Parasitic

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Parasitic

by benwyattirl

Summary

> Ilya rubbed his thumb across Shane's hand. "Thank you for sharing that with me. I know it was not easy."
>
> Shane scoffed, "No shit."
>
> Ilya flicked at him playfully. "Shut up. I am trying to be comforting."
>
> Shane peeked at Ilya from under his arm just to glare at him. Shane was glad Ilya wasn't being careful with him or anything–that would have just made him feel worse. Ilya was just being Ilya, and Shane needed that.

Or, Shane Hollander has OCD. It's frustrating, scary, and difficult, but Ilya is there for him every step of the way.

Notes

I have OCD, and I noticed that Shane has quite a bit of obsessive-compulsive tendencies and I saw a lot of myself in him, so I decided to make it official and put it in writing <3. This story takes place the summer before the hockey season in The Long Game, when they're both at the cottage. I am not Japanese myself, but I did want to touch on that aspect of Shane's identity in relation to the pressure he feels on himself being a hockey star in a predominantly white sport.

Big thank you to my dear friends Hailey and Elle for taking the time to beta this fic! I love you guys!

See the end of the work for more notes

For as long as Shane could remember, he's had these…thoughts.

He couldn't really describe them, if someone asked him. People always considered him high-strung, a good, no-nonsense, kind of guy. And that *was* true. But what they didn't understand was that he *had* to be. Shane had a pre-determined set of rules in his mind that forced him to act a certain way, to simply be a certain way, and a lot of people had the assumption that it was his choice. Shane Hollander was just a stand-up guy and that alone is what made him hockey's golden boy.

Shane had a lot of pressure riding on his shoulders. Being one of the few people of color in the NHL wasn't easy, and he had to live up to a standard that his white counterparts didn't. Shane had to constantly prove that he deserved to be in his top position–he had the strength and capability to make the climb, but external forces kept trying to push him down.

And even though his teammates knew he was gay, he tried not to make it a *thing*; he assumed that they were okay with him being gay in the sense of like "yeah, you can be gay as long as I don't have to see it." The acceptance they showed was conditional, and Shane suspected that if he acted too gay, or whatever, they'd start to show their true feelings on the matter.

The hockey world obviously wasn't known for being progressive.

He didn't *want* to be so neurotic–but he was hardwired to constantly be thinking about the worst case scenario, the future, everything all at once.

He always had too much going on in his head, and he didn't know how to control it. At the drop of a hat, in a split second, everything that he had worked so hard for would be taken away from him–or at least, that was what his mind insisted was reality.

Shane was tired.

—

When Shane talked to Ilya about going on his "performance diet," Ilya responded by raising an eyebrow at him.

They were lounging on the couch together, as they tended to do during these lazy months at the cottage. When Shane and Ilya could be alone with each other and their time wasn't limited by hockey games, physical distance, or team obligations, it felt like the world had stopped spinning. Just for a second, they could be Shane and Ilya: Totally Normal Couple and not Shane and Ilya: Decade-long Hockey Rivals who are Supposed to Kind of Hate Each Other.

Shane would never say that the two of them didn't fight–fighting was kind of the basis of their relationship. But when things mattered–when things were serious, they held each other up as best they could. Shane and Ilya never particularly saw eye-to-eye on physical health standards (read: Shane thought Ilya only continued to smoke for as long as he did to piss

Shane off even though he knew it was bad for him), so Shane was uncertain how exactly Ilya would respond to Shane's new plan.

Shane pouted at Ilya's response–or lack thereof–and asked a little indignantly, "What?"

Ilya shifted from where he sat on the couch to look Shane in the eyes. Before he spoke, he grabbed one of his hands and started stroking his thumb gently over the top. Physical touch always calmed Shane, especially when it came from Ilya. Shane reflexively relaxed with the contact.

"Is just…Why are you doing this, exactly?" Ilya asked, his eyes soft and warm. Ilya's eyes always had the ability to pierce Shane, regardless of what the situation was. He was just so damn…earnest, sometimes. It made it hard to resist him.

Shane had been under Ilya Rozanov's damn spell since the first time they had met in 2008, and he wasn't snapping out of it anytime soon.

Shane cleared his throat and bowed his head to avoid looking into Ilya's stupid eyes. "I told you. I…I want to play hockey for the next ten years. I want to be the *best* for the next ten years, and I can't do that if my body starts falling apart." There. It made perfect sense to Shane. Being a professional athlete had an expiration date–everyone knew this.

Once you reached a certain age, people started making comments, and Shane was determined to continue to be on his A-game so that those comments wouldn't see the light of day. He didn't want to wake up one day and see a headline on some sports website saying, "Shane Hollander: Is his Time as Hockey's Poster Boy Over?" It made his stomach churn just *thinking* about it.

So, there was some actual merit to this performance diet, Shane thought. Hockey was everything to him–it defined who he was, shaped his entire being. Sometimes, Shane didn't know where hockey started and he began. It was like a simple fact of life: Water is wet. The sky is blue. Shane Hollander plays hockey.

If he could no longer play it because of something that he could have prevented, he would never be able to forgive himself.

But maybe Shane wasn't telling Ilya the entire truth.

A lot about his life felt like it wasn't in his control–his sexuality, who he loved, how people perceived him. He was constantly under a magnifying glass, every little move dissected and taken apart by those around him. He did everything he could to be someone people could like, someone his teammates could trust, someone children could look up to. And yet, it still wasn't enough. *He* wasn't enough.

But this he could control. Food was something that he had autonomy over. If Shane could have *this*, then he would be okay. Everything would be okay.

Ilya looked like he wanted to protest Shane's claims about his health decisions being solely for hockey longevity, based on the furrow of his brow and the slight frown that painted his

features. Shane tensed a little bit, fearing the retaliation from Ilya.

In the end, though, Ilya didn't contradict Shane in the slightest, which Shane was embarrassed to admit surprised him. Ilya could probably tell that this was something important to Shane.

All Ilya said was, "Okay," as he pressed a gentle kiss onto Shane's hand.

—

Shane always felt overly aware of how others saw him. Sure, being self–aware could be a good thing but Shane's problem was being too self-aware to the point that it became a problem.

