

we only know the love we're shown

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we only know the love we're shown

by [justhockey](#)

Summary

Ilya has always known Shane could do better than him. It shouldn't come as a surprise that he's finally found it.

Found someone else.

Because that's what this is, isn't it?

Notes

Title from *Shower Arguments* by Semler.

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

After they lost in the Stanley Cup final, Ilya spent almost two full weeks in bed.

He'd felt it coming on for a while before that - felt the cold, bony hands of depression reaching out for him - and he'd fought it off for as long as he could. But once the season came to a devastatingly bitter end, he didn't have it in him to fight anymore. Those hands grasped hold of him, sinking their razor sharp claws in Ilya's flesh and refusing to let go.

When the fog finally starts to lift, Ilya doesn't remember all that much.

He remembers Bood and Hayes coming to visit, and Yuna and David, too. He remembers voices, and the creak of his bedroom door, and the sound of tires on gravel. He remembers chicken noodle soup, and ginger ale, and pill after pill after pill.

But, above all, Ilya remembers Shane.

He remembers the way Shane would kiss his forehead and whisper, "*It's okay, just rest,*" when words - especially English - were too far out of reach. He remembers waking up in the middle of the night to find Shane already wide awake, watching him. He remembers Shane's hands in his hair, and on his back, and caressing his cheek.

He remembers Shane staying. Always. Unwavering.

Ilya loves him, so much that it aches. And he doesn't know how to thank him, doesn't know how he could possibly convey how grateful he is that Shane didn't leave Ilya alone in the emptiness, even when that would have been easier.

So on the first morning that Ilya manages to get out of bed, and he finds Shane cooking breakfast on the stove, Ilya sidles up behind him and winds his arms around Shane's waist. His husband flinches, surprised at Ilya's presence, but in an instant he sighs, sinking back into Ilya's hold like he's been homesick for it.

"Baby," Shane whispers, his hands coming to land gently atop Ilya's.

"Good morning."

"Good morning," Shane laughs, his relief more than evident. "I missed you."

Ilya has to swallow back tears when he says, "I missed you, too."

Because he did. So much. It had felt like Ilya - the real him, the one who is happy and in love, and living the kind of life he used to only dream of - was trapped deep, deep down inside of him. Like *that* Ilya was banging on the window, begging to be set free, while the other Ilya - the Ilya who carries his mama's loneliness in his bones - wouldn't let him out.

Everything had felt just out of reach, until today. Until he opened his eyes this morning and felt like he could take a full breath again.

And now - now, all Ilya wants is his Shane.

He takes a step back, just far enough that Shane can turn around in his arms, and - finally - Ilya smiles. His husband's eyes are glassy, and his freckles look like fairy dust, and he's the most beautiful thing that Ilya has ever seen. He's so unbelievably lucky.

Ilya leans forward, rubs their noses together, and then he kisses Shane. It's chaste and brief - their lips barely even parting - but it feels like coming home. Shane hums softly into the kiss, and Ilya feels it all the way down to his soul.

"You brushed your teeth," Shane comments, and he sounds so proud that - if he were anyone else - Ilya might feel embarrassed.

"Yes, I did," Ilya acknowledges.

Because - like Galina always tells him - all steps are important, even baby ones. Even ones as simple and small as basic hygiene. Ilya hadn't been able to brush his teeth yesterday, or even the day before, but he did it today, and that matters. Shane is proud of him for it, and Ilya is proud of himself.

Shane kisses him again, then asks, "How are you feeling?"

There's no expectation behind the question, no pressure. Shane just toys with the hair at the nape of Ilya's neck, and watches him while waiting for an answer.

"Better," Ilya says. His voice still sounds a little hoarse, after so much disuse. "More like a human today."

"I'm glad," Shane says, as he moves one of his hands to Ilya's jaw so he can scratch his beard. "I was starting to worry."

"Sorry."

"Ilya..."

"I know, I know," Ilya sighs. "No sorries."

"No sorries," Shane agrees. "Not for this. I'm just happy you're feeling a bit better."

Somehow, Shane manages to never make Ilya feel guilty about his episodes. Even when he goes dark, even when he goes *silent*, Ilya is only ever met with warmth when he makes it to the other side. Shane never makes him feel bad about it, or like he should be ashamed, or like he needs to apologise for checking out for a while. He never makes Ilya feel like a burden.

He just lets Ilya know how happy he is to have him back. How grateful he is that Ilya is doing better.

"You want some breakfast?" Shane asks.

Ilya nods his head. He's spent two weeks eating the bare minimum, and now he's absolutely ravenous. Shane grins, clearly relieved at Ilya's response, and Ilya can't help but kiss him again.

“Thank you.”

“It’s just breakfast, baby.”

“Not for the breakfast. For...everything. All of it,” Ilya whispers softly.

For loving me. For knowing I am like this, and marrying me anyway. For staying, even when it is hard.

