale if you have it?” said Shane, shivering when a gust of cool wind swept through him.

The waitress dismissed his question and turned around to face Ilya.

“And you sweetheart?”

It was then that Shane finally took notice of the woman. Her brunette hair had been immaculately tied into a low bun, her skin was smooth and unmarred, and her smile was understanding – more than understanding when she flashed it at Ilya. But it was her posture that left a dull, tightening in Shane’s chest. It was the posture of a body which had not been forced to fold in on itself, the posture of a woman who had never once questioned whether she belonged. She knew she did. Her arms looked as if they would be warm.

“No, thank you,” said Ilya, his eyes concentrated on the creamy sauce that lined his plate.

“You sure?” She said, and grazed her fingers across his shoulder.

Shane did not hear Ilya’s reply, his entire being fixated on the waitress’s brown eyes as they went soft and shy with admiration at traversing Ilya’s naked, muscular arms. Ilya cracked a joke into her ear then, and the waitress’s dimples deepened as she laughed loudly and departed for the kitchen.

The moment she went out of his sight, Shane gritted his teeth and jumped to his feet abruptly, almost sending the entire table flying through Ilya’s shirt.

“Excuse me,” he murmured, his eyes on the floor. “I have to go.”

When Shane rushed into the bathroom, he checked beneath the stalls for occupants before allowing himself to break free. His knuckles whitened as he grabbed onto the sink for life, before instinctively caressing the flattened curve of his belly, the bane of his existence.

“Stupid,” he whispered, his eyes closing reflexively as the hurt seeped through his bones. “So stupid.”
His eyes turned a deep, poisonous red in the spot-marked mirror.

When he had first fallen head-first in love with Ilya, he’d felt insecure about the lovers he had been with before. During nights with his slick body draped beneath Ilya’s, he’d felt a hot surge of envy at the women (and men) who had experienced the warmth of being pressed against his torso, felt his hard muscles against their sweat-soaked spines, felt his cum drying on their thighs. When he had first voiced his fears in the darkness of night, Ilya had laughed heartily and kissed him all over his body. It had been sufficient reassurance back then.

Although it was the same hot envy that possessed him now, the well of Ilya’s love was not the same; it had run dry. He had taken Ilya’s knot, let him flood his womb, let his child mark his body with indelible scars, and now Ilya was going to do the same to the brunette waitress. And Shane would watch and suffer and regret denying him access to his grotesque body. Because Shane was not, and had never been, enough.

It was at that moment that Ilya slid into the bathroom, his face white with worry. He looked around wildly before his eyes fell on Shane.

“What happened?”

“Upset you couldn’t get your hands on her?” The poisonous bite Shane had been holding back was out before he could disguise it under something less transparently jealous.

Ilya’s shoulders tensed with fear. Of course, thought Shane smugly. “What?” said Ilya, an expression of visible confusion spreading across his face.

“You heard me, Rozanov.” Shane bit his tongue and licked the metallic taste that oozed out of the thick flesh. “Don’t hold back on my account.”

Ilya crossed the distance between them in two long strides, leaving behind a trail of dirty footprints on the floor. His hands came down on Shane’s shoulders and rocked him with sheer force. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Take her to our bed, Ilya.” Shane lifted his eyes to meet Ilya’s. “Fuck her all night for all I care. Knock her up, too. But don’t you fucking dare –” Shane screamed, “ to stop loving her after she bears you a child. She deserves better!”

Shane’s knees hit the dirty floor with a dull thud and he cried out in pure anguish. Ilya’s heart almost gave out as he dropped and rushed to grab Shane’s contorted, tear-streaked face. He pulled him close against his chest as Shane’s body wheezed and trembled for breath.

“What did I do wrong, solnyshko?” He whispered softly into Shane’s ear, making him pull away from his shirt.

“Fuck you, Ilya!” Shane’s face was a terrifying valley of emotions with a dripping nose and a mouth that formed a bubble as he tried to form coherent words.

“I can’t do this anymore. I fucking can’t. I am leaving. Maybe then you won’t be saddled with a sorry excuse for a husband and be free to fuck whoever you want!”

As Shane jumped to his feet and spun around to make haste for the exit, Ilya’s hand lunged forward and gripped his wrist.

“Not so soon, Hollander. Not. So. Soon.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The moment Ilya's fingers seized Shane's cold wrist, his right leg froze in the middle of a haughty stride. Slowly, Shane took a step back and came to stand in front of Ilya who looked up at him with his chin jutted high in the air. His jaw was clenched tight, his body barely able to contain the white rage, the evident fury that was ripping through his entire body. Ilya's eyes made Shane's arms erupt in goosebumps.

"What is it?" Shane hissed boldly, all his earlier fight still coursing through his veins.

Ilya glowered and leapt to his feet, his fingers still hot on Shane's pale skin.

"Let me go," grunted Shane, his heart lodged firmly in his throat.

"Did you think I wanted her?" asked Ilya slowly. Dangerously.

"I don't fucking care!" yelled Shane. "Just let me go!"

His words only made Ilya's grip tighter, made him pull Shane's face close to his own.

"Tell me, Shane," said Ilya, his tone unnervingly quiet. "Did you really believe I wanted to fuck her?"

His tone made it clear that Ilya thought Shane was the biggest idiot in the world. It made Shane want to make a lunge for the exit. He was desperately holding on to his mask of hatred and was hardly able to control the multifarious emotions that were bursting through his heart. There was a wave of relief, of course there was, but also arousal because there was barely any gap left between their lips now.

"That's how you used to get on back then, isn't it?" Shane's lips quirked up. "Who's stopping you now?" He threw his hands up in a gesture of exasperation. "Not me, Ilya. Not me. So rest easy." Shane got his lips close to Ilya's ear. "And have fun."

He turned around to make a start for the door then, less to get away from Ilya and more to cry in a secluded space, but Ilya reached out and curled his fingers around Shane's forearm again.

The hold was unshakeable; Shane was sure even a wrestler could not have been able to rip Ilya's hand from him. The silence between them was hot. Sharp. Fragile. The grip was tight but not uncomfortable, not the type that would have left red scars in the aftermath. Instead, it was a grip with only one question in mind: Did you really think I would leave you?

"I could never," whispered Ilya. "Never want to fuck her." He pressed a sloppy kiss to Shane's chin. "She's not the one I would fuck."

All the fight drained out of Shane in one swift motion. It seemed as if his gut had been punctured to let out all of his pent-up rage, envy, and hatred. Ilya's words hung in the air between them, and before Shane could decipher their implication, he pressed him flat against the wall with expert ease and shoved his tongue inside Shane's mouth, who let out a little gasp at the unexpected intrusion.

An expert at Ilya's ways, Shane recovered quickly and deepened the kiss so that their tongues clashed and struggled to declare a victor. When his teeth clacked against Ilya's, Shane allowed himself to savor his little victory. His smugness only lasted till Ilya grasped his short hair with its ends, and attempted to bunch them in an angry fist.

"You are the stupidest," Ilya turned Shane around, "motherfucking," pushed his cheek against the dirty wall, "slut I have ever known." When Ilya unbuckled his pants and pulled down Shane's too, he almost came in his pants like an inexperienced teenager.

Ilya wedged Shane against the wall, and pressed his aching boner against his bare ass, making him feel the hot want that had culminated in the sharp tip of his cock.

"No one can have this but you, Shane." Ilya pressed his red, leaking tip at the entry of Shane's weeping hole. "No one but you."

