

forgive me if i jump at the rattle of your keys

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by [justhockey](#)

Summary

Ilya knew, right from the very moment he met Shane Hollander, that he would never be good enough for him. He'd seemed so...pristine, when they first met. Untouched. And Ilya knew his unclean hands would only dirty him up. He's always been selfish, though; his father used to tell him that.

So it's no surprise, really, that Shane has finally gotten tired of it. Of *him*, always needing more from Shane than he deserves - always begging for more than he has earned.

Ilya would leave himself, too, if he could.

(Or, five time Ilya thought Shane would leave, and one time he knew he wasn't going anywhere.)

Notes

Title from *Doors* by Noah Kahan.

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

one.

After the door closes, the silence echoes with a hollowness that rattles Ilya's bones.

He wants to lie. Wants to say something like, *well, that went well*, all sarcastic-like, so they can both laugh even though nothing at all about this is funny. But Ilya doesn't have it in him; he feels drained in a way that's usually reserved for failed playoff runs and fights with his brother. Drained right down to the core of him.

And Shane - well.

There's a vaguely nauseous look to him, as he stands in the middle of his house and looks around like he doesn't recognise any of the furniture. Like nothing quite fits here now, after that.

And Ilya doesn't know what to say to make this better. He isn't sure there's anything he *could* say that wouldn't just be empty words, like a bandaid over a broken bone: a nice attempt, but entirely useless.

It was supposed to be a nice evening, a way for Pike and Ilya to get to know each other off the ice, for Shane's best friend to finally *see* him with his boyfriend and understand. Because that's what they both kept telling themselves - that once Pike could see them together, could see the way they love each other so unflinchingly, then he would get it. It would all fall into place inside his concussion-addled brain, and he would finally approve.

That's not what happened at all.

Ilya's not innocent, probably. He'd teased Pike, for sure, but he really was just joking around. Just needling him like he would any of the guys on the Bears, in the same way that all hockey players do with each other. He was trying to break the ice, to make things easier on Shane, to relieve some of the tension that Ilya could have cut with the fancy steak knives that Shane only brings out for special occasions.

But Pike had come into this with his hackles raised and his mind already made up, and Ilya knows now that nothing he or Shane could have done - or *not* done - would have changed his opinion.

He showed up here determined to keep hating Ilya, so that's exactly what happened.

Pike taunted, and baited, and prodded at Ilya, like he was a kid in a zoo trying to poke a bear. He goaded and pushed, and when Ilya finally snapped back - all claws drawn and bared teeth - Pike had grinned, gesturing at Ilya as if to say: *see, I told you, this is who he really is*.

And what could Ilya say to defend himself without making it worse?

Jackie had been lovely, of course, which helped somewhat. But that wasn't nearly enough to smooth over the disaster of an evening that had ended with bitten tongues and clenched fists,

and a problem that Ilya couldn't fix. So they walked out the door with Jackie looking apologetic, and Pike looking half-smug and half-disgusted.

And what they've left behind is a mess Ilya has no idea how to even begin untangling.

"Shane," he says softly.

Shane laughs. Loud, and abrupt, and so unlike his usual laugh that it makes Ilya flinch. There's no humour in it, none of Shane's gentle warmth, it's just brittle and cold and so very sad.

"Well, that was a fucking disaster," Shane acknowledges.

"Yes," Ilya agrees. "It was."

Ilya fixes things; it's the one thing he's good at. When his dad needed carers, Ilya paid for them. When his brother had debts to pay, Ilya handed over the money. When his rookie called him in the middle of the night after getting arrested for a bar fight, Ilya showed up and took him home. Whenever there's a problem in the locker room, or on the power play, or the penalty kill, Ilya puts on his Captain hat and he finds a way to solve whatever's going wrong.

Ilya fixes things because it makes him useful, and as long as he's useful he isn't disposable.

But he has no idea how to fix this.

He can't pay his way out, and he can't Captain his way through it, and he isn't sure where that leaves him. Isn't sure where it leaves *them*: Shane, and Ilya, and this relationship that they're trying desperately hard to make work, even though it feels like the entire world is conspiring against them.

Pike is Shane's best friend, he has been since they were rookies, and Ilya knows just how important that relationship is to Shane. He understands how much it means to have someone who always has your back, no matter what. Now, though, Ilya is coming between that.

He's straining a relationship that they thought was infallible, simply by existing in Shane's life.

"I thought..." Shane begins, then he trails off as he collapses onto the couch with a huff.

Ilya wants to go to him - wants to sit by his side, and pull Shane into his arms, and keep all the bad stuff from touching him. Ilya's not sure if Shane would want that, though. He doesn't feel sure of anything right now, and that's terrifying for Ilya because - for all the things he doubts in life - he's never doubted *this* before. Not since they whispered *I love you* in the middle of the night at Shane's cottage.

"I thought if you met properly, off the ice, then - then it would be okay," Shane says. "But it's not okay."

"No. It's not."

There's only one solution to this.

Ilya isn't brave enough to do it. He's too selfish, he loves Shane too desperately.

