say whatever you feel (be wherever you are)

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/80023491.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV), Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, Hayden Pike
Additional Tags:	Autistic Shane Hollander, Autism, Panic Attacks, Good Friend Hayden Pike, Anxious Shane Hollander, Angst, Depression, Headaches & Migraines, Pain, Depressed Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander Needs a Hug, Ilya Rozanov Needs A Hug, Protective Ilya Rozanov, Angst with a Happy Ending, Fluff
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-02-22 Words: 8,966 Chapters: 1/1

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by minnieishere

Summary

Ilya shifted him gently, until Shane was half across his chest, head tucked under Ilya's chin. The steady thump of his heartbeat under his ear was a metronome for Shane's still unsteady rhythm. Shane let his eyes close.

The thrumming in his chest was still there, quieter now but never totally gone. But recognising he wasn't alone, that Ilya would never leave him alone steeled his nerves.

or

five times Shane Hollander needs a little support, and one time Ilya Rozanov does too.

Notes

The Heated Rivalry boys own my heart. This is the result.

Full disclosure, I'm not autistic so any errors or corrections are very much welcome. Please check the tags, nothing is super graphic but better to be safe than sorry.

Kudos and and comments as always appreciated!

- Minnie

See the end of the work for more notes

i.

Shane supposed it was inevitable. Between training, games, and post-match interviews, he was exhausted and overworked, though eager to lead Montreal to victory again. He'd hardly had time to talk to Ilya over the past few games, and they hadn't even been in the same city for over a week. Though the absence of his presence always made Shane uneasy, he hadn't had time to linger on the thought.

He woke in Washington on the day of their first playoff game, and instinctively knew it was a bad day. Hayden was, predictably, still snoring, and a quick peek behind the curtain told Shane it was still early. The sun hadn't risen yet, and Shane took this as permission to move slowly for what felt like the first time in weeks.

Slipping free of the irritating sheets and quietly moving to the bathroom, Shane changed into his track pants and a hoodie; an outfit reserved for days like this, where his usual athletic wear would make his skin crawl. Uncomfortable, and, before long, completely unbearable.

By the time Shane returned to the main room and placed his carefully folded pyjamas under his pillow, Hayden was awake. A glance in his direction told him he was talking to Jackie and the kids. Shane mustered the energy for a quick hello, before begging off to the couch and putting his headphones over his ears.

In the quiet, unmoving hotel room, he convinced himself he could manage this. Steady himself enough to play well, to give the team the motivation they needed and to be the role model he was expected to be. He just needed five minutes to himself, and, thankfully, with their game not starting until that evening, he had just that.

He must've fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew, Hayden was gently tapping his shoulder, jingling the keys to the loan car in front of his case. Shane stood slowly and moved to start packing his gym bag, only to realise it was sitting by the door, ready to go.

"Why did you?" Shane asked.

Hayden just shook his head, smirking. "We need you on your A game today," he replied simply, and Shane made a mental note to be extra nice to his best friend for the next couple of weeks.

The car ride was about half an hour, and Shane managed quiet conversation with Hayden. His oldest, Shane couldn't for the life of him remember her name, was about to start school, and Hayden had spent the last few weeks helping Jackie buy stationery for her, and helping her come to terms with the fact that his kids were growing up, and there was nothing they could do to stop it. Neither of them was taking it so well, Shane gathered.

Thankfully, Shane wasn't expected to add much to the conversation, getting by with quiet hums of agreements, and comments agreeing with Hayden's obvious love of his family.

Going through the motions served him from there. Shane changed methodically into his uniform, gave the team a variation of the speech he'd given at the Metro's last playoff game, worked through the same warmup they'd completed every game that season, and then sat silently in locker room.

Any idiosyncrasy he couldn't cover, he made up for by claiming it as an athlete's ritual. He smiled quietly at the ribs his teammates gave him, grinned at a comment when he retied his skates for the third time, even as he was unable to stand the way the laces stretched over his feet.

Shane was playing as expected. Meeting his marks and moving the puck to positions his team could use, acting as he should – as a captain should. It was only when they scored their first goal, the crowd going wild in support of the beloved Metros did Shane start to realise he may not be able to keep it together until the final buzzer.

The noise ricocheted like bullets directly to his head, and he was instantly and agonisingly aware of his each and every sensation. The tag in his jersey was digging into his neck – his only shirt without the tags cut out, less an overbearing teammate wonder why he'd gone to the effort – the uneven pull of his laces, the fluorescent lights above the rink stabbing daggers off the ice.

It took all Shane's energy to match his opponents speed, unable even to think of trying for the puck and functioning largely on autopilot. When the whistle finally blew, Shane bolted for the locker-room, slamming the door behind him and collapsing onto the cold tile the instant he was out of sight.

The artificial light of the bathroom was flickering, a stuttering pulse that proved the last straw for Shane. He hurled his helmet to the floor, causing him to flinch hard against the noise. He clawed at his hair, fingers twisting frantically, tugging aggressively and unaware. A low keening whine escaped his throat, wordless as he rocked back and forth forehead pressed hard against his drawn-up knees, trying to squeeze the world into something smaller, quieter and more manageable for his overwhelmed brain.

Everything was too much, no thoughts except for an urgent need to make it stopped. He pressed his palms flat over his ears, rocking harder, the motion incessant and desperate.

He didn't hear the door open, didn't hear Hayden call his name, soft and careful. Didn't feel the stall door open where he'd failed to lock it. Hayden's voice only added another layer to the pounding in Shane's skull, the words blurring into indistinct noise thoroughly overwhelming him.

