

baptized in fear

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baptized in fear

by [yutanism](#)

Summary

Ilya didn't feel like himself sometimes, but Shane would always be Shane — the brighter and braver part of him.

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Ilya is going through a depressive episode. Shane tries to help.

Notes

Just cooked up some bs!! I've not posted a fic in almost two years so I'm rusty af.

This follows book canon post the long game and show canon as Ilya has blue eyes like Connor here!! I'm not too versed on how therapy works in Canada so I'm not sure how realistic Galina's sessions with Ilya are, but I'm a therapist myself so I tried to include some of my own practice on this. This is not overly sad, and it just makes you wish for a love like theirs. It also switches POVs because I can!!

To Gab (https://x.com/redskyam_). My #HOLLANOVSISTER. I love you princess!!

[tw](#)

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

You cannot blame yourself, if it... gets bad.

Ilya remembered those words as Shane smiled at him from the other side of the dressing room. No matter how much time passed, or how Ilya was starting to feel the fog around his mind, Shane was always his morning sun. He smiled back at him and shifted his gaze to his other teammates. If Shane stared at him so much, he'd know that something was amiss. How could Ilya explain something he didn't understand? And Ilya tried.

That would be a good summary of his life: all continuous attempts to make everything right, and most of them falling short. It had started with a burst of irritation: people spoke too loudly, moved too quickly, and he only wanted to snap at them to stop and then put his head in his hands and calm himself down. To tell them to leave him alone for a moment, or for the rest of his life. A captain couldn't do that. And last of all, a captain who was finally taking his team for the first time to the playoffs in ten years.

Ilya was used to be the first of many: the first Russian at a so-so age to do something extraordinary in the eyes of others, his team starting to achieve merits not even their most loyal fans even dared to dream of, and the first player to play with his husband in the same team without crashing. Husband. No matter how deep the well of sadness inside him started to fill, he always got the same thrill from the word. He was married to Shane Hollander, and no one in the world could deny it. Shane was also part of his very important firsts; Ilya had been his first kiss and night with a man, his first love, his first act of unraveling. Those were good firsts, but Ilya was probably also the first depressed person to be captain of an NHL team to the point he counted down the days for a break.

Galina, his therapist, had made sure to make him understand it: some wounds inside him were beyond his control, and from time to time they would go back to hurting, be it like a phantom pain or a pain so deep it would be like drowning on solid ground. He understood the comparison of a physical injury; he'd only have to wait, nurture, and work with the remains, but it was harder when he couldn't articulate where the pain was coming from. Not even in Russian he could: his chest hurt, but then that was not it. He hurt everywhere, his skin prickly and sensitive to the world around him. As soon as the match ended, he went to the showers as if the water could stop the irritation and the emptiness and many things he was failing to grasp. Galina did say his feelings tended to overlap, and he was not used to sitting patiently with any of them. He was patient, but not for this. He was supposed to be better.

At least, they won. If they hadn't, he would probably stay in bed all day tomorrow, unable to get up. His coach knew he was going to therapy and that he was using medication, but besides Shane, no one was aware. Some days he felt he was forcing the NHL to bend for him, and while in the good days that seemed like a powerful thing — Ilya could also be an annoying and way hotter activist than Scott Hunter —, on days like these, he felt it was all so jarring he would have preferred to sit in the dark and never get up. He heard Shane's voice, followed by laughter, and his chest sank. Shane couldn't see him like this. It didn't matter that he knew. Ilya would keep him in the dark all his life about this if he could.

Instead of wearing fancy clothes, he dressed so plainly as if to not attract attention. If Shane teased him, he'd reply that he looked hot on sportswear. The shower had helped some, but he

still felt oddly fragile among Shane and their teammates. Shane walked towards him and nudged Ilya with his arm, the two of them navigating what was appropriate in front of their team. No one seemed to mind, but Shane liked to always be professional. That was so Shane: not wanting to kiss his husband in front of the team because of professionalism, and not because he was ashamed. Ilya still kissed his cheek loudly, trying not to wince around all the whistles and funny talk.

He pushed Shane playfully towards the showers, not allowing him to speak. He'd ask later, but Ilya would need his excuses ready. He and Shane didn't keep secrets, but this thing was something he didn't need to burden him with.

