

you are the one mouth i would be a tongue to.

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by [hcneymooners \(romqntics\)](#)

Summary

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Outside, the snow continues its work of erasure. Inside, Shane's breathing begins to even out, every limb recalling how to be a man at rest rather than an animal fawning and freezing. The trembling subsides, wave by wave, as if Ilya's hand is smoothing it out of him.

"Sleep, *зайчик*," Ilya says softly, his free hand coming to rest in Shane's hair. "I have you."

This is not true, Shane thinks, and it is also the only true thing.

★

recovery, shane learns, is not a straight line. to begin to understand something, you must first name it.

Notes

this was supposed to be short. but i can't be normal about anything, i've always been a very intense person and i can't be anything else. thank you so much for the comments and kudos on my last hollanov fic, they meant the world to me and i slightly still cannot believe my luck.

content note: this fic deals extensively and explicitly with eating disorders, specifically restrictive eating disorders/anorexia. it includes detailed descriptions of disordered eating behaviors, calorie counting, food restriction, health anxiety, and panic attacks. while this story ultimately centers recovery and ends on a note of hope, the journey is not sanitized; recovery is portrayed as difficult, non-linear, and ongoing.

if you're in recovery yourself, please take care while reading. if these topics are triggering for you, please prioritize your wellbeing. recovery looks different for everyone. the approaches, timeline, and experiences depicted here are specific to this character and should not be taken as prescriptive or universal.

i love you.

title from "who" by sylvia plath.

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

There are numbers in everything.

Shane counts the days, the space in between Ilya *here*, with him, and Ilya *there*. Every year, winter feels like a rumor, the far-off smoke of a colorless fire that only becomes tangible when the snow accumulates in a blizzard and buries them underneath it. Then it is real, that stretch of no-sun and relentless dip in energy, emphasized by the strong bend of Ilya's back against Shane's stomach as he sleeps.

Winter is hard for many reasons, but it is especially hard for Ilya, who houses some dark lake inside of him that never freezes and instead deepens the further into the season they get. Shane doesn't mind it as much as his husband thinks he does; there is comfort in kissing Ilya's grown-out golden curls as he weeps into waking, there is memory housed in the small space between Shane's mouth—open and leaking kisses to Ilya's crown—and the slope of Ilya's shoulder. Winter is never truly about anyone but them, and rarely about him (*Hollander*, Ilya says into the dark), so the winter that everything falls apart is a surprise in many ways.

It is less of a falling, and more of a sliding, like rolling over to sleep in the sun, only to discover it has become so hot that the sand has been transfigured into glass and your body is tumbling—sweeping movements of flailing limbs with no hope of reaching water.

Shane's therapist later tells him that she is unsure of how far he could've gotten with it, but Shane likes to believe in himself at the wrong times, so he tells her,

"Pretty far."

The first ringing of the bell is before the cottage, before they've packed up and left, occurring in the remains of a dinner party as most self-important things do.

Isla is seventeen and Shane's favorite of the Pike children, though you're not supposed to have those, and she asks the kind of questions that require honesty because she knows that adults have learned not to answer them, and is taking advantage before she reaches an age where she forgets to ask.

They're alone in the kitchen—Hayden outside smoking with Ilya, Jackie putting the baby down—and Shane's plate has the structural integrity of something arranged for a viewing rather than to be eaten. Grilled chicken, no skin. Vegetables that have been steamed into sad submission, the broccoli left too long, though Shane would never mention that. The wine is good, expensive, and white, what Hayden saves for whenever Shane visits.

"Do you always eat like this?" Isla asks. She's not being cruel. Her own plate is half-finished, pushed aside for her phone, and she looks at him the way you look at something you're trying

to understand the mechanics of.

Shane says, "Yes," because it's true, and then a stumble, "I'm an athlete, so you know. It's all about healthy."

Isla nods. She has Jackie's dark eyes, Hayden's mouth. Her hair is dyed a terrifying platinum blonde that emphasises how bloodlessly pale her skin can seem, and across her thigh is the texture of the tennis racket she'd sat on for approximately twenty minutes before noticing, folded small in a lounge chair on the deck.

She's very fearless, Shane thinks idly. Likes to sit close to the fire in the pit, eyes alight like a scientist.

"My friend Mara does that too," she says now. "She counts everything."

Shane wants to say that he does not count everything, thank you. But the wine has loosened his memory, and he knows he has been counting since before Isla was born, since before Hayden was his friend, since the first time someone with a degree and his mother's backing told him his body could be *better*, *optimal*, and he believed them.

"It's hard," Isla says, and she means it simply, the way you'd say the weather is cold, and Shane thinks about the cottage, weeks off in this moment, about the particular quality of silence that comes with snow, about how Ilya will be waiting for him to say something, anything, and how Shane has been very good at saying nothing personal outside of his own mind for a very long time.

The drive north happens around three weeks later, when the season has beaten Shane's body into something that only technically belongs to him. Ilya drives because Shane's shoulder has started to make a clicking sound when he rotates it, a small mechanical failure he hasn't mentioned to anyone, not even the team doctors who would write it down, prescribe it, again make it real.

Outside the window, the world is adorned in winter, performing the frigidity with a certain strain of commitment that makes you forget it had ever been anything else. The snow doesn't fall so much as materialize, thick and directionless, effacing the highway in increments.

The trees are weighted with it, branches bowed in postures of supplication or surrender—Shane can never tell which. Everything is blue-white, eerie; that particular absence of startlingly bright color that is a product of snow and sky's conspiracy to become the same thing.

Shane watches it and thinks about disappearing. Not *dying*—he's never been interested in that—but the specific relief that arrives with being obscured, covered over, made into landscape instead of person. Lana del Rey sang about this once, Isla showed him. The snow accomplishes this without effort. It smothers the road and the trees and the mile markers until there is nothing to count, nothing to measure against. Just the hypnotic homogeneity of white.

Ilya has the heat on high, and it is uncomfortable—Shane can feel sweat gathering at the base of his spine, the hairs at the nape of his neck beginning to slick, too—but he says nothing of

it because Ilya runs cold, has *always* run cold, and Shane has spent too many years calibrating his own comfort around his husband's body temperature to begin stopping now.

This is love, he thinks, or a version of it. Mathematics, sometimes. A silent appraisal of needs, and whose get prioritized.

His wrist looks small when he takes off his watch and puts it in the cupholder. He notices this the way you notice a crack in a wall, with the dull certainty that it's been there for a while, that you've been choosing not to see it. Isla's voice comes back to him: *Do you always eat like this?* As if eating were a style, a choice, something you could do differently if you wanted to.

The cottage is still two hours away.

Shane counts the white lines on the highway until they blur into continuous ribbon, until his eyes ache with the effort of tracking them, and then he stops counting, and his body doesn't know what to do with the silence that follows.

He slides into a familiar dream, his mother and he.

In this dream, they are at the beach, and the world is bright and open, and he understands his mother perfectly.

They sit with their stomachs exposed, free from the compulsion to press their hand against their side, searching for reason. Yuna is beside him, crowned with a wide-brim hat, hair dark and cascading down her shoulders like an oil slick over the surface of a gulf.

Everything is bathed in light, delicious and searing, as if looking down into a pan oiled and packed with steak. Perhaps it's this bright because Shane knows his mother and knows, too, that they will never truly be here because he is not a child anymore and there are rarely any beach trips with the demands of his season, his profession entirely. In her lap rests a bowl of ripe, heavy blueberries, liberated from their plastic prison from the food co-op back she likes to go to with his father. They tumble down, follow the road of her stomach and thighs, and she lets them, unburdened by thoughts of waste or lost moments.

This world cuts into him with its perfection. He mirrors her: strong nose, sharp mouth slightly fuller than others, the subtle freckling along his cheeks. Undeniably from elsewhere.

They rarely speak in this dream, simply watching the water chase itself along the sand, their eyes tracking distant figures as they plunge from their boards into the hungry waves. In this dream, there is nothing wrong with his mother and him.

That's how he knows it's a dream.

Here, hunger is not a weapon to turn against yourself. Here he is free like everyone else, never to relapse because he has no disease, because there is nothing to return to.

I think I might have a [], he tells her.

They both know the truth isn't something you pull on like a cardigan; it sticks to you like heat. Yuna hums, and Shane knows this isn't his mother because his mother would weep.

Have you juiced today? she asks, and for once, the question doesn't drop like a stone into his stomach.

Yeah, he answers. *Celery. The green was beautiful.*

It's the last thing Shane says before he wakes up.