“In sickness and in health,” Shane says. “That was the deal.”

Ilya had warned Shane before they got married. He had said *if*, and Shane had said *when*, completely unwilling to entertain the idea of a world where they didn’t end up as husbands. Shane had promised in sickness and in health, and he’d upheld that vow tenfold. Til death do us part.

“Can we make another deal, though?” Shane asks, biting his lip.

“That depends.”

“After I feed you, you shower and shave. How’s that sound?”

Ilya snorts out a laugh, and it’s been so long that he feels a little bit out of practice, but Shane grins anyway. He leans forward, resting his forehead on Ilya’s shoulder, and just letting himself be held for a moment. Letting Ilya prop him up, after two weeks of the reverse.

“Deal,” Ilya agrees. “I love you.”

“I love you so much.”

It takes Ilya about a week to notice that something is off with Shane.

It’s small things at first, things that Ilya probably wouldn’t have even picked up on had he not still been reeling from the last few weeks. But he’s perhaps a little more sensitive than usual, a little more attuned to differences in Shane’s behaviour, or attitude, or tone.

So when Ilya says, “I’m tired, sweetheart. I’m going to bed,” and Shane responds with, “I’ll be up in a bit,” Ilya feels the first stirrings of concern.

They go to bed together every night, without fail. It’s their whole thing.

They don’t subscribe to the whole *never go to bed angry* adage, because sometimes it’s better to sleep on things - to leave them until morning when both their heads are a bit clearer. But they *do* always go to bed together, with a goodnight kiss, even if they’re not talking to each other and they sleep with their backs turned.

So Ilya - too surprised to even say anything about it - makes his way to bed without his husband. He lies there, in the dark, waiting and waiting for Shane to come and join him. It’s

an hour later when their bedroom door finally creaks open and Shane slips inside.

He thinks Ilya is already sleeping, so he's quiet as climbs into bed. Quiet as he places his glasses in their case on the bedside table. Quiet as he leans over and presses a kiss to Ilya's lips.

Ilya sighs in relief, murmurs unintelligibly, and leans into the kiss. Shane chuckles, his hand coming up to stroke Ilya's now-smooth jawline.

"Thought you were sleeping," Shane whispers, even though there's no one they have to stay quiet for.

"Waiting for you."

"Well I'm here now, baby," Shane replies. "Sleep. I love you."

"Love you, too," Ilya promises him, but it takes a long while for him to fall asleep.

When he wakes up the next morning, Shane is nowhere to be found.

Anya is sleeping in the patch of sunlight shining through the back doors, her water bowl full and a few chunks of kibble left her in her food bowl, so clearly Shane had taken care of her this morning. He's not anywhere in the house, though.

Instead, Ilya finds a post-it note stuck to the still-warm coffee pot.

Morning, baby. Had some errands to run but I won't be gone long. See you soon. Shane.

Ps. Take your meds.

And that's...fine. It is.

They don't do, like, *everything* together. It's just - Ilya likes running errands with his husband. He likes the simplicity of it, the mundanity of doing the normal, married-couple things that used to feel so out of reach for them. They've been married almost three years now, and that still hasn't gotten old for them.

Or, it hasn't gotten old for Ilya, at least. The novelty of being Shane Hollander's Husband hasn't worn off yet, and Ilya doubts that it ever will. Maybe Shane feels differently, though. Maybe Ilya singing along in the passenger seat has started to annoy him.

By the time Shane gets home - two hours later - Ilya's done the laundry and folded it how Shane prefers, weeded and watered the garden, and taken Anya for a run around the neighbourhood. He's stepping out of their bathroom and into their bedroom, with one towel around his waist and using another to dry his curls, when Shane walks in.

His eyes widen as he takes in Ilya's half-naked presence. "Oh. Good morning to me," he grins, wiggling his eyebrows.

“You left me,” Ilya pouts, all exaggerated, even though he really does feel some kind of way about it.

Shane rolls his eyes, but he’s smiling softly as he closes the distance between them and rests his hands on Ilya’s bare waist. Shane kisses Ilya’s lips, his jaw, the hollow of his throat.

“Sorry,” Shane says. “It was just boring stuff. I didn’t want to wake you.”

“I wouldn’t have minded.”

It’s Shane’s turn to pout, as he says, “But you look so cute when you’re sleeping.”

And, well. What is Ilya supposed to do with that, except kiss him? He doesn’t have time to analyse Shane’s strange behaviour, or worry about what he’s up to, when Ilya has his husband spread out beneath him like a four course meal.

For a while, Ilya tries to tell himself he’s imagining things.

They won the Cup with the Centaurs last year, and everyone had expected them to go back to back. The loss in game seven had been brutal, and with nothing left to distract him, Ilya’s depression had hit him hard. It had been a storm cloud pressing down on his chest, making it impossible to breathe. And he’s back to being his usual self now, but he tells himself the after-effects are still lingering.

