

To Be Known (Is To Be Loved)

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Summary

Ilya loves his husband. Very dearly. More than he's ever loved anyone, more than his own existence. Even if said husband wakes him up at 2am to ask ridiculous questions that have undoubtedly circled around in his brain for hours at this point.

Notes

Based on a spitball between myself and softly_softly_from_the_shadows, who suggested this amazing prompt that I couldn't get out of my head.

Even after over a decade of relationship, Ilya still struggles to understand how Shane's brain works.

He is getting better at it, and if Shane is to be believed, he's never *not* been good at it. Ilya has shown more patience in the face of Shane's quirks than most people bothered with, or so he's been told—by Shane, by Shane's parents, even by Hayden fucking Pike. The thought pleases Ilya as much as it infuriates him. If showing Shane some grace is so damn easy that Ilya, in all his Slavic cultural aversion to anything mental health related, managed to do it then what was everyone else's goddamn excuse?

Not that it matters now, when Ilya is the man Shane chose to marry. Ilya still can't quite believe his luck, still unsure how he pulled off marrying someone like Shane Hollander, still unconvinced that he truly deserves Shane's love and consideration.

"Does it bother you that I don't have a nickname for you?"

Yes, Ilya loves his husband. Very dearly. More than he's ever loved anyone, more than his *own* existence. Even if said husband wakes him up at 2am to ask ridiculous questions that have undoubtedly circled around in his brain for hours at this point. This very thought is the only reason Ilya chooses not to tell Shane to fuck off and go back to sleep, or else. See? It's that easy to be patient with him.

Ilya doesn't open his eyes, hoping that Shane will drop the interrogation until morning. A man can dream.

"Ilya, I know you're awake."

"No. I am asleep. You see?" Ilya turns his face towards Shane, drawing attention to his closed eyes. Despite the roughness of his voice, his words lack any real heat.

"You've been awake for a while," Shane points out correctly, and the thought of this beautiful, *wonderful* man refraining himself from asking the—to his mind—very pressing question the second he noticed Ilya was awake tugs at something fragile in his chest. Ilya doesn't think he'll ever tire of this feeling... the feeling of being seen, of being *known*.

"Ilya," Shane whines impatiently, stretching the vowels of his name as he nudges Ilya in the ribs insistently. "Answer me!"

"Have you been thinking about this since we came to bed?" Ilya asks to buy himself a moment. Nicknames. What a strange thing to be thinking about at 2am when one could be *sleeping*...

"No." Shane pauses, his feet rubbing anxiously against Ilya's ankles under the covers. "Not the *second* we came to bed. At first all I could think about was how badly I needed your cock inside me."

Ilya's lips quirk into a lazy smile. He cracks one eye open, slanting a knowing glance at Shane.

“Is that so? Ten years later and you still are desperate for me to fuck you?” Ilya tries, and fails, to *not* sound smug. A giddy laugh bubbles in his chest at the half-hearted kick to his shin the words earn him. “Hey, is not a bad thing to be attracted to your husband.”

“It is when my *husband* is an insufferable show-off.” Ilya doesn’t need to see Shane’s face clearly to know his cheeks are flushed an adorable shade of pink. Before Ilya can deflect by asking for a definition of the word ‘insufferable’, Shane heaves a long-suffering sigh and pulls further away from Ilya’s body. Well, that just won’t do.

“Where are you going?” Ilya complains, pulling Shane close to him and ignoring the outraged yelp that falls from his husband’s lips at the action. “There. Much better, yes?”

“Ilya, answer the question,” Shane demands, his tone just on this side of pleading, and fuck, but Ilya has never been able to refuse Shane much to begin with. Even without Shane’s breathy ‘please’ tacked on at the end, Ilya probably would have offered him the moon and all the stars in the sky if that’s what Shane’s heart desired.

“No. It doesn’t matter to me.” Ilya relaxes when he feels Shane sinking into his arms again, his husband’s face slotting comfortably in the crook of Ilya’s neck. Ilya’s voice lowers to a whisper when he speaks again. “I have your name. Is the best nickname ever. Is the only nickname I need.”

Shane huffs out a laugh against Ilya’s neck, the feeling sending goosebumps across his skin. Despite this, Ilya can still sense the underlying trepidation crackling like static electricity between them. He gives Shane space to think, refusing to rush him. Wherever that question came from, it’s clearly been bothering Shane enough to keep him up at night.