Eventually, Hayden saying Lily's name cut through the noise, and Shane forced his eyes open just enough. Hayden held out his phone, screen lit. From the speaker came Ilya's voice, tinny and thin but unmistakably his, though Shane couldn't parse actual words. Couldn't form a reply, could barely grip the phone through his gloved hands. But the sound of Ilya's voice promised to comfort, as Ilya always would.

Hayden, reading the stark change, the private moment he'd created and then intruded on, gave them space. He closed the stall door, quietly, then settled on the edge of the sinks

outside. Casual, but on guard. He wouldn't let anyone else barge in and see Shane like this. Raw and unravelled and, Hayden knew, when he came back to himself, ashamed.

"Shane, talk to me." Ilya repeated through the phone, and Shane managed a single phrase through gritted teeth.

"Too much."

"Is okay, you are okay." Ilya tried, and Shane would've laughed if it didn't seem so unlikely, so impossible.

"Too much." He said again, unable to form another thought through the chaos. He'd spent his whole life avoiding this situation, knowing when he was coming up to his limit, when he had past it and needed to remove himself from the situation. And now here he was, falling apart in front of a crowd of thousands.

"Is okay, Shane. Take your time." Ilya said down the line in a whisper, matching the volume Shane could tolerate, avoiding the sharp edges that would grate further over his sensitive ears.

Shane's not sure how long they stayed like that, Ilya murmuring reassurances while Shane did his best to settle himself, doing what he could to calm his agonised nervous system. Eventually his tears slowed, and he wiped his face with his sleeve. His foot had gone numb from the cramped position, pins and needles firing as he stood.

Promising to call Ilya as soon as he got home, Shane ended the call. On unsteady legs he stood, steeled himself against the cold wall and stepped – he would think – out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Hayden met his eyes immediately; Shane couldn't help but look away from his concern.

"I don't think I can play." He admits quietly, devasted but knowing he'd be a liability on the ice, slow distracted and one wrong move away from falling off the deep end. Again.

"Okay." Hayden says simply, already shifting into practical mode. "Sit this one out." He nods to himself. "Take a second, man." Hayden adds, nodding toward the mirror. A glance at himself reveals bloodshot eyes, flushed cheeks and hair wildly askew. Allowing himself a long, deliberate breath he nods, following Hayden back to the bench.

It seemed obvious to Shane that the team had been briefed, judging by the way no one stared nor asked. Instead, they gave him space. Quiet nods and averted eyes, the end of the bench left empty for him. Shane sank into it, focusing on the cold, predictable rhythm of the rink.

Shane was barely tracking the score in a game, he knew somewhere deep down, was important, Hayden leaned over the boards.

"When this is all over." He said, lowly enough for only Shane to hear. "you're explaining why Boston Lily is Ilya fucking Rozanov." He finished, winking and skating away. Shane rolled his eyes, somehow feeling better already.

ii.

He could feel it the moment he woke, a low, constant thrumming deep in his chest. Not pain but a familiar tension, making him feel restless and unsure. Shane was well acquainted with the feeling, had been since his teenage years.

They'd been at the cottage nearly a week, no practice, no travel no games. Just Ilya and Shane. And Shane was truly and genuinely happy. He could touch Ilya without creeping around, could kiss him whenever he wanted, sink into the quiet intimacies of a relationship that went far beyond sex.

Six days in, the place smelled faintly of woodsmoke and fresh linens. Outside, the lake shimmered under the Canadian sun, and everything was there for the taking. No buzzing phone alerts, no eagerly watching eyes. No friendly but overwhelming love from friends and fans alike.

That morning Ilya had woken first, unusual for him. Shane had found him in the kitchen, barefoot, stirring oatmeal on the stove humming low and off-key in Russian. Shane paused in the doorway, just watching the easy way Ilya moved in his own skin.

When Ilya turned and caught his eye, he flashed that crooked grin that always made Shane's stomach flip. "Morning, sleepy."

Shane crossed the room, slid behind Ilya and pressed a gentle kiss behind his ear. Ilya leaned back into him like it was the most natural thing in the world. For once, it felt like it was.

Shane wasn't about to ruin it by mentioning this problem, this issue which since he was a child had taken his breath away. In adulthood he'd learned to shove it aside, save it for when he had the energy or privacy to deal with it. To manage.

Right now, with sunlight casting a glow off Ilya's blond curls, and no real trouble in sight, it wasn't convenient. Not even close. So, Shane pushed it down. Instead, he smiled at Ilya, slow and deliberate in the way he knew drove him crazy.

"We've got some time before lunch," Shane murmured.

The rest could be left unsaid.

They spent the afternoon the way they had the previous few, slow and unhurried. A walk along the shore. Hands brushing together then intertwining. Sandwiches and apples on the porch, Ilya stealing coy bites from Shane's plate. An afternoon nap in tangled sheets that still carried their scent.

By the evening the sky had softened to pink and golds, and the air carried the first real biting cold of autumn. Shane felt lighter than he had in months, felt safe with Ilya, in the private universe they'd carved out together.

It was later that night that the twinge returned. They were sprawled across the couch, phones in hand, comfortable in silence after a long day together, in every knowable way. Shane was still managing it, though he could feel the anxiety settling deeper in his chest. Knew he couldn't push it away much longer but wasn't ready to let it ruin the night. Just a few more hours of peace with Ilya. It could wait till tomorrow, where he'd deal with it, inevitably.

Ilya's legs were thrown over Shane's lap, socked feet resting against his thigh. Shane traced absent circles over his legs, scrolling through team chats and highlight reels on autopilot. Every so often Ilya would huff a laugh, tilt the phone so Shane could see, a dumb mean or a rook wiping out in practice. Shane smiled each time, but it was growing thin. His anxiety was creeping back in, heavier now, pressing against his ribs and slowly compressing. He shifted some, tried to focus on the warmth of Ilya's body against his side, the steady rise and fall of his breathing. One more hour, he could hold it together for one more hour. Then take a hot shower, calm himself down.