He inched forward in a slow, agonizing motion, drawing a whimper from Shane's body. Ilya allowed himself a moment to feel the weight of his cock inside Shane, feel the way his insides began to clench around his cock immediately, feel the slick tightness of his begging hole. And then he began to thrust, his body slapping against Shane's in a relentless fury.

"You gonna come for me, Shane?"

"Yes! Oh God – Please!"

To Ilya, Shane seemed to be in the middle of an exorcism; his mouth was torn around a gasp that wouldn't come, and his cries resembled those of loons more than humans.

"Say you are mine to breed!" Ilya hissed, his thighs shaking with the effort of fucking. "Say you will take my knot!"

"I am, yes, I am!" shrieked Shane. "Yours to breed, yours to knot!"

Ilya knew he was close when his cock began to hurt – actually hurt. His balls tightened and then with one last frail thrust, Ilya pressed in as deep as Shane's tunnel allowed him, and felt his cock thicken at the shaft, stretching Shane's rim to accommodate the growing width, forcing him to let out an agonizing groan. Shane's body twitched one final time around the escalating intrusion and then came down hard. The wall in front of him suffered white stripes of hot release.

Soon, Ilya's vision went white as he shot spurt after spurt of his release inside of Shane. Afterward, with his breath still leaving him in rattles, he looked down at the point of their joining, and faintly registered the white web of stretch marks that lined Shane's hips. To make up for his inability to kiss them, he settled for Shane's clothed shoulder instead.

“God, solnyshko,” he slurred, his forehead coming to rest on Shane’s shoulder. “You have ruined me.”

“No, Ilya,” said Shane, his voice sounding distant. Disconnected. Disappointed at giving in. “You have ruined me.”

Later, as they smoothed their crumpled clothes with the palm of their hands, Shane avoided Ilya’s eyes and left the bathroom as abruptly as he had arrived. The battle was far from over, Ilya realized with a dejected sigh. He followed his husband out of the bathroom.

Chapter End Notes

I am floored by the love I have received on this fic! My heart is so full of love and I wish I could kiss each one of you on the cheek! Thank you, thank you, thank you! You make getting up worth it!😭😭😭😭❤️❤️❤️❤️🙏🏻🙏🏻🙏🏻

Also…moment of truth? This fanfic originally began as a one-shot. It clearly isn’t that now. Do I have an end in sight for it? Not really. But since it isn’t a part of a coherent plot, (and because I have already delivered on what was promised in the blurb), I am going to mark it as completed. I am also going to wrap each chapter up as if it could be the last.

But is it going to be the last, you ask?
Never.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hayden's house was swarming with kids. There was not a single corner in the tightly packed building where you could escape the screams bouncing off the walls. The eldest of Hayden's kids was engaged in a mock sword fight with the youngest, their silver-wrapped swords sliding against each other as they charged toward victory.

The other two kids, girls in dresses inspired by summer's hues, were chasing one another in the sweltering heat, laughing as their shoes jumped over water-filled potholes. The tall grass was swinging freely in the wind, eager to tangle itself around a careless ankle and finally put an end to their extended shenanigans.

Shane was staring at the girls from his place at the table, his face etched with a sad smile. Hayden had invited him and Ilya over for an impromptu lunch, and with no better alternative on their hands, they had driven all the way from the cottage as their daughter had dozed peacefully in Ilya's arms. At one point Shane had stared at her Slavic nose and had wished for Ames to spend the next eighteen years sleeping, then wake him up one day as a grown-up girl who didn't need him anymore. Later, as the countryside had rolled past him, he'd wanted to swerve into the oncoming traffic for wanting to miss out on the joys of parenthood.

"Is this taken?"

Shane jumped out of his reverie. A man, dressed in a pressed teal suit and a kind smile, was staring down at him. His blonde hair seemed spun of gold in the Sun, his blue eyes the deepest ocean. His fingers were clenched around the back of Shane's chair.

The seat next to Shane was, indeed, taken. The occupant was currently in the midst of assisting Jackie with eggs in her kitchen, trailing praises about her cooking skills which were continually carried to the garden by the air.

"It's not," said Shane, surprised at how easily the lie knocked out of him. A knot in his stomach made him realize how badly he didn't want to be seated next to Ilya, not after what had gone down at the cafe two days ago. The stranger had landed on that grimy afternoon as the perfect excuse.

He dropped down to his chair and extended a ringed hand. "Theo Locke," he said.

Shane slotted his fingers into Theo's. His wedding ring reflected the sun's ray and Shane caught Theo eyeing the gold band. "Shane."

"I know," he chuckled. "Quite the pair, you and your husband. Always making the headlines." He leaned in for a whisper then. "Don't tell Rozanov but back in Montreal, you were my favorite."

Shane's ears went embarrassingly hot. He decided to ignore his remark. "How do you know Hayden?"

"Oh, Pike, you mean? Met him at a party now, didn't I?" The man turned around. "Which makes me ask – where the fuck is that bastard?"

"In the kitchen, I guess."

As if summoned by the mere mention of his name, Hayden appeared on the scene bearing a trolley of treats, Ilya and Jackie behind him with their own set.

"Locke, you dick, how the fuck did you even make it?" Hayden's voice was tinged with genuine surprise, but his face was all smiles.

"Took a break from cocksucking, how else?"

"Fuck you!"

Hayden set the plates down on the table and lunged for Theo who shot up and returned the embrace with infectious enthusiasm. When Theo pulled apart and reached for his chair again, so did Ilya, both of their fingers coming to wrap around it simultaneously. Shane gulped.

"Pardon?" said Theo.

"Is mine," said Ilya, sure that the stranger had made a mistake.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Theo threw his hands and backed up then. "Why'd you say otherwise then?" he asked Shane and dropped into the chair across him. From his place next to him, Shane felt Ilya's eyes drilling holes into his neck, questioning whether Theo's words were true, asking if he didn't love him anymore. He didn't dare to turn sideways and meet them.

"Is Ames sleeping?" said Shane as beads of sweat began clinging to his neck.

"Yeah, Ilya put her down a minute ago," replied Jackie, scooping the mac and cheese into a half-moon curve.

Theo's left eyebrow sprang up. "You guys have a kid?"

Shane wished the Earth to open up and swallow him into its centre. His daughter was the last thing he wanted to discuss in front of a stranger, in front of someone who had not seen him through that ugly phase. Ilya couldn't read the room.

"We do," answered Ilya smugly, his hand coming to rest atop the back of Shane's chair. "She's two months now."

"Congratulations!" said Theo, his tone far from celebratory. "She must be your entire world."

“She is everything.” Ilya reached for the plate of grilled aubergine and dropped one onto Shane’s plate.

“How’s parenthood treating you, Shane?” Theo crunched down on a floppy tomato. “You must be happy.”

The garden felt far hotter than it had a minute ago. Shane felt a tight ball of heat forming low in his belly and then expanding slowly and steadily to occupy his chest, his throat, and then finally, his entire body. The pressure built and built till Shane’s ears began to ring and his body felt on the verge of bursting to pieces and spraying everyone with bits of skin, blood, and muscle.

“We are – ” began Ilya, but Theo put a halt to it with one outstretched hand. His unyielding eyes locked onto Ilya’s face. “I didn’t ask you.”

Shane needed to get out – now– before the pressure inside him made him keel over. “S’cuse me,” he mumbled, his words an incoherent slur. Before he could make it to the door, his knees buckled. "Shane!" The last thing he heard was the sound of Ilya’s footsteps before darkness claimed him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I apologize for the short update but also, long chapters are something that I don’t have time enough to write due to Uni work😭 You guys make it all worth it though❤️

Please subscribe for the next update!😇

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane was dreaming. Dreaming of him. He was back in the crowd at an NHL after-party, and the bodies were thrusting and shoving him around, but his mother's hand was firm on his shoulder as she guided him through the chaos. David occupied Shane's left, acting as his personal security as he jostled the others to make way for his family.

