

kiss me like a final meal

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kiss me like a final meal

by [blueberryink](#)

Summary

Everybody else on earth was born with a manual on How to Be. A sort of silver spoon already tucked into their mouth.

Shane wishes he had gotten one.

After an exhausting day of masking and overstimulation, Shane has a panic attack. He loses the ability to speak. Thankfully, Ilya is there to help him through.

Notes

hello! i have been writing this one for way too long and got so caught up in editing it that i was getting stuck. so i said, fuck that. i'm not editing any more of my too-much wordy-ness out lmao

idk anything about the NHL, so i'm imagining they are at a weekend event here where they could be in two different "events" at once. simply bc i needed that for the story!!

tw for:

- shane becoming non-verbal due to being overwhelmed
- use of holding ice as coping mechanism during panic attack
- descriptions of panic attack (many times)
- a bit of self-loathing from shane

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

It is too hot.

Is the only thing that Shane can think as his legs threaten to collapse him to the floor.

It is too hot and the starched collar of his shirt is snagging on his throat.

It is hot and it is *loud* and there is *so many people* and his fingers are slip-sliding on the damp stem of his glass.

Seeping up condensation from a bitter, bitter liqueur that he does not even like. A flavour that leaches the roof of his mouth into a desert. Why he said yes to a third glass, he has no idea, but when a high-up representative of the league clapped him jovially on the back and reached to press it into his hand, Shane's palm creaked-out open and relented to the intrusion.

It's hot. It is too. It is too, *too* hot.

All-Star Weekends always twist him inside-out. And at the sponsorship galas, in particular, he finds himself miserably sympathising with the bubbles trapped in the champagne bottles.

All of the handshakes. The mingling. The networking. The smiling. The chit-chatting.

The *pretending*.

He's always fucking pretending.

They make it seem so easy, here. Knowing what to say, knowing what to do. Knowing how to *be*. Knowing when to nod their head and when to smile and when to say *that's great!* and when to pat another person's arm. So friendly, so cordial, so amicable. How to lean in with a secret grin, how *far* to lean in, and how to read when a joke is a joke and not an actual comment veiled in velvet.

Everybody on earth was born with a manual on *How to Be*. A sort of silver spoon already tucked into their mouth. The universe must have cursed Shane before setting his feet to the earth, because although he has always been starving, he missed it.

Now, there is another representative speaking to him. He has no idea what she has said in the last five minutes, because he has been sifting all day through the collapsing library of mental scripts in the back of his skull, and he is *tired*.

"Sorry," he interrupts her now, in a sudden blurt. The words are dry sand in his mouth and he cannot quite get his teeth around them before they are crumbling past his lips. "Please, excuse me for one moment. My apologies. Please, just—"

He pivots away from her and stumbles his way to the outer ring of the ballroom. Bumping past shoulders and elbows and hips in the milling-around crowd as he does, muttering *sorry-sorry-sorry* beneath his breath. He finds the exit doors and when he shoves them open, the air conditioning cracks him ice-cold across the cheeks. It shocks the breath from his chest, for

a moment, but the bite of it is a welcome respite against the nest of flames that have rooted a cosy campfire in his cheeks.

He makes it to the foyer with the glass still in his hand and his heart writhing between his temples. It's too hot, it's too hot, it's *too hot*. His head is too loud. There is a noose winding itself scritch-scratch rope around his throat.

Behind the reception desk, a hotel employee snaps her head up at the sight and sound of him. She closes the folder in front of her and leans forward, pretty-perfect customer service smile sliding into place.

"Mister Hollander!" she greets, cheerily. "Is there something you need? Can I help you?"

"Bathroom," he grits out, through clenched teeth. His tie is too tight, the top button of his shirt strangling. The walls are teetering. "Please. Can you point me... The. Bathrooms?"

Her eyes slide toward the corridor he has just come from. "If you just go back through there, the ballroom ones are--"

Shane shakes his head, sharp. A tuft of carefully coiffed hair tumbles free from its gel and spills sticky onto his forehead. He scruffs it back with his fist as he turns away from the employee, babbling a weak apology, and heads down the closest corridor. He keeps one hand pressed to the wallpaper for balance as he goes.

Surely, *surely, please God surely*, there will be a bathroom along there, or somewhere private, or something quiet, or- or just anywhere. *Anywhere* where the buzzing in his brain can stop for a moment, where the pain in his eyes can dull at the edges, where the *everything everywhere all the time always* can drag to a stop, stop, *stop*.

Please.

He finds a single bathroom. Unoccupied. He grabs the door handle so roughly that it rattles as he pushes it open, then kicks it shut right away again at his heels.

He's hot, it's too hot, and he's buzzing, there's a static thrumming in his ears like the beating too-fast of angry wasps, and god, the knot of pain thumping between his eyes, dragging down his eyebrows, he-

He presses his forehead to the cold wood of the door. All at once, the floor around his stupid-fancy shoes is too close and too far. He's stuck in his body, but he might also be somewhere up-up-up and dissolving through the ceiling, gripping the roof tiles.

Talk to me, Shane. Talk to me. Talk to me, Shane. Talk to me.

His lungs clench down tight.

He doesn't realise his hand is sliding into the front pocket of his pants and wrapping around his phone. He doesn't realise he's scrolling for a certain number, a certain name, but his fingernail is catching off the glass and he's pressing it.