He couldn't have any interaction without thinking about how other people were perceiving him, and he always jumped to the most negative conclusion possible. Like when he was playing hockey, if he missed a goal that he should have easily made, it wasn't that he made a mistake–it was that he himself was a mistake and everyone on his team thought that. It was never true, of course. But it never ceased to feel like it was.

When he was young, Shane had the irrepressible desire to please everyone around him. He wanted so desperately to be liked–it festered within him like a parasite that caused him to feel as though he were dying if he thought did something wrong.

If he thought he said something hurtful to one of his friends, the parasite was happy. It would be content with the distress Shane was in, and as a result, he was no longer in tune with his own body–who he was. No longer was there Shane Hollander–there was only the parasite, and it fed on constant discomfort. His thoughts would consist of the following, over and over again: *They hate me. They think I'm the worst. I need to talk to them now, to apologize.*

All night, he would sit in bed with those thoughts running through his head on a loop, and he would plan out in his head the course of events that would happen the next day.

I'm going to see them at school, and I'm going to apologize.

But then, even with that reasoning, he would jump to these seemingly irrefutable truths: *It doesn't matter if you apologize. They still hate you. They will* always *hate you.*

There was never any room to argue. If he tried to argue, he would lose. And so he would just sit with a pit of distress in his stomach that was tearing him up from the inside and the inability to do anything but listen to the thought-loop. Over and over and over again.

It made it hard to eat when he was like that. The parasite didn't need nutrients–it needed reassurance, constantly. But with that reassurance, it would only continue to grow and grow until it consumed him entirely.

Then, the next day, he would get up, go to school, and his friends would greet him like normal. Nothing was wrong. His friends weren't mad at him. They all laughed, joked about how "Shane was being overdramatic once again!" Shane would provide them with a strained

smile despite the fact that he was dying a little inside. He spent the entire night before dreading the day ahead, bracing himself for criticisms from his peers, for nothing to come of it.

God, he always felt like such an idiot when this happened.

—

It had been three weeks of Shane on his performance diet, and he felt great. Everything was going well.

Until his parents came over and decided to bring over one of Shane's favorite comfort foods: lasagna. Even just the smell of lasagna could immediately transport Shane to a place of safety–it reminded him of his childhood with his parents, specifically the holidays. All three of them would get up early and start making everything from scratch (yes, even the pasta itself), and Shane would be in charge of making the sauce. Which, if Shane had to admit, he got pretty good at doing.

Instead of the sense of warmth he normally felt when seeing lasagna, that night all he felt was a tightness in his chest and a hammering in his skull.

Ever since Ilya became a member of their family, his parents had included him in their traditions, and he had started to join the Hollanders with their tradition of making lasagna, which is probably why his parents brought it over tonight. They thought it would make both of them happy.

The feeling in his chest grew tighter.

When Ilya opened the front door to greet Shane's parents, he took one look at the dish they had brought, and informed them sadly, "Shane is on his performance diet. He is only eating boring food." Shane was in the kitchen nearby setting the table, so he heard Ilya's statement, and walked to the entryway as well.

His mom shifted her gaze from Ilya to him, and said with a hint of sadness, "Shane, honey? You love lasagna."

Shane scrambled a little bit. "No! I mean, yes, I do love it. But, um. I just can't eat it right now." He shifted uncomfortably at the gazes from everyone around him, unsure what to do with himself at the moment.

If he ate the lasagna, he would ruin all the progress he had made over the past three weeks. His body would start to deteriorate. He would….*he could die*. If he ate the lasagna he could die. Probably not right away, but it might lead to diabetes or heart disease or whatever the fuck down the road. Shane couldn't risk that.

Shane's mom shared a look with his dad, one that Shane would file away and pick apart later, and then she stepped through the doorway. "Well, I don't want to force you to do anything. But there will be some leftovers if you change your mind, okay?"

Shane smiled thinly and nodded, knowing that he wouldn't change his mind, but he didn't want to hurt his mother's feelings.

It was times like these where two of Shane's issues were at conflict with one another: the need for control and the need to please everyone around him. Sure, he won on the control front, but now the parasite was screaming at him, condemning him for being so difficult all the time. His parents went out of their way to do something nice for him and his boyfriend, and Shane had the audacity to say no to them. All because of his stupid diet.

On the other hand, if he had given in and ate the food they brought, Shane would be content with the fact that his parents and Ilya would be pleased. But he would be sick at the thought of what the food might do to his body. There was no winning in this scenario.

Shane was exhausted.

Everyone shuffled into the kitchen, and Shane could feel Ilya's eyes on the back of his head as they walked, watching him.

Shane suspected Ilya was concerned about his diet. Shane had known Ilya long enough to recognize how he behaved when he wanted to say something but was calculating the right moment to do so. That night, Ilya didn't say anything to him. Shane was grateful for it.

—

Shane was sixteen when he caught himself staring at a guy in science class and felt something like attraction tug in his stomach. It was the first time he had the thought: *What if I'm gay?*

As soon as the thought entered his mind, his body grew numb. He was supportive of gay rights, sure. He had no problem with *other* people being gay–but Shane himself was not. He couldn't be. If he was gay, then that meant he had been lying to everyone around him all these years, making them believe he was straight. And, oh god, what about the two girls he's dated? He completely manipulated them into thinking he was straight, and somehow they must have known Shane was lying and now they think he's a terrible person.

As soon as Shane got home from school that day, he quickly ran to his room and searched online for any sign or reassurance that he was not gay.

First search: signs i am gay

Second search: how to prove i am straight

Third search: how do i know if i am gay for sure

All the results relied on some semblance of soul-searching and self-determination. The problem was that Shane *didn't know.* He doubted every thought that came through his head, and he didn't know what was true, what was real. How could he answer a question like that about himself when the slightest deviation in thought told him he was wrong?

I can't be gay because I've dated women.

Maybe I am gay because I didn't actually enjoy being with those women romantically, even though they were very nice.

If I am gay, what will my parents think? Will they kick me out because I'm not who I said I was? Will they think I'm some sort of fraud? Liar?

Shane threw up that night–presumably his body's attempt to rid itself of the mess that the parasite had created. If only it were that simple.

He dealt with the thought loop for the next week or so, until it eventually faded away, and Shane forced himself to move on.

—

After the high that the performance diet had given him the first month, he started to crash.