They halted in front of the stage and waited for the guests to come and shake their hands, to tell them how proud they were of their son, how elated they were that he'd lead the Montreal Metros to victory once again. But Shane's focus was not on the fingers that gripped his. No, he didn't care about those fairweather well-wishers in the slightest.

Rather, his eyes were locked onto the blonde curls far from where he stood. Ilya looked radiant in his pearl white suit; Shane wanted to tear it from his form. Their eyes locked and Ilya shot him one of his easy smiles. He shook hands with the woman he had been engaged with, nodded, and then proceeded to make a beeline for the Hollanders. Suddenly, Shane's armpits felt sweaty, and his hand's grip on the current well-wisher slackened as moisture gathered on his palm. Ilya came around then, and shook hands with his disapproving parents who nodded their heads slightly.

"Mom, Dad, this is Ilya Rozanov," Shane had wanted to say. "My boyfriend." But the words had been snuffed out in his throat the moment Ilya had grasped his hand gently and flashed a congratulatory, yet strangely condescending smile, a smile which could have only been flashed by a rival turned lover. Shane's heart had wavered and been on the verge of collapsing under pressure.

Back home, with his head buried in the pillow, he had turned that moment around carefully in his head, dealt with it as he would have with a precious ruby. Over and over again he had considered the alternative paths the moment could have taken if he'd been courageous enough to murmur those forbidden words. "My boyfriend."

Shane was sure his mother would have collapsed on the spot. David would have been surprised. Unpleasantly. But not as dramatically as Yuna. Shane's fervent apology would have meant dust to them. They would have shunned him forever, disappointed in their golden son. His mother would have taken the worst hit.

"I sacrificed so much," she would have said. " And for what?" Then, Shane's entire self-worth would have vanished in the span of a second, and his entire life, everything he'd been built to do as a child would go down the drain. His dreams would shatter. And the world will slowly, and gradually, forget him. "Remember Shane Hollander," they would say in crowded bars. "What a pity it couldn't work out."

The crowd would shake their heads disappointedly and blame Shame for bringing about his downfall, for letting them down with his bold streak of independence. Slowly, Shane would

die of a broken heart, all alone with his boyfriend who would never understand, despite his best efforts, the pain that had been forever etched into his bones. One night, the arguments would begin. Shane would blame Ilya, and Ilya him. Then, the next morning, Ilya would pack his bags and depart quietly and Shane would let him go, believing that he deserved better than being saddled to a shattered heart. And then, finally, his life will reach its undignified end, exactly how it'd been destined to from his first shaky breath.

In the end, Shane's horrifying dream had come to life, just not in the way he'd expected. He'd realized that his hockey career would have to take a pause the moment he'd seen those two pink lines in the bathroom. And he'd been okay with it, he really had. Although he hated to admit it now, he'd even enjoyed being pregnant; the kick against his ribs in the middle of grocery shopping, Anya's licks on his belly, Ilya's late-night talks to it in Russian, the increased libido which had almost driven him out of his mind.

But he had expected it to go back to normal. That had been his fault. One day, when Ames had completed a month, he'd looked back at his old pictures, at the smooth curve of his nose and his sexy smile and then collapsed to the floor in a heaving mess. Ilya had been at practice, his world unaffected while Shane's had quietly split into two.

———-

When Shane came back to his senses, the world around him seemed distant and blurred. His eyes were immediately blinded by the overhead lights. When he adjusted to them, he realized that he was back in his room. The ceiling above him seemed tilted and his head was cradled on a bare muscular lap. Ilya was looking down at him.

"I have got you," he whispered. "You are okay."

"What happened?" said Shane groggily.

"You fainted."

Shane's head felt like it had run a marathon.

"Where's Hayden?"

"Outside."

"Why?"

"You scared him." Ilya paused. "You scared me more."

"I am sorry."

Shane stood up abruptly from the couch and saw stars. It took a minute for his vision to clear and his weight to find its centre of gravity before he could make for the door. As his fingers wrapped around the door's handle, Ilya spoke up.

"Your beautiful bastard's here too."

Shane's grip tightened on the handle.

"Don't call him that."

"Why? Why the fuck should I not? He is why you are like this. Why you fell."

"He's not the reason why Ilya."

"Of course." Ilya smiled coldly. "Can't hear a word against him since he threw a bone at you. I didn't ask you, the fucker said. The fucking guts on that guy. I could have killed him."

"No one's killing anyone," said Shane sternly. "Besides, what did he even do wrong?"

"He was flirting with you!"

"And that waitress was not?"

"Don't you dare, Shane," said Ilya, his hand coming to wrap around his hair. "She was being kind!"

"And Theo wasn't?" Shane had had enough of Ilya: his face, his scent, his presence. It was a reminder of all that he had lost, all that he had once had with him. Ilya did not understand all the overwhelming, and twisted ways in which Shane's life, and all it had been rolling toward, had been ruined due to his love for him. Maybe he never did. Maybe he never will.

Because he could not articulate his sadness, and all three dimensions of it in coherence, he settled for fury instead. "You are sick in the head if you think that was flirting."

All the wind was knocked out of Ilya's lungs. His heart cracked and the shards lodged in his ribs, blown away by the winds of guilt and melancholic longing. His lips tugged upward. "You are right," said Ilya. "I am sick."

Shane realized his mistake a second too late.

"That's not what I — "

"Is fine, Shane." Ilya pursed his lips tightly to halt the cry on the verge of tearing out. "Is only the truth."

As Ilya began to walk out, Shane's heart faltered.

"Ilya!"

Ilya stopped dead in his tracks but didn't turn back.

"Problem, Hollander?"

Don't go, one half of Shane wanted to say. Not now when I don't even know what I want. I am dying. In the end, he let the other half win.

"The keys are in the kitchen."

Ilya walked out.

“What happened?” asked Hayden outside, his eyes narrowing as he took in the urgency of Ilya’s thundering footsteps across the path. Ilya dismissed it, his mind racing ahead of him.

“Ilya!” Hayden shouted after him.

Ilya kept moving till he had dropped behind the wheel, yanked the door shut, jammed the key into the ignition, and pulled the car out of their driveway. He drove to Svetlana’s without braking even once except at one point when he pulled over because his tears had blurred his vision. Then, he didn’t stop till after the tires had crunched the gravel of her driveway.

Chapter End Notes

"Matthias was dreaming. Dreaming of her." One of my favourite lines in literature and I finally got to use it in my own weird way.

I hope you guys liked the chapter! If you have any queries, drop them in the comments!!

Don’t forget to subscribe for the next update🧘‍♀️ Lots of love❤️

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ilya still remembered the first time he came down with a fever. The rain against his windowpanes had been relentless that night. As his five-year-old form had shivered and convulsed under the suffocating pile of blankets, the eel-like illness had tried to worm its way into his bones and carve itself a comfortable home. The room had seemed unreal — the stuff of dreams. Only his mother's fingers entwined with his had been his anchor to reality. He had been gripped by the irrational, childish fear that if he let go of her, even for a second, he would have floated away. And so, before his eyelids could grow heavier, he had held on tightly and clutched her palm close to his chest. When he had woken up, her hand had been gone.

Over the next few years, with no one left to love him in the world, Ilya learned to manage his fever independently. He premeditated its arrival by placing a glass of water at his bedside, stocking his cabinet with pills, and tucking a pair of fuzzy socks beneath his bed in anticipation of the chills. On feverish nights, he would lie very still and stare at the white ceiling, waiting for the morning's arrival. Always by the crack of dawn, his fever would break, leaving him hollowed out but still alive.