For years, before every single meet up, Ilya would convince himself it was the last time - convince himself that he could walk away from Shane without looking back. Then every time, without fail, he'd see Shane's big brown eyes and perfect dusting of freckles, he'd be reminded of how it feels to hold him, and he would chicken out.

He couldn't do it then, so he certainly can't do it now. Not when he knows what it's like to wake up with Shane in his arms, and how it feels to hear him say *I love you*. But he looks at Shane sitting on the couch, with that sad furrow to his brow and dejected twist of his lips, and suddenly Ilya knows that it's coming.

He knows that Shane is going to leave.

He understands it, he doesn't even blame him - he knew this day would come eventually - but it doesn't stop the sinking in his stomach or the pain in his chest.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, so Shane doesn't hear his voice break.

Shane looks at him, eyes glazed with exhaustion, then pats the empty space next to him. "Come," he says. "Sit."

And because Ilya has never learned how to say no to Shane Hollander, he takes the seat beside him - the one Ilya's not sure even belongs to him anymore.

Shane huffs out a sigh, loud and long and ragged, then he tilts sideways and lets their shoulders press together. Ilya should move away, maybe - should prepare to begin the leaving - but he can't do it. He leans into Shane, lets his steadiness settle the rattling of his ribcage even if it's only temporary. Even if this is just the calm before the storm.

"It's not your fault," Shane tells him. "I know how much you tried."

"It wasn't enough," Ilya argues.

Shane hums. "That's on him, not on you or on us."

It's not the answer Ilya was expecting. He turns slightly, just enough to look at Shane, and he finds that Shane is already watching him with a tired smile on his face.

"I appreciate it, you know? The effort you made. Thank you."

"He might not ever be okay with us," Ilya throws out there, because it's been playing on his mind since the moment he opened the door to Pike's sour face.

"Yeah, maybe not," Shane agrees sadly.

"So, what - I mean. What does that mean?" Ilya asks. "For us?"

He watches Shane's face as he processes the question, then as his eyebrows pull together in a frown. He shifts, too, turning sideways so he can face Ilya properly.

"It doesn't mean anything for us," he says, as if the answer is easy, obvious, simple. "If he can't accept us, then that's his own problem to deal with."

Ilya swallows thickly, refusing to let hope swell inside his chest. "But he's your best friend."

Shane's eyes widen. He lets out a sad little sound as he presses closer and raises a hand, brushing the back of his fingers over the curve of Ilya's cheekbone. The touch makes Ilya's breath catch and his eyes flutter closed, and he leans into Shane's warmth like a flower seeking the sunlight.

"*You're* my best friend," Shane says, so impossibly soft. "Hayden is important to me, of course, but - Ilya, he doesn't get a say in this. He can't break us."

The relief that courses through Ilya feels like a flood, a tidal wave, a whole tsunami. He groans, tipping forward and trusting that Shane will meet him halfway. He does, and their foreheads bump together gently, and Ilya can feel Shane's breath on his lips so he swipes his tongue over them to taste it. To taste *him*.

"Ilya, baby," Shane murmurs, both hands now holding Ilya's face. "No one else's opinion on us matters, okay? I know you and I love you, and you know me and love me. Nothing changes that."

"You promise?" Ilya asks, sounding soft and fragile, and every bit like the little boy inside of him who's still terrified of being left behind.

Shane kisses him.

It's slow, and chaste, and sweet - not a question, but an answer.

"I promise."

two.

The door slams shut, and Ilya feels it reverberate in his teeth.

He'd told Shane to go - begged him with gritted teeth and shaking hands - but that doesn't make his absence ache any less. The heaviness of it is so crushing, the emptiness so unbearable, that Ilya sinks to the floor beneath the weight of it.

With his back to the wall, and his knees pulled to his chest, Ilya shatters.

He'd scream if he had the energy to - if he felt anything other than such complete, utter devastation. But all that's left of him now is a broken heart, still trying to flicker to the beat of Shane's name. Still trying to keep this thing alive.

Shane had been cruel tonight, tossing around scathing remarks as if Ilya *wants* to be like this. As if he *wants* his team to be terrible, and as if doesn't kill Ilya that the best thing about him -

his hockey - is slowly slipping away from him. Shane's words had been callous, and unthinking, and had cut so deep that Ilya can still feel the sting of them echoing beneath his skin.

But Ilya had been mean, too. He'd had the gall to ask if Shane would choose him, like he hadn't *been* choosing Ilya this whole time.

Shane had given Ilya his room number that very first night. He'd opened the door for him, even though he was scared. He put himself out there, let himself be vulnerable in front of Ilya when they were still nothing more than manufactured rivals, and he's never once stopped putting his heart on the line since. He invited Ilya to the cottage, and he asked him not to marry Svetlana, and he came up with a plan that actually gave them a shot at working out.

Shane has never once stopped choosing Ilya, over and over again, and Ilya had the nerve - the fucking *audacity* - to question that.

He feels sick.

Sick that he told Shane to leave, and that he listened. Sick that they fought like this at all, so unnecessarily unkind to each other for no fucking reason. Sick that Ilya had always known this day would come eventually, but he'd just started to fool himself into believing that it wouldn't. That this was something he would get to keep.

