

déjà vu

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Summary

Ilya had never really let himself picture it before. Not for too long, anyway. Himself at twelve, standing in that doorway, seeing her lifeless body on the bed.

He didn't have any photographs of himself from that age, which made it easier to keep the memory at a distance. Just a fact. Something that happened to a version of himself he barely remembered being.

Niko turning twelve closed that distance.

Ilya is going through a depressive episode. Which is hitting differently now that his son is the same age he was when his mom died.

Notes

general disclaimer: this follows the same Hollanov dads universe from my other fics in [Our House](#), but they're all standalones so you definitely don't need to read any of them to read this one!! some general background that might add a little context:

- takes place abt 14 years post-TLG
- their kids are niko (12), max (9), and mila (3)
- they're both retired, but shane works as a skill development coach for the centaurs
- this fic follows the events after [this](#) fic in the series, but you don't need to read it to read this one! just know that ilya has been dealing with a depressive episode, accidentally went through withdrawal after not taking his antidepressants, him and shane had a fight about it, and is now ilyas back in therapy.

hope you enjoy! xx

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

"Be careful driving. It's dark out."

Ilya smiled as he shrugged on his jacket, Shane standing close beside him. As if Ilya hadn't driven in the dark thousands of times before. As if Shane didn't know that perfectly well.

But Ilya understood what Shane meant. This wasn't about the drive.

Ilya was about to see Dr. Galina for the first time in a couple of years for a real session.

He'd been falling back into depression for...well, he didn't actually know how long, actually. Weeks, maybe. Months, if he was being honest with himself. But it had started affecting his everyday life in ways that were getting harder to ignore, and accidentally going into withdrawal from his antidepressants because he'd let the prescription lapse was pretty hard to wave away as "fine."

Shane had called to set up this appointment before Ilya even had the chance, after finding out he hadn't been taking his antidepressants and after finding him crying uncontrollably on the couch later that same morning. *And* he set up the autofill for him. Ilya didn't deserve Shane.

Maybe that wasn't the right mindset to have, he thought to himself. Galina would probably have something to say about that line of thinking. He'd find out in about twenty minutes.

"I will be very careful," Ilya said. Shane was looking at him with that expression he could never quite keep neutral no matter how hard he tried. His bottom lip was pulled between his teeth. Ilya wondered sometimes if Shane even noticed when he did that

"I'll wait to put the chicken in the oven until five," Shane said, fidgeting with the zipper on Ilya's jacket. "It should be just about ready when you get back."

Ilya leaned in and kissed him. Though he had to admit, he was feeling nervous too. He wasn't exactly sure why.

"You would make a very good housewife," Ilya teased gently.

Shane didn't really laugh. Just kept worrying at his bottom lip.

Ilya reached up and brushed his thumb slowly beneath Shane's eye, over the scatter of freckles there. "Thank you," he said quietly.

A tiny patter of socked feet cut through the quiet a few seconds later. Mila came toddling over from her toy kitchen, plastic carrot in hand, and grabbed a fistful of Ilya's jeans. "Papa."

He smiled and crouched down to her level. "Yes, *malyshka*?"

"You be back soon?"

It wasn't the right time of day for him to be putting his shoes on—he was supposed to be here, in the kitchen, stealing tastes of whatever Shane was cooking and pretending not to. He

was supposed to be on the living room floor with her, being conscripted into whatever game she'd decided they were playing.

He smiled and tapped the plastic carrot with one finger. "Very soon. Just in time for dinner." He tilted his head. "Wait. Unless *this* is your dinner?"

She broke into a grin. "*Noo*, that's silly."

"*Da*." He clicked his tongue. "Could have fooled me. My little *zaychik*." He pinched her cheek.

Shane's hand settled on the back of Mila's head, his thumb automatically moving up and down. "Can you give Papa a big hug before he goes?"

Her whole face lit up. The carrot hit the hardwood with a sharp crack, dropped without a second's hesitation, and she threw her arms out as wide as they could go.

Ilya gathered her up, pulling her against his chest and pressing a long kiss to the top of her head. She locked her small arms around his neck and squeezed with everything she had, the way she always did.

He didn't let go for a while.

Galina's office was just as Ilya remembered. Clean, warm, everything in its place. Though she had added a few pictures to the wall since his last visit—he noticed a small painting he didn't recognize, right by the door. A little boat on a vast, open ocean. His eyes kept drifting back to it.

"It's great to see you again, Ilya," she said in Russian.

He was always grateful for that. To be able to think in Russian, speak in Russian, without anything having to pass through another layer first.

"Yes." He settled into the couch across from her. "You too." He felt a sudden overwhelming feeling of guilt. "I'm sorry it's been so long."

She shook her head. "You don't need to apologize. We talked through the decision to take a break together. You didn't disappear."

Ilya nodded. He unfolded and refolded his hands in his lap. "I know Shane is the one who set this up. Beat me to it," he said with a small smile. "You know how he is. But I want to be here. He has just been—" He paused. "He has been helping a lot."

She nodded. "I'm really glad you're here, no matter who set it up," she said. "He sounded worried about you, when I spoke with him."

She always got straight to the point. Ilya usually appreciated that about her. Right now he was less sure, mostly because getting to the point required him to know what the point actually was, and he was still working on that.