With Shane, Ilya had allowed himself to grow careless. The fastidious rituals that had once guarded his days had slowly, but surely, unspooled. He didn't know when it began, except that when it did, he let it happen. He stopped keeping a glass of water at his side, stopped checking if his cabinet had been restocked. Somehow, they were always within reach anyway.

There was a quiet comfort in that knowledge. He knew that if the fever made his temples throb at night, a cool palm would suppress it with a firm push. There would be someone to brush his sweat-soaked hair away from his forehead, someone to coax him to drink water when his throat felt parched, someone to tell him that it would eventually be all right.

And when the chills would inevitably seize his body in one violent coup, there would be more than the weight of blankets, more than the warmth of his fuzzy red socks. There would be Shane.

Shane who would never mind the heat radiating off his skin, or the sweat pouring out of his body, or the weak rattling of his bones. With Shane tucked beneath his arm, sleep would seem miles away. Not because it wasn't ready, but because Ilya wasn't. Somewhere, the little boy in him still feared that if he slept too deeply, he would wake to find the warmth gone.

But with each time Shane didn't leave, Ilya's fears did, relinquishing his grip on him at last. And for the first time since he was five years old, Ilya didn't feel like floating away.

In the cold of Svetlana's living room, Ilya's limbs felt gripped by a familiar fever. Except, there was no Shane this time to breathe in tune with him, or to lead him back to normalcy. He

had lost him forever.

Chapter End Notes

So…I have made a promise with myself to be consistent with posting, even if the chapters are short. And so here it is — a snippet written 30 minutes before bed time. I am so sorry😭

Also, I better not see any vitriol against Shane in the comments. It makes me feel horrible

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Did he really say that?”

Ilya couldn’t tear his gaze away from the engraved wall ahead of him. The surface of it had been carved and painted with hot pink tigers in a tight circle, their jaws dripping, their claws terrifyingly predatory. Typical Svetlana. The whiskey glass in his hand had long gone slick with moisture. His throat felt raw and abrasive — carved out of sandpaper. Swallowing did nothing to soothe it.

“Yes,” he spat after a while.

Svetlana shifted immediately, abandoning her ramen bowl to the lonely couch on instinct. Her fingers found his like they had a hundred times before. She laced them together and tugged till he had no choice but to meet her stare.

“He didn’t mean it, Ilya.”

Ilya scoffed. Then smiled. “Of course.”

“He didn’t,” she reiterated calmly.

Something volatile snapped inside Ilya.

“You weren’t there!”

He could hardly restrain the bubbling rage in his chest as it threatened to spill over, barely wrap it into a nice gift with a bow — could not wrap it into something that would not push her away.

Not her too.

His jaw tightened with the force of a man in a violent struggle with himself. He forced himself to look at the tigers. For a second, he saw himself in them.

“Don’t you love him?” She asked with a sense of finality in her tone.

The answer should have been as quick as his heartbeat. It wasn’t. There had been a time when Ilya had loved him. But so much of it had been dependent on Shane’s love for him. Or at least that’s what he thought. The memory of that desperate phone call from Russia was still fresh in his mind. Back then, he had not been brave enough to tell Shane the truth. But then Shane had loved him back — had the audacity to fall in love with a fucking misery like him. And then one day, all of his fears had packed their bags and left for the next station. When he’d said it the next time, he’d made sure that Shane understood. And he had.

Now, suddenly, Ilya found himself stranded in the middle of a deserted road with no headlights to guide him home. How much of his love was dependent on Shane's love, he'd asked himself one night. Not much, his heart had replied. But his heart had always been a dirty liar.

Ilya's circumstances had always forced him to wonder about the impossibility of loving someone who could not love you the same. Maybe could not love you at all. Could he ever love Andrei when all he had ever done was ask and ask and ask? Could he ever love his father when all he had ever done was demand and demand and demand. Could he continue loving Shane when all he had done was push him away and act like he had lost his tongue? Ilya didn't ask his heart this time; he was too scared of the answer.

The one thing his heart was sure of was that if this thing, this massive immovable ghost which had settled between him and Shane — which slept between them, had meals with them, and even participated in their conversations — was not resolved at the earliest, the silence between them would stretch and stretch till it couldn't stretch any more. Then it will break. Shane would take his daughter away, blame Ilya's sickness, and after a string of desperate requests, allow him to co-parent her as a charity case. Inevitably, Ilya will lose the only family he has ever known.

They would move away from each other, see each other occasionally, boldly see each other living in pictures on the Internet, but never be bold enough to intrude upon the lives they would build separately, the memories they would go on to share with strangers, memories none of them will ever know about. Then one day, Ilya would wake up to find his memories blurred on the edges — the curve of Shane's smile or the little scar on his shoulder not coming as easy as they once used to and he would realize what he had known all along — that he was just like his father. Distant. Cold. Forgetful.

His fear had not been founded on shaky ground but on an undisputable truth. His grip on his mother's memories had already started to falter, and already her hand had slipped away from his in the dead of the night. He'd looked at Irina's pictures one day in a futile attempt to compare her features to his daughter's. She was twenty in the picture, and dressed in a purple dress which stretched to her knees, the sparkle in her eyes a blinding force of light; not absent like it had been in Ilya's childhood. He had so wanted Ames to resemble her, squeezed his eyes to compare her little eyes, her nose, her jutting chin, her rosy skin to his mother's. But as hard as Ilya had tried, there had been no resemblance, nothing for him to hold onto or to remember her by. Where her mother's smile had been easy, Ames' had been pouty; his mother's eyes hazel, his daughter's the darkest sky. Just like Shane's. It was an awful thing to think about; the way love never died.

"Don't you love him?"

He did, Ilya realized with a sharp breath. And always will.

"It would be so," said Ilya, his voice teetering on the edge of a cliff, " fucking easy if I didn't."

"Then you would know that it was a mistake, Ilya."

“A mistake to call me sick?” snarled Ilya. “You don’t say that unless you have been thinking that.”

Svetlana sighed and dropped his hand. “What else has he been thinking? Did you care to ask him?”

“I did.”

“What did he say?”

Ilya went back to that night out on the couch, to the way Shane’s body had shivered and clung to his body with the desperation of a drowning man.

“Said he felt not good about his body. Said he felt insecure.”

“And did you do anything to help him out of it?”

“We fucked.” Ilya shrugged. “It helped.”

Svetlana narrowed her eyes. “Did it now?”

Ilya dropped his gaze. Svetlana sighed dramatically.

“Ilya, you don’t just fuck your husband when he tells you about his feelings and hope it will cure him…Sex is not a cure!”

“I know. I just thought that’s what he needed.”

“Well, clearly,” she scoffed, “ that turned out well.”

“What the — “

“What else?”

“Huh?”

“Start from the beginning, Ilya.” She fixated him with a gaze he’d only ever known from Galina. It made him feel uneasy. “When did it all start?”

“I don’t know," Ilya admitted truthfully. “I noticed it a week after Ames. I came home one day to find her crying — No, not crying, but wailing that ridiculous sound, and I ran to her. I thought Shane was not in the room. But he was. He was.”

The memory of that moment sent an awful shudder through Ilya’s body. He felt horrible airing out his husband’s dirty laundry. But then, who the fuck else was he supposed to talk to without sounding insane?

“He was just lying there. Staring at the ceiling. It was like he had forgotten he was there.”

“And?”

Ilya thought maybe he should hold back on this. It felt too vulnerable. But just as necessary too.