Ilya and Shane have always understood each other because, at the heart of them both, they're the same. They're the best in the world at what they do, and they wear the pressure of that like an old, worn coat.

It was Ilya's hockey that caught Shane's attention in the first place, so it makes sense that he sees Ilya differently now that he isn't winning.

Now that the competition isn't fun anymore, because they both know who will win.

Now that the old, inherited sadness is creeping into Ilya's lungs like black mould, infecting everything he touches.

Ilya knew, right from the very moment he met Shane Hollander, that he would never be good enough for him. He'd seemed so...pristine, when they first met. Untouched. And Ilya knew his unclean hands would only dirty him up. He's always been selfish, though; his father used to tell him that.

So it's no surprise, really, that Shane has finally gotten tired of it. Of *him*, always needing more from Shane than he deserves - always begging for more than he has earned.

Ilya would leave himself, too, if he could.

He thinks about that sometimes, abstractly. The way his mother left, and the way it would be so easy for him to do the same. He won't, probably. He doesn't want to, at any rate. At least, not really, not in any meaningful way. He just wonders, occasionally, how much easier

everything would be if he wasn't here anymore. How much simpler Shane's life would be, without Ilya dragging him down.

Though, he doesn't have to worry about that anymore. The door already slammed closed. Shane already left.

It's a good thing, maybe, that Shane won't be around to see just how low Ilya can fall.

He's not sure how long he's been sitting here on the floor, but enough time has passed that his knees are starting to ache when he hears the front door open and close again. The sound is almost eerily quiet after how loud the leaving had been earlier, but it still makes Ilya flinch.

He's just thinking about moving, about forcing himself away from the wall before he melds with it, when the sound of footsteps on hardwood floor has Ilya's head snapping upwards.

And there he is. Shane. In all his teary-eyed, snotty-nosed glory.

"Ilya." His name is a broken whisper on Shane's tongue.

Ilya braces for impact. For the *I'm sorry, but-* that he knows is coming. He scrunches his eyes closed, like it might shelter him from the worst of the pain. But then a mournful cry rips its way out of Shane's mouth, and there are hurried footsteps, and suddenly there are hands on Ilya's knees as Shane crouches in front of him.

"I'm sorry," Shane cries. "I'm so sorry, Ilya."

His eyes are wet with tears as he raises a hand to swipe away the ones rolling down Ilya's cheeks, and Ilya shudders at the touch. He never thought he would get to feel it again like this, so gentle and loving.

He shakes his head, and Shane pulls his hands back. "No. No, Shane, *I'm* sorry."

He'd doubted the one person who has never turned their back on him. If Shane would have left and never looked back, Ilya would have deserved it.

"*God*. I shouldn't have said it - any of it."

"Me too," Ilya says. "It's okay."

"It's not," Shane argues. "Of course it's not. I didn't even *mean* it, Ilya, I just - I don't know. I don't know, but I'm *so* sorry, baby. I love you. More than anything, okay? It's always you. Every time, every universe, I would choose you over it all."

It feels like Ilya's chest is cracking open from all the love he feels for this beautiful, wonderful man. He can't possibly contain it.

Ilya can't bear to not be touching him for a single moment longer. He stretches his legs out and lowers them flat to the ground, then he wraps his hands around Shane's wrists and *tugs*.

Shane falls into his lap with a grunt, and Ilya wastes no time in winding his arms around him and pulling him close, chest to heaving chest. Shane lets out a shuddering exhale as he loops his arms around Ilya, and encourages him bury his face in Shane's neck. As Ilya breathes him in - the clean, citrusy scent of his soap on Shane's skin - Shane presses kiss after kiss, anywhere he can reach. Ilya's hair, his forehead, the shell of his ear, the tail of his eyebrow.

"I love you, I love you, I *love* you," Shane murmurs between kisses.

Ilya holds him so tight he wonders if their bodies might merge together like their souls already have.

"I love you," he says, his lips brushing gently against Shane's throat. "I love you so much, sweetheart. I'm sorry."

"I know you are. I know, Ilya. It's okay. We're okay."

"I blindsided you."

He never should have asked Shane to go to Bood's party. Shane doesn't like his plans changing unexpectedly at the best of times, but to ask something so big of him without even a heads up? It was unfair. He hadn't meant to, but Ilya had set Shane up for failure, and everything had devolved from there.

"You're allowed to need people, Ilya. It makes sense that you would want your friends to know, I just--"

"You're not ready, I know. It's okay, I promise. I should have never asked you. It was too much, too soon."

"I don't want you to be lonely," Shane whispers sadly.

"I have you," Ilya states.

He'd rather have Shane and need to keep it secret, than live a half-life without him. There's no question, no doubt about it.

Shane pulls back ever so slightly. Ilya is about to whine, complain, pull him back into his chest, when Shane cradles Ilya's face so gently in his hands. He wipes away more of that tears that have fallen, then he leans in close and brushes their noses together in a kiss.