"Yes," Ilya said, his fingers tightening slightly where they were clasped. "I scared him, I think."

He wondered how much Shane had told her. Then the thought quickly dissolved—Shane would never dive into these kinds of details with Galina without running it by him first. Shane was careful about that kind of thing.

Unless Shane thought Ilya could be at risk of harming himself, he realized suddenly. Is that what Shane was thinking? Now he wasn't so sure. What exactly *did* Galina know?

"Why do you say that?" she asked, bringing him out of his thoughts. It probably wasn't a good sign that he was already swimming in anxious loops within the first few minutes of the session.

"Many things," Ilya said, trying to organize his thoughts into something coherent. "I have been telling him I am fine, when maybe I have not been fine for a while now. Then I stopped taking my pills—" He snapped his head up to look at her directly. "Not on purpose. I did not refill them on time. Auto-refill lapsed and I never reset it." He added quickly. "It is back on schedule now. Shane made sure of that. But he was worried, and he...he saw me have a breakdown."

Jesus. The more he said it out loud, the more the sinking feeling grew in his chest. Shane didn't deserve to deal with this version of him.

Galina's face remained neutral as she nodded, so whether this was new information or not was impossible to tell. Ilya supposed it didn't really matter anyway.

"That sounds like it was a difficult experience for both of you," she said gently.

Ilya just nodded.

"I know this didn't happen overnight," she continued, settling back in her chair. "How long do you think you've been feeling like this?"

"Hard to say," Ilya admitted, looking down at his hands again. "Months, maybe? I was doing very well for a long time. You know this. Then...not so much, I guess." He paused, his jaw working. "I don't know why."

"Depression moves in cycles," Galina said, unhurried. "Some months are better than others. Some days are better than others. Sometimes it's just hours."

"Yes, well," Ilya said, his voice tightening. "I just want to have some better hours, at least. Consistently."

"That sounds like a very manageable goal for us to work toward."

Ilya nodded, but his hands clasped tighter in his lap, his expression not quite releasing. "It is what our kids deserve. What Shane deserves." His foot was bouncing again, and he didn't bother trying to stop it. "We have three kids to take care of. I don't want Shane having to worry about taking care of a fourth."

"It sounds like you're viewing yourself as a burden to Shane," Galina said carefully.

"Well," Ilya said, a bitter edge creeping in. "Burden means carrying a heavy load, does it not? I would say me having a meltdown in front of him and being unable to remember to take a stupid pill every day qualifies as a burden."

"How do you think Shane would react if you told him that?"

God. It was infuriating sometimes, Ilya remembered now, when she would respond with questions like this instead of just...letting him wallow. "He would shut it down immediately," Ilya sighed, rubbing his face. "He would reassure me it is not true. Tell me it is not my fault I feel this way."

"And would you believe him?"

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. "I'd want to."

She let that sit for a bit, then crossed her leg over her other one and leaned. "Then that's another goal we can work on." She smiled at him. "How are the kids doing?"

Ilya's whole face shifted, like it always did when he had an opportunity to talk about his kids. "They are good," he grinned. "Making me crazy, many times a day. But I wouldn't have it any other way."

Galina smiled.

"Mila is just as rambunctious as when she was a squirmy little baby. Always so busy." Ilya's expression softened as he talked about her. "She just started daycare a few mornings a week. Half-days. I would keep her home with me every day if Shane let me, but," he shrugged, his mouth pulling up at the corner, "structured socialization, with kids her own age. Shane has very strong opinions on it."

Galina let out a small laugh at that. "And she likes it?"

"Loves it," Ilya said. "Social little butterfly. She walks in and immediately forgets I exist, which—" he waved a hand— "is very good for her development, apparently. But not so good for her papa's heart."

"It sounds like she's doing well," Galina said softly.

"She is," Ilya agreed. "Max is nine now. He is so funny, so sweet, such a good brother and friend. Wears his heart on his sleeve. It makes me so happy." His voice got quieter. "And it makes it easier, coping with him getting bigger. To know I get to see more of his big personality shine each day he gets older."

He paused, his fingers tapping lightly against his knee. "And Niko...he is thriving. He is so perceptive and kind. He is very patient with his brother and sister, even when they do not make it easy for him." A small smile crossed his face. "He helps without being asked. He's ambitious. Just turning into such a good person. Much better than I was at his age."

"Niko's twelve now, right?"

"Twelve, yes."

Galina nodded. "Twelve is a significant age for you," she said gently.

Ilya furrowed his brow. She wasn't wrong.

"Yes," he said simply. He kept his eyes on his hand.

There was silence for a bit after.

"How has that been for you? Having a son this age?"

Ilya wasn't quite sure how to answer that.

He had always known that he'd been young when he found his mother. Very young. He had never disputed that. He had said it out loud in this very office with Galina, unraveled it all with Shane. Worked through his coping mechanisms, the drinking and the sex and whatever else he could get his hands on as a teenager just to avoid thinking about it for too long. He had done the work. He knew what had happened to him, and that it had been unimaginably traumatic, and that none of it had been his fault.

Ilya had never really let himself picture it before. Not for too long, anyway. Himself at twelve, standing in that doorway, seeing her lifeless body on the bed.

He didn't have any photographs of himself from that age, which made it easier to keep the memory at a distance. Just a fact. Something that happened to a version of himself he barely remembered being.