He’s reading too much into things. Overreacting. Making a mountain out of a mole hill, as David likes to say.

Shane isn’t being odd, Ilya is just seeing things that aren’t there. That has to be it, because the alternative...Ilya can’t even consider it.

Until he’s given no other option.

Shane is sitting at the dining table drinking his post-workout smoothie and scrolling through his phone, and he looks so irresistible - sweat-damp hair, pink cheeks, and short gym shorts - that Ilya simply cannot help himself. He has to touch.

So he saunters up behind his husband and bends down, draping himself over Shane’s shoulders. But Ilya feels Shane tense for a split second, and he watches as Shane tilts his phone screen away, locks it, and then places it on the table. *Face down*. Only then does Shane relax, leaning back into Ilya and turning his face to look up at him.

“Hey, I’m all sweaty,” Shane says.

Normally Ilya wouldn’t care. He would bury his face in Shane’s neck and scent him like a dog. He’d lick a stripe up his throat and groan like Shane is his favourite meal. He’d murmur, “Good,” and then insist on helping Shane get a little sweatier before he helps him get clean.

But Ilya can barely even breathe.

His whole body has gone cold and rigid, like there's ice in his veins and a snowstorm in his chest.

He slowly releases Shane, standing up straight and then pulling away from him.

"I will let you shower," Ilya says.

He watches as Shane's brows furrow into a confused frown. "You okay?"

"Mhm. Yes. I am fine," Ilya lies.

Because what else can he say?

He doesn't want to think it. He doesn't ever want to doubt Shane - not after everything they have been through together, and all the obstacles they have overcome to get to this point. But Ilya is an expert at keeping secrets; he's spent almost his whole life doing it.

He knows what it looks like when someone is hiding something.

Ilya spent almost a decade tilting phone screens away from teammates so they couldn't see his messages, or making poor excuses to spend time apart from them so he could spend time with Shane. Ilya knows what it looks like when you're lying to people you care about, because he did that for a long time, and he watched Shane do it, too.

He's watching Shane do it again, now.

And the worst part is, Ilya can't even blame him. Not really. It hurts, of course. It feels like a million daggers, right to his fucking heart. But - but Ilya is so much hard work.

He's loud and brash, and he pushes Shane's buttons until Shane is all wound up. He's a menace on the ice, and in the locker room, and at home. Or Ilya is quiet, and sad, and a waste of space until he remembers how to be a human again. Until he sheds the weight pinning him to the mattress, and starts acting like a person again. He's a lot to put up with, a lot to handle, especially when Shane has so much going for him.

Ilya has always known Shane could do better than him. It shouldn't come as a surprise that he's finally found it.

Found someone else.

Because that's what this is, isn't it?

Staying up late, after Ilya has already gone to bed. Disappearing to run errands without Ilya, and never telling him what those errands are. Shane hiding his phone screen from Ilya, even though they share - they *used to* share everything with each other. The way Shane always feels a little bit restless lately, like he has something to hide.

And as good as they are at keeping secrets from the world, they're no longer very good at keeping them from each other. Ilya can read his husband like an open book.

Ilya desperately doesn't want it to be true. He tries to think of any other possible explanation, but he just keeps coming up empty. And he can't even blame Shane, not after Ilya's last depressive episode.

Shane wants a husband, not someone he has to take care of.

But then, later, he climbs into Ilya's lap and kisses him slow, and languid, and deep.

"Mine," Shane whispers, as he nips at the soft underside of Ilya's jaw.

"Yours," Ilya promises him.

Now, always, forever. No matter what.

Shane touches Ilya all over, then drops to his knees between Ilya's legs and takes him apart with his mouth and his hands, and the look in his pretty brown eyes.

He treats Ilya like a revelation - like something worthy of being worshipped.

And Ilya tells himself that maybe he *is* wrong, after all. Maybe he needs to call Galina and work on some of his insecurities, if he's managing to convince himself that his wonderful, devoted husband is being unfaithful to him.

Maybe, just maybe, there's nothing to worry about at all.

It all comes crashing down four days later.

Shane is out for lunch with JJ while he's in town visiting some relatives, and Ilya is home with Anya. He's already walked her this morning, already gotten in a workout in their home gym, already rewatched the episode of *Succession* that he'd fallen asleep while they were watching it last night.

And now, Ilya is *bored*.

The team is spread out across the entire planet at this point during the off season, going home to their families, or visiting friends on other teams, or relaxing on their well-earned vacations. Even David and Yuna are in Costa Rica for a couple of weeks.

Shane and Ilya are going to the Maldives in July, then planning to spend most of August tucked away in the cottage, recharging before the chaos of pre-season starts up all over again. But, for now, Ilya is home alone with only his sweet girl, Anya, for company, while Shane galavants around downtown Ottawa with J.J.