And then he saw it.

A simple fan post suggesting he and Ilya might be together.

They can't know, the rational part of his brain screamed. It was rapidly being drowned out.

They're going to crash through the door any minute, risk Ilya's life. Ruin both their careers. Take away everything Shane loves.

Images flash unbidden behind his eyes. Cameras flashing from across the street, headlines screaming their names, teammates turning away in locker rooms, sponsors pulling contracts. Ilya's career – everything they'd worked for – gone in a single leaked photo.

He feels like he's taken a knock to the stomach. He tries desperately to catch his breath, but it's gone.

Vaguely he registered sitting up. His hands shaking violently. His phone slipping through his fingers. Ilya staring at him, concern sharpening his features.

Everything else is drowned out by the rush of blood in his ears. His heart is pounding and he's pretty sure he's crying. His vision tunnelled. Edges dark and fuzzy. Couldn't do anything beyond the panic.

The room tilted. The couch felt rough against his skin, abrasive. His fingers tingled, numb and cold. Sweat was prickling along his hairline even as a chill ran through him. He was floating – detached from his own body yet trapped inside it. His chest was burning. Lungs refusing to fill. He was going to pass out. Or throw up. Or both.

Ilya said something. He can't make words out over the screaming of his anxiety.

Then Ilya's hands were on his, warm and steady, gripping his trembling fingers. Shane could see himself unravelling, shaking, gasping, coming apart completely.

"They're gonna find out." He managed, the words ragged and breathless.

He’s not sure what Ilya says in response. Still couldn’t hear anything. Pretty sure he was dying. He sees Ilya before he hears him. Though eventually his accent, thick and slow cuts through the haze.

“Copy me.”

Shane watched Ilya breathe in slow, exaggerated. Chest rising, holding, falling. Shane tried. Failed. Air caught in his throat.

“Come on babe, you can.” Ilya says, and Shane is trying, forcing his body to cooperate even as his lungs and brain scream. They stay like that, Shane unable at first to mimic Ilya, to return his breathing to even, deep strokes.

He tries, each time the air caught in his throat like broken glass. Ilya didn’t rush him. Just kept breathing, slow and loud enough to follow, thumbs rubbing stead circles over Shane’s knuckles. Shane’s world narrowed to that rhythm, in through his nose, out through his mouth. In. Out. In. Out.

The roaring in his ears begins to fade, replaced by the soft crackle of the dying fire, the faint lap of water in the lake. His shoulders, still bunched to his ears, start to drop. Tears keep coming, hot but silent now.

Eventually he settled enough, still nervous an unsure, but able to weather the storm. He feels safe by Ilya’s side, the man protective and safe. He smells familiar to Shane, brings him back down to earth and makes him feel grounded.

His anxiety lingered, a low hum that never really left. And now it wasn’t hidden anymore.

He leaned into the silence; head pressed safely in the crook of Ilya’s neck. Comfortable and safe in the embrace of his boyfriend.

“We have to talk about this.” Ilya whispered against his ear.

“Is okay, Shane. I just want to know how to help.” His voice so soft, so genuine, it cracked something open. Fresh tears slipped free.

Haltingly, he tells Ilya of when he was a kid, and it would all get too much on the ice. How his dad would have to hold his hands and sit in the car for hours, calming him down. One game in particular, a playoff he thinks, comes to mind. When he was barely twelve. The buzzer had sounded and the noise of the crowd had pressed in until he couldn’t breathe. His dad had pulled him from the bench, sat with him in the parking lot long after everyone had left. Breathing slowly and calmly until the shaking stopped.

He tells him about when he was a teenager, he’d excuse himself from parties, team celebrations, because his anxiety was tickling his throat and making him unsure how long it would be until it exploded again. He’d lock himself in bathroom stalls or slip out back doors, pretending he needed air, counting tiles on ceilings until the wave of nauseous panic passed.

How he'd learnt, as an adult to manage it. How it crept up over nothing and then, before he knew it, he was a sobbing mess in his boyfriend's arms.

Ilya listened quietly, nodding without judgement and looking deep into his eyes. Every so often he squeezed Shane's hand or brushed a thumb across his cheek, wiping away tears gently and without comment.

"And whole time." He says, "you deal with this yourself?" He asks. Shane grimaced a little at the question. Aside from his parents, he's never let anyone see this part of him.

"Yeah." He admitted after a moment, a little afraid to meet Ilya's concerned eyes.

"That changes now." Ilya says immediately. "When you feel bad. Like this. You tell me, straight away." Shane gives a half-hearted nod.

"Seriously. I will help. I want to help. But you must talk to me." He says, and Shane looks at him properly. Sees that his is serious, and that his love for Shane has not decreased as he assumed it would.

He searched his face for a hint of pity or disappointment. Instead finds the beautiful man who'd held him through the worst of it without flinching. Who has been the only one beside family who stuck around.

Shane nodded again, grateful to this beautiful man he gets to call his, aware of his luck even under his still settling anxiety.

"I'm tired." He grumbled into Ilya's Boston Raiders shirt.

"Is okay." Ilya responds instantly. "Sleep," he says, feels him running strong, nimble fingers through his hair.

Ilya shifted him gently, until Shane was half across his chest, head tucked under Ilya's chin. The steady thump of his heartbeat under his ear was a metronome for Shane's still unsteady rhythm. Shane let his eyes close. The thrumming in his chest was still there, quieter now but never totally gone. But recognising he wasn't alone, that Ilya would never leave him alone steeled his nerves.

For the first time in years, it felt like enough.

iii.