Niko turning twelve closed that distance.

Because Niko was so *young*. Even though he was tall and losing the baby fat in his face and could cop an attitude like a teenager—he was still a kid. Still tripped over his own feet sometimes. Still leaned into Shane's hand when he brushed his hair back. Still tucked his feet under Ilya's leg on the couch during movies.

Niko, with his wide grin and bright eyes and unguarded face, made it impossible to keep it abstract anymore.

Ilya had been that small.

He had been a child.

"It is a weird feeling," Ilya finally said, his voice quiet. "Seeing Nikolai be the age I was when I found her."

She nodded. "Has that been on your mind lately?"

"Not really," Ilya said automatically. Then he paused, his brow furrowing. Had it been? "I mean, I don't look at Niko and think, 'oh, wow, look at that, you are the age I was when my mother killed herself.' It's not like that."

"What is it like?" Galina asked.

"I don't know," Ilya said. "He is just a baby, you know? In my eyes. I watch him get to just be a kid. Lose a game and be upset about it for an hour and then be fine. Stress about a math test." He shook his head. "He is so young. Too young to handle anything more than that. And then I think..." He paused. "So was I."

He looked at his hands. "But I am not sitting around thinking about it constantly."

"But it's a reflection point for you," Galina said softly. "Like when you turned your mother's age when she passed."

He nodded. When Ilya turned thirty-eight, the same age his mother had been when she died, it had hit him in ways he hadn't anticipated. He went through a dark stretch that he didn't like to think about for too long. Galina had helped him work through that too; the grief, the guilt, the strange vertigo of outliving the version of his mother that he carried in his head. It made him petrified of leaving Shane and the kids alone, if anything were to ever happen to him.

That was years ago now. He didn't think what he was going through currently was necessarily the same thing.

But he wasn't entirely sure anymore.

"When I see Niko, I see so much of Shane," Ilya continued, and despite everything, he smiled thinking about it. "He looks *so* much like Shane. His little mini me. I love it." The smile lingered. "But now that he's this age...maybe I am seeing myself through him too. Just a little. And I don't—" His throat tightened. "I don't want that for him."

"Is it that you think if he resembles you, or reminds you at all of yourself, he'll go through what you did?"

He looked at the ceiling for a moment, then back at her. "That sounds a bit stupid, now that you say it out loud," he said. "But—yes."

"It's not stupid," she reassured. "It's understandable. You don't want him going through what you experienced at that age."

Ilya shook his head firmly. "No. Never." He frowned. "But, I mean, there is a correlation, right? He is twelve. I am in a bad depression episode right now..."

"And are you here, in this room, actively working to get better?"

Ilya leaned back in his seat, rubbing at his earlobe. "Yes."

Galina looked at him steadily. "Then that's what he'll see," she said. "You taking care of yourself. Thinking about what's best for your family even in the middle of struggling. You're already giving him everything that you deserved to have at his age."

Ilya nodded. He wanted to believe her, so he didn't say out loud his immediate thought.

That his mother had loved him too, just as fiercely as Ilya loved his kids, and it still hadn't been enough to protect him.

Ilya did end up leaving session feeling better, which was a relief in itself. He was more present at dinner than he'd felt in a while. He knew one session wasn't going to fix anything, as much as some part of him wanted it to work that way. But it was moving the needle, slowly, in the right direction.

After dinner, Shane intercepted him before he could start on the dishes—something he'd been doing more often lately. Being very firm in his very Shane way about the normal household chores they usually split pretty evenly.

Go play with the kids," he said, already reaching past him to start moving the leftovers into containers.

He'd been doing that every evening. Some version of the same thing each time: Go to the kids. Read Mila a story. Put a movie on with the boys. Let me handle this.

Ilya obliged, and when he got to the living room he was met with all three of them sprawled across the floor—Mila flat on her back in the middle of a mess of stuffed animals, the boys on either side of her with their legs tangled together, nobody too particularly concerned about the amount of space any of them were taking up.

"Children," he loudly announced as he walked in the room. "We have a big problem."

They all looked up. Niko looked genuinely worried for a second.

Ilya put a hand on his forehead and shook his head. "I made a mistake."

"What 'stake, Papa?" Mila asked.

"I forgot, I picked up a new job at a restaurant. Starting tomorrow," he said solemnly. "I made them a promise I will have three burritos ready for them by then."

Max was grinning big.

Ilya reached back and grabbed a throw blanket off the couch. He held it up and looked between the three of them with great seriousness. "I need some tasty, tasty meat for my burrito." He tilted his head slowly. "Who here is the tastiest?"

Mila shrieked before he'd even taken a step. "Max!" she squealed, pointing at him with great conviction.

"Max, hm?" Ilya repeated, already moving. "Not little girls named Mila?"

She screamed and tried to scramble off the cushion. He crossed the room in two strides and scooped her up mid-escape, wrapping the blanket around her whole body and tucking it in tight while she dissolved completely.

"Noo!" she shrieked, laughing so hard the word barely made it out, her legs kicking uselessly against the blanket.

Ilya set her on the floor, wrapped up in a burrito and all, and sniffed her like a rabid dog. "Hmm. What goes on a burrito?" He sniffed again. "Is it...boogers?"