"You deserve more than just me, baby," he says. "I have people who know, and you should get to have that, too."

"Not if it means losing you."

Ilya's voice breaks, and Shane lets out a wounded groan, and then he kisses him on the lips, one, two, three times. Shane's knees squeeze tightly on either side of Ilya's hips, and his fingers burrow into Ilya's curls as he slips his hands beneath the back of Shane's t-shirt so he can feel more of him.

“You’re not losing me, Ilya. Not ever,” Shane says, with so much conviction that it steadies the rapid beat of Ilya’s heart. “You don’t need to doubt that, okay? You don’t have to wonder if I’d choose you, because the answer will always be *yes*.”

“I shouldn’t have asked you to leave.”

Shane chuckles quietly. “I didn’t get very far.”

“No?”

He shakes his head. “No. Just drove in circles around the block. I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving it like that. Of leaving *you* like that.”

Ilya sighs. He tips his head forward, resting it on Shane’s mouth and chin in search of a kiss. Shane gives one to him, then a second and third and fourth, until the tension in Ilya’s body starts to seep out of him and the knot in his stomach starts to unravel.

“I think we need to get better about saying what we mean,” Ilya admits.

“And how we’re really feeling.”

“Cottage rules?” Ilya suggests, and he’s pleased when it makes Shane laugh. He’s missed that sound.

“Okay,” Shane agrees. “Cottage rules from here on out.”

The love of his life is here in Ilya’s arms, sitting on the floor, smiling at him like he’s Shane’s favourite thing the whole world. So the rest of it - the parties, and teammates, and hockey, and worrisome diets - it can all wait, for the moment.

Right now, this is all Ilya needs.

three.

The whole world knows.

It hasn’t found a way to creep into their home, people’s opinions haven’t managed to burst their bubble just yet, but it’s waiting for them outside. It’s knocking on the door.

Pike left only a few moments ago, with his face ashen and his tail tucked between his legs. Neither of them have dared to look at their phones yet - not the endless stream of texts rolling in, or the incessant phone calls, or the emails that are piling up from their teams, and agents, and brand deals. It’ll all still be there waiting for them, once they’ve had a minute to catch their breath.

This doesn’t feel like the kind of thing that’s going to go away, after all.

Ilya feels, well. He doesn’t know what he feels. He’s not really had enough time to process it. One moment they were sleeping in bed, and the next Pike was at their door and the whole world was crashing down over their heads. None of it even feels real, yet. Ilya’s sure, if he

dared to glance at his phone and read a single notification, then reality would sink its vicious claws into him pretty fucking quickly, but right now he needs...he needs a moment.

He needs to figure out where his head is at, and, more importantly, where *Shane's* is at.

He hasn't said a word since the door swung shut behind Pike. He's just sitting on the couch with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, staring down at the faded red-wine stain on the edge of the rug. He's silent, except for the occasional hitch of his breath.

"Sweetheart..."

"I can't believe this is happening."

"I know," Ilya whispers. "I'm sorry."

They'd reassured Pike that it was okay, it wasn't his fault, they didn't blame him. Shane had done a remarkable job of putting on a brave face in front of him. But now that he's gone, now that it's just Ilya here - the one person he never has to mask his emotions in front of - the depth of his fear is starting to show.

They'd come up with a plan, years ago, in Shane's cottage by the lake. That plan had been blown to pieces the day Ilya's plane almost crashed - the day they realised that ten years was far too long to keep hiding something so precious, when they could lose it all in the blink of an eye. When they almost *had* lost it all.

So they'd come up with a new plan, a better one, where they could tell the people who mattered first, then the rest of the world after. With carefully worded statements, in their own time, exactly when they were ready to do it.

But now all of that is out the window, too.

Now the world knows before they're ready.

"It's not fair," Shane says. "It wasn't supposed to happen like this."

"I know, sweetheart. I know."

"We were supposed to do it in our own way, when we were ready. When we'd planned it all out. Not like - like *this*."

He's right. It *isn't* fair.

They've spent so many years hiding this, so many years being careful almost to the point of paranoia, just to keep this safe - to protect the most important thing in the world to them. It seems so cruel that it would be exposed like this, and so close to the end, as well.

They only had a few more months to go. They were just waiting for the summer, then they were going to get married and tell the whole world how much they have always loved each other.

It hurts that this has been taken from them, after they've already sacrificed so much to be together.

"*Ilya*," Shane whimpers, a hand reaching out towards him.

Ilya can't stand the pain in his voice or on his face. He crosses the room in an instant, sits down on the coffee table in front of Shane, then folds him into his arms.

Shane doesn't cry, but his whole body trembles as Ilya holds him tightly. As he kisses hair, and rubs his back, and murmurs assurances that he can't guarantee. *It's okay, everything is fine, this will all work out*. He desperately wants those things to be true, wants to promise Shane that nothing bad at all is going to come from this, but they would both know he's lying.

"I'm not ready for this," Shane says, his forehead resting on Ilya's shoulder. "It's too soon, I'm not ready."

Ilya feels his heart turn cold, feels his body turn to stone where it's wrapped around Shane's.