It's fine. Ilya can handle it. He just wants to know how long Shane will be, is all.

Except Shane doesn't reply to his text. Or the one after. Or the one after that. And he knows Shane is a nightmare for checking his phone, so he's not worried, he just texts J.J. instead.

Ilya: *Tell my husband to text me back.*

J.J.: *???? I'm in Mexico, what are you talking about?*

Oh.

Oh.

Ilya's legs give way beneath him and he collapses to the floor in a pile of flesh, and bones, and heartache.

He'd weep, if he could. He would wail, and scream, and sob, if there was anything left inside of him at all. But Ilya can barely even breathe - every breath rattles with the sound of his broken heart, every gasp makes him wince in agony as the shards burrow into his lungs.

Ilya should have been prepared for this. He'd thought about it, considered it, mulled over the weight of it as if it was something he could analyse like game tape.

But he'd come to the conclusion that he was wrong. That he was imagining it. That his Shane would never...

Ilya grasps at his chest.

It's too tight, and he can't breathe even though his heart is beating too fast. He knows what this is; Ilya isn't a stranger to panic attacks, his own or Shane's. His face and hands feel tingling, like pins and needles, and his head feels like it's filled with angry bees - heavy, and fuzzy, and too loud, too much.

His husband is cheating on him. Shane.

The distance, the secrecy, the hidden phone screens and solo errands and fake lunches. It all paints a damn clear picture that Ilya really hates the look of.

Shane is having an affair, and it hurts more than anything Ilya has ever experienced in his life, but it's not like he can even be angry at him for it.

If Ilya was better, if he was good enough - if he didn't disappear into his own head every so often, leaving Shane all alone - then Shane wouldn't have to look elsewhere for what he needs. He wouldn't have to find someone else to give him what Ilya should be providing.

Ilya needs to do better. He needs to *be* better.

He's not sure how long he sits in a heap on the floor. He doesn't cry, he feels too hollow for that, but Ilya just sits and he thinks. Thinks about all the signs, all the things he had noticed but wanted so desperately to explain away, and all the moments where Ilya could have done something differently, or better, to stop Shane from getting tired of him.

It's only when he hears the crunch of tires on gravel that Ilya manages to stand up, and by the time Shane steps through the front door Ilya is already waiting in the entryway.

Shane startles for a moment when he sees him, but he's quick to smile. "Hey, are you--"

Ilya closes the distance between them and kisses his husband.

He kisses Shane hard and fast and desperate, biting at his bottom lip and sucking on his tongue, trying to consume Shane in the way that he deserves. He even tries to sink to his knees there in the hallway, but Shane stops him, laughing in disbelief.

"God, Ilya, what's gotten into you?" He asks, his eyes alight.

"Need you," Ilya says, as he mouths along Shane's neck.

"Okay, well it's like a million degrees outside and I'm all sweaty. Let me shower first, okay?"

Ilya stomach drops.

He wonders whose hands have been on his husband today, whose mouth has tasted his sweat-slick skin, and who has been buried inside of him, in the place only Ilya was ever supposed to go.

He wants to bite Shane, to claim him, to prove to this other man - whoever he may be - that Shane is already owned. That he already belongs to someone else. It's a jealous, bitter thought, but he can't help himself.

He wants to wrestle Shane into the shower and scrub him clean, wash away the ghost of someone else's touch - someone else's cum - so he can reclaim his husband. So he can prove that Shane chose him for a reason, and that he made the right choice. Ilya is still the same person Shane fell in love with all those years ago, that hasn't changed, he's just a better version of himself now.

Better for having loved, and been loved by, Shane.

"I like you sweaty," Ilya says, just to push. Just see if Shane will insist on showering this other man away before he lets Ilya have him again.

"You're feral," Shane laughs, pressing a kiss to Ilya's cheek. "Come shower with me, then?"

Ilya will take it. He'll wash off this other man's fingerprints and replace them with his own. He'll remind Shane how much Ilya loves him, how good they are together, how right they have always been for each other.

"Let me remind you who you belong to," Ilya says, as he leads his husband upstairs.

Shane flushes the most gorgeous shade of pink. "Like I could ever forget," he replies.

The words are almost cruel; they feel like a taunt. Like Shane is dangling the truth in front of Ilya's face, while hoping he is too blind to see it for what it really is.

He doesn't say anything, though. He can't.

Ilya is hard to love, he knows that. But he can earn it again. He can find a way to stay worthy of it.

He has to, because he's not sure how to survive if Shane leaves him.

Ilya doesn't confront Shane.

Not when Shane keeps his phone face down on the table throughout their whole date at their favourite restaurant.

Not when he says he's meeting with Yuna-the-manager, not Yuna-the-mom, so, *"Really, Ilya, you'll just be bored if you come."*

Not even when Ilya hears Shane whispering on the phone to someone, but then abruptly ends it once Ilya walks into the room.