She screamed louder.

"Cheese!" Max exclaimed from beside him.

"*Da!* That's right. Put the cheese on, Max."

Max leaned in immediately, sprinkling imaginary cheese all over her, which meant tickling her until her face went red and she could barely breathe.

Niko smiled and stacked a few pillows on top of Mila's blanketed, still-shaking form. "And sour cream."

"Perfect." Ilya was grinning, both hands resting on Mila as she giggled underneath him. "My boss will be so happy tomorrow. Now I am only missing two more burritos."

"No!" Max shrieked, already laughing.

"No? You are sure?"

Max grabbed the other blanket off the couch and launched himself at Ilya with it, trying to wrap it around him. Ilya let it happen, dropping dramatically to the floor like he'd been taken out at the knees.

"What is this!"

Max clambered onto his back, wrestling the blanket around him. Ilya resisted just enough to give him something to push against, then let his head get shoved dramatically toward the floor when Max grabbed a fistful of his hair and leaned his whole body weight into it.

"Max, watch his head," Niko said, sharp enough that Max pulled his hands back immediately and looked at him.

Ilya turned his head to the side. Niko was sitting cross-legged a few feet away, throw pillow still in his lap, watching them with that quiet, careful attention of his. The same look he'd been giving Ilya for a few weeks now, actually. Niko's eyes tracking Ilya from across a room, always seeming to be just slightly tuned in to wherever Ilya was.

Ilya reached out and wrapped his hand around Niko's ankle, squeezing it playfully.

"It's fine. Your papa has a very strong head."

Over the next few weeks, Shane noticed Ilya looking more like himself. Small things at first. His laugh reaching his eyes again. More nights where he actually slept through. Shane still checked the pill bottle in the medicine cabinet every morning, just to be sure. He'd probably keep doing that for a while.

It made Shane so deeply happy in a way he didn't have words for. Watching Ilya come back, little by little.

Shane had cut his hours at work ever since that morning Ilya had the breakdown. It wasn't something he'd deliberated over; it was just what he was going to do. No question about it.

His job made it possible. That was one of the things he'd come to appreciate about the skills development role he'd moved into with Coach Wiebe after retiring from playing—it had been built around him in a lot of ways. Less travel. More control over his own schedule. He was still on the ice every day, still working with players one-on-one on the technical parts of their game, still spending hours with video footage and individualized training plans. But he didn't have to be on a bus or plane every other week.

So he shortened his days. Picked up more of the school runs, the grocery store, the laundry, the dinner. The things that Shane knew from watching Ilya these past weeks could feel completely insurmountable when your brain was working against you. He wanted Ilya to be able to wake up in the morning and not immediately face a list. To just focus on getting better.

He was picking up Niko from hockey practice now, which had just finished up. He pushed off the wall he'd been leaning against when he spotted Niko coming out of the locker room. Joggers, hoodie, gear bag slung over one shoulder. One of Shane's old Centaurs hoodies, actually—Niko had a habit of quietly making them disappear from the closet, which Shane suspected was at least *partially* intentional. Hard not to look cool in front of your teammates when your parents were who they were.

"Good practice?" Shane asked as he got closer.

"Yeah." Niko recoiled slightly as Shane reached out to pick some lint off the front of his hoodie. "I'm really hungry."

"Shocker," Shane said, reaching out to grab Niko's gear bag he was holding. Niko let him. He knew no amount of fuss would stop Shane from doing it anyway.

They fell into step together toward the parking lot. The air was cold, their breath coming out in small clouds.

"You've been the one picking me up from practice more," Niko said.

Shane adjusted the bag on his shoulder and smiled. "Sorry to disappoint."

"No, I don't mean it like that," Niko backpedaled. "I just mean—you're usually still at work at this time."

"I'm joking," Shane said as they walked to the car. "I've just been able to be pretty flexible lately."

They stopped at the trunk. Niko watched him load the bag in. "But why?"

Shane looked at him as he closed the trunk. "Can't a guy just want to pick up his kid?"

"Dad," Niko said, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

They got in the car. Shane started the engine and adjusted the heat. "I've just been able to be more flexible at work lately. You know this—I can do that sometimes. Like when I went back to work after having Mila, remember? I had shorter days for a while so I could be home more."

Niko buckled himself in, still watching Shane carefully. "Yeah...but you didn't just have a baby."

Shane glanced at him as he pulled out onto the road. "I just want to be around a little more right now. Help Papa with some of the load. That's all."

Niko looked out the window and didn't say anything.

Shane checked him at the next stoplight. "Are you mad at me? We can go back to having Papa pick you up, if that's what you want."

"No, it's not that."

"Then what is it?"

Niko continued looking out the window, working his jaw. Shane tried to steal a few glances from him without making it too obvious he was hovering.

"Nothing," Niko eventually mumbled.

"Seems like it's something," Shane said gently.

There were a few more moments of silence, just the hum of the heater and the wipers going steady against the light drizzle.

"I know Papa's sick."

Shane's blood ran cold. He looked at Niko. "What? No. He's not sick, Niko."

"I can help out," Niko continued. "I can take on more if that's what we need. You don't need to treat me like a little kid—"

"—Niko, *Niko*," Shane interrupted. "What are you talking about? Papa's not sick."