"I'm going to talk with the team doctor," he told Troy. "Just a minute."

Troy nodded, leaving him be. He'd ask in that awkward manner of his later, or tell Harris first if he had noticed something amiss with Ilya. The team doctor, Terry, was finishing for the day when Ilya knocked. He didn't seem surprised by seeing him: he often had talks with him about anything health-related that could affect the team, and he was also the person who had suggested to him a sports psychiatrist until Ilya felt ready. He was not going to mention the fog his mind was slowly descending into, so he talked about how he had hit the boards too harshly. It was not a lie, but if he had felt like himself, he'd have asked Shane to look for him first, and then it would have ended with them rolling on the bed until Shane had frown and gotten him into bed with a painkiller.

"It doesn't seem serious. Tell me tomorrow if the pain persists," he said. "Good game."

"Obviously. We're very good."

Terry nodded with a small smile. "I was bandaging injuries of normal players a few years ago, and now I have almost an NHL all-star team, which includes the task of making sure Ilya Rozanov's ribs are great to keep winning."

"Very important business."

"I can't argue about that," Terry said and removed his white gloves. "How are you feeling?"

"My ribs hurt. I told you," Ilya said. Terry waited. "I'm fine. We won, and I'm married—"

"You're one of the few men who think being married is akin to winning in an elite sport," Terry said. Ilya shrugged. Shane Hollander was unique in the world, and he was Ilya's. He could understand the unhappiness of many. He just couldn't understand his own, even though it had nothing to do with Shane. "Is everything alright?"

Ilya almost said that it wasn't, that he was getting the signs indicating that something inside him was not right, but they had two matches left. He couldn't crumble yet. And Shane was happier than he had ever seen him recently, save for the wedding, and he couldn't ruin it. He had been happier, too, but it seemed that it was borrowed time all along.

"You can tell me if it gets bad, Ilya. I know you don't like to talk about medication, but a break is coming. You can consider it."

Ilya merely promised that he'd tell him if it got bad, and left. He wasn't surprised by seeing Shane waiting for him.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. Just checking my ribs," he said. Shane probably wanted to check for himself, but Ilya stopped his hands. "That's not very appropriate. I'll check with HR."

"They know I'm your husband. I'm allowed to see your stomach."

"In public?"

"And in private," Shane said. "Ilya."

"Yes, my love?"

"Let's go home."

Shane wasn't easily fooled by Ilya Rozanov anymore, or rather, he decided when to be now. And yet, he still didn't know how to approach it: he was pulling away, and he couldn't act fast enough. He had noticed how he flinched when the team was too loud, but transformed into the charming captain everyone adored. He somehow knew what the rest needed and was willing to give it to them, and maybe that was one of the reasons Shane hadn't felt as nervous as he should have been at starting in a new team. Ilya was there; he reminded him of those first days with soft touches here and there, so nothing in the world could touch Shane.

Why couldn't Shane give him the same reassurance? And while his jealousy could be a dark thing, he found himself happy that Ilya was so... loved by others. That they loved him a fraction of how Shane loved him; that they saw what Shane saw but could never get him completely because Shane was the one who had him. Now, however, he wondered if he should be doing more. He said that he couldn't blame himself, but Shane was past that. Ilya was his husband; the world, since he was a teenager, started and ended with Ilya Rozanov.

Ilya grabbed his hand on the ride home, but didn't speak. He leaned on the window with his eyes closed, and Shane's unease grew. When they arrived home, Ilya kissed his hair and left for their bedroom, and Shane stayed still as he heard a closing door. Anya followed him excitedly. At least a few months ago, he'd have cried in his arms, but this time he was closing himself off. Shane went to their room, but Ilya was just about to sleep. It wasn't that late, and they'd normally cook something and relax against each other, laughing at how exhausted they were to have sex. It hadn't been a problem when they were sneaking around, but the adrenaline had worn off after years of safety. Shane preferred when Ilya kissed him everywhere and took him to bed.

"I have a headache," Ilya said. "I'll sleep it off."

Shane felt somehow colder, as if Ilya's silences were the sun waning behind endless clouds. He helped him to remove his shirt and folded it neatly. He didn't mention how his excuse had been his ribs.