He peels his head from the door and staggers further into the bathroom.

The phone line crackles to life against his ear. He grips tighter.

“*Hello?*”

Ilya.

There’s commotion in the background. Cheering, chattering, chirping. The sound of glasses and bottles clinking, of music thrumming. Shouts of a barman and Shane can picture the clustering crowd of patrons pressed up to the bar top, leaning over, elbows knocking sticky off the wood as they spill their drinks and slur their orders.

Ilya had opted out of the sponsorship gala. After two days of keeping up appearances, of folding his arms and legs and spine into boxes that did not fit his skin, he’d favoured the more *relaxed* party tonight. Something more casual, where he could socialise with the other players.

Shane should not have called. He should not have called. He should not have called, *for so many reasons*. The list of reasons that he should not have called, actually, would fill a ream of manuscripts and yet. Yet. Here he is.

Here he is.

“*Hello?*” Ilya asks, again. The sound of movement, a hush that Shane imagines is him cupping a hand over the receiver and shouting a snarky reply back to someone, ordering them into silence. Then muttering, as he pushes through a crowd and finds a quieter spot, somewhere easier to hear.

“*Shane?*” he says. Then, softer, “*Sweetheart?*”

Shane’s wince bunches his shoulders up to his ears. He angles the phone a little further away, but his body buckles him closer to the wall. He turns his head to press his cheek against the cold tiles, to feel the ice of them leach fever from his skin.

He opens his mouth. He closes it. The words, they lodge in his throat, tangle around one another. They will snap- *he* will *snap* if he’s not careful.

It’s happening.

Oh, fuck, he thinks. *It’s happening*.

Shane loses the ability to speak, sometimes.

The words sink somewhere deep in the back of his throat, stuck in something thick and cloying and *suffocating*. A pit of molasses, a pot of gloopy honey boiled over. He reaches for them, he does, but the stickiness clings to his fingers, his wrists, his knuckles. He’ll get stuck, he’ll get stuck, he’ll get *stuck*.

He thinks and he thinks and, *god*, he *thinks*. The words should surface. His mind should catch them. What step comes first, what comes next? Think, inhale, shape, exhale, *say*.

Just say. Just say. Just say. Just say, say, say, just fucking *say*.

But nothing is working. Nothing. Everything instead is just- clattering to a halt.

He opens his mouth. He closes it. He opens it. He closes it. Opens it. Closes it. Opens it. Closes it.

It is terrifying, losing his words. Chilling to the bone as the ability slips away in real time, like dust that he cannot grip, dust that is slipping through his fingers despite how hard and fast he clenches his sweaty fists. Nothing is staying. And the shame that bubbles up overflowing in the midst of it all, because his mouth and teeth and tongue and jaw and throat and vocal chords are all there, they are all *fine*, they are all working, and yet nothing is coming out.

Nothing is *coming out*.

He was still so little the first time he tried to teach his silent mouth a lesson. He waited until his parents were busy in the kitchen and then quietly dragged the dining room chair across the hallway, over the bumpy carpet to the mirror in the entryway. The untied laces of his preschool shoes snagged on the rung of the chair as he climbed atop it, pulling the sneaker free and tumbling it to the floor.

He planted his hands on the console table. There, he stared his reflection down in the mirror. Leaned in and pressed close enough to the glass that the tip of his nose stung against the cold. Breath fanning out dragon-wings of condensation, he searched for the broken pieces of himself in his eyes.

Parts that were rotten and useless in him but apparently stayed glued together puzzle-piece perfect in others.

Just use your words, Shane.

Why aren't you speaking, Shane?

Stop being rude, Shane.

Look at me when I'm speaking to you, Shane.

Use your words, Shane.

Just use your words, Shane.

Use your words, Shane, use your words

Shane use your words, useyourwords useyourwords useyourwords

Staring into the mirror and pressing his little hands over his mouth, sliding his fingertips behind his teeth. Scrawling the tips of his nails over the ridges of incisors, the sharps of canines, the flats of molars. Were the words hidden there? Were the syllables stuck in his gums?

Maybe he could pull them out.

Maybe they were trapped.

Maybe they were blocked.

If something was physically wrong.... then maybe it was not his fault?

Hands in his mouth and tugging, tugging, *tugging* at five-years-old, at six years-old, at seven, at eight, at nine, at *ten-eleven-fourteen-eighteen-twentyseven*.

Because everybody made it sound so easy. To open his mouth and speak, to make the words fall out and let the air catch them, to say what he wanted and needed to say. Everybody made it *look* so easy, and he didn't understand, he *couldn't* understand, why it was so hard for him, why it hurt so much in him, why it took so much effort to do something that was *nothing* for everybody else.

And to still, *still*, come up short.

I am trying, he wanted to say. Every time. With his hands in his mouth and his eyes burning, tears scalding his cheeks. *I am trying. I am trying. I promise I am trying.*

Now, his forehead crumples in fear. But a scrape of a sound finally, finally drags free. A tangled-up huff of *Ilya*.

"Shane." Ilya's own voice has wired tighter. "Are you- Are you *okay*?"

Shane shakes his head. Ilya can't see, but it's all he has. He tries again to grip some words. Nothing comes.

On Ilya's end, a door swings shut. The clamour of the crowd deadens in the background as he steps outside. Shane knows that he has, because he hears the sharp intake of breath that zips into Ilya when he hits the cold night air.