Instead, Ilya irons their clothes - even their underwear, which Ilya thinks is stupid but Shane always insists on doing.

He reorganises their pantry, and stocks up on all the things they're low on before Shane even notices. Ilya even buys more quinoa, despite the fact that he *hates* it, and wishes Shane would use it a little less in his cooking.

He fixes the squeaky door to their trophy room, and turns over the soil in their vegetable patch, and he fixes the sink that keeps leaking in the guest room. (Okay, he hires someone for that, but still. It gets done).

He does it all silently. Not asking for, or even expecting, any praise for it. That's not the point of it.

They've always shared the housework, and the maintenance, and all of Anya's care, anyway. It's always been divided equally between them. Not some sort of set contract, but something that was just assumed.

Shane hates washing dishes, so Ilya usually does them. Ilya isn't meticulous enough with the ironing, so Shane tends to do that. Shane makes the grocery list, but Ilya usually does the shopping because the store overwhelms Shane. When one of them has a bad day, the other picks up the slack.

So it's not like Ilya wasn't sharing the load before, he just...does more, now.

It feels like it's working, maybe.

Like the more Ilya does around the house, the less attention he demands from Shane, the better things feel. Like Ilya is earning his place here again, in their home, in their life. Like, if Shane was slipping through his fingers before, then maybe Ilya is getting a hold on him again.

His heart aches every time he watches Shane walk out of the door without him, but he bites his tongue and keeps his mouth shut because he knows, at least for now, that Shane is coming back home to him. And if Ilya doesn't cause any issues, if he doesn't make a big deal out of things, if he finally starts making Shane's life easier instead of harder, then maybe he'll get to keep him.

The thought of his husband with someone else knocks Ilya physically sick, but he'll withstand it if he has to.

He'll do anything at all to keep Shane.

Shane is smiling when he comes home.

It's late, almost 9pm, and Shane had said he was meeting up with Rose before she flew out to Italy for the next three months to shoot her latest movie. Ilya had wanted to believe him, he nearly did, in fact. But then he'd seen a picture on twitter two hours ago, of Rose at the airport.

And he had known.

Ilya's heart had fallen right out of his chest and shattered to pieces on the floor.

He's been crying ever since.

Not loud, body-wracking sobs, but quiet, devastating tears sliding uncontrollably down his cheeks. He's tried and tried to stop, but he just can't help it. He can't hold it back for a single moment longer.

And for Shane to walk through the door like this - fucking *glowing*, like he's just had the best few hours of his life? It's too much. Fuck, the pain is *unbearable*.

And Ilya is proficient in hiding how much something hurts him, but he can't do it this time.

He can't keep pretending it doesn't kill him.

"Hey, baby," Shane greets him cheerfully, as he steps into the living room. "What are you- oh. Oh my god, *Ilya*?"

He drops his jacket on the floor, not bothering where it lands, and rushes to Ilya. To where he's sitting on the couch, as still as a statue, silently crying. Shane drops down beside him, his hands instantly fluttering around Ilya like he wants to touch him but he's not sure if he should - if he's allowed.

The look on his face is pained, and it only causes Ilya to cry harder.

Shane doesn't want to hurt him. Ilya knows that. That's what makes this all the more painful.

"What happened? Ilya. Talk to me. What's going on, what's happening?" Shane asks, frantic now.

He's probably never seen Ilya cry like this before. Usually, when his depression gets bad, Ilya retreats into himself. He hardly ever cries unless he's in therapy - or they're happy tears - and especially not like *this*, the resigned, grieving kind of crying, like it's coming from his very soul.

"Baby," Shane whispers. "I need you to talk to me. I can't help if I don't know what's wrong."

"I'm sorry," Ilya whispers.

"No," Shane says. "No, no sorries, remember? Just - just tell me what's happening right now. Tell me what I can do."

"You can leave."

Shane flinches.

"Not - I mean," Ilya stutters over his words. Clenches his hands into fists to stop himself from reaching for Shane. "I don't want you to. But you can, if that's what *you* want."

It's not fair to keep him here when he's not happy anymore. And it might destroy Ilya to let Shane go after everything he did to get him, but it would hurt so much worse if he had to slowly watch Shane begin to resent him. If Ilya had to watch from the sidelines as Shane fell in love with someone else, while still remaining married to Ilya because he felt like he had no other option.

"I don't - Ilya. Why - why would you think I'd want to leave you?"

"I know," Ilya finally confesses.

He watches as Shane's perfect face furrows in confusion. "You know what?"

He doesn't want to have to say it, doesn't want to spell it out. He's thought about it non-stop since the moment he realised what was going on, but he's never said it out loud before. He hasn't been able to work up the courage. Because if he says it, then there's no taking it back. If he says it, that makes it real.

But it's real now, anyway. There's no going back. So-

"The late nights after I've gone to bed. Running errands without me. Always hiding your phone so I can't see what's on the screen. The whispered phone calls that you end when you realise I'm there," Ilya lists.