“Let me help you.”

“Shane. My ribs are—”

“It’s not about your ribs,” Shane said and lowered his pants. He smiled for the first night noticing Ilya’s interest at that. “You have a headache.”

He waited for the remarks about how he didn’t care about pain if he could have Shane, or how a small ache couldn’t keep him off him, but Ilya didn’t. He allowed Shane to help him change, and he also remained silent when Shane got him into his side of the bed. Ilya surprised him by kissing him softly, pressing his lips against his, and then kissing the corner of his mouth.

“I’ll be okay tomorrow,” Ilya said. “Morning sex will be worth your wait.”

Shane kissed him again. “Sleep.”

“Are you going to stay until I fall asleep?”

“You’re hurt,” Shane said. “So I have to stay with you.”

“It doesn’t hurt as much when you’re around, yes,” Ilya raised a hand to caress Shane’s cheek. “Shane.”

“Hmm?”

“Nothing. I like saying your boring name.”

“You do like boring things.”

“No, just you. Always just you,” Ilya said and removed his hands. He didn’t speak anymore, and Shane stayed with him for a few minutes, not talking about how his pillow was getting wet, his body barely moving with his tears. Shane didn’t know if what he was doing was fine, if he was helping, but he wiped Ilya’s tears for him. He suspected Ilya was not fully present, but he couldn’t be sure either. He wanted to say, *take me to the place where it hurts. Let me share it with you.* He didn’t, and simply kissed his head when he stopped. Shane turned the lights off completely and stayed in the bathroom, drying his own tears.

When he woke up the next day, Ilya was not as close as he typically was, but was holding his hand tightly, caressing his fingers. Shane stared at his eye bags, and wondered since when Ilya pretended to be asleep but couldn’t. Ilya sometimes had nightmares, but he never recalled them to Shane. Ilya Rozanov had a graveyard of nightmares and haunting thoughts, and Shane was not allowed to see them. He kissed Ilya’s hand and got up. Anya followed Shane to eat and then went back to stay by Ilya’s side. Shane did his whole morning routine: the yoga, the smoothie that wasn’t as repulsive as it had been years ago, and cooked breakfast.

Going back, Ilya was already up, but he stayed in bed. He didn’t scroll on his phone or got playful with Anya. Anya didn’t bother him and stayed like a loyal bodyguard. Shane touched

his arm.

“Does your head hurt still?”

“A little, yes,” Ilya blinked at Shane. His blue eyes were like the sea covered in mist. Shane prayed for sunshine. “I feel a little... hurt.”

“I know,” Shane said. “How are your ribs? Maybe take another Tylenol.”

Ilya nodded, and Shane took his hand to lead him to the kitchen. Ilya ate little and didn’t speak except for a weak smile. It was when Shane was cleaning the table that Ilya hugged him so tightly that Shane felt his bones rattle. He heard him sob, and Shane’s heart broke. Their situation hadn’t been ideal for years; all the judgment, the explanations, the turning backs on him, but nothing hurt as badly as Ilya in pain. It tore him in two.

He hugged him tightly, and murmured how much he loved him in both english and russian. It was later when Shane said, “I want to talk with your therapist.”

Ilya’s red eyes widened.

“I want to understand you better,” Shane said. The words sounded wrong, so he added, “This part of you. I want to do anything I can to help you, to keep you safe.”

“You understand me,” Ilya said. “Nobody knows me better than you, and this is just... a phase. I’ll sleep it off. The team—”

“It’s not the same,” Shane said. “You know it’s not the same, Ilya. Why are you shutting me out?”

“Shane,” Ilya said, almost pained. “Is not what you think it is.”

“What do you think it is?” Shane tilted his head. Ilya went to the living room and sat down, and Shane’s confusion grew. “I just want to help you. I want to know how to do it.”

“Is just that talking with my therapist is...”

“She knows you,” Shane said. His russian was better, and they had even started to hold entire conversations, but he had accepted he was not a therapist. He had barely spoken with the Metros’ therapist in all his years there. “She knows you too, I mean. If you tell me you’re okay, I won’t press it. But is this what it is? You want to lie to me?”