He was getting a little sluggish out on the ice. He and Ilya rarely *did* anything anymore because he was always too tired. Sometimes, he would get irritable and snap at people for inconsequential things, and then he would immediately feel like shit after. He never looked forward to eating anymore because all it did was fill him with dread.

It didn't make sense to Shane. He was doing everything right. He was eating well. Healthy. So why the hell was he feeling so terrible all the time?

Shane knew that Ilya was building up the courage to bring up the issue to him, and Shane was dreading the day that he finally did, because he didn't know what he was going to say about it.

Ilya finally brought it up, one night at the cottage.

They were on the couch; Shane lay sprawled across Ilya's lap while Ilya stroked through Shane's hair. The repetitive movement calmed him. Some baking reality show played on the TV in the background that Shane wasn't really paying attention to.

"Shane," Ilya said, stilling his movement.

Shane sat up, hearing the serious note in Ilya's tone.

"Yeah?"

Ilya looked at him calmly, clearly going through some internal battle about how best to approach Shane at the moment.

"I have noticed that you seem sad. And uptight. More so than usual, that is," Ilya told Shane, with a slight tease in his voice. Ilya wore a gentle smile and Shane had to hold himself back from snapping at Ilya in response, because obviously it wasn't a bad thing that his boyfriend cared about him enough to notice. He just didn't like that he had been acting in a way that was so obvious to Ilya, and that he had brought Ilya distress.

Ilya always shouldered other people's emotions, especially Shane's. Shane suddenly felt selfish for being like this; he knew how negatively it would affect Ilya.

Shane schooled his face into a neutral expression and said, "Why, um. Why do you say that?"

"Well I know you are on your performance diet. Which is fine, but it is like whenever we are eating together you are not there. You are somewhere else. We barely have conversations at the dinner table anymore." Ilya paused here, perhaps waiting for acknowledgement from Shane, but Shane just stayed silent. Ilya kept going.

"And…you know I think you are an amazing hockey player. The second best. But lately you have not been performing as well as I know you can…and I am not trying to…insult you; I just know that you are upset with your own performance and are probably taking it out on yourself."

Sometimes Shane got upset with Ilya for being so emotionally intelligent. Shane struggled with recognizing his own emotions at the best of times, and understanding other people was something that he cared about but always failed at doing correctly. Yet Ilya was always spot on with his perceptions of others. Especially Shane.

Shane didn't know what to say in response, so he just said, "Oh."

Ilya waited patiently for Shane to add on, to maybe explain the reasoning behind some of the behaviors that Ilya had observed.

Shane cleared his throat. "I'm just stressed, is all."

Ilya laughed softly. "Shane. You are always stressed. There is something else."

Shane rolled his eyes and shoved Ilya playfully. "Shut up. I'm fine, alright? There's nothing to worry about. I think I'm just extra nervous about the upcoming season, and it's making me play like shit. It'll sort itself out soon enough."

"Mhm. I don't believe you."

Shane scoffed, "Well, you should because it's the truth."

Shane didn't like lying, but the alternative was telling Ilya the real truth: he was losing control of himself, and in turn losing control of everything around him. The only way that he felt he could fix it was by controlling how he ate. Except now, that was destroying him, too.

Deep down inside, the parasite felt satisfied.

—

When Shane was initially drafted for the Montreal Voyageurs, he was told what a role model he would be for other young Asian boys who wanted to be professional athletes. Shane was proud to be Japanese-Canadian, and he was happy that there were kids out there who could

watch hockey and see someone like them playing the sport when he didn't really have that growing up--but he didn't think he was the man for the job.

Shane? A role model?

He was a mess.

Shane could barely talk to other people without tripping and stumbling over his words, and he was often told that he was too "boring" and "serious."

Shane found it hard to connect with other people because he always misinterpreted their perceptions of him, and he believed they thought he was annoying and that they hated him. It's a very drastic line of thinking, for sure. But well. The parasite was never exactly subtle.

He couldn't help but feel that the supporters of the Montreal Voyageurs would feel the same too, the more they got to know him.

However, on the ice, Shane was a different person. His mind was quiet and all that was present was the puck, his teammates, and the goal. When he was playing hockey, he was able to be at peace and trust that he was capable enough to do what he was the best at.

Hockey was his freedom–he was the best version of himself when he was playing. Shane hoped that that would be enough for whoever would be looking up to him in the future.

–

After he and Ilya had had sex for the first time in *weeks*, Shane started crying.

It started off quietly. Shane didn't even know it had happened, but he noticed something was off when Ilya had rolled over so he could lay on his side of the bed. Shane stared, dazed, when he felt his cheeks grow damp. He reached up his hand to feel his face, and that was when he realized he was shedding real, actual tears.

What the fuck.

Shane didn't know why he was crying. He had just had good sex with the love of his life, and then his body decided it had been too much. Every emotion that Shane had been trying to keep buried under the surface started bubbling over, and he couldn't take it anymore. Within a second, Shane was full-on sobbing, and Ilya pulled him into his arms immediately, whispering soft reassurances in Russian into his ear.

"Moya lyubov," Ilya said, as he held Shane tighter, knowing that the strong contact helped Shane calm down, "What's wrong?"

Shane buried his face in Ilya's chest and said, "I can't do this anymore."

Ilya froze. "Do what?"

Shane startled when he realized how what he said probably sounded to Ilya. "No! No, I don't mean us."

Ilya relaxed marginally, relieved at the clarification. “Then what can you not do anymore?”

Shane debated in his head how to respond to this question. He was tired of keeping Ilya in the dark, tired of upsetting him in this way, but most of all he was tired of the internal battle he had been fighting his whole life. Shane was sick of constantly being on edge and feeling like he was about to throw up. He decided that Ilya deserved to know the truth. If anyone would understand, it would be him.

“I can’t be…*me* anymore. I’m sick of this.” If Shane had spoken any quieter, Ilya probably would not have heard him.

At that moment, Ilya’s tone grew serious. “Shane. Please look at me.”

Shane shifted upwards from where he was lying on Ilya’s chest and looked his boyfriend in the eye. Ilya put his hands on either side of Shane’s face and used his thumbs to wipe away the tears under his eyes. He didn’t move his hands away when he was done; he just kept them framing Shane’s face, and Shane reveled in the warmth they provided.