His therapist's name is Clare, and he finds her weeks before he actually sees her. He would like to say that Isla Pike was the only push he needed, but there are other ringings of the same bell. The loudest sounds on their first day back at the cottage.

To put it neatly, he has a rather large and disorienting panic attack. To let it sprawl, it happens like this:

He wakes in the middle of the night to a flood of notifications (*These Spices Will Change Your Life! Ancient Remedies You're Missing!*) and a desert in his throat. The bedside water bottle feels treacherously light, but some invisible force pins Shane to the bed, making the thought of a downstairs trip impossible. His head throbs—likely from poor pillow positioning—but his mind is already at work, uncaring of a morning far off, conjuring a midnight tumor, burrowing into his brain stem while he slept unaware.

Somehow sleep reclaims him, but in the morning, his chest is still a racing engine, and Shane finds his hands trembling as he swallows his allotted supplements, chasing them with an anxiety pill. A rainbow fills his palm, a consumable alphabet of supposed wellness. He stirs Vitamin C powder into his tall glass of orange juice, swallowing the pills two at a time while staring out the window (always coupling since Ilya), his mind adrift, face swollen with sleep.

He then swallows a warm spoon of honey, the curved metal kissing the inside of his cheek before he removes it. In his hands is a cup of aloe and vanilla tea. Shane wonders if there is an alternative, if maybe how one lives is only a demo version of oneself. A thousand demos, and a thousand ways to cheat death.

He'd like to be the first to know how.

Eventually, he unfolds from his seat at the island and slips into the white throat of the bathroom to brush and whiten his teeth, abstaining from coffee for exactly forty-five minutes because the iron won't absorb well if he has it too early. While the gel sits on his Crest strips, Shane fixates absentmindedly on the increasing tooth sensitivity. By the time the timer's shrill cry pierces the air, he's convinced himself of multiple cavities, despite his dentist's recent reassurances, and Ilya is awake.

He thinks of a couple of days ago, of when things got rocky again.

Your iron is low, the doctor's voice had lilted through the phone. *But lipids are normal. You're doing great, Shane. Just stick to what you do.* Shane hummed with practiced concern, already plotting which iron supplement to choose, disregarding his recommendations. A headache had already threaded its way through his skull, and he imagined it as a string he could pull to facilitate his own unraveling.

However, cholesterol is high, his doctor continued, nearly crooning, and Shane wondered if this is normal for your thirties. He was folded into the perfect center of their apartment closet, feet tucked beneath him, one hand cupped over his ear to catch every word. It was always like this with the calls because Ilya hated his doctor, who was also his dietitian, who was also someone hired by his mother's meticulous managing—a man Ilya had once snarled looked ratlike in the face.

So, these calls had to be secret. A private rite with its private silence.

It could be stress, the doctor offered down the line, because there was not a day Shane didn't wake to nausea and dread. The exposure of hockey had long turned his chest into a bed of snakes.

When he shared this with his mother, she hummed in agreement. *You need to eat better* was her verdict, nevermind how Shane was trembling like a leaf inside his wardrobe door. Nevermind how Shane barely ate terribly at all. Anxiety, mental health—these are just inconveniences that proper nutrition could solve.

He imagined the feeling of 10mg of Zoloft dissolving, neat and sweet, beneath the tongue. But he nodded, bobbing like a buoy on rough seas, and left the closet with practiced nonchalance. This was being proactive, collecting symptoms like charms for a bracelet you're not sure is wanted.

Now Shane is back in the cottage kitchen, the memory distributing, causing a sudden pressure, vellicating his lungs and sending saliva surging from underneath his tongue as though he is about to vomit. And his heart is doing something wrong.

Well, not *wrong* exactly. He is standing here, and it is beating, yes—performing its function—but the rise and fall of it feels incorrect, a rhythm that is a truth to someone else's body. A burden that he is forced to endure without a thought. He can feel it in his throat, behind his eyes, a pulse that seems to be trying to escape through his skin.

A protein shake sits on the counter, already measured: thirty grams of cakey vanilla powder, unsweetened almond milk because they were out of soy, half a banana with those strange pale yellow tendrils that roll off its body at times.

Eighty-two (82) calories, potassium for an organ that is currently betraying him. Shane's hands tremble as he reaches for the blender, and the tremor travels up his arms like a current, like an electrical wire misfiring. He feels the spark land in the water, and he knows that there is no time left to ensure that he is okay.

His eyes squeeze shut, and he is five again, thighs wet with urine as he shudders through a terrible dark space inspired by a rather vivid nightmare. He used to crawl then, down that hallway, the floor wide and long and never ending. He used to make it to his mother, burrowing into Yuna's side where he could smell nothing but *gingercondensed milkhinokiyellowrose*.

And she'd wipe him down, cover all of his sensitivities and otherness, and he could bleed back into sleep with a peace that rang beneath his ribs whenever he escaped a circumstance that threatened to swallow him. He feels it rings more as he gets older, moreso now that he has Ilya between the world and himself.

But Yuna is down the road, which is still not here, and Shane is losing his body to panic. He thinks of Sylvia Plath:

Mother, you are the one mouth / I would be a tongue to. Mother of otherness / Eat me.

He thinks: *I am having a heart attack*. He thinks: *This is it, this is how it happens, alone in a cottage kitchen at thirty-four*.

The blender is going somehow, put on by him as if by muscle memory. It is far too loud. Everything is much too loud: the hum of the refrigerator, the creak of the floorboards upstairs as there is movement, but Ilya is probably still in bed (that can't be right, that's—), the blood in his ears like an ocean of spirit.

Here is his body reminding him that he is alive in the worst way.

Shane grips the counter edge, and his knuckles go white, bone showing through skin that suddenly seems too thin to contain him, and he wonders about the chances of gripping hard enough that he will simply pop out of it.

He needs to drink the shake. This will help, he is sure of it. He needs to get his protein in before the window closes, before his body begins consuming itself, before it all turns on him, before—

"Shane."

Ilya's voice cuts through the noise, and Shane turns to find his husband in the doorway, sleep-rumpled and squinting against the morning light. Ilya's hair is a mess of gold against his temple, and Shane thinks absurdly that he looks like something from a painting, something too beautiful to be looking at Shane right now, like this.

"I'm fine," Shane says, which is not the morning greeting he intended, which is what happens when you're not fine, when fine is a country that looks lovely and you understand that it is a border only crossable to other people. You haven't visited in so long that you've forgotten how to get there anymore.

Ilya moves closer, and Shane can see the exact moment his husband registers the situation: the way Shane's breathing has gone shallow and rapid, the sweat on his forehead despite the cottage's avid chill ("*All those windows. All that glass,*" he hears his mother chide gently), his death grip on the counter.

"Okay," Ilya says carefully, the way you'd speak to something wild and cornered. "Okay, *зайчик*, let's sit down."

Bunny, he calls him. As if Shane is something small and twitching and shaking in a trap, as if he is not a body bigger than that covered in skin dotted with small brown mountains.

"I need to—" Shane gestures vaguely at the blender, at the protein and the powders, at the whole elaborate system he's been upholding, that's kept him alive. "I haven't eaten yet. It's already past the window, I'm already—"

"Shane." Ilya's hand finds his elbow, warm and solid. He turns them, blocking as if they are on stage. "Sit down."

"No, I know. Just wait, just wait a minute—I need to—I'll be quick, promise. If I don't get it in now—" He can hear himself, how he sounds, but it is a sound traveling through snow. Thick and muffled, the concept of speaking. The words are pouring out in odd batches, like something that has been punctured, and whatever has lived inside is struggling to fit through the hole its found. "My cortisol levels, they'll spike if I don't eat in an hour of waking, and it's been forty-three minutes, and I've wasted time, I think—"

"Sweetheart." Ilya's other hand comes up to cup Shane's face, thumb brushing his cheekbone. Shane focuses on the drag, eyes fluttering as pain settles along his sinuses. He can feel the rise of inflammation, up his nose bridge into the pocket above his brows. Ilya's palm is strong and cool against Shane's fevered skin. "Look at me. This is not good."

Shane's chest cracks open at the tenderness in it. At *sweetheart*, which Ilya only uses when things are serious, when *bunny* isn't enough. His husband is saying this is not good, that he alone cannot get Shane out of the trap this time.

And Shane wouldn't ask him to. It has always been his own foot in his mouth, gnawing, teeth aching over the chain. His vision blurs, and he realizes with distant horror that he's *crying*, that tears are sliding hot down his face and onto Ilya's wrist, small splashes of salt that spin down and down.

"I don't—" Shane tries, but his throat closes around the words. "I don't know how to stop. I just have to."