"Ilya--"

"You didn't go out with J.J. last week. He was in Mexico," Ilya says. "And you weren't with Rose tonight, because she was flying out of YOW two hours ago."

He doesn't have to say the words. It's clear as day what he means, what he *knows*. But he thinks that, unless he does say it out loud, he will never fully, 100% believe it.

“There’s someone else.” His voice breaks as he says the words for the very first time.

Shane whines, a high, wounded sound, as his face cracks open and he starts to cry. Ilya hates it. Hates that he’s made Shane cry, hates that Shane has made *him* cry, hates - more than anything else - that all their years of love have somehow come to *this*.

It’s instinct, when he rests his hand on Shane’s thigh and pats it to soothe him.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs.

It’s then that Shane begins to sob, a heaving, mournful sound. “No,” he cries. “No, Ilya. That’s not - *no*.”

Ilya moves his hand away from Shane’s leg, and Shane only cries harder as he reaches for it and grabs it between both of his own.

“Ilya, no. That’s not - *no*. How could you even - *God*, Ilya. Of course there’s no one else.”

He brings Ilya’s hand up to his mouth and starts to kiss it, the back of it, then his knuckles, and then he turns it over to kiss the palm and the tips of each of his fingers. All the while, he keeps whispering, “No, no, no.”

“Shane, please,” Ilya begs him. “It’s okay. I think it is time for us to be honest.”

Shane looks at him like he’s been slapped.

“Ilya, baby, I love you. More than anything. I could never - I *would* never. You’re - you’re everything. My whole world. I’m not, god, I swear I’m not-“

“Then *what*?” Ilya asks, finally. “If it isn’t someone else, then-“

“Russian,” Shane blurts out. “I’m, *fuck*. I’ve been taking Russian classes. I just - I just passed my B2 test today.”

Everything sort of just...stops.

The chaos of the moment, the tears, the pain, all of it grinds to a halt as Ilya takes Shane in. The expression on his face, the trembling of his hands as he holds Ilya’s, the weight of his words as they hover in the space between them.

Ilya doesn’t understand.

“You - what?”

“It was supposed to be a surprise,” Shane whimpers. “I know you’re teaching me, and I love learning from you, but. Fuck. I know, sometimes, when you have bad days, it’s hard for you to talk, and even harder to do it in English.”

“I’m sorry,” Ilya whispers.

He knows. He *knows* how hard he is to love.

“No. No you don’t have to be sorry. I just hate that your brain makes you feel bad, and I hate that it makes you suffer. I - I wanted to be better at Russian, to make the hard days a little bit easier for you.”

Ilya feels sick.

Sick with love, and guilt, and relief, and shame. His body and his brain can’t decide what to feel, so instead he just has to feel all of it at once - a maelstrom of emotions all swirling around inside of him, as he stares at the love of his life and realises how badly he’s just screwed things up.

Ilya could have just asked Shane.

He *should have* just asked him. Or he should have let him know he was worrying, let him know that Ilya thought something was wrong.

If he’d done that - if he’d communicated, instead of catastrophising - they wouldn’t be here right now.

“I’m - *Shane*. I am *so* sorry. I thought - oh my god, I thought-“

“Hey, it’s okay,” Shane rushes to assure him. “Ilya, it’s okay. I should have told you. I should have known you would notice. I thought I was being subtle, but I’ve never been able to hide from you, have I?”

“I doubted you.”

Shane looks heartbroken when he says, “I understand why. I do, Ilya. I get now how it must have looked.”

Ilya shakes his head, completely despondent. He doesn’t even know what to do with himself. But Shane turns in his seat to face Ilya, shuffling closer so he can tug him until he falls sideways into Shane’s arms.

He burrows his face in Shane’s neck and breathes in his familiar scent, clean skin with a hint of citrus. His arms wind around Ilya’s shaking body, and Shane rests his head on top of Ilya’s as one of his hands finds its way to Ilya’s curls. For a moment, Ilya just lets his husband hold him, as he fists his hand into Shane’s shirt and clings to him.

He’s not sure he deserves the comfort, but if Shane is offering it then Ilya can’t turn it down.

Ilya has always been taught that love is conditional; it is something that you earn.

His father was not a man who said *I love you*, but Ilya learned to pick up on when he was proud and when he was disappointed.

That pride only ever came when Ilya succeeded - in school, or hockey, or when he had a beautiful woman on his arm. Ilya was only worthy of his father’s attention when he was

doing something impressive, something that Grigori could brag about.

Alexei had loved him once, many, many years ago, back when Ilya was nothing more than his little brother. But when he realised Ilya was smart, and good at hockey, and that he could do things to earn their father's attention in a way that Alexei never could, all that love went away as if it had never existed in the first place.

And his mama - *god*, his mama.