"Where are you?"

Shane's fingers clench and unclench around the phone.

"Shane?" A pause. "Is it... Are your words gone? You can't speak?"

Only empty air between his lips.

"Oh, *solnyshko*," Ilya murmurs. His voice drops slow and soft, soothing. Knowing. *Knowing*. He knows. His breath quickens as he walks faster. "I'm coming. Okay? Where are- can you-" A curse, then, beneath his breath. "Don't worry. I'll find you. Don't worry."

Shane forces a swallow down his throat. It chokes a little, and then all of a sudden, his lungs begin to gulp rakes of air in.

In, in, in. In, in, in. In, in, in.

In, in, *in* but nothing is coming back out. Nothing is coming back out, and so there's too much, there's too much. There is *too* much. His chest is swelling as far around the balloon of his breaths as possible, but-

"Shane?" Ilya calls. Then tries, more urgent, like an elastic snapping, "Shane, *listen*."

Shane clamps a hand over his mouth. He doesn't know why, but his body does this when he's panicking, when it's not listening to him. Shoving two fingertips between his gritted teeth, as if to force some space there, as if it will shake the exhales out of him, as if it will sever the stream of *in-in-in*.

"Take your hand down. I'm coming, Shane. I'm *coming*. But take your hand down, okay? Take it down."

Shane tries. He does. But when his breath whistles against his knuckles, Ilya sharpens his voice and says, with crystal-cut glass, "*Shane*. Now."

He wrenches his hand from his face. It tumbles with a *thump* onto his leg. He flips it over to clench tight in the fabric of his pants.

"Good," Ilya says. Shane heaves. "Good. Now... There is a sink, yes?"

There is.

"Put your phone on loudspeaker and put it on top of the counter. Then turn the taps on."

Shane's brain is slow to follow the instructions. It's his legs that move alone and climb him up from his slump against the wall, his shoes that wobble him forward, that step him clumsily across the room towards the sink. When he places the phone on the counter, it lands with a sharp *smack*. It takes three attempts to stab the screen in the right place for the loudspeaker.

There must be a change along the phoneline that alerts Ilya, because he says then, and the word is a cottony croon in his mouth, "*Sweetheart*."

Shane, right there, trembling on the tiles, feels his knees almost buckle. He grabs the edge of the countertop. His fingernails bleach in their curl around it.

Ilya, he wants to say. If he could reach into his mouth, into his throat, into his chest. If only he could clasp a fist around the graveyard where his words have died and drag it out body-bag-heavy from his skeleton. *Ilya*.

"I'm here." Ilya knows. Of course he knows. He knows. He always knows. "I've got you now. You're doing so good."

The praise shivers down Shane's spine. His toes curl-up tight.

“Now, the taps. Remember? I showed you before, yes? The cold water?”

Shane does. He does remember. *Little trick from Galina*, Ilya had explained. Something-something about giving his nervous system a little jolt of a restart. A shot of ice-cold Russian vodka to the veins. Something for his body to focus on and bleed some of the adrenaline out through, leech it from where it saturated his pores.

His fingers shake as he curls them around the faucets and twists.

The sound of running water hisses through the air. Ilya hums, “Jacket off. Sleeves up.”

It’s easier to focus this way, when the choices are lifted gently out of his hands. Ilya feeds him teaspoons of directions, measured and careful, and even though he is not *with* Shane yet, even though he is not *right there* yet, it’s easy to swallow the medicine of it. Guiding him through the storm-cloud like a hand on the small of his back.

With Ilya, there is a single pathway to follow. All Shane has to do to find home is step onto it.

Shane shrugs his suit jacket off his shoulders and lets it crumple carelessly to the floor. He nudges it aside. His sleeves are next, and it’s the silver cufflinks that are getting annoyingly in the way. Too finicky, too hard to unhook while his fingers trembling. Teeth nipping into his bottom lip, he huffs out an aggrieved breath, curls his fingernail into the sleeve, and *pulls*. The buttons and cufflinks skitter along the floor in a scatter of directions.

“Are you ripping your fancy clothes?” Ilya teases. “You’ll be angry about that tomorrow.”

He shoves the fabric up to his elbows and then sinks his hands into the bowl of the sink. His eyes flutter tight-shut. The frost of the water lands like a sun-scorch on his skin, stripping away ribbons of the heat there, the sizzle of overstimulation.

Ilya had introduced Shane to using cold water during a panic attack. The first time Shane had had an autistic shutdown in front of him.... It had been a humbling experience for both.

There was no specific triggers behind it, that day. Nothing huge. Nothing particular. Shane was just simply *exhausted*. Burned out from a week of press, of practices. He’d been sitting on Ilya’s lap, one knee tucked on either side of Ilya’s hips, and Ilya’s lips were soft on his, coaxing a shudder out of him. His fingertips trickled down to tuck into the waistband of Shane’s pants.

“Do you want?” Ilya had whispered, then. His other hand came to cradle Shane’s cheek, thumb dusting over the softness of his lower lip. When all Shane did was nod, he smiled and pressed down harder, pulling Shane’s silent mouth open with a cherry-lollipop *pop*.

“You are so quiet tonight,” he murmured. “If you want, then you have to tell me with your words, Hollander.”

