

Unexpected

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Unexpected

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Summary

University student, Shane Hollander, visits the Ottawa Omega Health Clinic for his annual gynecological exam and leaves with more than he bargained for.

Or the one where Shane the Virgin (😬) gets accidentally artificially inseminated with billionaire hotel heir, Ilya Rozanov's sperm.

Notes

Before diving in, here is a list of content/trigger warning for yall:

medical malpractice and inaccuracies, accidental insemination, panic attacks, discrimination, homophobia but not homophobic language, mentions of pregnancy termination, attempted physical assault, attempted murder (I guess?), depictions of a car accident, blood, mentions of miscarriage/pregnancy loss (not MCs), mentions of surgery, loss of autonomy in a medical emergency, traumatic childbirth, mentions of hysterectomy, mentions of suicide, mentions of drug use and overdose, mentions of mental and physical abuse, mentions of depression, mentions of parental death, depictions of grief, depersonalization

Let me know if I'm missing or should add anything! 🤍

- Inspired by a deleted work

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

So there was this fic I read back in December (that I can no longer find) where Shane was a nerdy uni student who accidentally gets inseminated with billionaire Ilya's baby. Said fic, and my inability to find it, sparked this idea.

Editing to add: it's back!!!!

Editing to add (again): it's gone again 😭

Shane hates the gynecologist. Not that anyone who has the misfortune of needing one particularly enjoys going, but there's something distinctly uncomfortable about being one of the few male omegas in the office.

At five foot ten inches and two hundred pounds, Shane is solid, hard packed muscle, built more like a beta than the willowy, fine boned male omegas surrounding him. With their soft bodies and androgynous features, and sweet scents, Shane sticks out like a sore thumb.

If it were up to Shane, he would skip the exam entirely. There is possibly nothing worse than sitting in a too bright exam room wearing one of those paper dresses that cover nothing, and cover even less when you're someone of Shane's size, but in order to get the suppressants he wants, Shane has to go.

When his name is called, he keeps his head down, doing his best to make himself as small as possible as he navigates this way around the other omegas, hoping that no one realizes that the starting center for The Gee-Gees is at the omega clinic.

Shane knows there's nothing wrong with being an omega. Under different circumstances, he might even be proud of his designation, but being an omega in hockey, hell in any sport, is a detriment. Everyone automatically assumes he is weaker, that his body cannot handle the hits he takes, that one whiff of a compatible alpha on the ice will throw him into a heat.

Shane has constantly had to fight the stereotypes to get where he is, and he refuses to let his designation get in the way now. Not when he's in his third year and up for captain. Which is why, after the last decade of scheduling heats and wearing scent patches that dull his senses and hide his smell, Shane wants to go on suppressants.

He's done this before. The nurse grabs his weight and checks his vitals. Swabs the inside of his elbow and draws a vial of blood—standard panel to check his hormone levels, before handing him the too small paper gown and stepping out.

Next comes the uncomfortable bit—the internal exam.

Shane always contemplates his life choices when he's asked to stick his heels in the stirrups and scoot his butt forward.

Scoot.

"Just a little more."

Scoot.

Wishes that he could get a hysterectomy as he feels the cold, slick press of the speculum entering him, while tuning out the awkward small talk the doctor attempts to make. Hates that he'll be leaking a god awful amount of lube for the rest of the afternoon despite using what feels like 100 baby wipes to clean up, but he's in and out. Easy peasy.

Except..

There had been a mix-up.

Shane doesn't know this at first.

Doesn't know that a mislabeled tray in a busy teaching omega clinic is about to alter the trajectory of his life entirely. Doesn't know that his regular annual exam was actually a procedure meant for a fertility patient scheduled at the same time as him. Doesn't know that while he is being artificially inseminated, the omega anxiously awaiting her procedure is actually just getting a regular exam instead.

It isn't until three weeks later that Shane realizes something is off.

First it's the neediness he feels, the way he forces his best friend and roommate, Hayden, to cough up one of his dirty hoodies for Shane to wear to bed, and scents him before they leave for classes. Then it's the nausea that hits him out of nowhere. First in the middle of practice, that has him bending over and hurling on the ice, and then later when Hayden starts cooking ground beef for tacos. Then the exhaustion that saps all energy from him, that all Shane can do when he's not in class or at practice is sleep.

It isn't until he listens to a voicemail from the omega clinic that he grows concerned.

"Hello, Mr. Hollander, this is Sheri from the Ottawa Omega Health Clinic. If you could please give us a call back at your earliest convenience, that would be great!"

When Shane calls back they ask him to come in that afternoon, ushering him into a small conference room as soon as he checks in. And as he sits there waiting for the doctor to come in, he wonders if he's dying. Isn't that what usually happens when they call you to come in to speak with the doctor privately?