It's Boston's first game of the season against the Montreal Metro's and fans are eager to see Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander face off once again. For Rozanov, it's a chance to prove himself on home ice, for Hollander, an opportunity to amend the Raiders fate last season. Indeed, both seem eager to face up and demonstrate their team's capacity in this highly anticipated opening game.

Shane wouldn't say he was nervous, per se, to play against Ilya again. Indeed, he was eager to prove himself as a hockey player, and more eager to face Ilya. He never felt more himself on the ice than when playing against him. Ilya could match and predict his moves like no one else in the league.

Every time Shane glances across the ice and catches Ilya's eyes, bright and focused, something electric sparks in his chest. Fear mixed with affection, forming a certainty that no one will ever push him this hard or know him this completely.

The first period ends with Shane scoring a goal on the siren, tying the game at one-all, a success at the end of the period. He lets the team's cheers wash over him, Hayden slapping a friendly hand across his back as they slide off the ice into the locker rooms.

At the best of times, Shane is a neurotic player. He spends most of the eighteen-minute intermission removing his helmet, using the bathroom, and drinking half his water bottle. He talks to the team, offers encouragement when needed, celebrates small wins, and generally keeps spirits high.

The last thing he does before the end of the intermission is retie his skates, the laces sitting pretty over the top of his feet. Today he must mistime his routine, because the warning sirens blare over the speakers as he's tightening the left one.

He finishes it quickly, stands, skates effortlessly to the lineup then back onto the ice; invigorated, excited, even, to prove what the Metros are made of. To start the season with a bang. The duality of the moment isn't lost on him.

They're playing fast, Ilya and Shane driving the moment. It's a pace Shane isn't entirely comfortable with but knows Ilya thrives on. The tempo suits his style perfectly, quick decisions, constant motion, no room for hesitation. Shane finds it stressful, feels perpetually on edge and a half-step behind. He can't quite slow things down.

Every time Ilya blows past him on a rush, Shane feels the familiar mix of frustration and admiration twist in his gut. This is what they do. Push harder, move faster, force each other to be better. Tonight, it's exhilarating and exhausting at once. He wants to match Ilya stride for stride, wants to prove he can keep up, but he's faltering ever so slightly.

He knows it doesn't show, has seen countless game tapes where he looks as composed and sure as he always is. The worry is solely internal. Still, he plays his best hockey when the game slows just enough for him to think.

It happens rapidly and without warning. One moment, Shane is lining up the puck to send to Hayden, the next he's barrelling into the boards. All the air is knocked out of him instantaneously. He trips over his own skate, left lace coming undone. Tries to catch himself but can't on the slick ice. Shoulder slams the boards. Pain ricochets through his body. He collapses to the ice.

The impact is a white, hot explosion that steals every coherent thought. For a split second the rink vanishes, replaced by blinding light and stars covering his vision. He tastes blood, must've bitten his tongue. His left arm hangs useless, numb then burning, fingers twitching

uselessly against the cold. He tries to roll, to move, but the pain holds him under. His heart hammers wildly, sending spikes down his arm. Somewhere distant he registers the whistle blowing, skates scraping toward him, but the world narrows to the fire in his shoulder and the desperate, shallow gasps he can't turn into real breaths.

In the back of his mind, he knows people are watching. That he should signify he's okay. But his shoulder radiates agony, and he still can't draw a full breath. He stays down, lets the medics come to him.

"I'm okay." He manages through gritted teeth, uninjured hand clamping his shoulder. "Dislocated?" He suggests, voice trembling from the pain.

"That seems likely, Shane." The medic's tone is calm. Shane isn't sure how the man knows his name; everything is drowned out by the throbbing.

"We're going to give you something for the pain, then get you off the ice." They remind him he hasn't moved, that he's blocking play. He searches for Ilya's face, but his vision blurs, tears filling his eyes.

Standing sends fresh waves of excruciating pain through Shane's shoulder. He can't stifle a low, pained groan. The medic's concerned glance tells him it wasn't as quiet as he thought. He doesn't remember the walk off the ice – must black out a little. The next thing he knows he's on a bench in the tunnel. A doctor, he assumes, is speaking quietly.

Shane's trying to listen, but a wave of nausea threatens to overwhelm him, and he has to say something.

"Gonna… sick." He heaves over the side of the bench, bitter bile leaving an aftertaste in his mouth.

When he looks up, embarrassed, he's met with Ilya's bright blue eyes, brow furrowed in concern.

"Is he okay?" He hears, Ilya's familiar cadence catching on the last word.

"We're going to have to ask you to stay back, Mr Rozanov." The medic says, but Shane's brain is sluggish, overwhelmed by pain even despite the drugs.

"Stay." He slurs. Ilya is at his side in an instant. Shane grips his hand, oblivious to the looks from the Metro's staff. "I need you," he whispers. Later, he'll realise the pain meds lowered his inhibitions. In the moment, all he feels is raw gratitude. Ilya is here, solid and close against his own vulnerability.

"Shane. We're going to reset your shoulder now, okay?" They ask, and he nods. Ilya takes a step back, and Shane lets out an involuntary whine. "Even with the meds, this will hurt, okay Shane?" The medic adds, and Shane nods, putting on a mask of indifference through his fear.

There's no further warning. Pain whites out his vision in an instant. He screams, a high weak sound that embarrasses him even as it escapes. After a few moments the sharp edge dulls; he

starts to feel better.

“I want,” he slurs, but he’s not sure what he means and when Ilya’s grip returns to Shane’s he finds that nothing else particularly matters.

“We’ll get imaging and PT tomorrow, Shane. For now, keep it in the sling, get some sleep.” The medic instructs. He makes no indication that he’s heard them, grateful that Ilya is there, taking in the information where Shane does not.

“You go play?” He addresses Ilya vaguely. “They’re fine without me.” Ilya responds. “Metro’s best player off the ice.” Shane thinks he should laugh, but the moment slips away too fast.