"You said." Niko's voice was tight, controlled in a way that reminded Shane a little too much of himself. "I heard you and him fighting in the kitchen that morning. You said something about the ER and keeping him alive." His voice wobbled on the last part. He turned further toward the window, his shoulders hunching. "And now he's been going to these doctor appointments every week. So don't tell me nothing's wrong."

Oh fuck, oh *fuck*.

Niko had heard more of that fight than Shane had realized. Way more. His heart started hammering against his ribs. That had been weeks ago now, the morning he'd found out Ilya hadn't been taking his antidepressants for nearly a week.

"Ilya," Shane had said, panicking. "I am saying if you're going through withdrawal, you can't even take care of *yourself* right now, let alone—"

"Oh yes, okay," Ilya barked, snatching his phone off the counter and jabbing at the screen, "I call doctor now. Hello! Yes! Please send ambulance because my husband thinks I am crazy fucking man who cannot take care of children—"

"Ilya." Shane had reached for his arm.

"—Maybe also tell them to send social worker! To take my children away, because I am danger to society—"

"If you were on heart medication," Shane had shouted over him, his voice raw and desperate, "and stopped taking it for *six fucking days*, you'd be in the ER! Do you understand that? Is that fucking sinking in for you? This isn't about you being crazy, this is about you staying *alive*, Ilya!"

"Niko," Shane said urgently, reaching out toward him.

Niko pulled back slightly, pressing himself closer to the passenger door.

Shane's chest felt like it was splitting right down the middle. "Honey," he said, forcing his voice to stay gentle even though panic was clawing up his throat. "You caught that completely out of context. And I'm really, really sorry you heard us fighting like that."

"What context could there be?" Niko said sharply. He finally turned to look at Shane, and his eyes were wet, threatening to spill over.

It absolutely gutted Shane.

He wanted to pull over and unbuckle both their seatbelts and engulf Niko into his arms and not let go until his son believed that everything was going to be okay. But Niko wasn't even letting him touch his shoulder right now.

This was not a conversation Shane had wanted to be having. And especially not without Ilya.

"Papa takes medication to help his brain feel better," Shane started carefully. How the fuck do you explain this to a twelve-year-old? How much detail should he be going into?

Niko's eyes immediately went wide. "Like a tumor? Does he have a brain tumor?"

"No!" Shane said quickly. "No, nothing like that. Not his brain like—not physically." God, he hated how fast Niko's mind moved sometimes. "For his mind. To help him not feel sad or tired in a way that's hard to explain. And Papa didn't take them for a little while—by accident—and I got scared." He held Niko's gaze. "But he's okay. He is okay."

Niko was silent for a beat "Like, mental illness?"

Oh. Did twelve-year-olds know what mental health was? Shane tried to remember what he'd understood at that age. He also didn't love the word *illness*, though he supposed it wasn't technically wrong.

"Your papa struggles with his mental health sometimes, yes," Shane said slowly, choosing each word. "But he's taking good care of it. He sees a doctor who helps him with it. And this is not something for you to worry about or try to fix, okay?"

Niko was looking right at him with those sharp eyes of his. Analyzing. Shane could tell he was being studied, every micro-expression catalogued. He wondered if his pulse was visible in his neck, if Niko could see the way his heart was hammering.

Niko frowned, his brow furrowing. "If he's okay and it's nothing to worry about, then why are *you* worried about him?"

The questions. All the questions. He was Shane's kid, after all.

"Because," Shane started. He exhaled. "Because I wasn't sure he was getting enough help. And I wasn't sure he was telling me what he needed. But he's getting it now. And he's doing much better."

Niko's frown didn't move. "Why did you say that him feeling sad and tired is hard to explain?"

"Because it is. There's not one reason for it."

"Well, what are the reasons?"

"Niko..."

"Can't you name one?" he pressed, setting his jaw.

Shane looked at him. "I think that's a conversation for when Papa is here," he said carefully.

"You can't tell me *one* reason?"

Shane's heart was hammering. Niko knew, vaguely, about Ilya's upbringing. Maybe scratched the surface a bit of Ilya's trauma. But anything further, right now, was out of the question.

"Not without Papa," Shane said, a little more firmly. "That's his to share."

"If I knew one of the reasons, I could help," Niko said, his voice climbing.

"Niko." Shane tried to reach for him again, instinctively, but Niko once again didn't let him. Shane collapsed his hand back to his lap. "Niko, I already told you, you do not need to help with anything. It's our job to worry about you, not the other way around."

He narrowed his teary eyes at Shane. "Is it me? Am I one of the reasons he's sad?"

Shane felt his stomach drop. "Oh God, Niko, no. Absolutely not—"

"Is it Max? Mila? I can talk to them."

"Niko, *no*." Shane's heart was breaking. He tried again to reach for Niko's hand, but Niko pulled away and crossed his arms tightly over his chest, tucking his hands under his armpits.

Niko turned back toward the window, his jaw set.

Shane knew this posture. Had seen it before when Niko didn't get the answer he wanted, when the world wasn't making sense the way he needed it to. And he knew from experience that pushing him during these moments would only make it worse. That Niko needed space to process before he could accept any form of physical comfort.

A tuft of Niko's hair was sticking up at the back of his head, still damp and sweaty from practice. Shane wanted more than anything to smooth it down, to feel the familiar warmth of his son's head under his palm.