The video - it's too clear to try and say it's someone else, too obvious to deny that it's them. But there are options, aren't there? He knows when Farah shows up she'll have a list of ways they can handle this. Maybe...maybe they could claim it's AI.

Would Shane want that? Would he deny Ilya, even now?

He could. He could do it. Say the video was tampered with, edited, *something*. He could say it's not real, and then...what? There's always the risk of them getting caught again, before they're ready. And surely this - the response to it - will only make Shane more hesitant to come out. Will only push him further back into the closet.

What if - *god*. What if this is the last straw, the proof Shane has needed all along that Ilya isn't worth all of this?

Ilya's not sure he could survive Shane leaving him now.

He clears his throat. "Is - um. Do you want to, you know, deny it? Say it is fake?"

Shane jerks backwards, a frown already etched into the lines of his beautiful face. "What?"

"I'm sure, if we asked Farah, we could say it is not real. Say--"

"Ilya, *no*. No, I'm not gonna deny it. We're not ready, but - but it's happening anyway, and I'm not gonna - *fuck*. I'm not gonna lie about you, baby."

Ilya has been so scared, for so long, that one day Shane will come to regret him. Either because of the years he has wasted on someone who wasn't worth it, or for the years he could have spent loving someone easier, or for this, now, being outed and risking so much for someone who won't ever deserve it.

It's unfair, maybe, to expect so little of someone as magnificent as Shane. It's more of a reflection on Ilya than Shane, though - more proof of all the ways he has been damaged.

And then, because Shane is as perfect as a person can get, he says-

"I'm not going anywhere, Ilya. We're in this together."

-and he fixes something in Ilya that he didn't even break.

"Yes," Ilya agrees. "Together."

And then he sits on the couch with his fiancé, the love of his life, the man he is going to marry, and they hold each other close while the world burns around them. The flames can't touch them here; they're invincible.

They'll have to deal with it all soon - their teammates, and organisations, and all the people who think they get a say in any of this - but for now they have each other, like they did at the beginning, and they will at the end, and for every single moment in between.

And in the end, that's what matters most.

four.

Ilya is underwater.

He's deep, deep down on the ocean floor, where things go to die when the life has left their bodies and they're just a shell of themselves now. There are millions of gallons of water weighing down on him, keeping him from making it to the surface where the waves are crashing, and the thunder is rolling, and the crackle of lightning is in the air.

He can't move. He can't breathe. He's not even sure if he exists at all, or if he's just the ghost that is making this house feel haunted.

He'd woken up to Shane pressing kisses all over his face, and Ilya rolled away and turned his back on him. Asked him to leave.

He couldn't stand it.

Not the sweetness, or the care, or the love. Not the quiet, unwavering devotion, like Ilya is someone who deserves that. He can't stand the thought of his perfect, patient husband rotting away with him here, in this room, this house, this life. All Ilya is doing is dragging Shane down with him to the depths, and forcing him to drown alongside Ilya.

Shane could have had everything. He certainly *deserves* everything, after all that they have suffered through over the years. But instead: *this*. More pain, more suffering, all because of Ilya. Because his brain is broken in a way that can't ever be fixed.

Maybe he gets it from his mama, or maybe from his father, or maybe this is all him. All Ilya. Maybe he deserves it.

Shane hasn't seen him like this before. Not this bad, at least. Things have been so good for so long, that he'd dared to hope that maybe he could leave this heaviness in the past. But he woke up this morning and everything was perfect; his husband was in his arms kissing him, and their dog was waiting downstairs for them, and Ilya felt like he was suffocating.

Every breath filled his lungs with water.

And he's been stuck here ever since, pinned to the mattress, the world moving around him while he stays still.

Shane is still home. Ilya can hear him moving around downstairs, feeding Anya, sliding the back door open, brewing coffee. It's all so familiar that, by now, it's just white noise - just the soundtrack of this life that they have spent years building together. It sounds like a funeral march now, though; a reminder that he will take Shane down with him if things keep going like this.

Shane hasn't been back upstairs since Ilya asked him to leave.

Ilya had spent a long time believing there would be a breaking point, a moment when Shane finally realised Ilya is simply more trouble than he is worth. He hadn't expected it to be today, of course, but he figures it doesn't matter all that much. Today is better than six weeks from now, or six months, or six years.

He doesn't spend much time thinking about Shane leaving him anymore. It doesn't worry him in the way that it used to. In fact, he'd almost forgotten to worry about it at all.

But now, like so many times before, Ilya's brain has betrayed him.

He remembers once, back in Boston, being a healthy scratch for a game because he missed a team meeting that morning. He hadn't meant to - hadn't drank too much the night before, or missed curfew, or overslept. He simply couldn't get his body to move, couldn't get his brain to function in the way it's supposed to.

It's not fair, he thinks sometimes. Not fair that, no matter how fucking hard he tries, this part of him won't ever go away. It killed his mama and destroyed their family, and now it's doing the same to Ilya and Shane.

Maybe it's for the best if Shane leaves. Ilya doesn't want to ruin him with this.