“Okay, I take you home.” Ilya says, and Shane’s not sure if it’s his tone or his words, but any potential argument is silenced.

“Is this a jeep?” He asks. Ilya huffs out a laugh.

“You’re high.” Ilya replies. He can’t find words, so he lets the silence hang.

“We go to apartment; you go sleep so you play good hockey.” Ilya says. Shane hums his agreement, sleep sounds perfect.

Time blurs. He’s in the jeep, then guided through the elevator, through the door to his apartment. Ilya holds him steady against the wall. Shane leans in to kiss him, the motion familiar, safe.

Ilya turns away. “Not right now.” He says, though the words come out clipped and frustrated. “Sleep.” He takes Shane’s hand and leads him to the bedroom.

“You will feel better in morning.” Ilya says, carefully pulling a soft cotton shirt over Shane’s injured shoulder. Shane feels warm and protected by his boyfriend.

Before he knows it, he’s alone under the covers. The weight is comforting. In the living room the TV murmurs with the game’s final minutes. Somewhere in the haze he wonders about tomorrow’s headlines. They’ll question why Rozanov left early. Why he left with Hollander. Why the Raiders captain looked more wrecked than the injured Metros star. The speculation will be relentless.

But the worry doesn’t stick. Ilya’s scent, sweat from the game mixed with his cologne clings to the pillow, his shirt, the sheets. Shane breathes it in. The pain feels distant now, overshadowed by love. Ilya chose him over the game. This truth settles deep, warm and steady in his chest.

Before Shane knows it, he’s asleep.

iv.

He understands that this is part of the job. Engaging supporters, answering journalists' questions and delivering the team message are all part of playing the game he loves so much.

Once he became captain of the Metro's, this role grew more intense. Instead of just a machine on the ice Shane was expected to be a guiding light evidencing the team's success. In the locker room, in training sessions with his teammates he could do this no problem. Knew the intricacies of the ice and of every player, knew how to win.

With flashing cameras and screaming fans, he became more unsure. Not of hockey, that was steady, but of himself. Of his ability to answer questions while his senses were assaulted by lights and bellowing voices.

Over the years he'd learned to manage. He compartmentalised the assault, fought against the fluorescent glare and microphone reverb, learned to tune in when spoken to. Of course it wasn't foolproof. More than once he'd excused himself, retreated to a bathroom, eyes shut, taking deep, steadying breath.

This system, he knew, wasn't going to work forever. It was only a matter of time before everything came crashing down.

It's a game close to the end of the season, important to both the Metros' and Raiders' playoff hope. Shane is facing off against Ilya, and the two prove themselves fantastic players.

The game ends in the blink of an eye. Ilya scores on the siren, clinching the playoffs for the Raiders and leaving the Metros in disappointment. Shane watches his team leave the ice, quiet and despondent. He turns to the cameras, where Ilya is already lined up, gesturing for Shane to join. A friendly post-game interview between rivals. Ilya ecstatic. Shane gutted.

It overwhelms him quickly. The first thing he notices is the sweat cooling his hairline. It didn't bother him during play, but now, in the still air, it irritates. Flashing cameras add to the pressure in his system, reporters' overlapping voices compound the issue.

He tries to hold the pieces together, focus on the report's face, the questions and his answers. But It's layering too fast. Voices overlap into white noise. His skin prickles, too aware of jersey fabric, of air on his neck. He knows the signs, the slow drag, the fog creeping in at the edges of thought. He's here before, and he's pretty sure he can get through the interview get to safety and privacy.

Shane's answering a question about the team's prospects for next season when he feels himself start to drift. In the blink of an eye, he goes from managing to not. Every sensation becomes a vicious affront.

Ilya must sense it, because a hand reaches the small of his back. Private and hidden, no one will see. But the contact, gentle as it is, is too much. Another input his brain can't process. It registers as static, overwhelming where it was meant to be grounding. Words keep coming out of his mouth, strung together in a way that's meaningless even to him. He's running on empty and he knows it.

Then it all just leaves. He's not surprised, exactly, has been through these enough times, trapped in his brain and body on more occasions than he can count.

Still, it always sneaks up. one moment he's handling it, the next he's floating. Whatever he was saying is gone, as is any thoughts about the game, any potential disappointment.

He's standing before the press. Then there's a gap. Nothingness where he's not sure he's present in the world. Body upright but otherwise empty. He's not panicking, he's completely blank. Everything keeps moving around him. Voices, flashes, motion. But it's distant and muffled. He's inside himself, watching it occurs through fogged glass. Time dissolves. He can't move, can't speak, can't decide anything. His system chooses nothing.

Then he's sitting in the locker room. He's not sure how he got there. The nothingness fuzzes the edges. He snaps back into Ilya's blue eyes. He can't read the concern behind them, can barely see at all. Any emotion or concern is further than he can grasp.

Ilya is talking to him. He can't hear him, can't see his lips moving. He just knows somewhere in the far back of his mind that Ilya must be. He's trying to pull himself back. To feel anything beyond how overwhelmed he is, to understand anything past his unfocused eyes.

The problem is, he'll recognise only later, that all the therapy, all the strategies to snap out of it, to bring himself back to reality, don't work when he's like this. They're eternally outside his grasp.

He's not sure how much time passes. Could be seconds, minutes, hours. He's not sure if they're alone or if people are flowing freely. It is a locker room, after all. He still can't hear anything properly. Everything had, in an instant become too much, his senses so assaulted and his brain working on overdrive.

It's ironic, really. When his ears are being shot with bullets, eyes squinting in the harsh artificial light, heart pounding from the exercise and the loss, it all just stops.