But he resisted the urge. Just kept his hands on the wheel and kept driving, the silence in the car heavy and awful.

When they got home, Niko went straight to his room without acknowledging anyone, his footsteps heavy on the stairs.

Ilya, who was in the kitchen wiping down the counters, looked up when Shane came in. He took one look at Shane's face, and his brow furrowed immediately. "What's wrong with Niko? Did something happen at practice?"

Shane glanced over at Mila, who was at the kitchen table, completely absorbed in building something elaborate with her magnet tiles. "Mila, baby," he said softly. "Can you go play with Maxie in the living room for a little bit?"

She looked up at him. "I'm buildin', Daddy."

"I can see that. It looks great," Shane said. "But can you go ask Max if he can help you build an even bigger tower? Just for a few minutes, okay?"

She pouted, but after a second of consideration, she nodded. Shane lifted her out of her chair and set her carefully on her feet. "Thank you, sweetheart," he murmured, giving her a gentle pat on the back as she scampered off toward the living room.

Shane straightened and turned back to Ilya. He crossed the kitchen and put his hand on Ilya's lower back, grounding. "Niko overheard part of our fight in the kitchen from a few weeks ago," he said, keeping his voice calm and steady. "He's had it in his head that you've been sick."

The color drained from Ilya's face. "What?"

"But—" Shane quickly interjected before Ilya could spiral. "I talked to him about it in the car. Explained some of it."

"What did he hear? What exactly did he hear?"

Shane's expression softened as he watched Ilya's face crumple. "He heard me say the thing about how if you were on heart medication and stopped taking it, you'd end up in the ER," he said carefully. "And the part about keeping you alive."

"Oh fuck." Ilya's hands immediately went to his hair, fingers digging in, and he tried to step back, but Shane kept his hand firm on his lower back, holding him there. "Oh fuck, Shane. I didn't know he heard that. Is he scared? Did he seem scared?"

"He seemed worried," Shane admitted. "But, you know how he is. He wants answers. He wants to help. He gets frustrated when he can't."

"I need to talk to him," Ilya said, already turning toward the stairs.

Shane caught his arm. "Go to your appointment," he said. "Talk to Galina, just like you were planning to do anyway."

"Shane, who knows what else he's thinking right now—"

"He's okay, Ilya," Shane interrupted, keeping his voice gentle. "He wants some space. You know how he gets when he's processing something. He needs time before he's ready to talk

about it." He squeezed Ilya's arm. "So just go. Talk with Galina. Everything's going to be okay."

Ilya nodded, his eyes still fixed on the stairs. "Can you—" He swallowed hard. "Can you please make sure he keeps his door open?"

Shane's expression softened completely. "Yes. Of course."

"Even if he wants it closed. Don't let him."

"I know," Shane said firmly, both hands on Ilya's arms now. "I know, Ilya. I'll make sure, okay? I promise."

Ilya nodded. He looked at Shane for another long moment, at the steadiness of his face that Ilya never understood how he managed to maintain during situations like this.

Then he finally turned toward the front door.

"I've fucked up Niko."

Ilya didn't even sit on the couch when he walked into the therapy room. Just stood there, keys still in his fist, the teeth of them pressing into his palm.

Galina was watching, not saying anything yet.

"I've traumatized him," Ilya said, starting to pace in front of the couch, his movements agitated. "He overheard part of our fight. Or maybe all of it. He thinks I have been sick this whole time—maybe he thinks I've been *dying*. And I did not even know, did not even check on him since it happened." His heart was hammering against his ribs. He finally collapsed onto the couch, running both hands through his hair hard enough that it hurt.

"Let's take a breath," Galina said slowly. "Walk me back to the beginning. What happened?"

"He told Shane in the car, apparently," Ilya said, his words tumbling out fast. Speaking fully in Russian meant he didn't have to slow down to translate. "Just now, when they were driving home from practice. Shane told me Niko thinks I've been sick—very sick—because he overheard the ER comment, and the keeping me alive comment during the fight." He was breathing too hard, couldn't seem to slow it down. "Niko ran straight to his room when he got home. I don't know what he's thinking, or what they really said to each other, or what else Niko heard that morning Shane and I fought."

Galina nodded, setting her pen down and sitting more forward in her seat. "Niko is safe at home, Shane's with him. You are here. Let's hold onto that for just a second before your brain tells you that—"

"—This is all coming true." Ilya's interrupted, his voice was panicked now.

"What do you mean?"

What do you mean what do I mean? Ilya wanted to scream. Or maybe just walk out. He shouldn't have come here, he should have gone straight to Niko's room and stayed there until Niko could see with his own eyes that Ilya was okay, that he was here, that he was not—

"I thought you've been reassuring me this wouldn't happen," he said, the panic fully bleeding into his voice now. "All our conversations lately, about him now being my age when—it—happened, about how I did not want him to see me like—like this, *depressed*, sick—and now it is all true. The worst-case scenario is true. I did not protect him from seeing this."

His eyes were stinging. He could feel his breath going uneven. He knew he probably wasn't making complete sense but he couldn't find the thread to pull himself back.

Galina let the silence sit for a moment before she spoke.

"Your mother," she said. "Did she ever tell you she was depressed? Did she ever tell you how she was feeling?"