“You are my favorite person. You know this, yes? I don’t like when you speak about yourself so negatively. It hurts me that you cannot see yourself how I see you.” Ilya was so gentle with him, and it almost made Shane start crying all over again.

Shane took a deep breath. “I just. I have these thoughts? Like, these really repetitive, constant thoughts that control how I act and just make me feel awful all the time. It’s been like this my whole life, really.”

Shane paused, and Ilya nodded at him to continue. Shane released some of the tension in his shoulders that he didn’t know he was carrying. “And well. I kept telling myself that my diet was about me staying in shape for hockey, but it was more than that? It felt like I *had* to eat ‘healthy’ or otherwise I would be destroying my body. It became like a control thing, I think. Like, I don’t have control over so much of my life, but food was easy. No one could tell me what to eat or how to eat. Except now that’s fucking me up, too.” Shane laughed wetly at the last part, feeling a little bit embarrassed after having spoken this out loud.

Ilya pursed his lips in contemplation. “I’m sorry you have been dealing with this on your own. For the entirety of our relationship, I did not know you were struggling like this. I’ve always sensed…anxiety with you, of course. But I am sorry I did not see how serious it was.”

Shane shook his head quickly. “No, Ilya. Please. This isn’t your fault. You’re the only thing in my life besides hockey that helps me feel normal.”

Ilya hummed thoughtfully and started rubbing Shane’s arm. “Can you tell me more about these thoughts? What are they like?”

Shane thought for a second before responding, “They’re hard to explain. It’s something that’s so normal to me that it’s hard to wrap my head around the fact that other people don’t think this way.”

Shane had never really verbally articulated what it was like to be in his head, and he didn't know how to start. He could probably go back to as early as second grade to paint the picture for Ilya. Or he could just start talking, and see where his thoughts took him. It was hard to let go–to be vulnerable in a way that he hadn't been before. Of course, Ilya had Shane's heart under lock and key, but his brain was something else entirely.

What if, after finding out what Shane was really like, Ilya got scared away? Even though Ilya has proven time and time again that nothing would keep him away from Shane, the parasite kept insisting that this would be the straw that broke the camel's back. God. What a fucking mess.

Shane flopped down on his pillow so that he could stare at the ceiling, a completely neutral party in this affair. Looking at Ilya while he talked about this would make it ten times harder than it had to be.

Shane took a deep breath. "I guess…well. Hm. I, uh. Don't really know what to say." Shane laughed sheepishly, feeling embarrassed and a little bit stupid.

Ilya took Shane's reaction in stride and reached for his hand, squeezing it tightly. "It is okay. Take your time."

Okay. Trying again. Shane could do this.

"I'm constantly on high alert. I am aware of everything that's happening around me all the time. How people are thinking about me. God, it sounds self-absorbed, I know. It's not because I think of myself…highly or anything like that. It's more that I am worried they're gonna see me and hate me. I'm just convinced I'm not good enough for…for anything really. Hockey's the only thing I'm actually good at, and I'm scared that will stop being true one day, too."

Shane rubbed the hand not holding Ilya's over his face and continued, "I'm a total fraud. Everything I have is conditional, and as soon as people realize how fucked up I am they'll turn away. That's not even related to me being gay, which is a whole other thing entirely. I used to feel so guilty for having 'gay' thoughts, you know? Like I was a liar because people thought I was straight while inside I was fighting with myself. I'm mostly over that now, and I know I don't owe anyone an explanation about that, but sometimes it comes back up."

I just feel a lot of pressure all the time. I…have to be the best at hockey because there are people out there looking up to me. I don't want to fail them, you know? I just don't feel like I'm doing enough. How can anyone be a…role model, or whatever, if they feel like shit all the time?"

Shane stopped talking here because he honestly felt like he was rambling and hadn't really said anything of substance at the same time. Did he make any sense at all? He didn't really get into the extent of *everything* that's been happening with him, because otherwise they'd be there all night. Hopefully he gave Ilya enough context.

Ilya didn't speak for a few moments, digesting the information Shane had given him. While Shane was speaking, Ilya had moved to lean back against the headboard, understanding that it

was easier for Shane to look at anything other than him. He never stopped holding Shane's hand, though.

Ilya rubbed his thumb across Shane's hand. "Thank you for sharing that with me. I know it was not easy."

Shane scoffed, "No shit."

Ilya flicked at him playfully. "Shut up. I am trying to be comforting."

Shane peeked at Ilya from under his arm just to glare at him. Shane was glad Ilya wasn't being careful with him or anything–that would have just made him feel worse. Ilya was just being Ilya, and Shane needed that.

"Have you…considered seeing a therapist, maybe?" Ilya suggested gently.

Shane technically had considered it at some point in his life, but it was never something he gave much weight to. He always felt so ashamed of everything that went through his head–ashamed of who he was—that he didn't think he could even *do* therapy properly. For therapy to work, Shane had to be a willing participant, and he hadn't been all the way there in the past.

"I have…thought about it. I'm just scared."

Ilya responded, "I understand. I have thought about going to therapy for myself, but it is hard."

Shane shot up quickly, mouth open in surprise. "What? Are you alright? Do you need to talk about something?"

Ilya laughed like Shane's reaction had amused him. "In general I am fine. I think I have what my mother had, and some days it's worse than others."

Shit.

How had Shane not noticed that Ilya was dealing with his own stuff? Shane was so caught up in his own mind that he hadn't considered that Ilya may be unwell in some capacity, too.

Ilya's brow furrowed. "Shane. I know what you are thinking, and I want you to stop."

Shane spluttered, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Ilya sighed. "I do not understand what I am going through myself much, either…Like you said, it is hard to put these things into words. But you were so brave, just now. It gave me the courage to say how I've been feeling, too."

Shane, feeling way too many emotions at once, headily leaned towards Ilya until their mouths met. Shane lifted his leg to reach around Ilya's side so that he was straddling Ilya. Shane put his hands in Ilya's curls, tugging gently as Ilya returned the kiss with fervor. Ilya's hands found purchase on Shane's back, always a steady and firm reminder of his presence.

Shane pulled away gently, keeping his forehead in contact with Ilya's. "What a fucking pair we make, huh?"