Suddenly he's just a body, with no control or capability to respond. He'll never really understand it. Knows it's a symptom, knows he's not the only one to experience this. Somewhere in the back of his mind the word shutdown appears. That's what's happening to him. It's a perfect descriptor, really. His body is completely shut down, his brain no longer cooperating, though he doesn't know what he'd want it to do.

Everything is beyond him, and it's all he can do to just sit.

Eventually, he hears Ilya's voice. The words are still unattainable, but his deep, Russian timbre breaks through like a low, steady hum. He looks everywhere but at him, concerned that any further stimulation will send him back to nothing. He's doesn't like the feeling, but he's not sure why. He'll consider it later, when he's back walking on earth.

"You are okay, Shane." Is the first sentence he hears in its totality. He nods once, careful not to move his head too much, add to much noise to his brain.

“Home.” He manages, suddenly desperate to get out of here, to get to somewhere private and safe. The fact that they’re in Boston doesn’t occur to him. He just wants to go home.

“Can I touch you?” Ilya asks in response, and Shane can’t believe he’s thinking about sex right now. “I mean, to get to car.” Ilya adds hastily, obviously reading Shane’s mind. The thought of more sensation on his body makes him shiver. He stands, steps away from Ilya as a response.

He’s grateful, in that moment, that Ilya knows him so intimately. That this simple action is enough for Ilya to understand. He’s walking to the car; Shane’s bag is slung over Ilya’s shoulder. All he has to do is focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

Even this is a challenge for him. Ilya asks him a couple of questions, he can understand generally what he’s saying but can’t seem to find any answers. Thankfully, Ilya doesn’t press.

They’re driving slowly, and Shane is focused on the low rumbling of the car. The noise simple and consistent. “I’m sorry.” He mumbles. He thinks he hears a laugh.

“You were, overdone?” He hears Ilya respond. “Overwhelmed.”

“Yes. Is okay. Happens.” Ilya says simply. They’re interlinked in this moment. Shane barely needs to think, and Ilya knows his thoughts, knows exactly how to help.

Shane lets them fall back into the easy silence.

They’re pulling into the driveway when he forces the words past his lips.

“it’s more than just overwhelmed.” He starts, unsure of what to say next. He’s never practiced this conversation, never thought he’d need it, never thought he’d admit to anyone something that could be construed as weakness. He knows that it is not. He also knows that he plays hockey. And that people can be mean.

“I’m autistic.” He says it like ripping off a Band-Aid. He hears Ilya say the word under his breath, once, twice. Understanding it like a foreign language. Shane knows, for the first time, how that might feel.

“And I love you. Both facts. Neither particularly relevant to hockey. And you play the best hockey.” He says simply. Shane could cry with how grateful he is. How relieved he is that this doesn’t change anything for Ilya, doesn’t make him appear less worthy.

“I love you too.” He mumbles but knows that Ilya hears him.

“In the morning, you teach me how to help you.” Ilya says. Shane nods, watching the key slip into the door of Ilya’s apartment.

“For now, you shower. I cook.” This makes Shane look up, pull his lips into a half smile. “You can’t cook.” He says softly. “We’ll order in.” Ilya replies effortlessly.

Shane walks into the bathroom, hockey game well and truly forgotten. The door clicks shut behind him and for the first time in hours the world feels small enough to breathe in. He stands under the spray, lets the water drown out the last echoes of noise. Ilya is in the kitchen, looking after Shane.

He closes his eyes, revelling in the silence.

v.

It settles behind his eyes, unbidden and unwanted. He's halfway through the familiar track around his house, eager to keep up his fitness in the off season. This is when the first flashes hit, bright zigzags at the edges of his vision. Annoying, but manageable. He keeps running.

By the time he gets home, it's settled into a deep throbbing weight over his left eye, sensitive and painful. Unlocking the door, Shane pours himself a glass of water and takes two ibuprofens. He hopes they'll be enough to reduce the pain, though he knows this is unlikely. He's done this before, pushed through and waited out the pain. He is a well-rehearsed machine.

He drops onto the couch. The television murmurs news he doesn't register. Minutes or maybe hours pass in dull increments until the screen's flicker turns into knives against his skin. He fumbles the remote, kills the sound, curls onto his side.

In the back of his mind, he's aware he's having a migraine – used to get them occasionally when he was a teenager. He'd hoped they'd left him behind with age, but the deep ache he's experiencing now suggests otherwise. But he'll manage, he thinks, squirming some on the couch.

He presses his palms into his temples, trying to squeeze the feeling smaller. Every small sound – his own breathing, the distant hum of the fridge, lands like a hammer. He curls tighter, knees to chest, willing his body to disappear. The world shrinks to the pulse behind his eye, each beat squeezing through to his brain, an unwelcome reminder he is still alive. It's not sharp anymore, instead heavy, pressing inward and making every thought feel like wading through mud.

Shane shifts on the couch, trying to find a comfortable position, before resigning himself to the discomfort. He oscillates between managing the pain and being overwhelmed by it. Moves between telling himself it's just a headache and feeling it swallow his whole world.

He's grateful for the silence of the room, though angry that he hadn't thought to close the blinds, the sunlight streaming in is a vicious affront. Rolling over onto his stomach and covering his eyes helps a little, but the bright light of the room doesn't completely dissipate.

Without warning, waves of nausea overtake Shane. He tries to breathe deeply, settle his stomach and mind simultaneously. It's not very effective, but a few minutes convince him he's not going to be sick. It just feels like he is.

And then his phone rings. The noise, generally manageable, shoots like bullets to his head. He groans loudly, blindly grabbing the phone and hanging it up, relief at the noise stopping making him feel better for a moment.

The pain doesn't seem to be on the same page, though remaining stubbornly and aggressively over his head. Pain radiating through his entire body.