And just like that, snap-crackle-*pop*, Shane’s body swapped the mask for hyperventilation. He throttled head over heels into a panic attack. Right there, sitting on Ilya’s lap, his hands clutching tight onto the muscles of Ilya’s shoulders.

At first, Ilya had frozen with shock. Struck pinned-still with surprise and wincing at Shane's fingernails digging into his skin, wincing at how Shane *shook* in his lap. It took him a moment to gather enough mind to slide Shane sideways off his legs and land him gently on the edge of the bed.

Shane had grabbed for him, breathless, desperate. His nails left strawberry-pink scrawls on Ilya's arms.

Don't leave me, he wanted to say. *Don't leave, Ilya, don't-*

"Coming right back," Ilya hush-hushed him. "One moment, Shane, just one moment."

Shane's head spun for the entire thirty-seconds it took Ilya to return.

"Right here," he'd whispered then, falling to his knees between Shane's ankles. Shane had both hands knotted in the front of his own shirt now, curled-up claws over his ribs, shaking against the thump of his heartbeat. Ilya's fingers were gentle as they wrapped around one of Shane's wrists and eased it down, drawing it close to his own chest. "I will put some ice in your palm now, okay? It will help panic. Promise."

Shane's other hand slithered higher on his chest, climbing to his face, as if in chase of the climbing tightness. In his mouth, there was no air getting through his lips. There was no oxygen, there was no breath. Maybe if he could get to his teeth, if he could reach them, if he could pry his jaw them open wider, he could create some room, he could-

"Ah, no. No, no, no, Shane." Ilya wrapped his hand around that straying wrist, too. He tugged to keep it with the other against his chest. "You will hurt yourself. I don't want you to be hurt. Is okay. Is okay. Let me, let me."

Ilya pried Shane's fist open to place a cube of ice into it. Shane flinched at the cold, the shock of it shuddering across his shoulders. But Ilya held tight even as Shane's body winced backwards.

"It will help," Ilya soothed. His voice cracked, brittle with concern. His eyes were so wide-open and breaking on Shane's face. "I promise. I promise, Shane, it will help."

Shane could hardly hear over the roar of blood in his ears, but he clamped his hand down around the ice. The cold of it bled a sharp, throbbing numbness out from his palm to the tips of his fingers. Up his veins to his elbows, trickling like a drip full of anaesthetic. Like static swallowed by stinging, and Shane's mind quickly had less space to spiral because it needed more space to *hurt*.

"Copy me." Ilya pressed Shane's free hand flat to his own chest. His heartbeat, beneath it, *badum badum badum* of a steady, slow rhythm. He drew in a slow, exaggerated breath, and Shane's fingertips twitched as they followed the *in-and-out* of swell it. "Same time as me, Shane. Come on."

Shane tried. He really, really tried. He followed Ilya's blueprint as best he could and, whenever his lungs started to stumble, whenever they started to stutter him backwards, Ilya

squeezed his hand tight around the ice. The burn of it stopped him from unravelling further.

It felt like an age later when Ilya loosened his grip and asked, softly, “Okay?”

The ice cube was long, long melted into a pool. Puddled in the bowl of Shane’s palm with the rest dripping icily down Ilya’s bare chest, dribbling onto his shorts. He didn’t even seem to notice.

“Shane?”

Shane managed a weak nod. All his energy had drained away. Seeped into the earth and the soil somewhere far, far beneath the floorboards. Maybe Hell was thirsty, down there.

Ilya’s forehead wrinkled as he watched Shane carefully. His gaze was slow as it roved his face. Eventually, he tilted his head and asked, after chewing the words a little, “Shane... Can you talk?”

Shane’s breath hitched anew. Something raw and cracked-open in his chest withered again. It wilted him backwards on the bed.

The shame of it, the shame of it, the *shame* of it.

Why couldn’t he just *talk*? Why couldn’t he just be *normal*?

Ilya’s expression was a crepe paper swan crushed in a fist. “No, no, no,” he hurried to say. He let Shane’s wet hand go, but pulled the other up towards his face. His lips were on Shane’s numb fingertips as he dusted kisses to each one, but his eyes were on Shane’s. “Is okay, Shane. No need for words, now. That’s okay. I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

Shane buckled forward. *It’s not* okay, he wanted to say. *It is not okay*. But he pressed his forehead into Ilya’s shoulder and nuzzled his *thank you* there.

“Scared me,” Ilya whispered. He wrapped Shane in an embrace, lips in a tuft of his hair as he promised, squeezing him tight, “But everything is okay. We will figure this out. Together. Me and you. Okay? Okay.”

Now, Shane drops his head forward and closes his eyes as the cold water trickles and spills over his wrists in the sink. Trailing down over his palms and dripping between his knuckles. The nip of it centres him, grounds him, cools him. It brings life back into parts of his body that had lost connection somewhere.

He feels the heat in his cheeks. The belt buckle biting his hip. The sole of his shoes on the tiles.

The room has grown quiet, though. The line of the phone buzzing with nothing but static.

Ilya?

A fresh flare of panic sparks in his chest at the thought of being alone. Of how he could trip-stumble right back into to the claws of this. Without the ability to even voice a single word of

the distress. How the greedy talons of panic are probably already slipping in beneath the door, creepy-crawling claws across the floor to wrap around his ankles and-

"*Shane.*" Ilya's voice cuts in. Razor, knifed. A snag in the thick wool that is noosing round Shane's throat. "Keep breathing. In and out. In and out. Slowly, *slowly*. That's it."