Ilya smiled his beautiful, bright smile. "I think we are perfect."

Shane just rolled his eyes and went back to kissing his boyfriend.

—

Shane and Ilya both agreed to schedule appointments with therapists.

After that night, things had been nice between them. It was good that they were communicating with each other, and that extra layer of vulnerability they had both shared had made them closer than ever before (which Shane hadn't even considered was possible).

Shane knew Ilya was paying more attention to what Shane was eating, too, which Shane tried his best not to be annoyed with. Even though Shane was aware of his problematic eating habits, it was hard to break out of them. Ilya was good at knowing Shane's limits, and he tried not to push him too hard. Shane figured that most of the work to deal with this could happen in therapy.

His first appointment was on Thursday, and to say Shane felt nervous was an understatement. Sometimes it made him feel nauseous, how anxious he felt about his appointment. He had even considered cancelling the appointment altogether on numerous occasions, just so he wouldn't have to deal with the discomfort.

On the day of his appointment, Shane *actually* did throw up.

He had barely been able to sleep the night before, although he was able to get a couple of hours in before the alarm started blaring at 6am and Shane got out of bed. He tried and failed to eat breakfast, and then went to the bathroom and threw up in the toilet.

Shane's vomiting had probably woken Ilya up, because not long after he had started Shane felt a soothing warmth on his back, providing comfort.

"It's okay. Let it out," Ilya said, although Shane could barely hear him with his head pounding and stomach revolting.

Eventually, Shane's body decided enough was enough and let him have some rest. Shane moved his head up from the ceramic bowl and fell back against the wall, head in his hands.

"*Fuck*."

Ilya said, "It does not seem like you are nervous about your appointment today at all."

Shane let out an irritated noise and pulled a hand towel down from where it was hanging above him and threw it at Ilya's head. "Fuck off."

Ilya stood up without addressing the towel projectile that hit his head. "Come. Let me make you some peppermint tea, at least. It will help your stomach."

Ilya held out a hand, and Shane grabbed it while Ilya used some of his strength to help Shane stand up. Upon standing, Shane crumpled into Ilya's arms, head falling on his shoulder. Shane felt the deep rise and fall of Ilya's chest, a sign of a content sigh.

"I love you," Shane said.

Ilya pulled Shane against himself tighter. "I love you, too."

—

As much as Shane wanted Ilya to go with him to the appointment, they couldn't risk being spotted together, so Shane had to shoulder the burden of driving there all on his own. Shane fought hard not to spiral on the way there.

Sometimes driving was the worst for Shane, because he didn't have anything to distract himself with. He didn't really listen to music, outside of like, maybe EDM for running. But usually he preferred to run in silence–at least then he had the pounding of his heart and the sound of his feet slapping against the pavement to keep him present.

Driving, however, was a whole other story–which is why Shane didn't like driving all that much.

Luckily, the appointment was only twenty minutes away, so Shane did his best not to think about the worst-case scenario. He was semi-successful.

What if the therapist thinks you're overreacting?

What if I'm just being dumb and nothing is actually wrong with me? That this is just normal?

He took a deep breath at the stoplight and tried grounding himself by identifying five things nearby and saying them out loud, which is something he and Ilya had both been practicing together when the thoughts got to be too much. It helped.

Soon enough, Shane stood in the parking lot, steeling himself to make the trek into the waiting room. He knew that he would want to spend at least five minutes in the car hyping himself up, so he arrived ten minutes early to his appointment. After his self-allotted five minutes were over, he exited his car.

The therapist's office was located in an office building, and he looked at the directory to find that it was on the second floor. The lobby of the therapist's office was overtly modern, almost clinical, which stressed Shane out a little bit. He wished it was a little bit more…comforting? It felt as though he was about to get surgery, not pour his guts out to a complete stranger.

The receptionist looked friendly enough, and she smiled up at him as he approached the desk. "Hello! Can I get your name, please?"

Shane rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "Hi. Yeah. Um, Shane. Hollander."

She didn't blink an eye at his name, which Shane was grateful for. Either she wasn't a hockey fan, or she was just good at being professional.

The receptionist took a second typing into the computer and handed Shane a form on a clipboard. "You're all checked in. I just need you to fill out this intake form for your therapist, okay? It's going to give her a better idea on how to start your session today."

Shane grabbed the clipboard and pen being offered to him and said, "Thanks. Do I give it back to you or wait for the therapist?"

The receptionist responded, "You'll just hand it back to me. I'll give it to Dr. Ganesh and she'll look at it before calling you in."

Shane nodded slightly and smiled at the receptionist before going to sit down.The form was long. Shane had expected something like this when signing up for therapy, so he wasn't surprised, he was just overwhelmed.

At first, there were just the standard questions about his name, address, date of birth, etc. He froze a little bit when he got to the "Emergency Contact" section. Shane wanted to put Ilya's name, but it didn't necessarily make entire sense to do so. They wouldn't even be close to each other for the majority of the year once the hockey season started. He knew that his therapist would be sworn to secrecy, or whatever, so he wasn't too worried about outing himself and Ilya; he just wasn't sure about the practicality of the decision.

He decidedly wrote "Ilya Rozanov" in the blank along with his contact information.

Despite Shane's worries, Ilya *was* Shane's emergency contact. His boyfriend. His partner. His *person*. There was no one else he would want to come if–God forbid–something ever happened to Shane.

After that, Shane moved on to answer questions about his physical health, stuff related to sleep and diet, and Shane tried his best to be as honest as he could throughout this process. He really did want to get better, and he knew that he would be his own worst enemy if he lied on this form–as tempting as it was to do so.

When he got to the part related to mental health specifically, he took a little bit longer to get through everything, stopping every once in a while to think through his answers to make sure he was being thorough and truthful. He felt like he was going to be fucking graded on them or something.

Finally, about what must have been like twenty minutes later, he returned the form to the receptionist.

Soon enough, he saw a lady step out into the lobby with deep brown skin and long dark hair. She wore flowy pants and what seemed to be an incredibly comfortable sweater. She had a gentle tone to her voice when she called out to the lobby, "Shane Hollander?"

By some stroke of luck, no one else was in the waiting area, so he didn't have to worry about other people recognizing him or his name.