"I know," Ilya says, and he does know, has known probably for longer than Shane has been willing to admit. "I know, *любимый*. But we're going to figure it out. Sit down first. Just sit with me."

The thing about eating is that it's simple to stop. Restriction is harder and therefore feels more rewarding to perform. The body can be beautiful, but the mind is the true affliction.

And there is no cure, really. Only the trying, which you must learn to appreciate in the way one appreciates the sky they are looking at as they lie in the grass with an arrow through the heart.

Blood in the meadow, a strawberry burst of life.

Shane's legs fold neatly, giving out in a rare show of sporadicity, and Ilya catches him, guides him down to the kitchen floor because the chair is too far away for either to reach.

This is his body being honest, Shane thinks. This is his body exhausted, deciding it's done holding him up.

They sit with their backs against the cabinets, Shane folded into Ilya's side, legs splayed awkwardly like a doll dropped, and Ilya's arms come around him like a cage. Safety; the only system that has ever actually worked.

The protein shake sits forgotten on the counter, the banana browning in the blender, and for once, Shane doesn't catalog the wasted food, the missed window, the cortisol levels climbing in his bloodstream. The numbers dissolve. He is focused on breathing, what that means—jagged and wet and painful—each inhale catching on a peculiar sharpness thorned along his throat.

He wishes he could find a way inside of him, pulling at a thread until something gives, something black and gelatinous and ugly to hold in the light; something to show to other people so that they can be better at understanding him when he is unable to guide.

Ilya shifts, maneuvering Shane with the careful competence of someone who has held many fragile things (their entire history, their *togetherness* being one). He turns Shane gently, arranging him across his lap the way you might handle a newborn lamb—a figure that needs supporting at multiple points, a baby with a spine that hasn't learned and no notion that it has a responsibility to hold itself up.

Shane's cheek presses against Ilya's thigh, and his legs curl awkwardly, too long for this position, but his body doesn't care, has given up trying to be dignified.

"Okay," Ilya murmurs, one hand coming to rest on Shane's back, broad palm spanning his shoulder blades. "Okay, *зайчик*."

His husband has always been better at interpreting pain as temporary, at not mistaking it for a permanent state. He is mostly able to sit in the hole, knowing innately that there is a way out. Shane is always, well, losing direction.

He feels the warmth of Ilya's hand through his thin sleep shirt, and then Ilya's fingers are finding the hem, lifting it slowly, asking permission with the gesture. Shane doesn't move to stop him. He never really could because he's never really wanted to. The air hits his bare back, cool and clarifying, and then Ilya's hand is on his skin: warm, slightly calloused from years of their sport, substantial in a way that calls attention to Shane's adjacency to his body rather than a life spent living in it, how unreal he has been feeling since always—birth, maybe.

That's where everything starts; you begin to inherit.

Ilya's palm drags up Shane's spine, slow and deliberate, each vertebra a small mountain range beneath the touch. Up to his neck, down to the small of his back, where Shane is most ticklish, where he usually flinches away, but now he just lies there, letting Ilya map him. The rhythm is steady, hypnotic. *Up and down. Up and down.* Peak after a peak. A different kind of counting.

Shane closes his eyes. The panic is still there, but it's receding, or maybe he's just too winded to feel it anymore, too wrung out to do anything but exist under Ilya's hand. His husband's touch is grounding him, reminding him that he has edges, that he is contained, that he is not dissolving into the floor of their kitchen.

"I think I may have a—" Shane starts, and stops. The word is a stone in his mouth. He knows its shape and its weight, but cannot bring himself to release it, to spit it out. "I think there's something wrong with me. Something I can't fix."

Ilya's hand doesn't stop its movement. *Up and down.* Patient as winter. Knowing that it will arrive because it will arrive.

This is what it means to be known, Shane thinks. Someone's hand on your back—your husband's—moving in circles. And you are too tired to perform wellness, too tired to be anything but what you are: sick and small and asking.

"And I can't—" Shane's voice breaks, reforms itself into something smaller. "I can't ask you to fix it. That's not fair to you."

Ilya's hand pauses for just a moment, spends a single second resting at the base of Shane's skull where tension gathers like a fist. Then it continues, the rhythm resuming, and when Ilya speaks, his voice is very, *very* gentle.

"Okay," he says simply. "We will get some help. Ask someone else to fix it."

We will ask someone else. We will find another way to hold you together. We.

This is something else he's needed: confirmation that Ilya seeing him dismantled has not discouraged him in anything, has not paused the act of loving him. His husband's touch is ceaseless, an argument against disappearing. Every stroke of Ilya's palm says: *you are here, I am looking for you, I can feel you.*

Shane begins to cry again, but it's different this time. Not the desperate sobbing of before, but something that feels like a wound finally draining. Relief, sharp and painful as any hurt.

Because he's so tired. He's been so tired for so long that tired has become his natural state, the baseline against which all other feelings are measured. He just wants it to be easy sometimes. Just once, he wants to eat without arithmetic, to inhabit his body without constant surveillance, to live without the exhausting work of staying alive.

He just wants a bracelet to be a bracelet, a watch to be something to wear to tell the time, no thought of the circumference beneath it.

Ilya's hand continues its path up and down Shane's back, and Shane thinks again about how love is sometimes just this: a palm on the spine, moving in circles, waiting for you to come back to yourself. There is no promise of saving you—Ilya cannot save him, they both know this and are alright with it in their own ways—but there is a vow of staying, lingering in order to witness. Touching the bruise so that its pain triggers the memory that you are allowed to be touched.

Outside, the snow continues its work of erasure. Inside, Shane's breathing begins to even out, every limb recalling how to be a man at rest rather than an animal fawning and freezing. The trembling subsides, wave by wave, as if Ilya's hand is smoothing it out of him.

"Sleep, *зайчик*," Ilya says softly, his free hand coming to rest in Shane's hair. "I have you."

This is not true, Shane thinks, *and it is also the only true thing*. Ilya cannot have him, cannot hold all the broken pieces together through will alone. But he can be here, and he is trying to be, and maybe Shane does not always have to raise the bar to justify his right to kindness.

He can let his husband put his hand on Shane's back and move it in circles and say *I have you* and mean *I am here, I am not leaving, you are not alone in the trap you have made of yourself*.

He is allowed all this. *All this*, Ilya says, *I will give to you*.

Shane's eyes grow heavy. The kitchen floor is hard beneath them, unforgiving, and somewhere above him, Ilya is keeping watch, palm pressed to Shane's bare back as if he could push warmth and steadiness through skin and into the frightened animal of Shane's body. Ilya's thigh is a warm pillow under his cheek.

The last thing Shane is aware of before sleep takes him is the shifting motion of Ilya's chest folding over so that he can press a kiss to Shane's temple, fingers rubbing at his hips now—*up and down, up and down*—and the thought, small and tentative as the first thaw, that he'd like to fire his dietician.

There are small ways, he's finding, to be brave.

So, then, there is Clare.

The morning of the appointment, Shane wakes with a jaw already tight, teeth grinding against one another in an effort to find purchase, something solid. His body understands before his mind that today is the day he must name his affliction to someone, must say it out loud in a

space where it will be written down and prescribed to, made concrete in a way that can't be taken back.

The light coming through the windows is thin and gray, a winter morning that can easily shape you into the feeling that the sun has given up halfway through rising, that you should do the same. Shane lies in bed and counts his heartbeats—*fifty-three, fifty-four, fifty-five*—trying to determine if the rhythm is normal or if this is the day his heart has finally decided it's been put through enough, that it's time to quit on him. He presses two fingers to his pulse point and counts again to be sure, because you can never be too sure, because what if—

Ilya shifts beside him, still asleep, one arm thrown across Shane's chest in a wide arc with the weight of an entire forest logged. His breathing comes deep and even, unburdened by the constant calculations that run through Shane's mind like stock tickers. Shane watches him for a moment, studying the way Ilya's eyelashes cast small shadows on his cheeks, the way his mouth is slightly open, vulnerable in sleep in a way he struggles to be when awake. There's a small crease between his eyebrows, and Shane's thumb soothes it, stroking tenderly until it goes slack.

Shane's stomach is already churning; that familiar morning nausea is rising like tidal water, his neuroses the moon it responds to. He has two hours before the appointment. Two hours to get through breakfast, to shower, to drive into the city, to sit in a waiting room and pretend he's the kind of person who does this, who asks for help, who admits to things.

He slides out from under Ilya's arm carefully, trying not to wake him, but Ilya's eyes slide open anyway. They always do, as if his body is attuned to Shane's absence even in sleep. The blue of them is so pale in the slant of sunlight, weak and nearing white. His blinks are slow, feline.