Shane bends at the waist until his cheek is pressed against the countertop.

"My pretty boyfriend makes such sad, sad sounds," Ilya laments. "Breaks my heart, Shane. To hear you like this. And you know Russians do not do broken hearts."

Shane forces a breath in. And out. In. And out. In. And *out*. He presses his face against the marble until his cheekbone burns.

"Almost there, Shane. I will find you. You were by the... The ballroom, yes? Okay. Okay, I will go there and say, *did you see a Mister Hollander running away?* Then I will find you."

I will find you.

I will find you.

I will find you.

Please find me.

It feels like a lifetime scrapes past, but finally, *finally*, the bathroom door is clanging suddenly open and Ilya is stepping quick as lightning through the frame. Shane twists around, shoes squeaking, and- *God*, the sight of him. The sight of him. The *sight of him*. Right there.

He's still wearing the black tuxedo he'd chosen for the reception earlier this afternoon. Except now, the sleeves are rolled up all crinkled at his elbows and his blazer has been abandoned.

He looks like what warmth on a cold winter's night feels like.

You found me, Shane wishes he could say. His hands drip water onto his pants. A knot of emotion curls on his tongue, a rattling breath shredding around it. *You found me, you found me, you found me, you-*

It's overwhelming, the relief. Like he's a been a shaken-up bottle of a fizzy drink for hours and the lid has just been twisted off, flooding in *space* and flooding out *pressure*. He stumbles toward Ilya, but then-

But then the shame. A punch to the ribs, a clatter to the guts. He looks at Ilya standing there, in the doorway, cheeks flushed with exertion and hair ruffled as if he's been stressfully pulling at the roots.

Ilya had been so *excited* to go to the party with the other players.

And Shane had pulled him away from it.

He pulled Ilya away from his friends. He pulled Ilya away from the fun.

He pulled Ilya away from where Ilya should be because he, *yet again*, is failing.

Shane looks at Ilya. Where the relief had come, now pummels in guilt. His breathing is spiking all over again. He staggers backwards until he hits the sink.

Ilya's eyes widen with fear. His cheeks, his lovely golden cheeks, pale with shock, with confusion. He's pinned fish-on-a-hook on Shane's retreating steps. He asks, cautiously, "Shane?"

Shane's hand is clamping back over his mouth again. The air is whistling against his teeth, but maybe if he presses there, maybe if he forces his jaw closed, maybe if he claws it tight shut, he will convince his body to remember how to breathe *out* because all it is doing right now *again* is sucking in.

In, in, in, in-in-in-in and once a-*fucking*-gain there is no room left. There is no room left, he is stitched like a steel zip from pelvis to throat with panic and too-much, too-much, *too-much*-

Ilya reaches for him, but Shane flinches. He tosses his head in a frantic shake. *No*.

"Shane-"

A noise, something between a huff and a sob, rips from him. When Ilya takes a single step closer, Shane's other hand slaps over his eyes. He can't see him here, he *can't*. He feels shame heat his cheeks, lick the tips of flames at his ears, this is all so *stupid*, why is he so *stupid*, why can't his brain and his *body just*-

Ilya's knees hit the floor with a dull thud in front of him.

Your clothes, Shane thinks. He grieves. *Get up off your new clothes. Don't do this for me. You'll wrinkle them, you'll dirty them, you'll-*

Ilya's fingers are gentle as they wrap around Shane's elbows. He tries to ease Shane's arms down from his face, but Shane shakes him off, knocking free.

"Shane." Ilya holds his hands up, palms out. Innocent, careful. "I won't touch you if you do not want, but you have to move your hand, *solnyshko*. Or you won't get any air."

Shane's fingers clench tight enough that the skin beneath dimples. *Can't*, he wants to say. He can't and he wants to but he is so ashamed, he is so embarrassed, he is so horrified at his brokenness, and his body is not listening, his thoughts are not listening, his mind is not-

"Let me touch," Ilya pleads. He looks like a broken heart. "It helps you. I will help you, Shane. Please?"

Shane heaves. He looks at Ilya. On his knees for him. Offering to help, asking to help, *begging* to help. And despite the guilt, despite the nauseating grip of it round his stomach, he feels like the earth is splitting beneath his feet, and he does not want to get lost in the cracks.

He manages some version of a nod and then Ilya is *there*.

“Just my hands on your legs.”

The brush of familiar palms sliding warm around the back of his ankles. Slipping up his calves, curling around the outside of his thighs. Stroking up and down. Slowly, slowly. A soft rhythm, over and over, a pathway painted for Shane’s breathing to follow.

Shane is trying. *God*, he is trying. His heart is hammering like a hare in his neck, a bunny in a wolf’s crushing jaws, but he is trying. He is trying.

Ilya’s hands move higher to wrap around Shane’s elbow again. This time, Shane relents to the pull, letting his hand fall. Ilya brings it to a rest in his own hair, next to his ear, pressing Shane’s palm down until his fingers uncurl and thread through the locks.

Ilya figured out years ago that this comforts Shane. Maybe for the closeness, maybe for the warmth. Maybe for the sensory experience of sifting through clusters of those curls, of twirling the honey pieces round and round. Brushing them down with gentle knuckles only to watch them flop stubbornly back. It grounds him, the simple back and forth motion. A standing-still in the spinning-around tornado of it all.