Shane stood up and walked towards the lady. “Yeah, um. Hi.” He reached out a hand for her to shake.

She smiled warmly at him and took his hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m Aarya Ganesh. Let’s go ahead and step into my office.”

Dr. Ganesh’s office was much more welcoming than the waiting area. The color scheme centered around warm tones, almost deliberately the vibe of fall, which was inherently comforting–in Shane’s opinion. A medium-sized brown couch sat in the middle of the room and a comfy-looking chair of the same color across from it. Decorative pillows featured little hedgehogs in scarves on the couch–for some reason, that eased Shane’s nerves.

As if reading Shane’s mind, Dr. Ganesh smiled as she sat down in her chair. “I know. The waiting area is pretty clinical. I keep telling them that they need to make it less like *that* or they’re gonna scare all the patients away! Luckily, I have control over my own office, and I understand how much an environment can play in someone’s comfortability.”

Shane really didn’t know how to respond to her, so he just nodded slightly and kept his hands in his pockets.

Dr. Ganesh wasn’t deterred by Shane’s awkwardness. “Please! Sit down.” She gestured to the couch, so Shane followed the direction her hand was pointing and sat down.

“So! Shane.” She picked up a stack of papers that was sitting on the table, and Shane spotted the intake form among the pile.

“I read through your intake form just before you came in, but I wanted to give you a chance to tell me yourself why you decided to start therapy. Or if you would rather I start based on the intake form, that’s okay, too.”

Shane appreciated that she was giving him options, rather than forcing him to go in a certain direction. It made him feel like he had some control.

He cleared his throat. “I think it might be easier if you start. It’s, um. It's still hard for me to talk about this stuff.”

Dr. Ganesh nodded understandingly and began again, “No worries at all. Well, then–”

Before Dr. Ganesh could continue, Shane cut her off, “Wait, uh. I just have a quick question before we start.”

She looked pleased that Shane was engaged, and said, “Of course.”

“Do you know who I am?”

Dr. Ganesh didn’t look surprised by this question and took it in stride. “Yes, I will admit I know who you are, Shane. My wife is actually a big fan of hockey–me, not so much. But it would be impossible to not have heard your name in my house. I assure you, though, I have no preconceived ideas about you that would affect our professional relationship. I have had

plenty of professional athletes as clients before, and you will be treated just like anyone else."

Shane's brain caught on the word *wife*, but that was a line of thought for him to deal with later–it was still jarring for him to come in contact with other queer people in public, but it did make him feel a little bit more comfortable knowing that she was similar to him in that way.

Shane had no reason to believe that Dr. Ganesh wasn't telling the truth, so he simply said, "Okay."

Satisfied with his response, Dr. Ganesh picked up where she left off, "Based on your intake form, Shane, it seems like you deal with a lot of anxiety. Is that a correct assumption?"

Shane nodded and then realized he should probably say something. "Yeah, I think so."

Dr. Ganesh said in response, "I think we need to talk a little bit more so we can figure out what kind of anxiety you're dealing with–it's not a 'one-size-fits-all' kind of thing, and everyone has unique experiences with mental health."

Dr. Ganesh paused and pursed her lips a bit before continuing, "I know the hockey world isn't the most…accepting of things that are out of the established norm for 'masculine' men. But I want to make sure you know that mental health issues are not a weakness, and you are so brave for trying out therapy."

God. She sounded like Ilya.

Shane probably blushed a little bit. "Thank you. It wasn't easy getting to this point."

She smiled sadly, "I'm sure. Would you be able to describe in more detail the nature of the thoughts you experience?"

"The nature of them?"

"Yes, like what triggers these thoughts, how much do they affect your day-to-day life, et cetera."

Well this wasn't exactly an easy question to answer. Everything had the possibility to trigger the negative onslaught of emotions that Shane experienced. A fraught interaction with a teammate. Missing a goal he should have made. Someone yelling "You suck!" from the stands. It was hard to predict what his brain would latch onto at any given moment and decide to think about for the rest of the day.

Shane sat up a little bit straighter from where he was sitting on the couch, "There are a lot of things that can cause these thoughts to start but I guess something that's been giving me issues recently has been food."

Dr. Ganesh took a second to jot what Shane had said down on a notepad and responded, "What about food in particular has been bothering you?"

Shane faced the problem again where he needed to do anything other than look at the person he was spilling his problems to. He looked down at his jeans and started picking at a loose thread on the side. “You know I’m an athlete. So I tried to start eating healthier, or whatever. But it’s gotten to the point where I feel like I have to eat clean foods or I’ll die. Like, last week, I tried eating a piece of chocolate, and I literally couldn’t because the thought of it made me sick to my stomach. Objectively I know there’s nothing wrong with eating chocolate. I just felt like if I ate it, then I would explode, or something.”

Shane laughed and hid his face in his hands. “Oh my god. It sounds so stupid when I say it out loud like that.”

Dr. Ganesh waved him off. “None of that. You’re not stupid–and the sooner you stop the negative self-talk, the easier it will be to talk about your issues. Although I know it’s easier said than done. But that’s what we’re here for, right?”

Shane smiled softly at her, feeling reassured and comforted by her response. “Right.”

She asked him a follow-up question, “Why is it important for you to be healthy?”

Shane thought the answer was obvious, but he wasn’t going to say as much. “I need to be at the top of my game to continue playing hockey. I’m getting older, and it’s started getting to my head, probably. Even though I still rank high, I keep feeling like if I slip up everything is going to come crashing down. I have people who look up to me…kids who have come up to me and told them how much seeing me on the ice means to them. I can’t let them down. I *won’t* let them down. Not if there’s something I can do to prevent it.”

When Shane finally worked up the courage to look at Dr. Ganesh, her head tilted to the side a bit. “I see. It seems to me like you’re putting a lot of pressure on yourself, Shane.”

Shane shrugged. “I guess.”

Dr. Ganesh tapped her pen against the side of her face in thought. “This issue with food you describe sounds a lot like a compulsion of sorts. You feel like you have to eat healthy, or otherwise something disastrous is going to happen.”

Shane said, “Yeah.”

“Have you ever heard of obsessive-compulsive disorder?”

Shane nodded. “I think so. Is that the one where people feel like they have to be super neat all the time?”