He floats for a while, in the deepest depths of the ocean. Not asleep, but not awake either; not dead, but not quite living. He's in some kind of liminal, in-between space, where nothing feels real and everything seems just out of reach. He can't even work up the energy to open his eyes and check the time.

He's not sure how long it's been, when the door cracks open again.

He holds his breath. Whatever Shane wants to say, Ilya can't hear it today. Later, when he's feeling better, he will let Shane leave him and he won't even beg him to stay. He'll allow for a quiet goodbye. But right now, he can't handle the heartache.

Shane doesn't say anything, though.

Instead, Ilya feels the bed dip behind him. And there's a warm, solid weight at his back, and an arm slung over his waist, and a kiss being pressed to the back of his neck.

It takes three tries for Ilya to finally ask: "What are you doing?"

"Holding you," his husband answers simply.

Against his better judgment, Ilya finds himself relaxing into Shane's arms. He leans back into the embrace, and takes his first breath that doesn't hurt.

He's being selfish, he knows, but he can't seem to help it. He'll do better tomorrow - he'll find a way to be worth it again, or he'll do Shane a favour and tell him to leave once for all. But that can wait. For now...for now Ilya just breathes.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"There's nothing to be sorry for."

"I am broken."

Shane squeezes him. "You're perfect," he says. "You're just struggling right now."

Shane loves him so much that Ilya isn't quite sure what to do with all of it. He's never once doubted that. Of all the times he's thought about Shane leaving him, it was never once because he didn't love Ilya. And it feels like a miracle, to have someone like Shane love somebody like Ilya, and do it so effortlessly as well.

Like it's the easiest thing he has ever done.

"You deserve more than this," Ilya tells him.

"No," Shane argues. "You love me better than anyone ever could. I deserve *you*. Your brain is just lying to you right now, baby."

That's what Galina tells him, too. When he gets too in his head, when he worries that he's not a good husband, or teammate, or son-in-law - when he thinks the people around him deserve better than he can give them - she tells him that his brain is lying to him. That he should imagine that voice in his head as someone he hates, so it's easier for Ilya to dismiss their remarks as bullshit.

It helps sometimes. And so does the therapy, and the medication, and the routine he and Shane have built around their individual needs. But, for now, the thing that is helping the most is Shane. Just Shane.

"I'm sorry," he says again, because he needs Shane to know it's true. Needs him to know that Ilya doesn't mean to be like this, to be so much work.

“Remember last week,” Shane begins, “when I had that really bad day? When I basically shut down after the game, and you had to help me change and get to the car?”

Ilya nods. He remembers.

“You remember how you took care of everything once we got home? You sorted Anya, and then you washed my hair, and you got me into bed,” Shane reminds him. “Do you think you deserve better than that?”

Ilya’s whole body tenses, and before he even makes the decision to move, he’s rolling over to face Shane. His kind, gentle husband.

“Of course not.”

“Did you think about leaving me to make your life easier?”

Ilya whines, tears springing to his eyes as he presses closer. “*Shane*, no. Of course not, sweetheart. Never.”

Shane smiles, then, like the sun rising over the lake at the cottage. He brushes Ilya’s messy curls out of his eyes and leans forward to kiss him, even though Ilya hasn’t brushed his teeth yet.

“Exactly,” he says. “In sickness and in health, baby. That was the deal. I’ve got you, and you’ve got me.”

Something unfurls inside Ilya’s chest, soft and bright. It warms him from the inside out, like the first thaw after a brutal Ontario winter. He isn’t magically better; that’s not the way any of this works. He still feels heavy, weighed down, like his clothes are waterlogged and there are bricks tied to ankles.

But Ilya is treading the water now; his head is above the waves.

“I love you,” he tells Shane, who smiles again and kisses him so sweetly.

“I love you, too,” he says. “Now let me cuddle you, okay?”

So Ilya does. He closes his eyes and trusts that Shane will stay the course.

five.

Ilya is the good kind of tired, where he feels worn out after a busy day doing what he loves.

He’d woke up to his husband on top of him, and it had only gotten better from there.

They walked Anya to their favourite cafe, where they sat outside while they ate breakfast and went over the game last night - resounding 6-2 victory over the Voyageurs, which still feels just as good now as it did on their first win against them last year. After breakfast they went home, where Ilya spent a good few hours taking Shane apart, before carefully putting him back together again.

They stopped by Yuna and David's later in the afternoon for a quick visit, and Ilya and David finally managed to complete the jigsaw puzzle they've been working on for weeks. Then they came home again, got ready, and left for one of Bood's infamous barbecues.

So Ilya is tired in that syrupy-slow way, and his hair smells like smoke from the barbecue, and he's had a really good fucking day.

"I won't be able to eat for a week," Shane groans as he chugs a glass of water while standing over the sink.

Ilya snorts. "I should not have had that extra piece of chicken."

"It was fun, though," Shane says. "I love hanging out with everyone."

It's maybe Ilya's favourite thing in the world, the way Shane has slotted in so seamlessly with the Centaurs. It's been over a year now, but it feels like they both have always been a part of the team - like it's exactly where they were supposed to end up. The guys are just amazing people, and they love and accept Ilya and Shane so easily that Shane is more than happy to be affectionate with Ilya in front of them.