“He cried one day. Said Ames deserved a better father. Like he’d already failed. Already given up.”

“Oh, Ilya.” Svetlana’s eyes had gone soft.

“I said that wasn’t the truth. But — ”

“He didn’t believe you?”

“Yeah.” Ilya’s face fell in his hands. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I do.” The last time Ilya had seen her this certain was when she’d told him, without hesitation, that he loved Shane. “You need to stay.”

“How — ”

“No, shut up. Listen to me. You don’t get to leave him when he’s down. You don’t get to kick a dog when he’s dying. Not now, not ever. He’s not weak Ilya. You might think he is — “

“I never said —”

“Shut the fuck up!”

And this time, Ilya did. For good.

“You think he’s weak and so you try to fix him. You can’t fix him, Ilya. Just like you can’t fix yourself. You should be there for him.”

“I am.” His voice didn’t sound sure to his ears.

“Are you? How often are you away on practice?”

“Not often,” he lied. Svetlana gave him one of her quintessential faces. He felt guilty. Corrected himself. “Often?”

She sighed.

“And Shane’s not. Ever wondered why?” She looked disappointed in him. “He’s given up everything for you. He’s given up on hockey. Given up on the life he used to know. Don’t let him give up on you too.”

For not the first time in his life, Ilya felt like a failure.

“I feel like shit,” he admitted after a minute.

“Don’t bother.” She paused. “Is he seeing anyone?”

Ilya shook his head.

“Maybe he should. Even when he says he doesn’t need it. Especially then.”

“Okay,” Ilya whispered. His mind felt caught in the midst of a whirring machine, too fast for him to catch up. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes. Fine. I’ll do your thing. Stop trying to fix him. Take him to therapist.”

She smiled smugly. “Well, you should always do my thing.”

“Fuck off!”

Ilya laughed heartily. She flipped him off, and for a minute, it seemed like nothing had ever changed.

As Ilya dropped back behind the wheel and waved goodbye to Svetlana, he felt invincible for the first time in forever. Unfuckable. More than unfuckable — He felt like a fucking king.

As the countryside melted through his mirrors, his fingers tapped against the steering wheel, in tune with the upbeat music. He rolled the window down for the cold air to slip in; it cut through the residual heat in his chest. He felt clean. He felt hopeful.

The road curved ahead of him, a path he had taken a hundred times before, and yet, it seemed renewed by the sheer force of his faith. And then the tires skimmed over a wet patch of leaves. The car slipped and veered off the road as his tires screeched; he slammed into a tree with a bone-shaking force. The windshield shattered in a burst of glass, and its spiderweb cracks raced against time. Ilya’s world tilted. And the night closed in.

Chapter End Notes

Before I began with this chapter today, I had a brief moment of self-doubt.

I thought I wasn’t a good writer.

I thought about deleting this fanfic.

I thought “I am 20…What the hell am I even doing with my life?”

I began to write anyway. And in the middle of it, while writing about Ilya’s desperation to see his mother’s resemblance in his daughter’s face, I began to cry and had to stop for a moment. Then I thought, this is why I write.

Thank you for making it all worth it❤️

Chapter 9

No matter where Shane turned, he could never escape Ilya. Even back during their rookie season, when Ilya had made the first draft, Shane had tried to rush back to his hotel room at the first break. He had bolted past the well-wishers, the guests, the sponsors, and before he had even managed to make it to his room, he had been caught by Ilya's shadow a hundred times — in the posters he had rushed past, the undecipherable conversations he had caught, and even in the hallway where his gaze had snagged momentarily at Ilya's room number.

In the privacy of his room, Shane had allowed himself to break free and slid to the bathroom floor, twisting the tap free in the process. The water had thumped against his scalp rhythmically, drenching him — drowning him. He had licked the salty droplets that had stuck to his lips. It was only after a while that he'd realized the taste of his own tears.

The clock had not even crossed ten minutes when his phone began to ring. Yuna. Shane had almost torn his hair out in agony, fisted them in bunches, and pulled hard enough to sting. He had let it ring, turned the tap off, put on his bathrobe, and sat down on the cushioned chair in his room. He had closed his eyes and breathed. In and out. In and out. Five minutes later, he had cracked his eyes open; they had landed on a magazine. Ilya had stared back at him from the cover.

For a moment, something feral had gripped Shane, and almost forced him to grab the butter knife on the table and slash the paper Ilya open: his eyes, his chest, his legs — all ripped apart by a dog in the throes of insanity. But it had only been a fantasy. Shane could never have despised Ilya enough to even cause his paper-self injury. Because somewhere, in the deepest, darkest pit of his heart, there had been the ghost of something else. Something dangerously close to admiration.

And tried as he had to suppress it with the collective force of his hands, it had grown and grown and grown till it had plowed through his bony ribs — till his entire body had been encompassed by his heart, all the arteries and veins and ventricles humming only one name: Ilya.

As he gazed at the baby in his arms now, he felt that same heart heavy and punishing in his throat. Ames was sucking at his milk-rich pecs, her lips working tirelessly to draw out the last drops from his skin, the tender spot on her skull pulsing with life. Her skin was flushed pink, a rosy shade she had inherited from Ilya; her nose seemed like he had willingly plucked his out and attached it to her face. There was a tiny mole in the centre of her right cheek. The resemblance was so jarring that it made Shane weirdly emotional. Even now, Ilya could not leave him alone to his devices. No — he just had to gift him a mini amalgamation of his moles and nose and skin that will stay with him when he won't.

Reluctant as he was to admit it, Ames had been an accident. Although Shane had always had an unreliable memory on a crusade to blur his best moments, the memory of her conception was clear as day. He could still feel the pressure of Ilya's hand on his shoulders, the way his

thighs had rubbed against his sweaty calves, how his cock had expanded at the base and forced Shane to scream — making all his inhibitions a relic of the past.

Afterward, while Ilya had bathed and scrubbed himself clean, Shane had felt his come dripping out of him and sticking to his thighs. It was supposed to be another normal Sunday for them and Shane was supposed to catch a flight for Ottawa a week later. And then came the symptoms like an unwelcome guest — knocking at his door, threatening to break it open if he didn't answer.

One Sunday afternoon, when they had been dining at Shane's favorite downtown restaurant, the server had delivered a plate of exquisite sushi onto the table — its salmon draped over the fine grain, the scent fresh and intoxicating. While Ilya's mouth had watered visibly, Shane had gagged at the smell, clapped his hand firmly to his mouth, and sprinted to the bathroom.

The moment Ilya had stepped in behind him, he had known.

"Shane," he had said and given him his easy eyes. And then they had been in on a secret — an oath larger than the one they had kept before. In the days that followed, Shane fell witness to a side of Ilya he had never seen before. "Let me" became a phrase that was always on the tip of his tongue, eager to jump out at the slightest push — Let me carry that, let me make you a cup, let me get you shoes, let me, let me, let me. Just when Shane had begun to grow sick of it, he started finding Ilya's steadying palm on the small of his back more often than before.

On cold nights, long after Shane had drifted into sleep, Ilya would notice his bare feet peeking out from beneath the covers and quietly tuck them back into the white fuzzy blanket. Later, he'd fetch another from the wardrobe and drape it across the first, indifferent to the overheating the pile might cause. Then he would climb in behind him, tuck his leg in between Shane's warm thighs, and wrap his hand around his tummy, feeling the life slowly, but surely, growing beneath the warm wraps of his body.

On most mornings, the food appeared beside Shane before he even lifted his hand — trays laden with meticulously prepared spinach sandwiches and buttery avocado toasts. Ilya was at his beck and call to the point of annoyance. It was too sweet for Shane but then, Ilya had always been that for him.