He presses his face into the cushion, muffling quiet whimpers. The fabric smells faintly of laundry and sweats, ordinary yet overwhelming. His skin is hypersensitive, every shift like sandpaper. He stops moving entirely, lying as still as possible, breathing shallow to keep the nausea at bay.

He loses time. Drifts. Somewhere in the fog he registers quiet, involuntary whimpers slipping out of him. He doesn't bother trying to stop them.

It's probably about an hour later when he hears the door squeak open. The sudden addition of noise to the otherwise silent room causes him to let out a groan, and he doesn't have the wherewithal to wonder who it is, how they got in.

"Shane?" Ilyas accent familiar and for once thoroughly unwanted.

He manages a hum of affirmation, not moving from his position. When he opens his eyes, Ilya is standing over him, looking concerned.

"You hung up phone. You sick?" Ilya questions bluntly.

" 'S too loud." Shane rasps. Ilya's eyes widen a little in surprise. Without further questioning, he moves to the blinds, pulling them shut.

Shane could cry in relief. "Migraine." He gets out through gritted teeth.

"Mike grain?" Ilya says confused. "I do not know this word."

"Headache." Shane says, hoping he won't be expected to speak anymore. Ilya seems to jump into action at this word.

Suddenly the radio, which he could hear buzzing faintly in the other room is shut down, the blinds shut fully and the door closed, any light from the hallway cut off from the living room.

When he dares open his eyes again, Ilya is kneeling before him, a small glass of water in hand. "Drink if you can." He says in a low whisper, having obviously caught on to Shane's sensitive ears.

Shane tries. The first sip hits his stomach like a stone, the second no better. But he forces them down anyway.

It's comforting, Shane thinks. Though Ilya isn't actively helping him, his presence makes him feel just a little bit better.

He drifts in and out, the pain ebbing and flowing but never quite receding. Ilya stays still, a warm weight reminding Shane of his presence. Every so often he feels the faint brush of Ilya's fingers against ankles, hovering cautiously in the silence of Shane's argumentative immune system.

He must fall asleep, because the next thing he knows his body is heaving without his position. Leaning over the couch, he throws up water and bile, though he'd struggled to keep food down for long enough that his stomach is empty.

His head rebels at the sudden movement, and in tandem with his upset stomach he feels utterly miserable. Ilya is at his side in an instant.

"Is okay Shane, let it out." He says, voice gravelly and low. Shane groans helplessly, gripping tightly Ilya's outstretched hand. He tries not to, but can't help throwing up again, whining tightly under his breath.

Ilya's hand moves comforting circles across his back. Shane feels tears running down his face, though he's not aware of crying.

"How long like this?" Ilya asks. "What's the time?" He asks in response, the world having given way to the pain.

"10 11 o'clock" He hears, Ilya's voice rolling the words. He feels but does not see Ilya tense. "Since 8 this morning." Shane reluctantly admits.

"That's too long, we go doctor." Ilya says, gently manhandling Shane, who groans against his will at the movement.

Standing must make him black out a little, because his vision fuzzies at the edges and he lets out a yelp against his will.

The next half hour pass in a haze of pain and tense concern. The first full thought Shane has after leaving his house is that he's in a hospital bed, a drip in his arm, and that he feels better.

Not good, which still feels a way off, but a little better. The lights hurt less, his brain pushing against his skull a little less, and his senses facing less assault.

"Thank you," he slurs in Ilya's direction. The blonde man nods, concern still painting his features. "You should've said something earlier." He says, not angry but not happy either.

"I will next time." Shane promises, but they both know he's lying. That he'll push through every emotion, every pain himself until he physically can't anymore.

They're looking into each other's eyes, emotion and love not bothering to hide behind them. "I'll be here every time," Ilya whispers quietly, holding Shane's hand from the uncomfortable hospital seat.

Shane squeezes back weakly, the IV line tugging at his arm. The hospital room is dim, monitors beeping softly in the background. Shane feels a little ridiculous, letting a simple headache incapacitate him this much.

Ilya's thumb traces slow circles over his knuckles, in rhythm with Shane's slowing heartrate.

Shane leans over, kisses him softly. Just for a second, but it's enough to make him feel better again. His head is still hurting, but for the first time in a while, it hurts a little less.

+1.

The summer has brought with it opportunity for Shane and Ilya to spend significant time together. Though the sneaking around is exciting, Ilya is grateful to be with Shane not just for sex but for intimate, domestic moments.

The cottage is beautiful over the summer. Sun beams through the countless windows, and the natural beauty is starting to grow on Ilya, who initially flinched away from the Canadian wildlife.

It makes no sense then, that he's feeling so down. He knows that it doesn't have that depression is genetic and that it can strike him for no reason at all. But he'd been managing so well, the last couple of years. Dutifully taken his medication and managed his days, speaking consistently to Galina.

And yet, in the late hours of the morning, Shane long having vacated the bed, Ilya is struggling to work up the energy to move. He's comfortable, and really, what would he be getting up for anyway? Shane is on a run, will be gone for at least another half hour.

He's not hungry, hasn't been particularly hungry in days. Indeed, there seems no good reason to move at all. He snuggles a little tighter into the blankets, revelling in the soft, warm sensation.

The next thing he knows, Shane is standing over him, gently shaking his shoulder. Vaguely it occurs to him that he must've fallen asleep.

"It's nearly midday." Shane says quietly, concern evident in his voice.

Ilya does his best to quell it. "Just tired, I get up now." He says, dragging heavy uncooperative limbs upright.

"I'll make lunch." Shane says, though it's earlier than they normally eat, Ilya is grateful for the extra moment alone.

Looking in the mirror reveals slightly sunken eyes, hair unruly and unkept, and a smile which despite his best efforts looks face even to him. Ilya runs a finger through his hair, once twice, and when it still fails to fall naturally, he gives up.