In fact, he'd spent half the evening curled on Ilya's lap as they sat around the fire, chatting with the guys.

Ilya is living the kind of life he once could have only dreamed of. It feels impossible, and wonderful, and perfect.

"I can't believe how much Milo has grown," Shane remarks.

"Yes. And Susie, too."

Shane tips his head back and laughs. "Oh god, Evan and Caitlin have their hands full with her."

Susie is all of six years old, with blonde hair and bright green eyes, and an attitude that rivals just about anyone Ilya has ever met. He's terrified of her, and he absolutely adores her. He does whatever she tells him, and doesn't question how or why.

"She frightens me," Ilya confesses, and Shane just grins at him.

"Oh, Ilya. She frightens everyone," he says. Then, softer, "I can't wait until we have kids of our own."

Ilya feels himself freeze.

He's not quite sure what his face is doing, but - whatever it is - Shane picks up on it in an instant.

"What?" He asks.

Ilya's mouth opens, then closes, then opens again. "I just - I'm not sure that I want kids."

The words don't feel quite right as they leave his mouth, but Ilya doesn't try to take them back. He watches as Shane's face falls. Ilya isn't sure if he's ever seen his husband look quite so devastated before.

They've never really talked about kids seriously.

Years ago Shane had mentioned wanting to be a dad someday, but that was before they were even officially together - a conversation in some nondescript hotel room, somewhere around Jackie's third or fourth pregnancy. And then they'd talked about it, liked hypothetically, during the summer camps when they were surrounded by kids. But it had always felt more like a far-off dream than something actually attainable.

"What do you mean?" Shane asks.

"I just - I don't know if-"

"Don't you think that's something you should have mentioned sooner?"

Yes, probably. Definitely. It's just. It's not that Ilya doesn't want kids, it's that-

"You knew - you've *always* known - that I want a family, Ilya."

"Oh, so I am not your family?" He retorts.

It's mean and petty, and not at all what he meant to say. He can feel this conversation spinning out of control, can see the car crash up ahead, but he can't slam on the breaks fast enough to avoid it.

"That is *not* what I meant. Don't twist my words!"

"It is what you said!" Ilya argues, even though it's not. Not really.

He doesn't know what to do in this situation. He isn't at all used to arguing with Shane. They bicker all the time about tiny little things, like who has the fastest lap time, and who washed the dishes last, or who's turn it is to take out the trash, but it's never *real*. It never feels like this.

Ilya just needs to backtrack - needs to explain what he meant, so maybe Shane will understand. But then-

"Well you *said* you wanted everything with me, so I guess we're both liars!" Shane yells.

And then he's turning his back on Ilya, walking out the door, and slamming it behind him. The keys rattle loudly in the lock.

Ilya feels like he has whiplash; he's not sure how this went from the most perfect day, to his husband storming out of the house.

He didn't *mean* that he doesn't want to have children with Shane. God, he can't imagine anything better than having a child that is half of his husband - a sweet little baby with dark

hair, and brown eyes, and freckles just like his daddy. Fuck, of course Ilya *wants* that. He's just - he's not sure if he can have it. Not sure if he *should* have it.

But that's what he should have said to Shane. He should have explained what he meant, explained why he was worried, instead of shutting it down so abruptly.

He's moving for the door before he can even think about it.

As he swings it open, ready to jump in his car and chase after his husband, he stops in his tracks when he sees Shane already standing there, fingers reaching out for the door handle.

He lets out a breath, and Shane does too, then he's stumbles forward into Ilya's arms like he can't stay upright without Ilya holding him.

"Sorry," Ilya whispers. "I'm so sorry my love, that is not what I meant. I promise you, I did not mean it like that."

"I shouldn't have shouted. Shouldn't have left."

Ilya kisses Shane's forehead, nose, cheeks, and then mouth. "I deserved it."

"You didn't," Shane disagrees. "I didn't give you a chance to explain. That was on both of us."

Despite their lack of experience with real arguments, they *have* spent over a decade learning how to communicate with each other. They don't always get it right, obviously, but they're good at fixing it even when they get it wrong. They're good about talking through their feelings, and listening, and understanding each other.

Their marriage feels like standing on solid ground after a lifetime of wading through quicksand.

"Come back in," Ilya says, closing the door behind them. "Let me explain."

They move back to the kitchen, sitting beside each other on the barstools by the island. They face each other, Shane's knees between Ilya's and their fingers threaded together, as close as they can possibly be.

"I didn't mean I don't *want* children with you," Ilya begins to explain. "I cannot imagine anything I could want more than that - than having a family with you."

"Okay. Okay then why did you say..."

"I panicked, I think. You said it so easily, and I just - god, Shane. What if I'm a terrible dad?"

The only thing Ilya learned about parenthood from his own father is what *not* to do. He was cruel, and cold, and distant but somehow still suffocating. He demanded more than Ilya could give, and then shamed him for not being better. Ilya learned how to shrink around his father - how to make himself so small, it was like he barely even existed at all.