"Morning, *любимый*," Ilya murmurs, voice rough with sleep. His hand reaches out, finds Shane's hip, squeezes once with a thumb scraping along the bone. He does this every time he breaches the morning, searches for proof. "You okay?"

"Fine," Shane says automatically, which is the first lie of the day but certainly not the last. "Going to shower."

Ilya nods, still walking the border of sleep, and Shane slides off the side of the bed, feet cool and bare as he makes his way to the bathroom where he can lock the door and care for himself without the realization that someone is watching him do it. He wonders if sometimes his husband wishes he had an easier partner to love.

The thought alone nearly causes him to vomit, a flash of heat surging in his throat and searing his gut as his stomach heaves. Saliva pools, and the shower is far too hot, far from warm, but Shane doesn't adjust it. He stands under the spray and counts tiles; thirty-two on the wall in front of him, if you don't count the half-tiles at the edges, thirty-eight if you do. He washes his hair with the shampoo Ilya bought him, imagines his husband's hands in his hair. When he gets out, his skin is pink and tender, his freckles made more prominent by the sensitivity, and he avoids looking at himself in the mirror as he dries off.

Mirrors are dangerous, at all times. They reveal without asking if he is prepared for their vision, ready to see.

Shane pivots, away from the glass, and pulls his clothes on quickly: black jeans that are getting loose at the waist, a thick knit sweater in warm navy woven by his grandmother's hand—paternal.

Downstairs, Ilya is already one step ahead, moving about silently in the kitchen. Shane can hear the soft clink of bowls, the opening and closing of the fridge, the auriferous sound of one of their tablespoons disrupting a liquid, stirring something. When he finally forces himself down the stairs, there's a bowl waiting for him on the counter, and Shane stops in the doorway to look at it.

It's beautiful, unfairly so, in the way Ilya's food always is, especially when made for someone he loves. It's been arranged with meticulous precision. Kefir, deep and dark like a bruise or a sunset, a purple-red one might've called mulberry, topped with apple slices fanned out in a perfect, pale half-circle. Two figs, halved to reveal their jeweled pink insides, the seeds clustered in tiny perfect villages. A careful scattering of what appeared to be pumpkin seeds, cacao nibs down the side next to them, then chia seeds arranged in a small spiral. There's even a drizzle of honey, golden against the rich purple.

Shane's throat closes looking at it.

"I made you breakfast," Ilya says, and there's something careful in his voice, like he's offering a gift he's not sure will be accepted. He's wearing Shane's old Voyageurs t-shirt, the one that's too small for him now, stretched across his shoulders. His hair is sleep-mussed, askew like a child's, and he looks hopeful in a way that makes Shane's chest ache.

Shane looks back at the bowl. At the apple slices (six visible slices, which is half an apple, roughly forty-two (42) calories but it depends on the size), at the figs which are sugar, pure concentrated sugar, at the honey which is also sugar, at the beauty of it which somehow makes it worse because Ilya *tried*, put thought into this, arranged it like an offering, and Shane is going to—Shane cannot have that. He is not allowed.

"I can't eat this," Shane says, and his voice comes out sharp, edged with something mean that he doesn't intend but can't stop. "You know I can't eat this. My regimen—"

Ilya's face does something complicated. The hope drains out of it like water from a sink, replaced by something more neutral, more careful. More isolating. Shane suddenly feels bereft, as if he is on a patch of ice floating away from Ilya, as if he is watching him disappear into the water.

"Is kefir," he says quietly, still trying. "Is good for your stomach. Probiotics."

"You don't—" Shane cuts himself off, but the irritation is already spilling over, hot and bitter like bile. "You don't get to decide what's good for my stomach. I have someone for that. That's not—I didn't ask for this."

He gestures at the bowl, and the gesture is dismissive, cruel in a way Shane will hate himself for later.

Ilya goes very still. His face does something that Shane recognizes from hours of looking at himself doing the same: the shutting down, the retreat into oneself that happens when there is a lashing out and the whip cracks over you, when an illness makes the one you love so mean.

And he is mean sometimes, Shane knows this about himself. The hunger makes him more irritable, vaguely unkind, makes him snap at the person who loves him most, makes him punish those around him for the decision he's made subconsciously, daily—to punish himself.

"Okay," Ilya says finally, and his voice is flat now, neutral. "I am sorry. I will put it away."

"Don't—" Shane starts, but he doesn't know how to finish. *Don't put it away, don't be hurt, don't look at me like that, don't stop trying, please, even though I keep pushing you away, even though I'm impossible, even though I'm sick, with a mind that is rejecting everything.*

But the words refuse to come. They sit in his throat like another bite he cannot swallow, lining it, and instead Shane grabs his keys from the counter and walks out to the car.



The car is utterly freezing, and Shane sits curled in the driver's seat with the engine off, watching his breath fog in the air. He thinks it's ironic, how much it looks like smoke as oxygen pools from his mouth, how much it speaks to the fire he just set unnecessarily over something as simple as breakfast.

The cottage appears peaceful from here, every inch of glass glittering like an eighth wonder of the world, snow pristine and undisturbed except for his footprints—large and leading to his escape. It looks wonderful, like the sort of place where people are happy, where every marriage works, where no one spends their mornings splintering over a bowl of kefir and despising themselves for it.

Shane checks his phone. One hour and twenty-three minutes until the appointment. He could drive there now, sit in the parking lot, but that seems worse somehow—waiting in a strange place instead of here, where at least the misery is familiar. Where at least someone loves him for it.

But does someone have to love you in order to fix you? Or do they just have to love the work?

His hands are shaking, tremulous as ever. Shane notices this distantly, the aftershock running through his fingers like an earthquake's effect. Low blood sugar, most likely, or anxiety—

again, very likely—or the fact that he's barely slept, or all of it, the perfect compilation of his body's various complaints. He presses his palms against his thighs to stop the shaking, the muscle corded and distended with strain, and counts to ten, then twenty.

For a moment, he is fine, but then he gives up because the counting isn't helping, it's just another compulsion in a life made of compulsions.

The cottage door opens, and Ilya emerges, pulling on his parka, the olive one Shane bought for him last year from Canada Goose's Wyndham line. Shane didn't hear him coming, hadn't expected him to follow, but here he is, crossing the gravel in his unlaced boots, breath pluming in the cold air. He doesn't knock on the window, never one to request permission, instead opening the driver's side door and crowding Shane in, bringing with him the smell of the cottage: woodsmoke, coffee, his cologne—*plumsmokesageoudvanillacaramelamber*.

There is a moment, a second suspended by a lack of motion from either of them, and then Shane is falling forward as Ilya expected, head buried in his chest. Shane can feel Ilya's ribcage shrugging up and down with his breath, can feel Ilya's gaze on the crown of his head, but he is unable make himself return the gaze, so ashamed of his earlier outburst, though he knows Ilya rarely holds anything against him with his Gemini nature.

Shane is a Taurus, the stubborn bull.

"I'm sorry," Shane says finally, and his voice breaks on it like ice, thin and futile under weight. The tears come hot and fast, rolling down his cheeks, his shoulders shuddering awkwardly because he has never been one to truly cry. It always lands in a way that feels pathetic, childish. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—it was so nice of you and I just—I *can't*."

The words tangle in his throat, twisted into briar. He's crying less now, shoulders no longer shaking with it, but his body is still twitching with distress. He can't stop even though he wants to, even though this is making everything worse.

"I'm so afraid all the time, and I don't know how to not be angry about it. I don't know how to just—" Shane pulls away, makes a helpless gesture at nothing, at everything. "I don't know how to eat a fucking bowl of yogurt without feeling like I'm going to die."

Ilya reaches over, cupping Shane's face in his palm. His hand is warm, calloused on the palm, and Shane leans into it like a dog seeking praise, seeking forgiveness.

"I know," Ilya says quietly. "Is okay. I know, *зайчик*."

"It's *not* okay. You were trying to help," Shane's breath hitches. "You were just trying to take care of me, and I was horrible to you."

"Shane." Ilya's thumb brushes away tears, patient and methodical. "You are going to talk to Clare. You are going to get help. That is all that matters now. The rest—" He makes his own gesture, equally helpless. "The rest we figure out after. We always figure it out."

"I don't deserve you," Shane says, which is melodramatic and true in equal measure.

"Funny," Ilya says, and there's the ghost of a smile in his voice. "I am always thinking the same about you. But I have you anyway."