Shane is not sure how Ilya figured it out, but he did. He just knows Shane, and he knows what soothes him. There is something woven deep into the fabric and cells of Ilya that designs him so sweetly for comfort and quietening. As if he arrived to earth with a knowing of how to lullaby a bruise, as if the first musical instrument he ever put his chubby-baby hand to was heartstrings.

“Helps you,” Ilya says, as Shane’s hand closes gently in his hair. And it does, it *does*. It’s like muscle memory, the way his body remembers Ilya as crawling home. “And feels good for me, too.”

It takes a while, but Shane’s breathing eventually begins to even out. Little bit by little *little* bit, with his fingers tugging and twirling at Ilya’s curls. His lungs still hiccup on the swell of each inhale, but it jolts him less on each exhale.

The adrenaline begins to wane. But Ilya is back on his feet and gripping Shane’s waist before he can start wobbling.

“I want to hold you,” he says. “Let me, let me hold you?”

The nod Shane gives is again a weak imitation of movement, but Ilya hears it loud and clear. He steps in closer and when he wraps Shane in his arms, drawing him in close to embrace, Shane melts. He has no energy to hold himself up. Ilya cocoons him like a soft blanket and takes one of his hands, bringing it to his lips.

“I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” he whispers, pressing a long kiss to the palm. He curls Shane’s fingers around it, tucking the kiss in snug and safe. “Let’s sit, okay?”

All day long, Shane has been stuffing the overstimulation and stress down. Shoving it deep inside himself, hiding it in the crevices of his bones. Now, it weighs so heavy on him, so tight *inside* of him, that he feels crammed seam to seam with soot. All his hyperventilating has shaken it loose. If Ilya stops holding him together, will his chest tumble right off of him?

“I know, I know.” Ilya hears it even unsaid. “Is okay, Shane. I’ve got you.”

He walks Shane backwards and then lifts him around the thighs until he’s sitting on the edge of the counter. Hiss legs dangle in the air beneath them. So limp and lifeless that one of the shiny leather shoes slips from his heel and thumps from his toes.

Ilya’s hands are so gentle on him. His palms so careful and tender as he cups Shane’s shaky knees and eases them open to step between, pressing as close as they can get. He squeezes them, for a moment, before lifting up until his fingers cradle Shane’s cheek. His thumb presses gentle into the rosy-red apple there.

“Breathing is a lot better,” he whispers. “It does not sound like you are about to choke anymore. But your words are still gone. Yes?”

Shane’s spine stiffens.

I am trying. To clear his throat, to unclench his teeth. To open his jaw, to drag his voice out. *I am trying. I promise I am trying.*

No sound comes, of course. Ilya’s touch on Shane’s face gentles even further. He shifts to tuck a knuckle beneath his chin and tip it up.

Shane cannot bare to meet Ilya’s eyes. He stares at his eyelashes instead and slowly counts the fair, feathery swoops of them.

One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-

“You are tired,” Ilya says, softly. “I can see. Is in your red cheeks. The freckles, here,” he strokes the blush again, “They are almost pink. Like little flowers.”

He slips his hand around to the nape of Shane’s neck.

“So much talking today. Talking, talking, talking. And noise,” he murmurs. He draws Shane gently forward until his forehead meets his shoulder. Shane tries to lift one hand to press it against Ilya’s chest, to feel the beat of his heart, but it lands there with a heavy thump, as if his muscles are drained. Ilya covers his exposed ear with a gentle palm.

“You don’t like it,” he murmurs. “Your poor, poor head does not like it. At all.”

Shane turns his nose into Ilya’s neck. The scent of his cologne hums there. *Home.*

Ilya gives him a moment to settle there before easing back. He dips down to catch Shane’s eyes, his fingertips sketching soothing circles into Shane’s temples.

“Time to go, yes? We will go to our hotel room now and relax. Take a break. Have a time-out.”

Shane wants to. *God*, in the bottom of his chest, his stomach, his heart, he wants to. But he can't. He can't. He *can't*. He has an appearance to hold up. He has expectations to meet. He has role-model boots to fill. He has footsteps not to *follow* in but to create.

There is simply *webs* of demands dangling just outside the door of this fancy bathroom. All that the spiders are waiting for is to gorge sticky-sweet on his body. On his persona.

On his *mask*.

And he cannot... He cannot keep Ilya away from the fun any longer. Not again. Not anymore. Not after already needing him here, *now*, when he could have stayed with his teammates. With his friends. When he could have been enjoying the celebrations, the festivities.

When he could have been doing absolutely anything other than talking his fully-grown, adult partner down from a childish spiral.

Shane feels guilt grip his joints. He freezes.

He should not have called Ilya. He should not have called. He should have been able to handle this, to handle *himself*, alone.

Shane *should not* have called. But, he did. He did. He *did* and- *fuck*.

He should not be so needy. He should not be so clingy. He should not be so-

He should not be so *broken*.

Fuck. He cannot even *talk*. He cannot even talk. *He cannot even-*

He is a grown man. He is a professional, he is an athlete. His face is plastered across billboards all over the country, across television screens in thousands of living rooms. His smile sparkles on posters pinned to bedroom walls. But here he is. Here he is.

Here. He. Is.

Hiding in a bathroom and hyperventilating over a sink. Because his brain cannot manage a stupid event, a stupid weekend, stupid *gala*, without shutting down.