Ilya's jaw tightened. He didn't really want to talk about this right now, rehashing old memories, when every second he was in this room was a second he wasn't with his son.

He shook his head.

"But from what you've described to me over the years," Galina continued gently, "you saw the changes in her behavior. You noticed something was different, saw how she was treated by your father, but you didn't understand what it meant. And no one explained it to you."

Ilya nodded slowly. He sank back into the couch, his hands clasped so tightly in his lap that his knuckles had gone white.

"What you're doing with Niko is different," she said. "Niko feels safe enough with his parents to even bring this up. And Shane talked to him. And you're going to talk to him too, when you get home, right? You're going to answer his questions honestly."

Ilya nodded. "Yes."

"That is fundamentally different from what happened to you," Galina continued. "You didn't have anyone to explain what was happening with your mother or reassure you that she was getting help." She paused. "Niko has that. He has you and Shane. He may be worried right now. But he's not alone."

Ilya wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, rough and impatient. They were coming faster than he could get ahead of them. "I just—" His breath hitched. "I don't want Niko seeing me like this."

"How do you think Niko sees you?"

"Like how I saw my mother."

Galina held his gaze steadily. "How did you see your mother?"

Ilya didn't say anything for a moment. "Sad," he finally said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Very, very sad."

Galina nodded, waiting. "How else?"

Ilya's throat worked. He looked down at his hands, watching his thumbs rub against each other. "Beautiful," he said quietly.

"What was beautiful about her?"

Ilya didn't even know where to begin. A million memories of her flooded through him at once. Her golden curls and the way her eyes crinkled when she smiled. The way she hummed him to sleep, the same song every time. The faint smell of vanilla when he hugged her on the days she made medovik or sharlotka

"Everything." He exhaled slowly. "She was so kind. Gentle with me." His eyes stung again. "I get to see her every day now, in the kids. I hear her in Niko's laugh. I feel her in Max's rib-crushing hugs." The corner of his mouth moved. "I see her in Mila's smile." His voice went quieter. "I get to say hello to her every day, in a way. She is just as beautiful as I remember."

When Ilya eventually looked up, Galina was smiling at him, soft and patient, even if she was a bit blurry at the edges right now.

"Your depression isn't who you are," Galina said gently. "Even when it feels all-consuming. You're not a depressed father. You're a father who has depression." She held his gaze. "Niko has seen a million different versions of you. And he loves every one of them."

Ilya didn't say anything. He pressed his lips together and looked away, toward the picture of the painting of that little boat on the wall again, blinking hard. If he looked at her directly right now, he wouldn't be able to stop crying.

When Ilya got home, he immediately went to Niko's room. He stood outside his door for a moment when he got there. It was cracked open a few inches, and he could hear the faint, tinny bleed of audio from headphones.

He knocked softly on the door frame. Nothing. He pushed the door open the rest of the way.

Niko was sprawled out on his bed, typing away on his phone. He looked up when Ilya appeared in his peripheral vision and pulled one side of the headphones off his ear.

"Hi," Ilya said from the doorway. "Can we talk?"

Niko nodded, setting the phone face-down on the mattress beside him.

Ilya stepped inside, pulling the door mostly closed behind him. He stood there for a second, hands finding his pockets. Trying to gauge if Niko would allow him to get any closer right now.

"I know you already spoke with your father in the car," he began slowly. "And I'm sure you have some questions for me."

Niko nodded once. His expression was careful. Not cold exactly, but definitely guarded.

"Is it okay if we have this conversation in Russian?" Ilya asked softly.

Another nod.

Ilya moved to the end of the bed and sat down. Niko didn't shift away, so after a moment Ilya angled himself a little closer. He looked at Niko for a long moment before speaking.

"First of all," he said, transitioning into Russian. "I'm sorry you heard your father and I fighting. I didn't know you did. We would've talked to you sooner if we knew." He let that sit for a few seconds, searching Niko's face. "But I am not dying. I am not sick. I'm not going anywhere."

Niko frowned, shifting a little on the bed.

"What questions do you have?"

Niko didn't say anything for a few moments. Then: "Why are you sad and tired all the time?" His voice was even, but he was watching Ilya carefully. "Dad said there were a lot of different reasons. But he wouldn't tell me what they were."

Ilya smiled a bit. "That's because your father didn't want to speak for me, out of respect," he said softly. "Not because he was trying to hide anything from you." He looked at him. "There are many different reasons, he is right."

"I had very bad things happen to me when I was young," he continued. "I lost my mother, like you know, when I was your age. And I did not have such a great father."

"And your brother sucked," Niko added quietly.

Ilya smiled a little despite everything. "Yes. He sucked very much," he agreed. "Which was all very hard and confusing for me. And even though I am so happy now, and you and Max and Mila and your father are the best things to ever happen to me, sometimes my brain is still not so nice to me. Partly because it grew up hearing and seeing not very nice things for a long time."

Niko's frown deepened. "That's not fair."

Ilya's chest tightened. "You are right," he said softly. "It is not fair at all."

They sat with that for a moment.

"Have you heard of depression?" Ilya asked quietly.

Niko nodded. "Like when you're really sad all the time?"

"A little bit like that," Ilya said. "It's more like...when your brain is telling you that you're sad, or very tired, and you don't really know exactly why. Even when good things are happening all around you. That's what I have."