She loved Ilya so much. He knows that, he does. It's just - it's hard not to question why that love wasn't enough. If Ilya had been more well behaved, braver, politer, just *better*, then maybe she could have loved him more. Maybe she wouldn't have left him alone in that house.

Maybe she would have stayed.

When Ilya is scoring goals, and winning games, and helping the Cens to the playoffs, then the fans love him. They wear his jersey with pride and they cheer his name from the stands.

But when Ilya's got the monkey on his back, and he can't get the puck to find the net, and the Cens crash out of the playoffs, the fans boo him. They point out his age, or his contract, or his relationship, in search of reasons for why he's no longer good enough for their team.

Shane has never once made Ilya feel like his love is conditional - like it is something he might take away if Ilya isn't good enough. He's so selfless with his love, so open and honest and *generous* with it.

But sometimes...sometimes it's hard to unlearn all of the instincts that kept you alive.

And Ilya has gone through life never fully trusting love, or affection, or adoration, because he's always believed that it's fleeting. Temporary.

That it can be taken away as easily as it can be given.

So maybe he's spent a long time holding his breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for Shane to decide that Ilya is simply not worth all of the trouble that he causes. Except-

Shane is still here. Through everything. Through pain, and suffering, and distance, and confusion. Through hatred, and bigotry, and grief. He's never flinched away from Ilya. Never treated him like a burden he has to bear. Never once, in all the years they have belonged to each other, made Ilya feel like Shane does not love him.

He can't believe he got this so wrong.

"I'm so sorry, Shane."

Shane kisses Ilya's curls, his forehead, anywhere that he can reach. "*I'm* sorry."

Ilya pulls away so he can sit up properly, so he can look at his husband as he tells him, “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I did,” Shane insists, as he brushes a curl out of Ilya’s eyes. “I hid something from you, and we don’t do that. We tell each other everything.”

It’s not a rule they have, or anything like that. It’s just the way that they work. The rhythm they’ve slipped into after three years of marriage.

Shane can get anxious, and he struggles to read between the lines. Ilya can be insecure, and sometimes he *invents* lines to read between. It’s just easier for them both when they are completely honest with each other, about what they want, or how they feel, or something as simple as what they want to eat for dinner.

It seems like both of them have failed at that, this time around.

“You wanted to surprise me.”

Shane snorts. “Yeah, some surprise that turned out to be, eh?”

Ilya can’t help but laugh a little, and Shane smiles in return. Sweet and honest, and so gorgeous that Ilya needs to kiss him. He tilts his chin up in search of his husband’s mouth, and Shane obliges by leaning down and pressing their lips together.

“How long were you - I mean, how long did you think this?” Shane asks, serious again now.

Ilya sighs. He doesn’t want to talk about this, he just wants to pretend it never happened and go back to the before. But he knows they can’t - not if they want to properly work through this.

“I felt like something was wrong for a few weeks, but it was after J.J. that I knew for sure. Well, *thought* I knew,” he admits. “You weren’t answering your phone, so I text J.J. and he told me he was in Mexico.”

“God, Ilya,” Shane whispers sadly.

“I thought I was going to lose my mind. The thought of you with someone else, you *loving* someone else-“ His voice cracks. “I can’t.”

Shane rests a careful hand on Ilya’s cheek, and turns him so he’s looking at Shane again. He rests their foreheads together for a moment, just so they can breathe each other in. So they can steady each other in the way they’ve always done.

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?” Shane eventually asks. “All that time you thought I was - and you just...”

“I didn’t want it to be real,” Ilya explains. “And - and I thought maybe, if I could prove to you that I could be better, then you would keep coming back to me. That you would-“

Shane sobs. He covers his mouth with his hand but the sound bleeds out anyway, and his eyes fill with tears all over again.

It breaks Ilya's heart all over again.

"That's why - oh my *god*, Ilya. All the laundry, and the ironing, and the fixing things before I even noticed they were broken. You were - *fuck*."

Ilya closes his eyes against Shane's pain, unable to bear the sight of it on his lovely face.

He hears movement, feels the couch shift beneath them, and suddenly Shane is on his lap. He straddles Ilya's thighs, presses their chests together until every inch of their bodies are touching, and clings to him. Shane's arms wrap around Ilya's neck, and Ilya's wind around Shane's waist, and they just hold each other.

Ilya plucks at Shane's t-shirt until he can slide his hands beneath it, needing to his feel the warmth of his skin. Shane shudders at the touch, leaning closer and squeezing tighter, and tangling his fingers in Ilya's hair.

They just sit there for a while.

For all the pretending Ilya has done these last few weeks, his body couldn't be fooled. He's been holding himself tense this entire time, and that tension only starts to bleed out of him here, with Shane in his arms and their hearts beating against each other.

Ilya takes a breath, then another, and for the first time in weeks his lungs finally feel full. He would cry if there was anything left in him, but he's completely drained of anything except the love he has for his husband.