“It’s just,” Shane starts, his fingers curling tightly around Ilya’s waist. Ilya doesn’t bring attention to it, because if Shane can take a tiny bit of comfort from the gesture, then he will happily indulge him. “You have nicknames for me. *Moi lyubimyy*. *Moya lyubov*. Sweetheart. And... I like them. I *love* hearing them. They make me feel...”

Shane trails off and buries his face deeper in Ilya’s neck, no doubt hiding the deepening flush of embarrassment on his cheeks. Ilya holds him, not bothering to fight the smile tugging at his lips. From where Shane’s face is pressed against his pulse point, there is no point in hiding how his husband’s words make his heart beat faster.

“Loved?” Ilya ventures, not quite able to keep the amusement from his tone.

“Safe,” Shane corrects after a beat. Ilya is grateful that no answer is expected of him now, because he doesn’t know how he’d manage to speak around the lump forming in his throat. “Cherished. It makes me feel good and... I want you to feel like this, too.”

Ilya forces a breath through his nose to compose himself, but judging by the small exhale coming from somewhere under him, Shane misinterprets his silence for ridicule.

“Forget I said anything.”

“Hush, moi lyubimyy,” Ilya chides gently as he presses a kiss to the crown of Shane’s head. “You worry too much. I am happy with you. I don’t need nicknames to feel good with you.”

Shane doesn’t say anything for a few long seconds, and were it not for his fingers gently stroking complicated patterns into the skin of Ilya’s hip, he would have thought Shane finally asleep.

“Yeah?” comes the soft reply, Shane’s voice so small it breaks Ilya’s heart.

“I’m sure. You don’t give nicknames, is not a problem for me.” Ilya waves absent with his hand, as if swatting a bothersome fly. “We all know I married you for your amazing body.”

The statement pulls an unexpected snort from Shane.

“Right.”

“Your body and a Canadian green card,” Ilya adds, hoping to alleviate some of the tension with jokes.

“You’re an asshole,” Shane says fondly, pulling away from Ilya’s embrace long enough to level him with a fondly exasperated look.

“See? You *do* have nickname for me.” Ilya steals a kiss from Shane’s lips, keeping it chaste for fear of Shane complaining about unbrushed teeth and morning breaths. The last thing Ilya wants to do is get out of bed now. “I love you, Hollander.”

“I love you too, Rozanov.”

“Ah, ah! It’s *Hollander* now,” Ilya corrects, his smile widening at the words. “No returns possible. How do you say? You are stuck with me now.”

“Afraid I am,” Shane murmurs, settling back against Ilya and finally, *finally*, closing his eyes. “I’m not mad about it, though.”

“Good. Goodnight, sweetheart.”

“Goodnight, Ilya.”

Two weeks pass and Ilya forgets about the nickname debacle entirely. It doesn’t even occur to him that Shane has been thinking about nothing else since that night, because Shane himself doesn’t bring it up again. Until one afternoon when Ilya is busy making tuna melts for them, sneakily dropping a pinch of cheese on the ground for Anya to Hoover up, and Shane comes in from his lunchtime run.

“Hey you,” Shane greets him, seconds before he appears at Ilya’s side and kisses his cheek in greeting. His hair is still damp from his recent shower, cold droplets hitting Ilya’s bare shoulder. “Tuna melts?”

“Of course.” Ilya looks up from his preparation long enough to affectionately bump his forehead against Shane’s, his easy smile matching the one on his husband’s face. He returns his attention to the sandwich in front of him before adding, “your favourite. I know how to treat my husband.”

“That you do, Illyushka.”

And just like that, it’s like the world stops spinning on its axis. Ilya’s movements halt abruptly, his body tense like a bowstring as the word washes over him. Shane moves away, seemingly unaware of Ilya’s internal turmoil. He wants to ask how Shane *knows* to call him that, but the words refuse to come, his throat dry and rough. Vaguely Ilya hears Shane droning on about the dogs he encountered on his run, and while his body is still in their shared kitchen, his mind is back in Russia, back to the last time someone called him by his childhood nickname.

“I love you so much,” his mother would remind Ilya every night, kissing his nose and then his forehead as she tucked him in, *“I love you, my sweet Illyushechka.”*

“I love you, mama,” Ilya would say in return, the memory of her sad smile now twisting his heart like a vice.