Ilya leaned against the couch and stared at him. Shane wanted to shake the sadness out of him, to let him share it. Even the act of assuming it was just sadness seemed simplistic to him — hadn’t he read all he could find about depression when Ilya told him about it? And yet, he had stopped after a few days because Ilya seemed okay. He didn’t want to seem pushy and didn’t want to ruin his mood. But since a few days ago, he noticed he was withdrawn. The last time he had used that word, Ilya had gotten mad.

“Just think about it, okay?”

“Shane.”

“Don’t say things you’ll regret,” Shane said, a little more forcefully. “I’ll wash the dishes.”

They had a match that night, and Shane pretended nothing was amiss. Ilya didn’t speak to him or to anyone, and after the warm-up, stayed in the bathroom. Shane’s phone vibrated, and he saw a text from Hayden. He sometimes texted him before matches to wish him luck, and Shane replied the day after. He knew Hayden felt bad about what had happened to Shane, but there was nothing Shane could do to make him feel better. Some days, he wished he could turn back time and go to another team. Three coups seemed pointless when the team didn’t deserve any of them.

“Is Hayden being an annoyance again?” Ilya appeared by his side. His blue eyes were still cold.

“He says hi.”

Ilya shrugged. “I hope he’s enjoying the Metros’ losing streak.”

“Ilya!”

“It’s true, isn’t it?” Ilya turned around. “Barrett, do you care about real-life issues?”

Troy raised his head. “The Metros losing is definitely a real-life issue.”

“That’s why you’re my...” Ilya let the sentence trail off until Shane hit his arm. “My friend. Nothing more, Barrett.”

“What a loss,” Troy said.

That night, Shane didn’t play at his best, but it was better than most. He and Ilya understood each other on the ice better than anyone would have anticipated, and the Centaurs’ fans were always bragging online. If the average fan weren’t as homophobic, they’d probably ask Shane and Ilya to marry even if they weren’t together. A dark world, really, for Shane wouldn’t get married to anyone if it wasn’t Ilya Rozanov. Still, Ilya’s play was *muted*. He always had the attitude of the king of the ice, the best *8/1* in any sport, but that night and the match that followed, he seemed to be slower, and when a player pushed him too roughly, he didn’t say anything. Shane got so angry that he had to take time.

They lost one match, but out of their last three, two wins were more than enough.

“Is he okay?” Troy asked Shane. “I’m not asking you because you’re his husband. Or maybe? I feel I need to ask. I’d ask the watchman at this point.”

“He will be.”

Later that night, Ilya said, “You can meet Galina. I already spoke with her.”

Shane was as nervous as it was his first professional match. Ilya hadn't taken too much convincing, all things considered, and Shane knew it was partly because he was not in his full capabilities. To see him like that — so numb he barely moved — spiraled him into such a broken state that he had cried to his mom on the phone. He had always loved Ilya as if his chest was cracking open, and his pain was nothing less than corrosive. He wanted him happy. But if he didn't have him happy, then he'd stay in the dark with him.

Galina explained all his credentials to him, and Shane nodded along. The whiteness of the space made him a little bit restless, so he didn't listen as attentively as he should have, but he had already searched for those credentials since he found out Ilya was going to therapy. The session was not even for him, but he felt... strange somehow. Ilya did this two times per month. Or according to him, when he felt bad. He was too busy pretending he was okay.

"I appreciate that you want to talk with me," Galina said. "Ilya seemed surprised by the request."

"Is it common? This?" Shane said.

"Not really, no. Unless mental conditions are worsening and need more intense care, partners only come for therapy exercises. I'm assuming this is not the case as Ilya is not present."

"No, it's not. I have no problem with him suffering from depression," Shane said, and then, noticing that sounded odd, he added, "It's obviously not ideal. I hate him seeing sad but—"

"I get it," Galina said with a smile. "I'm sure Ilya has shared his diagnosis with you. I made him a report with all the interviews and tests that justify the diagnosis. Did you read it?"

"Yes," Shane said. He had a copy in his desk back home. Ilya had told him he didn't need to print it, but Shane didn't care. "His life hasn't been easy. Our relationship hasn't either..." Shane blushed a little. "I never mean to cause him any pain, and if I don't support him correctly, then I will probably mess up again."