Shane, on the contrary, felt as if he had grown limbs of glass overnight, as if he had become something fragile, vulnerable, and worst of all, dependent. His ticket to Ottawa had been cancelled the second those two pinks lines had shown up in the bathroom. Farah had yelled at him through the phone, her voice the thinnest sheet of metal. It had cracked something open in Shane.

"Tell me this is a joke," she had begged with desperation evident in her tone. It had not been a joke. Shane had cut the call and fallen back onto the couch. Hockey, for him, would never be the same again. Sure, at one point he will gain strength enough to jump back onto the ice, and his blades will cut through the rink as they had before, and the crowd will cheer for their King's return as they had before, but his body, alas, won't respond to his commands like before.

There would be softness where there had been hard lines before, a lingering weight that would not shed even after hours of training in the gym. Even his stamina would betray him at times, his breath catching sooner than it used to. But then, through all this bedlam in his chest, he would look at the stands and see Ilya smiling at him, their daughter in his arms. And then it would all be so, so worth it. So worth it.

On the day Shane crossed the beginning of his seventh month on the calendar, Ilya came home early with snow still clinging stubbornly to his golden curls; the broad red shoulders of his jacket had been dusted white. He was heaving as if he had run a marathon. Shane had waddled in his direction, his huge middle already making the mundane task of walking a climb to Everest.

“Hey,” Ilya’d whispered, before tilting his head and slipping his tongue into Shane’s mouth. Shane had pulled him closer by wrapping his arms around his neck. “Hi,” he’d replied shyly.

And then Ilya had dropped to one knee. For one brief absurd moment, Shane had thought it must have been to tie his shoelaces. But it had not been for that. No, it had not been for that at all. Shane’s assumption had been confirmed the second Ilya had pulled out the ring from his pocket. It had been a ruthlessly precise diamond in the cut of a tear. It was the most beautiful thing Shane had ever laid his eyes on, second only to Ilya’s face.

“Shane Hollander,” Ilya had begun, his voice edged with tears. “Will you make me — ”

Ilya was a fool if he thought Shane was going to let him finish his proposal before dropping down on him. With much difficulty, and with his belly an unwanted (wanted) weight on his body, Shane had kneeled and kissed Ilya as tears had leaked down his cheeks.

“Y-Yes,” he had been able to manage. Barely.

And that had been the beginning of their forever.

To be continued…

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The moment Shane leaned his torso out of the car's window, the wind began beating against his skin and threading its cool restless fingers through his hair almost instantaneously. Shane could not remember the last time he'd had something like this — the last time he had felt so free and untamed. Although there had been drives before, of course, the ones he had undertaken with his husband on a quest to satisfy his midnight cravings, he had not been allowed to sneak his head out of the window; it had been deemed too dangerous in his state.

"Nothing is going to happen, Ilya!" He had hissed back then.

"What if your head gets hit by an overspeeding car?" Ilya had retorted. "I am not taking any chances!"

More than half of Shane's mood had been ruined, right then and there, by Ilya's comment. Even the ice cream had not tasted half as good as it had the previous week when he had received it in the comfort of his blankets.

"Careful, Hollander," said Theo now, his hand steady on the wheel, the grin on his face evident in his tone. "The way you are acting man — I feel like I am sneaking Rapunzel out of her tower."

Shane laughed and withdrew his head.

"Yeah, well," he said, "I feel the same."

And although Shane did indeed feel like Rapunzel abandoning her duties toward her godmother, or in this case his daughter, whom he had left behind with Hayden, he also felt so goddamn free. And yes, he loved his daughter more than life, but Jesus, didn't he deserve a fucking break too?

Even in his wildest dreams, Shane could not have imagined that his reprieve would come through in the shape of a man who had only been a stranger a few hours ago. But then, was Theo really a stranger when he had cared enough to check up on him, and to not step around him as if he was something to be avoided — to be forgotten? The fact that he had been a Montreal fan made the getaway even better.

"So," said Theo, "got any place in mind?"

The answer should have been simple but Shane's stupid heart refused to be confined to one place. It scattered into a million places and his stupid mind, forever obedient, conjured up a multitude of locations in the span of a second. Shane imagined himself in Los Angeles, basking and tanning his body in the Sun, except the body that came to his mind was not the one he carried now but the one he'd had before Ames had come along. Then, he imagined his

head tilted back in Norway, glancing up at the vibrant greens, blues, and purples dancing in the sky during the Northern Lights. But in the end, did the place even matter?

“Wherever you want.”

Theo looked a bit taken aback. His blonde hair was riding the waves of the wind blowing in through the window, each strand dancing happily in the wind’s caresses.

“Wherever I want?” Theo smiled and for a second, Shane felt like smiling too. “You have no idea what you have just agreed to!”

As the open countryside slipped past them, and the cars blurred in a race, Shane felt a tug of guilt low in his stomach. “Later, okay?” he demanded from his body. For once, it obeyed. They pulled to get their fuel refilled at the next gas station, and while Shane hopped off and went to grab a bunch of candies from the counter, he saw Theo snagging a bottle of absolute vodka from the refrigerator. Shane’s mouth watered at the sight; it had been too long — far too long — since he had felt that overpowering, that completely overwhelming burn humming alive in his veins. When Shane pulled his wallet from the pocket at the register, he found that the bill had been cleared in advance. From his place near the car, Theo winked.

The moment they jumped back into the seats of Theo’s stunning red Ferrari, Shane’s belt caught halfway and stubbornly refused to click into place. He tugged at it hard, once, then twice, and pulled again and again till Theo reached over, hovered dangerously close to Shane’s breathing space, and in a single smooth movement, snapped the belt into place. The car roared to life, and Shane licked the sweat that had gathered on his upper lip a few moments ago.

They drove on and the scenery shifted as their car picked up altitude. The air thinned, the turns sharpened, and the world below seemed to fall away inch by inch. After an hour, Theo pulled over near an empty slanting field littered with brushes and shrubberies and overlooking a sky so blue Shane wondered if it had been painted from an artist’s palette. Theo grabbed the vodka from the backseat and started down the hill. Shane followed suit with a much slower gait as he worked his way around the huge obstructing rocks in his path.

Theo dropped down into the middle of the field and Shane, too, lowered himself beside him. For a minute, neither of them spoke, both of them too sober for the conversation they knew would soon begin. Then Theo uncorked the vodka, took a swing, and handed it to Shane. The moment Shane lifted his hand to reach for it, Theo swung it back and cocked an eyebrow.

“Aren’t you breastfeeding?”

Oh, fuck.

In his mad chase to regain a bit of his old life back, he had completely forgotten about the child waiting for him back home. The husband who had left an hour ago. And who, Shane was sure, was never coming back. But was Shane really to blame if he wanted to forget all about it just for one day?

And so, he shrugged his shoulders and yanked the bottle from Theo's grasp, making a small dent in the volume the minute it touched his lips. The reward was blinding, and his nerves began to sing at the burning sensation almost immediately. It felt like the release of a withheld orgasm.

The moment Shane placed the bottle in the space between them, the world seemed brighter than before. Better too. He felt like a fucking King.

"How's life, Shane?" asked Theo abruptly.

It was a simple question from a simple man. Shane did not know where to begin.

"Good," he lied. "Pretty good."

And then because it would have been rude not to, he added, "How's yours?"

"Shitty," replied Theo. "Pretty shitty."

For a while, they just watched the blue sky dissolve into shades of pink and orange.