Dr. Kline comes in a moment later, followed by a woman she introduces as Marissa Vale. Both women sit down, hands clasped tightly in front of them, and grim looks on their faces.

"Mr. Hollander," Dr. Kline says carefully. "There's no easy way to say this."

“Oh god, I’m dying aren’t I?”

“What?”

“Is it bad? Stupid question. Obviously it’s bad, or else I wouldn’t be here...”

“Mr. Hollander—“

“Oh fuck... What am I going to tell my mom?!”

“Shane!” Dr. Kline barks, using her alpha command. “You’re not dying, Mr. Hollander. Although, I’m afraid the news isn’t much better.”

Shane swallows thickly, fighting back the nausea that’s threatening to consume him.

“There was a procedural error during your last visit.”

Shane’s brow knits in confusion. “During my annual?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of error?”

Dr. Kline inhales. “There was a mislabeling incident in the reproductive materials storage. A sample that was not intended for your chart was introduced during your exam.”

Shane stares at her and blinks, the words not landing.

Reproductive materials... Sample... Introduced...

“Introduced,” he repeats slowly. “Like...?”

Dr. Kline looks at him sadly and her voice softens. “I apologize, Mr. Hollander, but it appears that you were inseminated.”

Shane chokes out a thready laugh, can feel the panic rising as her words sink in. “That’s not funny.”

“I’m not joking.”

Shane’s hands grow clammy, can hear his pulse pounding in his ears.

“That’s... I didn’t consent to anything like that. I’m not even... I wasn’t...” He stops, breath hitching. “I was here for my annual...”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hollander, but due to a catastrophic error, viable genetic material was used during your exam.”

His face drains of color. “You mean sperm.”

Dr. Kline gives a curt nod, “Yes.”

The word sits between them like a bomb, and Shane's hand flies to his abdomen instinctively.

"No," he whispers. "No, no, no."

"We would like to run immediate testing," she continues, voice clinical but strained. "To confirm whether or not your hormone levels indicate early implantation."

He looks up at her, eyes wide. "I could be pregnant?"

Another nod. "Yes."

Shane's breathing turns shallow as he processes. "That's... That's assault," he says finally. "That's criminal."

"Yes," Dr. Kline agrees quietly. "It is. The hospital has already initiated an internal investigation, which is why I have included Ms. Vale here in our conversation."

"Mr. Hollander," she says gently. "I represent the hospital."

Shane's eyes narrow as he turns back to Dr. Kline. "You brought a lawyer."

"This situation has significant legal implications," Ms. Vale says carefully. "We wanted to be transparent from the outset."

"Transparent?" Shane's voice cracks. "You put... Sper—something inside my body without my consent and you're talking about transparency?"

She doesn't flinch.

"You have every right to be angry. What happened to you is indefensible. We are prepared to take full responsibility."

"Responsibility?" he repeats. "What does that even mean? You can't just undo this."

"No," she says softly. "We cannot."

Shane swallows hard. "Does the other party know?"

Dr. Kline and Ms. Vale exchange a look.

"Under Canadian law, we are required to notify the owner of the genetic material once a viable pregnancy is confirmed."

His stomach twists. "Am I allowed to know who it is?"

Ms. Vale hesitates. "If testing confirms that the insemination has taken, then yes, you will be notified."

"And then what? He sues me? Claims something? Takes it?"

“No,” Ms. Vale says firmly. “You have bodily autonomy. You have legal protections. He cannot compel you to do anything.”

“But he can fight for custody.”

“If you carry to term, there could be parental claims, yes.”

The weight of that lands heavily.

Shane stares down at his abdomen again.

There’s nothing visible.

Nothing different.

And yet everything is different.

“I just came in for an exam,” he whispers.

Dr. Kline’s voice breaks slightly. “I know.”

Shane looks between the two women, both trying to manage the disaster that could potentially live inside him.

“What happens now?” he asks.

“We would need to take urine and blood samples to confirm pregnancy.” Shane nods. “Once confirmed, we will notify the donor before figuring out the next steps.”

“Next steps?”

“You are under no obligation to continue the pregnancy, Mr. Hollander. You have options.”

The implication hangs heavy. Shane could terminate if he wants to—it would be the smart thing to do in his situation. But there is the option of continuation, of carrying a stranger’s baby inside of him to term and then signing his rights away. And litigation. God his mother was going to lose her shit when she finds out.

“We are here to protect you. Medically, legally, whatever means necessary.” Ms. Vale supplies.

Shane snorts. “A bit late for that.”

“We are truly sorry, Mr. Hollander.”

Shane hums.