"The fact that you care enough says a lot," Galina said, a small band-aid for Shane's guilt about last year or so. "And while external support is important, you cannot blame yourself. It's a complex condition despite its commonness. Ilya is aware that it's not a battle he has to win. It's more of an aspect of his life he has to take care of, the same way he takes care of his body."

"Sometimes I think he's not just sad. It's like he's so... numb. He barely moves, and it gets me so worried—"

"That can happen too. For many, sadness is an emotion with many layers," she said. "He lives it differently than other people. You've known him for a long time. I'm sure you can think of many ways he hid how he felt with other potent emotions."

Like anger, Shane guessed, even though Ilya's anger didn't materialize with much physical reaction. He had never been scared of him that way, regardless of Ilya using his body on the ice as much as he could against others. If he pushed him against the boards too roughly, it was more of a foreplay than anything else. Ilya knew how to bite and how to soothe Shane.

The others weren't relevant to him. Galina continued talking, and Shane nodded along from time to time, feeling so sad sometimes that he felt that he was about to cry. Ilya was going through so many different symptoms. Shane wanted to curl against Ilya and never let the hurt in ever again.

She didn't disclose any personal information she had, but Shane guessed. He guessed where the sadness could come from, why he probably felt some days he was still trapped and helpless. His family was ghosts, their burials untidy.

"Ilya is not too keen on different therapy exercises, but you can do one too, if it helps him," she said. "Write him a letter by hand, he can read when things get hard. Normally, the individual does it when they're better, but Ilya has been hesitant. Imaginary scenarios don't work on him."

Shane had never seen Ilya write anything by hand besides signing his name. He wasn't surprised that those exercises didn't work on him. Ilya probably had a hard time disconnecting himself from all the expectations that had been placed upon him since he was a kid and connecting with himself in more ways than physical. Galina also recommended that he take care of himself so they both didn't sink, and Shane wanted to say that he was always very disciplined, that nothing got in the way in the endless ways he tried to keep his body, and to some extent, his mind healthy and sharp, but Ilya was different. Not better or worse, just different.

When he went out, Ilya stood up so quickly that Shane couldn't help his smile. Ilya moved as if nervous, and Shane hugged him.

"Are you okay?"

"Should I be? Did she tell you my darkest secrets?"

"Like what? Tell me an example, and I'll decide," Shane said and poked his shoulder. "She didn't tell me anything that you didn't want to share with me."

Ilya stayed silent.

"Let's talk at home, okay?"

Regardless of the years between the last time he spoke with his brother, Ilya was used to arguments never being picked up again. The last time he had fought with Shane seriously, out of the creeping fear that they weren't on the same page anymore, he had spiraled and then apologized, and then he had almost died, so they never could approach it deeply. Ilya didn't know how to speak about all the turmoil inside him to anyone — his mom's death was treated like a ghost legend, true only if you believe it, and no one did, and he didn't think being this empty counted as true pain. He didn't trust himself that way either: he and Shane played in the same team, Shane had the support of his city, and Ilya himself wasn't as lonely as he used to be. And yet, he was sad. He didn't feel like getting up, he didn't feel like speaking, like breathing.

They had arrived at home, and he had put Shane against his chest. He wondered how he could tell him what he meant. Galina had suggested a session after Shane talked to her, but he didn't want to. Sometimes he wondered if this was fair to Shane; if going to see his boyfriend's therapist was the life he envisioned for himself, even before they met. If maybe when his dad had said years ago, if they weren't nice men in Montreal—

He sat straight, missing the warmth of Shane. That was a sign of its own: he could spend the rest of his life hearing the heartbeat inside Shane, the proof that he was alive and that he was Ilya's. Years ago, when he was a teenager in a cold house, he wouldn't have thought he'd ever feel this warmth. That it existed in the world, that he only had to suffer a little bit to deserve it. Ilya didn't feel like himself sometimes, but Shane would always be Shane — the brighter and braver part of him.

"I'm not okay today, Shane," Ilya said. Shane didn't have the time to be surprised when Ilya continued. "I don't know why. I can't explain why. I just meant to tell you..."

"Ilya?"