The love that has never once wavered, even through all of this.

Shane slowly leans back, cradling Ilya's face between his hands, and then he kisses him. It's unbearably tender and loving, and Ilya relaxes into him as the last few weeks of agony melts away.

"I love you," Shane says. "More than anything in the world, Ilya. It's - it's unconditional, okay? You don't have to earn it. You don't have to earn *me*. I'm yours. Always."

"I worry that I make your life harder, not easier," Ilya confesses.

It's ridiculous, probably. Nothing about their relationship has ever been easy. The circumstances, the distance, the secrets and lies, the media and public response - everything about them, right from the very beginning, has been difficult.

Except, of course, the love.

The love has always been impossibly easy. The easiest thing that both of them have ever done.

But sometimes - sometimes Ilya worries that, for Shane, it won't always be enough.

“Ilya, my life has been better since the moment you walked into it. Better since you told me you loved me. Better still, since you agreed to marry me,” Shane says. “Every second of every day with you, is better than the last.”

Ilya loves him so much his heart might explode.

“Everything is easier because I have you,” he continues. “And even if it wasn’t, fuck, Ilya - I’m not with you because I want easy, I’m with you because I can’t imagine being *without* you.”

Ilya kisses him again.

He doesn’t know how it’s possible, but every single kiss with Shane feels as good as the very first one they shared. Each one reaches right down to the core of him, burning through his veins and lighting up all of his nerve endings.

Shane consumes his body, and his mind, and - above all else - his heart. There’s no part of his being that doesn’t have Shane’s fingerprints seared onto it.

“I love you so much,” Ilya tells him. “I only ever want you to be happy.”

“You make me happy, Ilya. Happier than anyone or anything else ever could.”

“You make me happy, too,” Ilya promises him. “I love our life.”

Shane kisses the corner of Ilya’s mouth, then presses their cheeks together for a minute.

He’s missed this so much.

Physically, they have still been close. They’ve slept in the same bed, had sex, and spent their days together like they always do, but emotionally, Ilya has been building up walls. He’s spent weeks preparing for the inevitable: Shane leaving him. And now - now that he knows Shane hasn’t found someone else, that he only wants him - Ilya finally gets to tear those walls down.

He gets to feel close to his husband again, without fearing that the rug is about to be pulled from under him.

“Ilya.”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

Shane smiles at him, trails his fingertips over the lines of Ilya’s face, and says, “I think we should go to therapy.”

“Shane...”

“Not because anything is wrong with us, not because we’re in a bad place, just because - well, it helps, right? Galina helps you.”

“Yes, but I don’t think this is the same.”

“Think of it as maintenance,” Shane says. “Sometimes you go to the physio for a massage to stop yourself from getting an injury. This is like that. We’re not treating something, just... preventing it.”

Ilya stares at Shane for a second, and then he bursts out laughing. It’s so loud and unselfconscious that Shane can’t stop himself from laughing too, and it’s such a beautiful sight. The most perfect thing Ilya has ever seen.

God, of *course* Shane would talk about this in hockey terms. Ilya’s not sure why he expected anything different.

His husband is so endearing, and wonderful, and *good* - right down to the very core of him - that Ilya would agree to just about anything Shane asked of him. Whatever he wanted, Ilya would do it. Whatever Shane asked for, Ilya would find a way to get it for him.

There’s nothing on this earth that Ilya has ever been able to deny Shane. Not since a cold, winter afternoon in Saskatchewan, when - with big brown eyes, and beautiful freckles - Shane had introduced himself to Ilya, and shook his hand twice in the span of two minutes.

Ilya has been gone for him ever since.

“Okay,” he agrees. “We can go to therapy together.”

“Oh,” Shane says, sounding surprised. “That was easier than I expected.”

“When do you I ever say no to you?” Ilya asks, and Shane blushes but he’s smirking, too. He knows exactly the kind of power that he holds.

“Thank you,” he whispers softly.

Ilya kisses him, then says, “You’re welcome, my love.”

They hold each other for a little while longer, not wanting to part just yet. Not after weeks of misunderstandings, and distance, and silent agony.

But after a while they make their way upstairs to their bedroom, moving around each other with such ease and familiarity as they ready themselves for bed. They brush their teeth side by side, elbows knocking together. They stand in the closet beside each other as they hang their clothes back up. And then they climb into bed beside each other, where Shane pulls Ilya into his arms.

He kisses him slowly, on the lips first, and then his cheek, and nose, and eyelids, and everywhere else that he can reach. Over and over again he kisses Ilya, until they’re both laughing softly, and half-hard but with no real desire to do anything about it tonight.

“My baby,” Shane whispers as their eyes start to close.

“Yours,” Ilya promises.

And nothing on this earth is ever going to change that.

End Notes

there are probably a hundred fics like this already but i couldn't get it out of my head & you guys know how much i love angst :)

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