Oh, how he hates himself, sometimes.

A lot of times, really.

Here he is. Here he is.

Shane *fucking* Hollander.

He lifts from Ilya's chest and, putting a hand on Ilya's shoulder, forces him a step backwards. There is a space created between their bodies, now, a slot that he should slide to his feet into. He should *go*. Leave. Walk out the door, walk down the hallway. Walk right back into the ballroom. Dig his fist into his chest and shove the spoiled roots of himself aside, drag out that picture-perfect smile, still so minty with toothpaste. Peel it back around his gums, his teeth, his lips.

Ready, steady, *go*. He's up for the next act!

He can do this. He can do this. He can *do this*.

He has to do this.

His lungs are already beginning to stutter.

The noise. The *people*. The talking. The heat. The eye-contact.

The *everything* that is waiting to swallow him whale-in-the-belly whole the moment he steps a foot outside.

"*Shane*," Ilya pleads. He's stepping back into Shane's space, his hands finding Shane's arms. Squeezing, rubbing, up and down, up and down. An air of desperation sinking into his gentle. "You cannot go back out there. Look at me, look at me."

Tears prickle at Shane's eyes. Bitterness that blurs the edges of his vision world into a palette of watercolours.

"You need rest. You need a break," Ilya says. He sounds wounded. "You don't have to go back out there like this. You can't."

Shane hangs his head. His chin droops to his chest, weighed down by a collar of shame, but Ilya does not let him hide. Ilya does not let him hide, he does *not* let him hide. And instead, he is soft as silk as he cups Shane's face in both his hands, as he cradles his frowning cheeks so gently and brushes light thumbs over his crumpled-in eyebrows.

"There is nothing wrong with needing a break," he promises. He tilts Shane back up into him, out of the shadows and into the light. "You have done enough today."

Somewhere inside of Shane, a string snaps.

"Let me help you," Ilya says. "I want to help you."

Okay, Shane thinks. It feels like failure, but Ilya catches him. *Okay*.

Back in their hotel room, Ilya runs Shane a bath.

He is always careful when he slips Shane's clothes off his body. Piece by piece, layer by layer, shred by shred. As if Shane is worthy of tender handling, of sweetness. Worthy of softness.

Tonight, there is extra sweetness melted through the honey-tea of his touches. It makes guilt twist in Shane's chest, even as he takes Ilya's careful hand to step into the tub. He knows he should not need this. He should not need to be *coddled*. He should not need this kind of help, this kind of support. He should not fold easy into this care, like origami paper beneath Ilya's fingertips.

But *oh*, does the stress trickle right out of his bones the moment he settles in the warm, warm water. Tension slipping from him like the last of his earlier gasping breaths.

"Good?" Ilya asks. He sits on the edge of the tub. "All you need to do now is relax."

There is no pressure here. To force himself to speak, to barb-wire the words out. No demand that he reach into the part of his chest that has shuttered itself off. Here, he can just be. He can just be.

For Ilya, that's enough. To just be.

He tucks his legs into his chest and pillows his cheek on the curve of his knee.

He blinks up at Ilya, at the familiar baby-blue of his eyes, and thinks, *Oh*.

The freckle on Ilya's cheek. A gift from the sunset, where she rolled lazy across the horizon and kissed him with a speckle of gold. Shane looks at it and he thinks, *I have never known a love like this*.

He never even knew something like this could exist.

Before Ilya, Shane had never spent much time mulling over about love. Really, he had never even fully listened to a love song. The sappy melodies on the radio had never captured his attention. The ballads during the dip-and-kiss scenes of movies never piqued his interest. They all but slid off his back, water off a duck.

He never knew that a deep-down part of himself had been quietly waiting. Biding its patient time, like a breath holding itself in. And he never expected that it would find him on a random Tuesday night. That a song, *the* song, would drift through the grocery shop speakers and stumble him to a sharp *stop* in the middle of the fruit & vegetable aisle, with a net of apples in his hand.

Because how could Shane have *known*, before Ilya, what the point of love songs was? What they were even trying to say? Before there was a face to colour the crooning, a smile to curve the melody. Before the sugar of the lyrics was upended on a table and a name drawn through the granules.

All these love songs. All these *lyrics*. They had always been reaching for something that did not exist. Not in Shane.

He had no idea he was just waiting to hear the word *Ilya* for the singing to start.

And it's not like Shane now listens to every love song that he hears. Far from it. But there is times he catches himself pausing, these days. Dishes in his soapy hands in the kitchen when a

lyric from a television commercial catches his sleeve. Drumming his nails on the steering wheel as he waits for the traffic lights and a song on the radio spreads a shy smile across his face. Sitting in a chapel pew at his cousin's wedding and growing misty in the eyes when Ilya grins butter-bright at him above the choir's song.

He never knew this could exist. And it's his. It's his?

It is *his*.

The whole wide world has known about them for a year, now, but, Shane remembers the fear. It was not so long ago, just a few months, when the terror of it all still had him snared around the neck. Pinned flat to his knees in the dead of the nights, at an altar of shame. The taste of it still clings to the back of his tongue, some days. He wakes from a nightmare with horror in his throat... before he remembers that it is *safe* now. They are *safe* now. Him and Ilya. They are so, so safe now.