Dr. Ganesh laughed, like this was the type of response she was expecting to get. “No, not necessarily. There is a lot of misunderstanding surrounding OCD. Colloquially, the term gets thrown around quite a bit in the context you described. But OCD can present itself in many different ways, and the different kinds of OCD are called ‘themes.’

“It’s a disorder characterized by obsessive, repetitive thinking that often results in us feeling compelled to do something–or not do something. And if we don’t listen to the OCD when it

talks to us, it feels like we are falling apart. For instance, someone with OCD may feel like they have to close the door a certain amount of times before they can leave the house, or else they think they or someone they love will die."

All Shane could say in response to that was, "Oh."

Very gently, Dr. Ganesh said, "Does the description I gave resonate with you at all?"

Shane shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I don't know. I don't really have thoughts like the one you gave an example of."

"Right. But based on what you said about your relationship with food, you do have an all-or-nothing mentality. And like I said, OCD is different for everyone who has it. What the experience is like for one person is probably not the same for someone else."

Dr. Ganesh stood up then and went to shuffle around her desk in the corner. She opened up a drawer and pulled out a thin pamphlet, walked over to Shane, and then reached out to hand it to him.

"This is a pamphlet about obsessive-compulsive disorder. Before our next session, I want you to read through this and the different kinds of OCD and maybe do additional research online, if you want. I can give you a diagnosis, but I don't want to jump the gun or anything just yet, so I'll wait for our next session before talking in a more official capacity. However, based on your intake form and what we talked about today, you are showing strong signs of some form of OCD."

Shane took the pamphlet from her. He noticed his hand was shaking a little bit. On the cover was a stock photo of a mother and her child, smiling broadly. Shane thought it was weird that they decided to use some people smiling for a pamphlet about mental illness. The top of the pamphlet said, "Understanding the Reality of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder."

He was suddenly very warm, and he could feel the beginning of a headache pulsing in his skull.

Dr. Ganesh could probably sense Shane's apprehension by his lack of response, so she went back to her chair and said, "I know this is a lot right now, Shane. We'll end today's session here because I want you to process what we talked about. Once we understand what exactly is happening with you, we can begin with more targeted treatments and hopefully work on getting you to feel better."

She smiled sadly at him before continuing, "Do you have any questions for me at the moment?"

Shane's brain kind of shut down on him during this session, so he couldn't really think of anything to ask her despite the fact that he probably had many questions. He felt something weird churning in his stomach. "Uh, no. Not really."

Dr. Ganesh stood up again, her long dark hair flowing a bit with the movement. "Alright, Shane. It was nice to meet you today. I look forward to our next session together! If you have

any questions between now and then, don't hesitate to send me an email, okay?"

Shane stood up and followed Dr. Ganesh to where she had opened the door for him. "Thank you. Um. Have a good rest of your day."

"You too."

And just like that, his first therapy session was over.

—

On the drive back to the cottage, Shane was not entirely *there*. There was a word he heard for this somewhere dislocating? Distracting? Who knows. Whatever. Point is: Shane was physically in his car driving home; mentally, he was just…drifting.

It was probably dangerous to be driving like this, but luckily he made it home in one piece. It seemed like one second he was at the therapist's office and the next he was in his driveway. He parked the car, leaned forward, and felt his head thud against the steering wheel. Shane closed his eyes and took a deep breath to prepare himself to talk to Ilya.

Ilya, who was probably inside anxiously making Shane lunch and waiting for him to return. Shane knew that Ilya would have questions for him, questions that Shane didn't know if he could answer well.

OCD? Really?

Shane wasn't sure what to make of that not-quite diagnosis. He felt the pamphlet burning a hole in his back pocket.

Upon entering the house, Shane heard the familiarity of Ilya shuffling around in the kitchen. He smelled food, which means Shane's assumption about Ilya making lunch had been correct. Ilya wasn't a terrible cook or anything, but he definitely wasn't the best. Nevertheless, Shane would never trade any meal from Ilya for the world.

Shane walked into the kitchen to see a catastrophe, to say the least. Ilya always made a mess when he was cooking, and this time was no exception. Despite the fact that he was only cooking salmon and broccoli (seriously, how do you make a mess out of that?), there were like, three separate pans on the stove, ingredients spilling over everywhere, and a shit ton of wooden spoons and other cooking utensils in the sink.

Just the presence of something so normal grounded Shane a bit, and he could feel himself coming back into his own body. Shane leaned against the door in the entryway. "What the fuck happened here?"

Ilya had earbuds in and was clearly too wrapped up in his cooking to notice that Shane had come in. He had just started plating the salmon and broccoli when Shane asked his question, and Ilya's face immediately brightened as he took out one of his earbuds.

"Shane! Welcome home."

Shane moved from his spot in the entryway to approach Ilya and meet him with an embrace. Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya's broad back, and Ilya dropped what he was doing to return the favor. Shane nuzzled close to Ilya's neck, breathing in the subtle scent of cedar and rose water that came from the new body wash he was using.

They didn't say anything to each other for a few moments, Ilya knowing that Shane simply needed to be held. Sex with Ilya was great, obviously, but it was moments like these where they had delicate, intimate touches that made Shane melt a little bit inside. It was moments like these that reminded Shane that Ilya was his *home*.

Shane broke away from the hug–because he knew Ilya would never initiate the separation–and reiterated, "Let me ask again: What the fuck happened here." He didn't really say it as a question this time, sounding more exasperated instead of confused.

Ilya kissed Shane on his forehead and responded animatedly, "I am cooking you lunch! Salmon and broccoli. Your favorite."

"Mm. And you had to destroy our kitchen in the process?" Shane teased.

Ilya shook his head and went back to scooping the broccoli from the pan to the plate, "You are so ungrateful. Why do I do anything for you?"

Shane pouted and went to lean his head against Ilya's back, wrapping his arms around his middle. "No, no. I'm kidding. I love it. Thank you."

"Yes, yes. Let's go eat."

–

Salmon and broccoli were definitely *not* Shane's favorite. But they were two of his safe foods, which is why Ilya decided to cook them, because he knew that Shane would probably not be in a space after therapy to step outside of his comfort zone. Shane felt a little bit fuzzy inside, knowing that Ilya was so thoughtful.