"I want to give you the life you want. That I'm sure I want every day except when I'm... like this. But I couldn't... I couldn't stand it if you or any future kids we'll have describe me like I describe my mother," he said, his eyes hurting. "I don't want to be described as wonderful but sad. Sad enough that I—"

"Don't say that," Shane interrupted him. "You're always so good to me. So good to the people around you. And what truly matters to me is that you exist in this world. That I get to share this lifetime with you. No matter what happens, if you still have bad days, we have to work through them. I trust that."

Ilya snuggled closer to Shane. He didn't shake his head or reply, but he decided to believe it. He decided that at some point, he'd wake up and his heart wouldn't feel broken, that he had the keys to his own made cage, and that Shane would be there with him. He grabbed Shane's face and kissed him. Shane seemed surprised for a moment, and then kissed him so tenderly that Ilya's heart throbbed. That was emotion; that was warmth. That was Shane.

"I love you," Shane said. "Have I told you that today?"

"Yes," Ilya said and kissed him again with a smile. "You always say it. I always feel it."

"Ilya," Shane's eyes were red. "Don't ever leave me."

"That sounds..." Ilya narrowed his eyes with a smile.

"Toxic?"

"No problem, moya lyubov. I'll never go outside if you request that of me."

"People want you too much," Shane said and wiped Ilya's tears with his thumb. "Not as much as I want you, though. Control that."

"This is me," Ilya said. "The real me."

Shane caressed his hair. “Sometimes sad, sometimes annoying, but always breathtaking. I’m here with you, okay?”

“Okay.”

Ilya nuzzled against his and held Shane’s thighs tightly. Ilya fell asleep.

A few days later, he met with Terry.

“I talked with your psychiatrist,” Terry, the team doctor, said as soon as Ilya arrived at the team’s building. Ilya closed the door. He didn’t correct Terry about him having a psychiatrist; he only spoke with a man recommended by Galina, and then briefed Terry about his diagnoses. “I’m not a mental health professional, but I still made sure you have the best this system can offer you.”

“Thank you,” Ilya said and cleared his throat. “Is it true? My performance won’t be affected?”

“It won’t be affected because of the anti-depressants directly, but more because of the side effects that have to disappear after the first two weeks,” Terry said and got out two pamphlets. “Headaches, nausea, insomnia, among others. If you get another episode in those two weeks, then you have to tell me immediately, and we suspend it. There are a lot of options, and I assumed Shane would want the information too.”

“He definitely does,” Ilya smiled. It was early in the morning, so he received the bottle of pills from Terry and swallowed one. “Does Coach know already?”

“Yes. He’s concerned because he cares about you, and not because of your performance in the last two matches. It’s good for him to know what is going on with you, and how we as a team can support you,” Terry said. “Still, it’s no one’s business but yours.”

“I’m not planning on telling the team,” Ilya said, suddenly calmer. Shane knew for obvious reasons, and he’d never hide it from him, even if they weren’t teammates, and Troy suspected it because they were similar in more ways than one. The rest of the team didn’t need to know it. He had pushed more buttons, and while his bisexuality was known, what went on inside his head seemed even more personal than anything else. “Shane knows. Maybe Troy will find out as I see him outside games, but...”

“That’s completely up to you,” Terry said. He didn’t add how it was unknown about elite athletes taking pills. If people made assumptions about Ilya based on what they knew, this would be a field day for them. Not that he cared that much, but he couldn’t drag Shane’s name with him. In his heart, he had promised Shane peace. The same peace he had given him. “Also, it’s very important that you consume alcohol moderately or quit it together and drugs are a hard no. Not even weed.”

Ilya nodded. He’d joke to Shane that he was known for his past food regimen. Terry went on, and Ilya’s only worry was the lack of libido. He hoped it didn’t affect him that way, or else he’d have to force his body to do it. Being intimate with Shane went beyond sex, but it was

one of his favorite things. When they won the Stanley Cup in a few months, he'd be in ecstasy not only for the cup, but for fucking Shane like a winner again.

Shane was waiting for him in the desolate dressing room. All players had left for vacation, and they had packed everything to go to the cottage for the holidays. He wasn't unused to the cold, but he still felt chilled inside and out. He hugged Shane tightly.

"Terry told me you'd want the information too," Ilya said and playfully hit him with the pamphlet. "Hollander, you need to let me deal with him."