Ilya can smell sweet omelettes radiating form the kitchen, making his stomach flip. He smiles anyway, an expert by now at faking it for the cameras.

Shane was talking about something, the Admirals, Ilya thinks, because he hears Scott Hunters name in Shane's stream of words. Anything else, though, is beyond Ilya's capacity to hear.

He tries, is always interested in what Shane has to say, yet can't focus and doesn't understand.

Shane must realise, because the next thing Ilya knows a freckled face is looking into his eyes, concerned.

"Are you feeling okay?" He asks, not accusatory but concerned. It's the second time Ilya has made Shane concerned in one day, and guilt quickly stabs him. He's almost grateful for the emotion cutting through the blankness.

He thinks about lying. About smiling that fake, uneasy smile and insisting 'of course, why'. But then he thinks about Galina. About how difficult it would be to face her and admit he hadn't felt anything for days, that he was once again just going through the motions.

And he thinks about how worried Shane would be. How he'd try to hide his anger that Ilya didn't say anything in favour of caring for him. How making Ilya feel better would be so difficult, and Shane would be so disappointed in himself for not being able to do better.

And so instead he grits his teeth. Ignores the itch that suggests one day isn't so bad, that he's faking or exaggerating.

"I've been. Sad. Lately." He says, hoping his tone makes up where his vocabulary lacks.

"That's okay!" Shane says, bright and happy in contrast with how Ilya feels.

"We can watch a movie, eat some junk food. You'll feel better in no time." Shane is grinning now, and it hurts Ilya to take the smile off his face.

"Not like that. Depressed." He says grimacing, the word rolling off his tongue.

Ilya can tell the word surprises Shane. Both that it exists in Ilyas vernacular and that he is using it to describe himself.

"I see Doctor sometimes. Therapist." He adds, hoping to add legitimacy to his claim. This shocks Shane into silence. It makes Ilya antsy, like he should say something, do something to erase the uncomfortable tension in the air.

Instead, he forces himself to embrace the discomfort. He's exhausted from the conversation, which is silly, really, all he's done is talk to his boyfriend.

"Do you want me to try and book a session?" Shane asks tentatively. "With Galina." He adds, though it's not necessary. Ilya knows what he means.

He forces honesty past his lips. "I just want to go back to bed."

Shane's brow furrows further in concern. "Why don't you have a nap on the couch, if you're tired. I'll call Galina." He compromises.

Ilya wants to be angry. He's an adult, why should he be manhandled around by his boyfriend, when he's perfectly capable of making decisions for himself.

These thoughts, though, feel miles away. They are how he should feel. Instead, all he feels is empty. He nods once at Shane. Drags his feet lazily to the couch, flops haphazardly on to it.

In the other room he hears Shane talking quietly down the phone. He tries to listen, strains his ears, but it's strenuous, and he's exhausted. He falls asleep easily.

When he wakes, it's to Shane standing over him for the second time that day, gently shaking him awake.

"You have an appointment with Galina in an hour." He provides. "Do you think you can get dressed?"

Ilya looks down. He'd forgotten he was still in his tracksuit. The thought of changing even into jeans and a t-shirt seems herculean, but he forces himself too anyway. He's scared Shane enough.

Time flashes awkwardly. One minute time passes like quicksand in which he's stranded, the next he's in the car, not entirely sure how he got there. The next he's in the car, has been for hours. And then he's sitting in the waiting room to Galina's office. He's not sure how Shane knew where to go.

She comes out, stands and smiles at him. Ilya cannot bring himself to move.

"Do you want me to come?" Shane asks kindly. Ilya wants nothing more. Instead, he shakes his head, not willing to traumatize Shane with his thoughts, with his mind.

It's a gruelling session, Ilya tries his best to be honest, and Galina is tough. Ilya knows it's helping, knows *she's* helping. He doesn't care particularly though. She asks questions he doesn't want to answer, points out patterns he already knows but can't escape. He leaves feeling raw, scraped open, but also, lighter. Like something heavy being named makes it less impenetrable.

Shane asks, in the car ride home, how he went. He grunts an affirmative noise, unwilling and unable to provide more information. Shane, mercifully, doesn't press.

"Can we watch Top Gun when we get home?" Ilya asks quietly.

Shane balks a laugh. "Top gun? That's so out of character." Shane laughs.

"Reminds me of you." Ilya adds by way of explanation. Takes no joy in the way Shane's face falls.

They do. Shane microwaves some popcorn and Ilya forces himself to eat it, watching his American comfort movie with his boyfriend by his side.

He falls asleep again, should probably be considered about just how much he's sleeping but can't bring himself to care, to be afraid.

He's in bed, under the covers when he wakes again. Shane must've carried him. He doesn't feel any better, not really. He's still mostly numb, still depressed. Still bringing Shane down

with him.

But his boyfriend is by his side, hasn't run screaming at Ilya's weakness. Has instead provided him comfort when he needed it most. It's not okay, Ilya's not sure he's ever going to be okay again. He knows this is an unreasonable thought, that this to will pass.

He doesn't move, watches Shane's chest rise and fall. Smells his boyfriend's hair – doesn't care that it's a little creepy. He lets himself pretend he's content. Let's himself pretend that he will be.

Shane stirs, eyes opening slowly. He doesn't speak, just reached out, finds Ilya's hand, and threads their fingers together. He's not asking anything, not asking *for* anything. Ilya exhales, long and shaky. For the first time in days, if he's to be honest, the numbness cracks. Enough, just, to let something warm slip through.

End Notes

i. Meltdown
ii. Panic Attack
iii. Injury
iv. Shutdown
v. Migraine
+1. Depression

Thanks for reading!

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