At the table, Ilya hooked his foot around Shane's in a sign of gentle, assured solidarity.

Ilya was saying, *I know that was hard. I'm here. I'm always here.*

Shane moved the food around on his plate a little bit before trying to take a couple bites. He was able to eat a little bit of the salmon and one piece of broccoli before he decided he needed to take a break for a second. He put his fork down and Ilya cleared his throat.

"So."

"So."

"How did it go?" Ilya asked and then popped a piece of broccoli into his mouth.

Because Shane was a little shit, he said, "How did what go?"

Ilya rolled his eyes. “I am going to kill you, Shane Hollander. Answer the question.”

Shane crossed his arms over his chest as he contemplated what to say. “I don’t know. It went.”

Ilya seemed unconvinced. “Okay. Will you be going back? I think that–”

Before Ilya could finish his sentence, Shane cut him off with, “The therapist thinks I have OCD.”

Ilya’s mouth opened and closed a couple times, and he put his fork down and reached his hand across the table for Shane to take, if he wanted. Shane obliged.

“I have heard of OCD, but I do not really know what it is.”

Shane reached into his back pocket and grabbed the pamphlet from the therapist, and he threw it down on the table. “Yeah, well I guess I didn’t either. Apparently there are a bunch of different ‘themes’ or whatever the fuck.”

Ilya let go of Shane’s hand to pick up the pamphlet delicately, like it was going to hurt him or something if he grabbed it too fast. He said out loud, “‘Understanding the Reality of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.’ Have you looked at this yet?”

Shane shifted his gaze down to avoid eye contact with Ilya. “No.”

“Let us look at it together. After lunch.”

Shane didn’t know what sort of reaction he had been expecting from Ilya, but he was always surprised by the unwavering support that came from him. Despite how loyal Ilya had proven himself to be, Shane’s stupid brain always told him that he was not enough for Ilya to stay. That Ilya was just looking for a reason to pack up his bags and say, “Sorry, Shane. It has been a good ten years but I’ve had enough.”

Shane choked a little bit and could feel the beginning of tears. God, why was he always crying nowadays? He quickly wiped at his eyes and hoped that Ilya hadn’t seen, but of course he had.

Ilya softened his features and walked around the table to kneel in front of Shane. “Moya lyubov. Look at me.”

Shane didn’t realize he was still avoiding eye contact with Ilya, but at that moment he listened and looked into his boyfriend’s kind, beautiful eyes.

“We will get through this, yes? You and me. Always.”

Shane couldn’t help but smile softly in response. “Always.”

—

As promised, Ilya looked at the pamphlet with Shane after lunch. They went back to their bedroom because it was where Shane felt the most comfortable. Sitting on the bed, limbs tangled together, Shane opened up the pamphlet and began looking through.

Just like the therapist said, there were a lot of different kinds of OCD. Contamination OCD. Harm OCD. Relationship OCD. Underneath each subtype of OCD, there were little descriptions that briefly described the theme and what it consisted of.

Shane's breath caught when he saw Sexual Orientation OCD. The description read: *Sexual Orientation OCD is characterized by an intense feeling of uncertainty surrounding one's sexuality. An individual who experiences this form of OCD may have repetitive, distressing thoughts about their sexuality that results in them feeling guilty. They may seek reassurance from sources like the internet or other people in their lives.*

"Jesus," Shane breathed. Well there was one point for OCD, he guessed. Fuck.

Ilya hummed, giving Shane the space to elaborate if he wanted to. Shane did not want to. Yet.

They kept reading.

Health-Related OCD was the next theme that caught Shane's eye. Here, the summary said, *This theme causes an individual to experience anxiety surrounding physical health. This can present itself in catastrophic thinking patterns, like equating an unfamiliar symptom to a serious health concern. It can also showcase itself in eating habits–i.e., needing to eat healthy or the individual thinks something bad may happen.*

Well.

Aside from these specific themes, there were other general identifiers of OCD: things like rumination, intense intrusive thoughts, constantly believing every little thing is going to result in *something bad*. Feeling like you're not good enough, like you'll never be good enough.

Shane couldn't really read the pamphlet anymore.

He extracted his legs from where they were enmeshed with Ilya's and crumbled into himself, trying his hardest to take deep breaths.

His hands pressed into his eyes as he said, "Fuck. I really do have OCD."

Ilya gently pried Shane's hands away from where they were digging into his skull. "Yes, I think you do."

Shane groaned, "This is so embarrassing."

Ilya frowned. "Why embarrassing?"

Shane replied, "I am one of the best hockey players in the world. I…I have people who look up to me. How can I…I just feel like a fucking fraud."

“Just because you have OCD does not make you weak. You are the strongest person I know, Shane.” Here, Ilya gently took hold of Shane’s chin and lifted his head.“There is nothing to be ashamed of. You are still Shane Hollander, second best hockey player.” Ilya smirked a little, and Shane couldn’t help but give a soft laugh at that.

Ilya continued, “I am serious. You would not call me weak for having depression, yes?”

Shane quickly shook his head. “Of course not.”

“Then I want you to think the same for yourself.”

Shane hummed, understanding what Ilya was saying but finding it hard to completely agree at the moment.

Ilya grabbed Shane’s shoulders and held his strong hands there, “It will be hard work. But everything will be okay. It feels scary to have a name for what we are feeling, but it is actually good. Now that you know what is happening, you can start working towards improvement.”

Shane couldn’t help but scoff, “God, I hate how smart you are sometimes.”

Ilya pulled Shane against him. “I know. I am the best.”

Shane whispered against Ilya’s chest, “You really are.”

—

Shane booked another appointment with Dr. Ganesh for that Friday.

Inside the office with Dr. Ganesh, she said, “I am happy to see you came back, Shane. Have you given any thought to what we talked about in our last session?”

Shane nodded, “Yes…I…do think I have…OCD.” It was still hard to admit out loud. “I want to get better, though. For my partner, for my family, for my fans…but also for myself. I want to get better for myself.”

Dr. Ganesh beamed at Shane, “I am very happy to hear that. I think you are in the right place.”

End Notes

I am considering making this a series, maybe? Either exploring Shane's journey through therapy/recovery or delving into some of Ilya's issues with depression. Idk. Regardless, thank you so much for reading!

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