"I don't think he's ever coming back," said Shane. In the silence of the valley, beside a man he will never meet again, the truth seemed easy to speak. The impact of the vodka had already hooked itself to his bones.

"Who?" drawled Theo.

"My husband. Ilya."

"Oh."

They did not speak for another moment. And then, it was Theo who broke the silence. He was smiling sadly, the lines of his face concealing a truth Shane could not understand.

"I met Cath when I was thirteen," he said. "Do you believe in love at first sight, Shane?"

Shane thought back to a tuft of unruly curls pulled tight under a beanie. The strong stench of smoke. A dark mole in the parking lot as the cold wind had torn through him in Saskatchewan.

"I do," answered Shane. Theo nodded understandingly.

"Well, it was that for me. It was the first day of eighth grade and she was alone in the hallway, staring at a place to sit, her fingers around a white tray. I offered her mine. She was so…" Theo stared off dreamily into the distance. "So beautiful. Her white dress was so clean. Pure. But when she sat down beside me and bit into her apple, I noticed that her nails were dirty."

Theo took another drag from the bottle.

"Do you want to know why, Shane?"

Shane nodded.

“I don’t know,” said Theo with a disappointed shake of his head. “She never told me. And I never asked her why. That’s marriage Shane.”

Theo stared into Shane’s eyes, his eyes a piercing blue.

“That’s marriage.”

And then finally, Shane understood. In the end, it simply didn’t matter if Theo was not privy to every intricacy of Cath’s being, every curve and every nod and every hurt that she had suffered through her life. What mattered was that he had understood, had stood by her nonetheless, and that he had not held her secrets against her and neither had been offended by her inability to articulate them. They had found their peace in silence.

And now, it was Shane’s turn.

“Do you love him, Shane?”

Shane’s throat felt tight. Darkness had descended upon them now, its stars brightly embroidered in the thickest patches of the sky. All of a sudden, the admittance of his love for Ilya felt too much in the presence of someone who had not witnessed those isolating years of their relationship. It felt too fucking much.

And then, lost in the whirlwind of his thoughts, Shane almost didn’t notice Theo leaning in for a kiss. Shane’s heart lodged in his throat instantly and he dodged the collision of their lips at the last second. His heart felt impossibly fast. Theo withdrew from Shane’s space and sighed.

“You do love him,” he said. His voice felt distant. “What a pity.”

Shane’s head felt dizzy with shock.

“Are you and Cath — ”

“Still together?” asked Theo. “Yes. We are.”

And then it really was too much for Shane.

“But there’s no love Shane.” It was difficult to see Theo’s face in the dark and yet, the glint in his eyes reflected hurt. “It died so long ago I can’t even remember ever being in it.”

He grabbed Shane’s hand firmly. “But yours is still there.” His skin was cracked and cold. “Don’t let it go so easily.”

And then, Shane realized that he had gotten it all wrong. All this time, he had been so stupid thinking that Theo had been trying to set himself as a role model, a standard for Shane to rise to. But that had not been his motive. He had only been trying to teach him how to let go. It had been Shane who had misunderstood his words — who had failed to understand because he had loved Ilya. Because he still loved Ilya and could not imagine ever falling out of it.

Somewhere beneath the weight of that realization, he held onto the hope that Ilya felt the same.

An hour later, when the inebriation finally took over the pair, they both fell flat on their backs and let sleep sweep them away to better lands where they belonged. In the car, Shane's phone buzzed once, twice, then a hundred times. An unknown number. A hospital nurse. Shane was too far gone to answer.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked it!! Please leave a comment❤️

Also, just to be clear, Shane was not going to cheat. He even interpreted Theo's words wrong because of his love for Ilya. Thank you 🧘‍♀️

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The darkness receded slowly from Shane's eyes. His body felt impossibly heavy, as if his limbs had sunk to the bottom of a deep ocean and forgotten how to pierce the surface; he felt breathless but didn't have the strength to make it out alive. When he reluctantly squinted his eyes open, his vision seemed blurred at the edges. The darkness above him with its smooth spread of stars was a smudged firmament of nothingness. Emptiness.

He felt the dirt pressing into his palms as he pushed himself to an upright position, his arms shaking with the effort of gaining consciousness. It was only when he looked at the figure sprawled beside him — a man drooling and wetting the patch of grass beneath his mouth — did he realize where he was. In that split second of epiphany, Shane wanted nothing more than to sink right back into that baseless ocean and pretend that this was a nightmare he could wake up from with a shaky breath — a nightmare his husband would rescue him from by pulling him back under the duvet. Except, it was not a nightmare. It was his reality.

He needed to get back home. Right now.

Shane curled his fingers into Theo's shirt and shook him with the strength of a man running on vodka.

"Theo," he rasped, his voice on the verge of a collapse. "Wake up!"

Theo's body lolled to the other side, unresponsive to the insidious grasp on his shoulder. Then, something snapped inside Shane; his palm came down on Theo's right cheek with a resounding smack before he could stop it. Theo woke up with a sudden jerk.

"What the fuck man?" He gasped as his glassy eyes flew open. "What the actual fuck?"

Shane barely heard him over his own breath that was coming out in uneven bursts of air. The thin air of the high altitude was not helping his case in the slightest. The air was freezing, and the chill had long since seeped into his muscles and made them unprecedentedly slow. He wondered how he had even lasted this long out here. The vodka, his mind supplied dimly. Definitely the vodka.

"We need to move!" Shane barely managed to pull himself to his feet, using Theo's shoulder as leverage. Then, he hauled the other man onto his two feet with a strenuous effort that made him grit his teeth. Theo was heavier than he had realized. Or maybe Shane was weaker. He didn't have time to think it over.

After a minute of stumbling at every step, the pair finally made it to the top with their chests huffing together in a ragged cadence. They half-fell inside the car, their heads still muddled due to the liquid in their system, their vision still not at its best. Shane looked at Theo and wondered if he was in any state to drive. Either way, he was going to have to. The moment

the doors slammed shut against the deafening air, Shane's hands fumbled for the glove compartment and yanked his phone out. He pressed along its edge.

The sudden flash of light was blinding — he blinked rapidly till the blur disappeared and his eyes formed the numbers imprinted on his screen.

Twenty missed calls lined his lockscreen: an unknown number, Hayden, Yuna, and incomprehensibly, Svetlana. Shane's chest almost caved in. The minute his phone connected to the network, a flood of text messages appeared on his screen. Shane did not have to read through them; he already knew that something had gone wrong.

As the engine roared to life under Theo's unsteady hand, it was not Yuna's or Hayden's or even Svetlana's number that he dialled. It was the stranger's.

As soon as the ringing started, Shane's mind conjured up an elongated slideshow of every bad thing that could have occurred in his absence — Ames choking to death as Hayden played a video game on his phone, leaving Shane to grieve over a baby he had not loved half as much as he had resented; David on his death bed, waiting for his son to hold his hand one last time, or maybe Ilya —

No.

Shane forced his brain to stop, braked it against the very instinct that was keeping it reeling. He didn't want to think about Ilya — it just was not possible. Ilya was safe, he consoled his heart. Sure, Shane did not know where he was — but that was fine, right? He. Was. Safe. Maybe passed out across the counter of a bar, his hand stretched around a glass of whiskey, maybe fast asleep in the back of his car, too drunk to call him, maybe even bitching about Shane's atrocious behavior to Svetlana — but safe.

The ringing stopped.

"Hello, this is Emily Martin from St. Mary's Hospital. How may I help you?"

Shane's ears registered the word 'hospital' and then bloomed with static; a stone, impossibly large for his body, began to weigh him down, and pull him back into the ocean's depthlessness for the third time. This time, Shane did not let himself sink.