Niko was watching him carefully.

"Not every day is hard," Ilya continued. "But some are. When my brain is not being very kind to me." He thought for a second. "You know how after a big game, once the adrenaline is gone and the celebrating is over, you get sluggish? You always fall asleep early on those nights."

"Yeah."

"It is a little like that. On the sad days, my whole body and mind feel the way your muscles do the morning after a game. Heavy. Slow." He looked at Niko. "Even when everything around me is going well."

Niko leaned in slightly, his shoulder pressing against Ilya's arm, studying his face. Ilya put his hand on his knee.

"I don't like that," Niko said quietly. "I don't want you to feel like that."

"I know." Ilya smiled and brushed his thumb across his knee. "That is because you have a very big heart." He let out a long breath. "I have medicine that helps me. And I see a doctor—Dr. Galina—who is trained to help people who have depression. The same way we take you to the doctor when you have the flu and make you drink that disgusting medicine you hate."

Niko almost smiled at that. "Is that where you've been going? To see Dr. Galina?"

"Yes. Every week right now."

Niko nodded slowly. Then, quieter: "Is it working?"

"It is," Ilya said honestly. "Very much. Slowly. Some days are harder than others. But yes, it is helping."

Niko nodded. "That's good."

"And Niko," Ilya said. "None of this is your fault. There is nothing here for you to fix. Okay?"

He nodded. "Okay."

"Can you repeat that back to me?" Ilya asked gently.

Niko sighed, a little exasperated. "Papa."

Ilya smiled and nudged his leg. "Please? For me."

"It's not my fault," Niko said, his voice quiet but steady.

"And?" Ilya prompted.

"And there's nothing I need to fix."

"Good. Thank you." Ilya squeezed his knee and held it there. "Do you have any other questions for me?"

Niko was quiet for a moment. "Is there something I can do?" he finally asked. "Like, when you're having one of the sad days? To help?"

Ilya felt his chest go warm. He smiled and leaned in to kiss Niko's cheek; he couldn't help himself. He was grateful when Niko didn't completely shove him away when he did it. "There is nothing you have to do," he said softly. "Except continue being the very sweet, very wonderful boy you already are."

Niko made a face at that, but he didn't pull away.

"Although," Ilya added with a small smile, "if you try not to pick fights with your siblings or your father on those days, that would be very much appreciated."

Niko huffed out a laugh. "I don't pick fights."

"No?" Ilya raised an eyebrow. "So this morning, when you told Max the breakfast he worked so hard on looked like dog food, what exactly was that?"

"An accurate observation," Niko stated, the corner of his mouth pulling up.

Ilya laughed, pulling him in by the shoulder. "You are trouble."

They sat like that for a moment, neither of them saying anything, the house quiet around them.

"There is one thing you can do, actually," Ilya said. "Something that would make your father and me very happy."

Niko perked up a bit.

Ilya pulled back a bit so he could look back at his face. He cupped his chin, his thumb brushing across the freckles on his cheeks. His little Shane. Everywhere he looked. "Be open with us," he said. "About how you're feeling. Sad, happy, confused, something you don't even have words for yet. Bring it to us. I want to hear it all." He held his gaze. "If you can't find the words, I will help you look for them."

Niko was watching him. Then he nodded, slow and certain. "Okay. I can do that."

Ilya's eyes burned. He pressed his thumb once more across Niko's cheek, then moved his hand quickly to rub at his own eye hastily. "That is all we ask," he said. "That is everything."

Niko's glanced at the side for a moment. He pulled his feet up onto the bed and hugged his knees to his chest.

"Papa?"

"Hm?"

Niko shifted, tucking his feet under Ilya's legs. "I feel...good."

Ilya could've burst into tears right then and there. He pulled Niko in closer and kissed the top of his head.

"I feel good too."

End Notes

I was finishing writing this fic when the discourse about harassment against fic writers started last week. And I'm not going to lie, for the first time since writing this series, I felt hesitant to keep going with this specific one because of the hate I've been seeing. What really made me almost stop was hearing that an out of context snippet of someone's fic exploring Ilya's depression got posted on twitter and bombarded with hate...what the fuck is going on.

I want to give a huge thank you to all of those who have sent such kind words in the comments, because that's what really what motivated me to keep writing this fic. I think I've also had an influx of readers for this series recently (hi!!), so I just really cannot express how much I appreciate the support. I know this one is not the usual fluff like most of the series and is less kid-centered, and I completely understand if this is not your cup of tea! But I appreciate all the words of encouragement in continuing to explore more angsty topics for this universe, because that's been an interest of mine since starting this series. But there'll be more domestic fluff, I promise 🍷

I have been very fortunate to receive limited negative feedback (aside from a few users who've negatively rated my works in their PUBLIC bookmarks, I didn't realize people did this lol). But my heart really goes out to the authors out there, and I've been trying to find more ways to support HR authors beyond just commenting and leaving kudos. So I've made my bookmarks tab public in case anyone's looking for recs and authors to send some love to 💕 They're my favorite authors and all have gorgeous fics!!

As always, thank you so much for reading!! xx

Edit: I am overwhelmed with the support :'(I want to reply to as many comments as I can, thank you all so much 💕💕

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!