Even towards the end, when Grigori could barely remember his own name, he still remembered that he hated Ilya.

Ilya is absolutely terrified that his father's anger lives inside of him.

He inherited his mother's depression and her love of skating. What if he got his father's cruelty? His meanness? His inability to be a decent parent. Ilya couldn't live with himself if he brought a child into this world, and raised them anything like the way his father raised him.

He watches as the full spectrum of emotions passes across Shane's face, before settling on determination.

"Ilya, baby, you would be the best dad in the world."

"What if I'm not? What if...Shane, what if I am like my father?"

Shane's eyes go impossibly wide and glassy. "God, *Ilya*."

He slides off the barstool and slips between Ilya's thighs, pressing their bodies together as he holds Ilya's chin and looks deep into his eyes.

"You are *nothing* like him," Shane insists. "Ilya, you are kind, and good, and gentle. Hayden's kids adore you. Milo, and Susie, and Boyle's twins adore you. The kids from the foundation worship the ground you walk on."

"I don't want to do it wrong."

Shane laughs, his eyes glittering as he shakes his head. "We'll do so much wrong, baby. That's just part of being a parent. But you won't ever be *bad* at it. Trust me."

And Ilya does. More than anything or anyone, he trusts his husband. He trusts him to be ready for Ilya's pass on the ice, and he trusts him to step in when someone at a bar starts to flirt with Ilya, and he trusts him to remind Ilya to take his meds. He trusts Shane with his feelings and his heart, and he trusts him to say what he means and mean what he says.

There's no reason for Ilya not to trust Shane with this, too.

"I want babies with you," Ilya says, and those words finally feel right coming out of his mouth. They feel honest.

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Three, I think. Not four, that is too many."

Shane's grinning from ear to ear as he rolls his eyes. "How about we start with one? In like, a few years. When we're retired."

"Nope," Ilya says. He slips off the stool, curls his hands beneath Shane's thighs, and hoists him up off the ground. "You said you want babies, so I'll give you babies."

Shane throws his head back in laughter as Ilya carries him through the house. “You can’t get me pregnant, Ilya.”

Ilya leans forward and nips at Shane’s exposed throat. “I can try.”

+one.

“Ilya. Ilya I want a divorce.”

Ilya groans. It’s too early, and the bed is too warm, and he hasn’t even opened his eyes yet. But there’s something poking incessantly at his cheek, and his nose, and his forehead. He swats it away with a grumble.

“No.”

“Ilya. I’m serious.”

He opens his eyes to find his husband hovering over him, naked except for the boxer briefs that are practically painted onto his skin.

There’s something about bossy Shane that has Ilya’s dick perking up in an instant. He feels the slow grin spreading across his face as he eyes his flawless husband, and Shane looks even more delicious when his cheeks start to flush.

“Stop checking me out!” Shane insists, poking Ilya on the forehead again.

“But you are so hot when you are mean to me, sweetheart.”

“Well I’m about to be scorching, then!” Shane hisses. “You. Left. Your. Boxers. Next to. The. Laundry. Basket. Again,” he says between pokes all over Ilya’s body.

When he jabs his index finger right into the middle of Ilya’s chest, Ilya grabs it. Then he tugs as hard as he can, pulling Shane off balance before he can brace himself. He flops down on top of Ilya with a punched out breath, and before he can try to wriggle away, Ilya traps him by locking his arms and legs firmly around him.

Ilya hums contentedly. “Better.”

They’d fallen asleep with Shane half on top of Ilya last night, and he was most disappointed to wake up without him in the same place this morning. This will simply have to do, though.

“Ilya, I’m asking for a divorce. I’m leaving you,” Shane tries to argue, but he’s not very convincing.

In fact, he’s settled in quite comfortably on top of Ilya, and his fingers are now playing with Ilya’s sleep-tussled curls.

“No thank you,” Ilya says. “I am keeping you.”

“You can’t even keep your laundry in the basket,” Shane grouches, but there’s not much enthusiasm to it now that Ilya is gently scratching his back.

“It’s not my fault this time.”

“Oh really? Then who-“

“Who took my clothes off last night, sweetheart?” Ilya asks, as Shane props himself up to look down into his eyes. “Who stripped my clothes, and pushed me on the bed, and-“

Shane kisses Ilya to shut him up.

“Fuck off,” he murmurs as he licks into Ilya’s mouth.

“Hm. I do not think this is what you want.”

“I hate you.”

Ilya laughs, deep and loud, rumbling in his chest until Shane is laughing too. With a sharp, practised move, he flips them over so he is hovering above Shane, who looks up at Ilya like he hung the moon and all the fucking stars in the sky.

God, he’s the luckiest man in the world. He gets to keep Shane for the rest of his life - gets to work with him, and live with him, and raise a family with him, and *love* him. Always. Forever.

Shane smiles, sleep-soft and lazy, as his hands trail along Ilya’s shoulders and to his face.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

And then Shane pulls him down, and they kiss the morning away.

End Notes

this is a bit all over the place, sorry about that!!

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