He bends, kisses Shane with a searing tenderness, sucks on his bottom lip until it is swollen, and Shane is slightly dazed. "I have you anyway. Will not give you back. *Я эгоистичен. Очень эгоистичен.*"

Shane arcs upward, back curving into a half-moon as he seeks another kiss, his husband's hand on the small of his back. He watches as Ilya's eyes darken, he watches them close as Ilya looses a breath through his nose and makes the hard decision to refuse him.

"More kisses when you are back. Promise," Ilya tells him. He bends, delivers a *kunik* kiss. "Now go. You will be late."

Clare's office is in a converted apartment building on a quiet street that overlooks a long, unfurling river. There's a small sign underneath the flat's button on the intercom—*Dr. Clare Arima, LMFT/CEDS*—and it sang a soft chime when pressed. Shane stands on the landing for about thirty seconds, counting his heartbeats again, before he makes himself ring it.

The door opens almost immediately, and there's Clare.

She's much younger-looking than Shane expected, though when she steps back to let him in, he revises that assessment. She has one of those faces that reads as youthful at first glance—smooth skin, bright eyes, a certain animation to her features—but there's something in the set of her mouth, the competence in the way she moves, that suggests more years than her face implies. She could be thirty or forty-five.

Her hair is dark brown, almost black, cut in a sleek bob that swings when she tilts her head, and she's wearing all black—fitted turtleneck, tailored pants, simple leather boots that rise to the calf—in a way that suggests she's possibly thought about it, but most likely this is just how she is.

"Mr. Hollander," she says, and her voice is warm but steers clear of cloying, professional but steers clear of distant.

"Shane," he pushes out, smiling weakly to soften the correction.

She gazes at him, head tilting, before continuing.

"Shane," she agrees. "Thank you for coming in. You can call me Clare."

She extends her hand, and Shane shakes it. Her grip is firm, her hand smaller than his but not lacking for strength. She smells faintly of something metallic and green—fir maybe, or mint.

"Come on back," she says, and leads him down a short hallway lined with plants—a fiddle-leaf fig, a snake plant, something trailing and emerald green he doesn't know the name of—all of them thriving in a way that suggests someone actually enjoys taking care of them, is relentless at it.

Her office is at the end of the hall, and as he steps into it, there is a sudden giving out of his knees, as if all of him has finally come together and discovered that they are here. Every inch of the room is colored in soft grays and draped in natural light, with cream-colored chairs to the right of him that curve around the individual within like arms, designed to hold fractured people together.

There's a large print on the wall of a sprawling oak tree, the trunk thick and wide, its branches extending in every direction. Shane stares at it for a moment, trying to decide if it's meant to be comforting or if it is intended to make him feel small and exposed, like an animal standing in a field with nowhere to hide, neck feeling the phantom presence of a rifle's scope.

He supposes, in a way, that he is here to put a part of himself down.

The room is odorless for the most part, but there is a touch of bergamot to the air, one that matches aesthetically with the butter-yellow ceramic tissue box in the middle of the coffee table. Said coffee table is small and situated between the two chairs with a candle, unlidded and unlit—cream-colored, from Sand + Fog, christened "Clean Waves" upon closer look at the label. Next to it, a succulent in a ceramic pot, glazed a vibrant violet, and the literal tissues in the box look expensive themselves, organic, as if even all of your crying should be done sustainably, with consideration for the earth.

"Have a seat wherever you're comfortable," Clare says, waving half-heartedly to the chairs. They're positioned at a slight angle, so you're not staring directly at each other, but not capable of completely avoiding eye contact either. It's calculated in a way Shane can appreciate, as one who does the constant math himself, this careful consideration of how to make people feel safe enough to begin scratching at the scab.

Shane sits in the chair closest to the window, the far left one. Through the glass, he can see the street, a neighbor walking their dog, the ordinary world continuing while he's in here, about to—what? Confess? Admit defeat? Embarrass himself?

Ask for help. Ilya's voice croons through his head, the dark dip of it thrumming along his heart. *You want to ask for help, любимый.*

Clare settles into the other chair with a notepad and pen, but she doesn't write anything yet. She allows him a moment, or maybe herself, and simply looks at him with eyes that are undoubtedly kind but also clearly assessing. She's already started working, already has begun cataloging his tells:

- *strong posture - rigid, discomfort with the body*
- *hands are folded in the lap, shaking - symptomatic, anxiety*
- *unable to make eye contact - shame*

"So," Clare says, and her voice is nothing but neutral, but there is also something underneath it, like a trench on the floor of the ocean; it suggests she's not going to let him bullshit his way through the time he's paying to spend here. "Tell me what made you seek therapy."

Shane's prepared an answer for this. He rehearsed it in the car for the entirety of the drive, a neat script about stress and anxiety and wanting to work on coping mechanisms. Just a few lines, vague and manageable, something that doesn't require him to name the *[[*, to look at it squarely, not just glance to the side of it on occasion.

But what is revealed instead is: "My husband has always been better at cooking than me."

There's a pause. Clare's expression doesn't change, but her posture shifts, a minute adjustment of her shoulders and the tucking of her right leg underneath herself that suggests she's heard what Shane isn't saying, seen the deflection for what it is.

"That's lovely," she says evenly, and there's something borderline amused in her tone, as though she's met this particular defense mechanism before, and is unsurprised. "But that's not why you're here."

Shane blinks, lashes long and butterfly kissing across the rise of his cheekbone. The directness of it catches him off guard, makes him feel like he's been seen through; the careful mask he wears has fallen, suddenly becomes transparent. He's used to people letting him change course, used to being able to redirect conversations away from anything that gets too close. Even Ilya, who knows him better than anyone in life and death, often lets Shane lead them away from the hard topics, as if giving him space to approach them on his own terms.

But Clare is just looking at him, waiting. The relaxed line of her body suggests she can wait all day if necessary, that this is her job, and she is good at it.

"I—" Shane starts, then stops. His throat feels ridiculously tight. "No. It's not."

"You made this appointment for a reason," Clare continues, and her voice has lost no modicum of its delicacy, but there is more again, that sense that she's not going to let him hide. "What is it you're afraid to tell me?"

Shane looks down at his hands. The knuckles have gone white from gripping one another. His wrist looks small emerging from his sweater sleeve. He's wearing his watch—the custom one Ilya bought him two birthdays ago, titanium and engraved—and he can feel the weight of it, the band slightly loose now, able to travel along the bone more easily than it used to.

"Someone asked me a question recently," the words come slowly, his voice inappropriately honeyed in the way one gets when delivering the worst news, and it sounds strange to his own ears, distant. "Isla. She's seventeen. She's—um—she's my best friend's daughter."

Clare nods slightly, encouraging him to continue.

"She asked me if I always eat like I do, and I—" His throat seals, a tomb. He swallows hard, tries again. Ilya is crooning in his head, Yuna behind him. "I said yes because...I mean, I do."

And she said her friend does that too. That her friend counts everything. I wasn't—it caught me off guard, because I wasn't counting that day.”

"Mmm," Clare nods, writes a new bullet point.

“But do you?” she asks. Shane looks at her then. “Count everything?”

"Yes." The word comes out small, barely more than a whisper. “Sometimes. A—a lot, sometimes.”

Clare's face softens, and she rises, rounding the back of her chair to walk to the side of the room where Shane now sees holds an electric kettle and coffee machine. She sets it alight, steam churning, and plucks two mugs from the shelf above it.

"What do you count?" she asks, undeterred by her tea-making.

"Calories. Macros. The time between meals. How much water do I have? How many supplements? Stuff like that.” Shane's speaking faster now, the words tumbling out like they've been waiting behind a dam. "Um, I track my steps and heart rate and try to know my sleep cycles. I have a dietician who helps me, so. I have to—I play hockey, like professionally, so.”

So, what, Isla's voice asks, but Shane shoves it down.

“*So*, I need to be at my best, optimized to play my best game. I need certain amounts of protein, and I have to know, like, whether I'm within my eating window or if my cortisol levels are spiking or—”

He cuts himself off, breathing hard. His hands are trembling again, and there is salt sitting at the back of his throat; he knows without looking that his eyes are glazed with tears, nearly confectionery.

Clare doesn't appear shocked or concerned or pitying, for which he is grateful. She only nods, stepping away from the kettle to write something brief on the face of her notepad. "How long have you been doing this?"

"I don't know." Shane's voice cracks. "I don't remember *not* doing it. Since I was fourteen? Fifteen? My mom got me a nutritionist and a trainer, and they—they wanted me to be optimal. For hockey. To be the best version of myself."