"Hi — " His voice was barely audible. He tried again. "Someone called — "

"Is this Shane Hollander?"

"Yeah — "

"Ilya Rozanov's husband?"

His breath hitched. "Yes, that's — "

"Sir," The receptionist's voice was straight as a rod. "Your husband's been in an accident… Where are you?"

Accident. Shane had been in an accident once. The world had seemed so…far. Ilya had been there then. Near him.

“No, no, it must be a mistake,” Shane said calmly, shaking his head, a small laugh escaping from his throat. “My husband’s not — ”

“I’m sorry, Mr….Hollander, is it?”

The receptionist proceeded to tell him something about a car crash, how it had been massive, and how she didn’t know if his husband was going to make it out alive. She asked him how long it would take him to get there, how far he was from the hospital, and reassured him that his family was there. Except him, Shane added on her behalf. Instead of answering her questions, Shane pressed down on the red button while the woman was still talking. He wanted to smother her words and return to the man he was an hour ago, someone blindly swimming in the darkness.

“Shane, is everything alright?”

Theo’s eyes were focused on the night stretching ahead of them. They had already descended and the car was rolling at a swift speed towards his home. Shane wanted to tell him that he had taken the wrong turn — that they had to go to the hospital. The bulge in his throat made that impossible.

He had called him sick. The last thing that Shane had ever called him — sick. Once, Ilya had woken up with the worst headache of his life. He had been moody the entire morning and had gone on to sulk in each corner of the house. When Shane had firmly pressed his hand between his shoulder blades, he had shoved it away. When Shane had thrown his shirt off in an unusually seductive manner, Ilya had looked away. When Shane had offered to make him one of his healthy yet tasteless sandwiches, Ilya had not resisted but slowly backed away.

The entire house had boiled in an incomprehensible sadness from dawn to dusk. At night, after Shane had scrubbed the greasy deposits from their plates clean, he had retired to their room to find Ilya curled in on himself, sobbing into their pillows. The sheets had been twisted around him, Shane’s pillow clutched tightly under his arm.

For a second, Shane had just stood there.

Then, he had stepped closer and sat beside him as the mattress had dipped under his weight. He had let his hand settle against his nape and wrapped his finger around the curl there. Ilya had tensed beneath his touch and turned to face him. His face had looked…mottled. But still beautiful. Still, the one that Shane had fallen in love with.

“Talk to me,” Shane had said, and reached beyond to rub his palms against Ilya’s spine.

“I am sick,” Ilya had said plainly as if it were an indisputable truth. “There’s no cure for it.”

Shane had just kissed him deeply, twisted their tongues together, and mingled their breaths. That had been enough to reassure Ilya that Shane didn’t feel the same — could never feel the same.

Sick. That's what he had called him. Sick.

And now there was going to be no apology, no proper goodbye, no proper kiss. Sick.

"Take a left," said Shane after a while.

"Pardon?"

Shane closed his eyes. "Take a left."

Theo did without asking why. Shane was grateful.

The second the hospital appeared in sight, Shane jumped out without waiting for the car to halt. The hospital was a compound of beige stone buildings in the middle of a massive field. He made a brief stop at the reception to inquire about the floor of Mr. Rozanov and didn't wait to give his name before departing for the elevator. On the fourth floor, he rushed past the commotion of doctors and nurses scurrying toward their duties — carrying carts with equipment or domed food.

At the end of the hallway, Yuna and David sat huddled under the pale overhead light with their arms slung around each other's backs. The moment their eyes landed on Shane, they shot up at once and rushed to meet him halfway. Yuna got to him first, colliding into him with a force that knocked the breath from his lungs. Her hands came around to clutch at Shane's shirt, and before Shane even knew it, he was crying — breaking down in his mother's embrace. He felt like a child again and cried like one too. The world seemed tilted. Shane wondered if it would ever be right again.

———

"It all happened so fast," said Yuna, "We didn't even get to see him properly…He had already been taken when we got here."

Shane faintly heard her words in the back of his mind.

"Where's Ames?"

"She's with Svetlana." Yuna sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Such a sweetheart."

The coffee in Shane's hand was horrible. Still, he took a sip and waited for his mother to ask. He knew her too well.

"Where were you?" Yuna looked at him with a hint of anger in her eyes. "We called you so many times. I thought you were — "

Dead too.

She didn't need to say it.

Shane didn't know how to tell her the truth.

“I was out. With Theo.” He paused. “Drinking…” His tongue seemed made of lead. “I am so sorry.”

Surprisingly, Yuna did not poke further. She knew that there would be no end to his tears if she did.

“Mom,” said Shane after a moment. “Do you remember Matt?”

It had been such a long time, Yuna took a while to remember. Then, clarity dawned on her face as clear as day.

“Your kindergarten friend?

“Yeah.”

“What about him, honey?”

“He…um. He didn’t have a dad.” A tear spilled down Shane’s cheek. “He used to be so… sad. All the time. And so you asked me to befriend him one day. But he was still sad, Mom.”

Shane’s eyes began dripping furiously. “He was still so sad.”

And then he was back in his mother’s arms, his face pressed deep into her sweater’s elbow where it was difficult to breathe. One unfortunate delay and Ames could have ended up like Matt. The children stood apart because of one impossible minute. It was too much for Shane. Too fucking much.

Ilya could not — was not allowed to leave them behind. Shane was not going to let him go, even if he had to drag him back from God itself.

———-

Before the beeping of the machines pulled him back to the surface, Ilya had been dreaming of freckles on rosy skin. God, he still remembered how Shane had hated them. He never understood Ilya’s fascination with them; Ilya never tried to explain it either. He didn’t know how to tell Shane that those freckles — those tiny dots that only became visible when Ilya was pressed close against Shane — were a reminder of their love. Their proximity. Their love.

Then, the beeping grew louder and louder till it became impossible to sidestep. Ilya’s eyes twitched painfully then opened in one firm movement. His limbs felt like they didn’t belong to him, too unresponsive to his commands. He tried to inhale but it broke halfway in, splintering into something that made his ribs protest violently.

It was then that Ilya realized that his ribs were not in pain only because of the hurt — but because of the weight of a man slung over him. Shane was breathing deeply into Ilya’s thin blanket, his face the reddest tomato he had ever seen. The freckles were as evident as ever.

He tried to call him out but his tongue lolled uselessly. He lifted his hand —felt more like lifting a car — and ran his fingers across Shane’s freckles. He jolted awake, his body

responding to the caress before his mind. Pure instinct.

For a second, Shane's eyes darted around the room wildly, searching for their target. Then they landed on Ilya. Everything in his face broke like a dam that had held too much.

Shane surged forward without thinking then halted at the last moment. His arms came down on Ilya's shoulders — careful, almost afraid — then slid down to his elbows.

"Ilya — " All the words in the language seemed foreign to him. "You are alive."

And then, before he could stop himself, "You are not sick." He needed Ilya to know that Shane didn't think that. He needed him to know —

Then Ilya's fingers intertwined with his in a firm move. There was no need, they seemed to say. It was all right, they said. I love you, they said.

Shane leaned in and brushed his lips against Ilya's bandaged forehead. A single tear darkened its white cover. Shane was home.

Chapter End Notes

Just to make it clear: this is Shane and Ilya's happy ending. I love you guys so much! Thank you for reading along.

But honestly? I don't think I am done with them. Yet. I believe they are not quite where I want them to be. And so, I am going to lock myself in my room and type 30k words of pure angst into my docs app. Then, I am going to publish it bi-weekly :)

If that's something you are interested in reading, you can always subscribe <3

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