“Ilya?” Shane’s voice cuts through Ilya’s memory unexpectedly, pulling him back to the present as abruptly as a hook yanking a fish out of water. “Fuck, you’re bleeding!”

Ilya looks down at his hand, absently noticing the red line running down his left index. He’s vaguely aware of a throbbing ache where the sharp knife sliced into his skin. Ilya’s muscles refuse to move even though his brain tells him he should probably clean the wound and bandage it. Thankfully Shane acts much more quickly, dragging Ilya to the kitchen sink and running cold water on the open wound.

“Ilya? Can you hear me?”

“What did you call me?” Ilya rasps, his eyes meeting Shane’s pleadingly, hoping he hasn’t misheard. Shane looks entirely too calm when he repeats the nickname.

“Illyushka. I did some research into Russian nicknames and found out about diminutives of names. I can’t believe you never told me about this, by the way.” Shane breaks eye contact long enough to cut off the water and dry Ilya’s finger with a paper towel. “I like how it sounds. Ilyushka. It’s cute.”

And what is Ilya supposed to say to *that*? Of course Shane did research into this. Ilya doesn’t know why he expected anything less of his husband. And how could Shane have possibly known how much the sound of this particular nickname would trigger Ilya, when Ilya hardly ever speaks about his mother? It’s too painful, even though she’s been dead nearly twenty years. If he allows himself to think about her, his thoughts inevitably turn to that tragic morning. If Ilya was a braver man, he might bring himself to face the memories of his mother more often, if only so Shane can learn what kind of woman Irina Rozanova was.

His mother deserves that much.

“Ilya, what is wrong?” Shane asks again, concern now evident in his tone, and Ilya realises with no small amount of mortification that the world around him has gone blurry. “Did I do something wrong? Did Google lie and calling people by their diminutive is actually very rude?”

“Shane...”

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Shane interrupts him, the words coming from his lips with steadily increasing speed, “fuck, I just wanted to call you by a cute nickname. I’m sorry, I should’ve dropped it when you said—”

“Shane,” Ilya tries again when the painful fog of memory starts to lift from his mind.

“I just thought it would be nice, you know? I like learning about your culture. I love learning Russian, so I thought I’d surprise you.” Amazingly, despite his rising panic, Shane somehow managed to wrap a bandaid around Ilya’s finger. “I’m sorry. I won’t ever use it again, I sw—”

“Sweetheart.” Ilya’s voice is firm, but not unkind, the word stalling Shane’s spiral and pulling his husband’s gaze up to meet Ilya’s. The latter bites back the fresh tears, instead forcing a wobbly smile to his lips. “Say it again.”

“What?”

“Say it again.” Ilya pulls Shane closer, brushing their noses together as his eyes flutter shut. “Please.”

“Il... Ilyushka?”

Ilya will forever deny the needy keen that falls from his lips as he wraps his arms around his husband’s waist, burying his nose in Shane’s freshly washed hair. If Shane is at all surprised by the reaction, he doesn’t let it show.

“You, uh... like it, then?” Shane ventures as he rubs soothing circles on Ilya’s back. Ilya nods against his temple, swallowing around the lump in his throat. “It’s just... you looked so sad then.”

“Yes.” Ilya takes a composing breath. “The last person to call me this was my mother.”

Shane tenses as realisation dawns on him. “Fuck,” he curses under his breath, leaning back to meet Ilya’s gaze. “Ilya, I never—”

“You did not know,” Ilya is quick to reassure his husband before Shane has a chance to panic again. “I wasn’t prepared. When you called me that, it reminded me of her. Is okay. I am okay.”

Shane nods his understanding, bringing one hand up to wipe at Ilya’s wet cheek. Ilya leans into the touch like a neglected kitten.

“I don’t have to call you that if it’s too painful.”

Ilya smiles gratefully, his heart so full of love for this amazing man he's lucky enough to call his husband.

"It is painful, yes. But when you say it, it makes me feel... safe," Ilya admits, borrowing Shane's very own words from that night. "Cherished," he adds softly, feeling more vulnerable than he's comfortable but taking strength from Shane's grounding touch.

"You are," Shane assures him, meeting Ilya's lips in a loving kiss. "You are so loved. So cherished."

"I know." Even though Ilya still can't believe it. Even though some days, he doesn't think he deserves it. "I love you too, Shane."

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