"You keep saying that: optimal, best. How does that feel?" Clare asks. "Does having people manage your food intake make you feel your best?"

Shane thinks about this. There is no “best” when sitting in a sterile office while someone with a degree explains macronutrient ratios and caloric deficits. There is no “best” about his mother nodding along, taking notes, but there is how proud she looked when he started getting leaner, faster, better. There is no “best” about how his view of himself shifted, about how he began to understand that his body was a project, something that could be improved and needed to be, something that could be perfected rather than something he was equipped

to live with—live through. There was nothing necessarily “optimal” about the love and approval that arrived when he succeeded at that project.

But there was expectancy. And there was routine.

"No, but I felt safe," he says finally. "It felt safe. There were rules, routine, and if I followed them, I'd be okay."

"And are you okay?"

The question hangs in the air between them. Shane needs to flee, so he looks out of the window again, at the neighbor who's now gone beyond the pane, at the empty street he must drive back on, at the world that keeps its spin regardless of whether you're okay or not.

"I don't know," he answers. "I don't really have a baseline for that."

Then, a fragile whisper, the beginning of a life-long weep,

“No, I don't think I am.”

Clare comes to stand in front of him, and Shane watches her hand move, watches as she offers him a medium-sized mug, pink and full of what smells like raspberry leaf tea. When he looks up again, her eyes are dark enough to fall into, but there is understanding, a kind of frank assessment that makes Shane feel both skinless and strangely relieved.

"Did something happen other than Isla? This morning, maybe," Clare says, "before you came here."

Shane's chest tightens. "How did you—"

"You've been crying," she says, returning to her seat, legs folded completely now—crossed. "Recently, by the looks of it. And there was something in the way you were holding yourself at the door. Like you were bracing for something, some kind of reaction that I was supposed to give."

Shane lets out an uneasy breath that might be a laugh if it weren't so close to a sob. "Ilya—my husband—made me breakfast. A kefir bowl, because he knows that I've liked it the few times that I've tried it. It was so beautiful. He—he put all this effort into it, made it look nice, and I—" He closes his eyes. "I couldn't eat it. I was so fucking mean to him about it."

"What made it difficult to eat?"

"I didn't—I didn't know how many calories were in it. The honey, the figs—they're sugar. I'm not allowed to have that. And I have this rule about eating before anything important, like games, because what if I get nauseous, what if my stomach—" He's talking faster again, spiraling. "And the window was wrong, it was too early, and I just—I couldn't."

"The window," Clare repeats. "Tell me about that."

"I have to eat within certain times. To keep my metabolism optimal, to—" Shane stops, hearing himself, hearing how insane it sounds when said out loud to someone who doesn't live with him, neighbor to all the posturing and collapse he does in his head. "To stay in control."

"Mmm. And when you're not in control?"

"Then something bad happens." It comes out flat, matter-of-fact.

"Like what?"

Shane thinks about the panic attack on the kitchen floor, about Ilya's hands on his back, and nearly feels it all again, but phantasmal: a hollow heart racing, breath deceptive and shallow, an immovable certainty that he is dying. He thinks about standing on the scale and seeing the number go up, the way his entire day could be ruined by two pounds, by the evidence that his body was doing what bodies *do*.

"I lose myself," he says quietly. "I stop being the person I'm supposed to be."

"And who are you supposed to be?"

It's such a simple question, but it lands like a blow. Shane opens his mouth, and nothing comes out. Who is he supposed to be? Captain Shane Hollander, Olympic-level athlete, someone disciplined and controlled, and perfect? His mother's son, undisappointing, always high-achieving? A husband, Ilya's, someone who can eat a beautiful breakfast without having a debilitating breakdown?

"I don't—I'm not sure," And the admittance all but guts him.

Clare nods slowly, writes something else. When she looks up, there's something unreadable in her expression. Somehow, it centers him.

"Shane," she says, and there's a gravity to the way she says his name, like she's about to tell him something important, a secret. As if she wants him to really hear it, so that she is not alone in keeping it. "I think you know why you're here. I think you've known for a while. But we'll get nowhere if we never name it."

Outside the window, it's started to snow again. Small flakes drifting down like ash, an odd rebirth of the world he's always known.

"I need you to say it," Clare prods. "Can you? Shane, why are you here?"

"I think I—" His voice cleaves in the middle of it, the secret now less of a secret and more of a blade. He takes a sip of tea, tries again. "I think I have an [//]."

He repeats it.

"I think I have an [eating disorder]".

There is blood in his mouth.

The words hang in the air, and Shane waits for the bad thing to occur: for the room to shift, for Clare to gasp, for there to be a sudden accident. But nothing has changed. The clock on the wall is still ticking, and the snow keeps accumulating just outside, silent and unaware.

Clare reaches out, nudging the tissues nearer to him, then writes it down.

"Thank you," she says. Quietly, so quietly. "For telling me that. I know that took a lot out of you to do."

Shane wants to laugh. He's been hiding this for years, has gotten so good at concealing it that most people think he's just disciplined, just committed to his sport. The only difference now is that he finally got tired enough, sick enough, scared enough to admit it.

"What kind?" Clare asks, and Shane looks at her blankly. "There are different types. Anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder, ARFID, OSFED. Do you have a sense of which—"

"I don't—" Shane's breath is coming shorter now. "I don't know. I just—I restrict. I count everything. I have rules, and if I break them I feel like I'm going to—" He can't finish the sentence.

"Do you purge? Make yourself vomit, use laxatives, anything like that?"

"No." The thought makes him feel sick. "No, I just—I don't eat enough. Or I eat the same things over and over. Safe foods. Things I can measure."

Clare nods, writing. "I know this is overwhelming, Shane, but it's truly just intake. We're almost through. Now, your weight? Has it changed significantly?"

Shane thinks about his jeans getting looser, about Ilya's worried glances, about the way his watch loses traction around either wrist now.

"I don't weigh myself anymore, unless I'm at my doctor's," he says.

"That's actually really good," Clare says, and she sounds genuinely pleased. "That shows insight."

"I want to," Shane admits. "I want to know, sometimes. But Ilya hid the scale, and I—I'm trying not to look for it."

"Ilya is your husband, right?" Shane nods, thinks of how he said this already, realizes she may simply be trying to ground him. "And how does Ilya feel about all this?"

Shane's throat *sears*, and he puts the mug down, mindful enough to put down a coaster.

"He knows something is *wrong*. I think he's known for a while. But I haven't—I couldn't talk about it. Didn't know what to call it, and he didn't either." He stops, thinking about their cottage kitchen and its floor, about Ilya with his hands on his back, those circles. About 'we *will get help*'. "He wants me to get better. He said we'd find someone—someone else to fix it."

"And is that what you want? To fix it?"

Why wouldn't I, Shane almost snaps, but then he pauses because. The question should be easy, but it's not. Because part of Shane *doesn't* want to fix it. Part of him is brutally terrified of what happens if he lets go of all of the control, of all of the rules, and the careful management of his body. Part of Shane thinks that without the eating disorder, he won't be disciplined enough, won't be good enough, won't be Shane Hollander, elite athlete, anymore.

But he's also so tired. So *tired*. He's tired, exhausted of being afraid of trying something new, of food. He's over the measuring and calculating, tired of living elsewhere, in his head instead of his body, tired of being at war with himself when there is no way to win.

"I think," he says finally, "that I just want to try."

Clare smiles, and it's the first time she's smiled since he walked in. It transforms her face, making her look fresh-faced and free. Her teeth are small, like a figurine.

"That's all you need, really," she says. "Because this is hard work, and you can't do it if you don't really want to. We're going to work on it together, but it's going to be uncomfortable, and there are going to be days when you hate me and days when you want to quit. But if you're willing to try, I can help you."

Shane nods, unable to trust himself to speak.

"I want to see you twice a week to start," Clare continues, switching into logistics mode. "And I'm going to refer you to a psychiatrist—someone who specializes in eating disorders—because medication might help with the anxiety. And we should probably get you set up with a nutritionist, but not the kind you had before. Someone who works specifically with eating disorder recovery."

"My mom hired the last one," Shane says. "She's—she's very involved. She means well, I don't—she really does. She just wants me to be healthy."

Clare's expression does that shift again, becoming more careful, eyes on the ground presented to her so that she knows best where to tread.

"We'll... speak about your mother," she says. "About what role she plays in this, about boundaries. But that's for later. Right now, I just want to establish—do you feel safe? Are you in immediate danger, or do you feel that you are?"

"I'm not going to—" Shane swallows hard. "I'm not suicidal."