"I also did my own presentation, but this helps," Shane said with a shy smile. "Isn't this what I must do to keep you with me, Rozanov? You like me in your business."

"Of course, husband. Of course."

On Christmas Eve, Ilya had taken his medication for a few days already. Terry had said it would show effects in two weeks minimum, but he did feel slightly better. The fog wasn't as thick, he worked out, he swam on the lake, he hugged Shane as much as he could, he called his teammates to wish them happy holidays. Troy and Harris were going to come for a day or two before New Year's, and Ilya was half convinced of sharing his diagnosis and his treatment with Troy. Not as a captain, not as a teammate, but as a friend. Very odd to have one of those beyond sharing a team.

Shane was beyond beautiful those days, completely relaxed if Ilya felt better, and just being so perfect it took a piece of his heart out every time Ilya looked at him. Shane being made for him stopped being a torture years ago, but never would stop coming as a marvel nonetheless. Still, besides making out and making him come with his hands or his mouth, he didn't touch him. He wanted to be present when it happened; he and Galina never spoke explicitly about it, but he did use sex to cope. If he used Shane that way, he wouldn't forgive himself.

Maybe in the past he had, but it was different. When he was with Shane, nothing else in the world mattered. Every nerve ending of his started and ended with him.

Now, however, he was burning with need. When he had woken up, Shane was gone so he couldn't have his way with him already. He washed his teeth and then removed his shirt. He also grabbed the bottle of lube and went down to meet Shane. He received him with a smile, one of his small ones when he didn't know what to expect from the day but couldn't help, and Ilya noticed the mug.

"Hey," Shane said. "It's tradition so—"

Ilya walked towards him and sipped a small amount as Shane chirped that it was hot until he couldn't form words from how insistent Ilya was kissing him against the counter. Shane didn't hesitate on reciprocating, and gasped when Ilya bit his lip. This. This was waking up after a long slumber. Shane was shivering on his arms, and Ilya moved away.

"Are you okay?"

“Yes. Fuck, just let me—” Shane kissed him again. “Take me to bed.”

“As a princess deserves,” Ilya said and Shane narrowed his eyes. His cheeks were so red that he looked even more enticing; Shane’s temperament had always been so fierce that Ilya had lost the battle against him the first time he saw him. He needed to make him blush for other ways, to unravel against him, on him. He carried Shane as they climbed the stairs with one arm, the other too preoccupied with not making them fall. He had already made the bed.

He undressed Shane, and started to kiss every inch of his legs. Shane leaned on his elbows, his eyes so intense Ilya felt everything on him throb. When his face went close to his crotch, Ilya chuckled.

“Leaking already.”

“Shut up.”

“Did you miss me? Of course you did,” Ilya said and was about to lick his tip when he heard Shane speak again.

“You never left.”

Ilya raised his head. Shane’s expression was so earnest, so honest, that Ilya’s heart stopped for a moment. Was this how it would feel every day? Probably. It had felt like that since he came to the cottage for the first time: Shane Hollander was going to kill me. I’d love to die by his hands.

“I love you, Shane Hollander,” Ilya said. “Now, let me kiss you all over, yes?”

Shane threw his head back when Ilya took him in his mouth. He moved his head, and started to get lost on the whimpers Shane released, the breathy curses, until Shane tapped his arm. He stopped.

“Fuck me.”

“I will, sweetheart,” Ilya wiped his lips and crawled towards Shane. He stared at him and Shane didn’t utter another word, but Ilya was about to burst. His cock hurt and he wanted nothing but to fuck Shane senseless, but first, he kissed him again. He loved kissing him. What didn’t he love about him? Shane hissed for the cold of the lube. “You are used to it.”

“Evil.”

“Never,” Ilya said and held Shane when he squirmed against him, his eyes hooded. “You always leak all over.”

Shane tried to grind on Ilya, but Ilya shook his head. He and Shane wouldn’t leave their bed for a long time that day, but he needed it now. He needed to be inside Shane. Ilya removed his fingers and got himself ready.

“I’m going to fuck you raw, Hollander,” he said. “Is that okay?”