Maybe not from online gossip or trash-talk articles. Maybe not from sneaky pictures stolen of them in public, or that one freak who tried to dig through their rubbish bins for scraps to sell online. But in all the ways that matter most, in all the ways they feared would crumble but by some miracle did not, they are safe. They are *safe*.

They share a team. They share a home. They share rings. They share *family*.

"You are spinning again," Ilya whispers, now. "Your mind. Come back to me, *solnyshko*."

His fingers stroke over Shane's bottom lip. When his mouth opens, the tip of Ilya's thumb tucks just inside, resting against Shane's teeth. Shane hesitates not even a second before closing his mouth around it.

"Breathe," Ilya reminds. "In and out. In and out."

Shane nods. He pulls in a slow mouthful.

Breathing is easier around Ilya. Breathing is easier *with* Ilya. Breathing in general, in life, is now easier.

"Better?" Ilya asks. He tilts Shane's head side to side gently, playfully, before slipping his thumb free. "No more spinning. Stay here with me. Am I not entertaining enough?"

Better, Shane thinks. *Better*.

Before Shane came out to his parents, he had feared their reaction. He worried that they would be disgusted. Ashamed. Disturbed. He sat in that panic, many-a-night, on the cold tiles of his bathroom floor, with his head in his hands and his nails buried in his scalp. Battling back mental images of how disappointment would look on their faces.

But in all the crises Shane has ever had...

From his six-year-old *What if I'm the worst hockey player?* to his *I don't know how to be a role-model* at eighteen.

To his: *Mom, I am sorry. I tried really hard not to be, but I'm gay.*

He never had to consider, not even once, that his parents would feel nothing at all. That they might not care about it. About *him*. That there could be... nothing.

How terrifying it is to even imagine. That a void could exist there, yawning silently beneath the soles of his shoes. That he could chip back the layers of fear in his chest and hold out his soul to his parents only to be met with... emptiness. A hollow.

But for Ilya... For *Ilya*. That was it. That was it. His father, his brother... They hated him. They *hated* him. His performance on the ice, his sexuality. How *American* they felt he had become. His everything. Other than the money that they could let from his veins, the rows of pearls around their necks still tacky with Ilya's blood, they felt... nothing. They did not care. They never cared.

After his mother's death, nobody had cared enough to make Ilya feel whole. Nobody had taken his little hand and read him *I love you's* from storybook pages. Nobody had taught him how to sound-out the jokes printed on the back of cereal boxes.

Nobody had loved Ilya in the way that he loved *them*.

There is nothing. There is nothingness.

Who taught you, Shane wishes he could ask, *to love so gently?*

In such a cold house, he'd say, *where did you warm yourself?*

Because, now, when Ilya holds Shane. Now, when he wraps Shane in his arms. Now, when he caresses Shane. He touches as if his hands have only ever known softness, as if his fingers have only ever tenderness, and Shane fears he might *shake* apart beneath it.

Tonight, at the side of the tub, sitting on the rim, the porcelain must be biting hard into Ilya's thigh. But he stays there, anyways. Taking care of Shane. Always, always taking care of Shane. Even when he loses his words. Even when Shane needs him in ways he feels are shameful. Stupid. *Weak*.

Even when Shane feels like an all-too-full room and an all-too-empty casket at the same time.

He stays there.

"Pretty," he murmurs, too. His smile is soft, the dimple on his chin flickering. He's watching Shane like a painting he'll never grow sick of. "Even when you are thinking so hard it is making the squishy *shcheki*. The squishy cheeks. You are so pretty."

So easy, too, with his hand drifting back-and-forth beneath the surface of the bubbly water. He traces a slow, lazy pattern into Shane's arm until Shane's hand suddenly closes around his wrist. He brings Ilya's hand up to his face and presses the palm flat-open against his own cheek.

There, he looks into Ilya's eyes again and he thinks, *I will love you*.

I will love you now.

I will love you so much that you will never know nothingness again.

“Shane,” Ilya says, hesitantly. A curl of amusement, but shorn a little frail, a little thin. His eyes tiptoe across Shane’s face. “It is very... gooey? The way you are staring at me.”

Shane presses harder on Ilya’s fingers, until they spread wider on his cheek. He feels the warmth of Ilya’s love-lines melt against his skin, the flutter of his pulse humming.

He does not know how to put words to this, even if he could. There is no words for it, really. Maybe it’s for the best that his ability to speak has fallen away, because there is no tongue under the skies that could capture how very much Ilya *means* to him. There is no words to describe how when Shane wakes up in Ilya’s arms, it feels like he’s taking his first breath of life, over and over and over. The pillow is in his hair, the blankets are in his fingers, and Ilya is in him and in him and in him.

Shane has no words, but he has his body. He has how Ilya *knows* his body. He has how he can slide his free hand into Ilya’s hair now. He can draw Ilya in close. He can ease him in and down until there is nothing left between them but the hush of their breathing, and even that is joining together.

And when he brushes their lips together, when he strokes his palm gently over Ilya’s curls, he can whisper, wordless, with his kiss, with his warmth:

I love you. I love you. Thank you.

End Notes

thank you SO much for reading! i hope you enjoyed it <3

thank you from the bottom of my heart to wilder & kay for always supporting me and for listening to me babble about this fic for probably two months now!! <3

title also has basically nothing to do with the fic but i love that song by Elbow so much and i went through packs of lollipops writing this!!

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