"Okay. But eating disorders can be medically dangerous. When was the last time you saw a doctor? Had bloodwork done?"

Shane tries to remember. "A few months ago? Our team doctor does regular checkups, and so does my personal one."

"And everything was normal?"

He thinks about the phone call in the closet. "Mostly," he hedges.

Clare writes something else, and Shane can see her underlining it. "I want you to make an appointment with a doctor. A different one. Get a full physical, tell them what's going on. Eating disorders can affect your heart, your bones, your organs. We need to know where your health is at."

The thought of telling his team doctor is terrifying. So is the thought of searching for a new one. They'll have to report it to the team, and then everyone will know, and then Shane won't just be the captain anymore; he'll be the captain with the eating disorder, the one who can't handle the pressure, the *weakest* one.

"I can see you're worried about that," Clare says softly. "We can talk through those fears. But your health has to come first."

"Okay," Shane says, because what else is there for him to say?

He feels the least autonomous he has ever felt, despite having a body contracted to a team, to someone's ownership, professionally.

They sit in silence for a moment. The snow is coming harder now, accumulating on the windowsill as it slurs downward in its spirals. Shane watches it and thinks about how winter places a hold on everything, makes the world clean and slow and new, and wonders if that's possible for him too—to be slowed and remade into something that isn't whatever it is that he is now. Whatever it is that he has been since fourteen.

"One more thing," Clare says. "Do you have support, Shane? Besides your husband?"

Shane thinks about Hayden, who's been his best friend for years, but doesn't know about this. About Rose, who has been his best friend for a little while less, but cannot know about this. About Isla, who noticed but is seventeen and not his therapist. About his mother, who loves him but may be a part of the problem in ways he's only beginning to understand.

"I—Not really," he admits.

"Okay. That's something we'll work on. Building a support system. Maybe a support group, other people recovering from eating disorders."

The thought of sitting in a circle with strangers, sharing his secret (?), makes Shane want to crawl out of his skin. But he nods anyway because he promised ~~Hy~~ himself that he would try.

Because, yes, it is embarrassing to reveal anything about your private self to a public eye, but only because it is admitting that you want something.

"Our time is almost up," Clare says, glancing at the clock. "But before you go, I want to give you something to think about for next session."

She leans forward slightly, her hands threaded together under her thighs, feet balancing on their tips before lowering to the floor again. Shane wonders if she was once a dancer. When

she speaks, her voice is tender and unflinching.

"You've spent a lot of years trying to *control* your body, trying to make it 'optimal'," Shane watches her fingers curl into quotes, loose and pale. "Trying to turn it into something perfect. And I want you to ask yourself—what has that cost you? What have you lost in the pursuit of control?"

Shane thinks about the distance it's created between him and his own life, about how he pushes away living and the love that comes with allowing yourself indulgence, fuel. Food.

"Everything," he says, and it is the final scale of the scab peeled off.

Clare nods slowly, looking at the wound, satisfied.

"And that is what we're going to work on," She tells him. "Everything. And getting it back."



He sits in the car for a moment after, the engine unstirred, his hands on the steering wheel. He thinks about what he just did.

He'd named it, faced it head-on: *I have an eating disorder*. The words felt impossible, but now they were real, documented in Clare's notes, a fact rather than a suspicion.

His phone buzzes. A text from Ilya: *How did it go? You okay?*

Shane stares at the message, trying to figure out what to answer with. How *did* it go? He cried, he told someone the truth, and it was all so unexpected. He feels raw and unprotected and blank with fear, and also, somehow, deeply relieved.

Good, he types back. *I think it was good. Coming home now.*

The drive back to the cottage feels longer than usual, or maybe Shane is just more aware of it, more present in his body than he usually allows himself to be. Hands on the wheel, foot on the pedal, his heart beating steadily in his chest. Sitting in the discomfort is difficult when he doesn't allow himself to analyze it.

When he pulls up to the house, Ilya is on the porch, bundled in his heavy coat, waiting. He must have been watching for the car because he's already coming down the steps before Shane has even turned it off.

Shane gets out, and Ilya is there, pulling him into a long hug with perfect pressure, arms like a vise around Shane, solid and warm, voluntary captivity. Shane lets himself sink into it, lets himself be held.

"I have an eating disorder," Shane says into Ilya's shoulder. It's surprisingly easier to say after the first time.

Ilya's arms tighten. "I'm proud of you," he murmurs. "So proud, *зайчик*."

They stand like that for a long time, uncaring of the cold, desperate to hold on to each other, and Shane thinks about what Clare asked: what has control cost him? What might he gain by letting it go?

This, maybe.

Inside, it is warm. Ilya has made hot chocolate—Shane's favorite blend, the dark chocolate one with hints of hazelnut and snap pea green marshmallows—and there's a blanket on the couch waiting for him, cashmere and ready to cradle.

No food, Shane notes. His chest constricts at the observation. Ilya learned a long time ago not to push, to let Shane come to things on his own terms, but Shane wonders if that's part of the problem, too, the careful avoidance, the way they've built their life around their varying difficulties without ever denoting it.

"She wants me to see her twice a week," Shane says, wrapping his hands around the mug. The heat is a much-needed kindness, good and sweet against his palms. "And a psychiatrist. And a nutritionist who specializes in eating disorder recovery."

"Okay," Ilya says simply. "We will make it work."

"And I have to find a new doctor. Get a physical."

"Okay," Ilya says again. Then, "Do—Can I come with you?"

Shane thinks about this. About sitting in the doctor's office, trying to explain, having to say it all again.

"Yes," he says. "Yes, I think—I need you."

Recovery, Shane learns, is not a straight line but a series of attempts, each one slightly different from the last.

There are the sessions with Clare—twice weekly at first, then once when things stabilize, though "stabilize" feels like an ambitious word for what he's doing— and there are exercises: eating without his watch on, eating foods he's labeled "unsafe" in the careful taxonomy of his disorder, journaling.

There's the psychiatrist Clare referred him to, a woman named Axelle, who prescribes him something for the anxiety that softens the edges of the world, but doesn't temper the hunger,

doesn't make the hunger any less complicated.

There are good days, where Shane eats miraculously without calculating, where he lets Ilya cook dinner and doesn't ask what's in it, content to just swallow, to consume. There are bad days, where he spirals, where the rules reassert themselves with vicious clarity, where he stands in front of the fridge and cannot make himself open it, the handles suddenly of the same making as a bear trap.

And then there are days like today, three months into treatment, when Clare asks him to do something that feels impossible.

"I want you to try eating something while Ilya is present," she says during their session. "Something 'unsafe'. And I want you to let him help you through it."

Shane's first instinct is to say no, to explain that eating in this new way, healing, is something he has to do alone, that having Ilya watch makes it worse, makes the shame unbearable. But he's been learning—slowly, painfully—that the things that scare him most are often the things he most needs to do.

So that evening, he asks Ilya to sit with him, tells him what Clare has ordered, feet dangling over the edge of the bed.

"Do you want to?" Ilya asks.

"Yes," Shane says after a moment, heart tripping at the way his husband cares so much for what he wants. At all times.

"Okay. What do you want to try?"

Shane closes his eyes, hand flexing along his stomach before answering.

"Pudding, please," he says finally. "Banana pudding."

Ilya doesn't ask why, doesn't question the arbitrary nature of Shane's fear, doesn't need to know that Shane chose it because he struggles with the texture and the indulgence of the sugar content. He only nods and gets up, leading them both downstairs, unclasping their hands so that he is able to go to the kitchen, and Shane is able to go to the couch. And Shane hears him as he always does, moving around, opening the fridge. An echo of every morning.

When Ilya returns, he's holding a small bowl—not a full serving, Shane notes with relief, just a few spoonfuls—and he sits beside Shane on the sofa, close enough that their thighs are touching. The bowl itself is lovely: custom china, nature scenes from a time they have never been privy to, painstakingly handpainted and sealed in the yellow-orange of marigolds.

"Don't think," Ilya tells him, and Shane seals his mouth around the spoon, sucks the pudding off the round, grey bone.

Tears are lining his lashes, clustering together like spiders' eggs, and his throat bucks at the thought of swallowing, his stomach riotous. Ilya holds him firm, presses their foreheads

together until his face is the earth and his curls are the sky, gold and fragmented in the periphery of Shane's vision.

"Don't think, *зайчик*. *Come on*."

Shane's throat bucks, but he swallows, the cream and sweet mixing with spit, spiraling down, and the sound that leaves him feels wet but sounds less so, and time passes under the increment of four more bites—rather large—and then he keels over politely to lie rigid and horizontal on the couch.