Shane nodded, and Ilya slid inside him. They both groaned, and an explosion of emotions went through Ilya. No one on the planet could understand all the things Ilya Rozanov felt when Shane Hollander was near him. No one had loved someone the way Ilya loved him. He tried to be soft, to make love to him, but Shane got impatient, so he fucked him hard and deep, the rhythm not exhausting him in the least. Shane's eyes were full of tears, and as it often happened when he was overwhelmed, his head turned to the side. Ilya raised his legs more, and Shane whimpered, the sound turning to a groan when Ilya pushed him closer and fucked him on the side.

"Ilya."

"Yes?"

"Ilya."

"Tell me."

"Kiss me," Shane said and tried to open his eyes. "Kiss me, please."

Ilya was not going to last much longer, but still kissed him, tasting his sweat and his tears. He touched Hollander's cock, and he spasmed against him. He followed him swiftly and didn't stop kissing him. Shane put his arms around him and peppered his face and his neck with kisses and licks, and he didn't even flinch for the mess leaking out of him. Ilya was about to die.

"You're so sweet," Ilya said. "You're so fucking sweet, moya lyubov."

"Ilya," Shane said again. In recent years, he said his name like a Russian would. Ilya was about to tease him when he noticed that Shane was crying again. "Fuck. Sorry."

"Shane? Did I hurt you?"

Shane shook his head and once again hugged him so tightly that Ilya struggled to breathe for a moment. Shane's grip was strong.

"Do you feel better?"

"Yes, Shane. It's working, sweetheart, don't cry."

"I hate seeing you in pain," Shane whispered. "I love you. I love you more than anything in the world. Do you know that, right? Tell me you know it."

"I do," Ilya said. "Of course I do."

Shane nodded and allowed Ilya to put him back on the bed. Ilya knew Shane would like to do more, that he would like to understand what went on inside his head in the bad days, but Ilya didn't need to. What he wished for every day was this: to look at this man's eyes, the sun of his life, and know they were mirrors; that all the love he felt for Shane was staring back at him.

That chased the nightmares away.

They had their world within the world, and all the lights were always lit. Home.

To Ilya Rozanov,

I've thought about writing this letter in Russian, but my writing is still not good enough. I still know how to write the most important word of them all: your name. I'll probably practice even harder so one day I can write the same lines and you can correct them (I just imagined you as a teacher and smiled).

I remember the first time I told you you were withdrawn, that there were things you weren't saying, that you kept hidden. Back then, we were still learning each other outside of years in secret. Months later, you told me there were days you didn't feel okay. Now it's one of those days. It feels like a banging a door constantly closed. You're on one side, and I'm in the other, my head pressed against it for a sign that you will come back to me. To the life we're building together. But even if it never opens, I'll stay with you. I'll stay with you in the sunshine and in the night and in the complete dark. That's what you have to tell yourself: someone is waiting for me. Someone who loves me dearly, someone who learned what love was because of me. I love you happy, I love you sad, I love you healthy and I love you sick. I love you in every possible form.

The first time I met you, I was sure I had lived securely. I thought I'd know what my life would be like; a little boring, maybe, as you'd like to recall. However, you appeared. You and your blue eyes and seriousness that turned out to be a facade every time we were together. You made me angry, you made me laugh, you made me alive. You opened the door for all the joy I kept inside and never thought I'd have access to. You were the first person I've ever kissed with intent, the first person I slept fully with, and all the glimpses of who you were made it impossible for me to deny what you were becoming to me.

You became everything to me, Ilya. You're all under the Earth and under the sky that I love. I'll never give up on you, on me, on us. No matter what happens in the future when we finally reach dynasty, we still be us. Shane and Ilya. Me with the weak backhand and you with the smile that will haunt me forever. Remember that word? You said it sounds like a bad thing, but in my case, it just means that I carry you everywhere. You're my heart and I can't live without it. It doesn't matter how bad it gets, how bad you think it can get, you have to have faith in that. I want all the suburban dreams with you, but I also want the quiet nights when you can't sleep and hold my hand instead. I want to love all the versions of you I've not known. I want to learn if you'll be a cranky old man, or I'll have to ask people to not look at you because you're so stunning in any age.

Ilya Rozanov, what I would do without you? I have to win this race. You can't leave me. You have to come back to me, slowly if you prefer, but back to me regardless.

End Notes

Thank you for reading!!! I'd love to write another Hollanov.

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