Ilya keeps saying *sweetheart* over and over, a drone of affection singing between Russian and limited French—anything to reach him—and Shane feels the digestion down to the ankle because he's always been more a mind than body, and now it has been reversed on threat of death.

When he tells her, after, Clare looks scared but proud, or maybe slightly disturbed, as most therapists should be. Shane sits in his seat in her office with his eyes closed, feeling the roll of his stomach again, thinking of how Ilya probably heard every bodily movement through all of Shane's skin that evening.

He thinks of all the reaching and watching his husband had done as he held his hands large and hot over Shane's ears so that the eating was easier.

And Shane doesn't care if Clare disapproves (a part of him does) because the body is a window for a moment, and his was for *once* open enough for Ilya to crawl through and land on its floor, feet trailing like a ballet dancer over every strand of guts. His husband had touched him anew in a way that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with hunger, which in a way was about sex too.

But Clare only says, "Well done, Shane," which is a blessing because if she had called him Mr. Hollander, she would've sounded like everyone else, everyone judgmental, and he would've sustained another wound like an absentminded sprain.



This is how recovery goes: in small circles, lakes of tears and slivers of triumph that mean more when they are bound together, Ilya's hands over his ears, Clare's quiet praise.

It is never linear; you are never able to track.

Some days, Shane can eat the pudding.

Some days he can't.

Most days, you are an animal running, hunted by an unnameable feeling, at times remembering that you can turn and hunt it back.

Six months after his first session with Clare, Shane sits in his living room with his phone in his hand for twenty minutes before he actually calls. Ilya is in the kitchen, giving him space but close enough that Shane can hear the quiet domestic music of their life together.

His mother answers on the second ring. "Shane? シェイクン, is everything alright?"

It's instinct, that question, with that term of endearment. Yuna always assumes something is wrong when he calls outside their usual schedule. And she's right, he supposes, but not in the way she thinks.

"Yeah, Mom. I'm—" He stops, starts over. In the background, he can hear his father saying something, the television on low. "I'm good. Is Dad there? Can you put it on speaker?"

There's a rustling sound, his father's voice coming through clearer now. "Shane! How's my boy?"

They talk for a while about nothing important: the weather, hockey, Ilya's new recipe obsession with fermentation that has their fridge full of jars. Mundane things as padding for what is more devastating. Shane tells them about the off-season, how he's dealing, about the hike he and Ilya took last weekend, where his body felt strong, and it wasn't as hard as it felt sometimes to participate in life.

Shane makes listening noises as his mother tells him some gossip or other about a WAG scandal circulating online, and then, when there is a brief pause, he slides in the tip of the knife.

"Actually," Shane says, and his voice wavers slightly. "お母さん, can I talk to you alone for a minute?"

There's a pause, a long one. He can picture the look that passes between his parents, the way his father will have squeezed Yuna's shoulder before leaving the room.

"Of course, honey," she says, and then there's the sound of a door closing. "What is it?"

Shane takes a breath. He's rehearsed this, has practiced with Clare what he wants to say and how to say it, but now that the moment is here, all the careful words scatter.

"I've been seeing someone," he starts. "A therapist. Her name is Clare. She's been helping me with—"

Shane falters, rubbing a hand at his throat. Ilya comes in behind him, settling just beyond his shoulder and leaning down until his lips are warm and substantial against his back.

His mother is quiet, patient, waiting.

"Mommy," He is a child again, five and desperate to crawl into his parents' bed, tired of nightmares, "I have an eating disorder. I think I've had it for a long time. And I think I don't want to have it anymore."

There is a blistering silence down the line, and then the horrible hitch of his mother's breathing as it changes, the shuffle of white noise as she shifts positions, sitting down.

"Shane—" Her voice is careful, tight with the level of emotion she's trying to control, so much effort. "What do you mean, sweetie? You've always eaten so well. We made sure of that."

"I know," Shane interrupts, as gently as he can. "You guys have never wanted anything other than what was best for me. But I think at some point, things just *slipped*. It wasn't healthy anymore, and maybe—maybe there has never been a time when it was, but I just know I can't keep continuing like this. I measure *everything*, お母さん. I have panic attacks about food. I—" His voice breaks. "I've been sick for a long time, and I didn't know how to tell you."

Nothing. More waiting, more passing of the time.

"I didn't know," Yuna says finally, and her voice is minuscule in a way Shane has rarely heard it. "Shane, I didn't—We were just trying to help you succeed. To give you every advantage."

"I know, and I love you for it." Because he does know this, can feel the truth of it. "But I need you to understand that it's been hurting me. The doctors, the focus on being better—it's been feeding something in me that was already sick. I was primed for it. And I need—" He swallows hard. "I need to get better, to recover without a focus on being best. So, I have Clare for that now. I have Ilya. And I have you guys. I want—It's hard, and I need you to just be my mom."

There's a sound on the other end that might be crying, soft and muffled like Yuna is covering her mouth.

"I'm so sorry, baby," she whispers. "I'm so sorry. I didn't see it. I should have seen it."

"You couldn't have known what you didn't know," Shane says, and it's something Clare has told him, about his own blindness to his disorder for so long. "But I'm telling you now. And I'm asking you to be with me, just while I figure this out."

"Okay. Yes, okay, of course, baby. We're—You know we're only half an hour out," Yuna says, and there's something almost pleading in it, the mother who wants to fix everything, to make it better. *Now*, immediately. "I could come over, if—"

"Mom." Shane closes his eyes, thinks of Clare's words about boundaries. "I love you. So much I don't know what to do with it sometimes. But I need you to stay there for now."

He can hear her breathing, harsh and anxious. He can imagine her in her office, hand pressed to her throat the way it goes when she's overwhelmed, in the same way he does when drowning, as if he has enough power alone to keep himself afloat. He knows without question that his father has probably returned, hovering in the doorway, uncertain.

"Okay," she says finally, and her voice is thick with tears. "Okay, but honey, you'll tell me, right? If you need anything? You'll call me?"

"I will," he promises. "I'm going to be okay. I'm working on it."

"I know you are," she says. "シエイちゃん, I know. I am so, so proud of you. And I love you so much."

"I love you too."

"Shane?"

"Yes?"

"There is nothing *wrong* about you. Sometimes we just get a little lost, a little turned around. Like swimming. You find the shore again."

Shane is unable to find something to say to that, so he just lets out a terrible little sound, like a bleating lamb. And his mother understands because she is him and he is her, and they are one another, an origin and an end. So she assures him that she loves him, says it again and again, and is the one to end the call.

Ilya takes the phone from him, places it on the charger just to the side of them, then slides his hands under Shane's thighs to lift him into his lap. His husband starfishes slowly, the movement liquid, until they are spread against each other on the floor. Shane, with his eyes, closed and leaking. Ilya, with his open and peering at the baroque mural they had painted on their ceiling, because when you are sensitive and insular, love is both ecstasy and religion, and home is a chapel.

Ilya rolls them, hovers over him, and drops slightly to press copious, slick kisses to his neck. They say nothing to each other, because they are, in a way—with this physicality—saying everything.

Shane knows that recovery is an infinity sign, a figure eight you skate your whole life, but he has also learned that his hunger persists because it is in love with him. And he must learn to abide.

He will lapse because he is human and full of fallacy. He had cantaloupe and pineapple in the morning, washed down with a finger's width of supplements. No lunch. Dinner will be a bowl of jasmine rice and lentils, thick and fragrant, and a single trick-or-treat-sized Kit-Kat as a treat.

Maybe today wasn't his best. But it didn't have to be.

Tomorrow allows for a new attempt. His tentative plan is two pieces of toast, spread thick with almond butter and avocado, placed along a cascade of blueberries, strawberries sliced tenderly, and more of his beloved cantaloupe.

Tonight, still, there is a pot of dark hot chocolate Ilya has left simmering on the stove. Shane looks forward to feeling the warmth. Tomorrow there is coffee with goat's milk, too—though the lactose disagrees with him at times.

Perhaps that appears like a punishment from a bird's eye view, but it isn't. Shane drinks it for the luxury of the taste.



“The body is the ultimate witness to love. And I learned that the right way.” — **Ocean Vuong as interviewed by Krista Tippett.**

End Notes

this piece is incredibly personal to me, as someone in recovery, who was very much a shane and had no ilya but instead a mother to learn it from and a very dedicated father who caught me when my body failed the first time. i love you, and if this resonated with you in anyway, i see you and i promise you it is worth it to get better. i am proud of you simply thinking of trying, if you have not already begun.

please leave comments, i really love reading them and i respond to every single one.

all my love. x

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