Dr. Kline and Ms. Vale excuse themselves, letting him know a nurse will be in shortly. He doesn’t wait long. His blood is drawn and a urine sample is taken, and he leaves the clinic his mind a mess.

All he could think about is how he is supposed to have practice at four. What is he supposed to tell the team if the test comes back positive? He can't play if he's pregnant. Can't play if he terminates either, at least not for a few weeks, and if he can't play, then he'll lose his scholarship. If he loses his scholarship then he'll have to drop out.

He thinks about his body. The one he trained so carefully, that it might suddenly not be just his own. He thinks about the donor and the omega who will get the devastating news of the mix up. How they will learn that they made a baby with someone they didn't intend to, that what should be a joyous moment is now one filled with pain.

He doesn't tell anyone. Not his coach who yells at him for having his head in the clouds, threatening a bag skate if he doesn't get his shit together. Not Hayden, who wrinkles his nose when Shane comes home smelling of vomit, having thrown up on his way home from the rink after trying to force himself to eat. Not his mother, who has texted him asking him how his week is going.

He knows he should say something. He shouldn't carry this alone, but he can't. Not until he knows something. Not until he has answers.

The call comes two days later, and Shane almost doesn't answer.

He's in the locker room, lacing up for practice, pretending everything is normal. Pretending the blood draw, the whispers, the word insemination haven't been echoing in his skull since Tuesday.

His phone buzzes again, and his stomach drops as Ottawa Omega Health Clinic flashes across the screen.

"Hello?" Shane says as he steps out into the empty hallway outside the locker room.

There's a pause. Paper shuffling. A breath. "Hello, Mr. Hollander, it's Dr. Kline." She clears her throat. "Your labs have come back."

Shane says nothing, just waits.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hollander, but your hCG levels indicate implantation. You are pregnant."

The world tilts and his knees buckle. Shane slides down the wall behind him.

"No..." he says weakly.

"I'm sorry." Dr. Kline says again, gently. "We've notified the donor as well." Shane gags, can feel the nausea rising as Dr. Kline continues. "The specimen was traced this morning." He presses his back to the cold cinderblock wall. "To Ilya Rozanov."

The name means nothing for half a second, and then it hits.

"Rozanov," Shane breathes. "The hotel billionaire?"

"Yes."

His laugh this time borders on hysteria. “You’re telling me I’m pregnant with a Russian oligarch’s baby because someone misfiled paperwork?”

“It appears so,” Dr. Kline says evenly.

“Ilya Rozanov.” Shane says again in disbelief.

He’d heard of Rozanov, of course. Had seen him splashed across the headlines, his beautiful supermodel wife hanging off his arm. The same Ilya Rozanov whose older brother, Alexei, had died in a yachting accident early last year, leaving Ilya abruptly thrust into heir status.

“We’re on your side, Mr. Hollander. Please remember that.”

Shane barks out a laugh, sure that he sounds as unhinged as he feels, and hangs up after Dr. Kline mentions he has options and that someone will follow up with him shortly about next steps.

Hayden finds him, half suited up, legs splayed out in front of him and head resting against the cement wall behind him.

“You ok, bud?”

Shane shakes his head, letting out a wet laugh. “No.”

Hayden flops down beside him. “What happened?”

Shane rolls his head to look at Haude, voice cracking. “I’m pregnant.”

Hayden blinks the barks out a laugh. “Hilarious, Hollander.”

“I’m serious.”

“Dude! Shut the fuck up, no you’re not.”

“I really wish I wasn’t, Hayd.”

Hayden stops laughing, turning serious. “How?”

“The clinic. There was an error. I got inseminated on accident.”

“Holy fuck! Does your mom know?”

“No.” Shane shakes his head. “You’re the first person I’ve told.”

“Fuck, dude. This is bad. Like really really bad.”

“I know.”

“Your mom is going to want to sue the shit out of the clinic.”

“I know.” Shane says again.

“Fuck.”

“That’s not even the worst part.”

“Dude how can this get any worse?!”

Shane chokes out a laugh that’s dangerously close to hysterical. “The donor is Ilya Rozanov.”

Hayden says nothing for a moment. “The Russian fucking billionaire?”

Shane nods.

Hayden stares at him like he’s grown a second head. “You’re telling me you went in for a routine exam and came out carrying a literal oligarch baby?”

“Don’t say it like that.”

“Like what? It’s insane.”

“Do you know what happens if this leaks?” he says after a moment. “I’m an omega athlete on scholarship. You think they won’t eat this alive? ‘College hockey star accidentally impregnated by married billionaire.’”

Hayden winces. “The headlines write themselves.”

“And he’s fucking married,” Shane says, voice breaking slightly. “To a literal fucking supermodel, and now I’m carrying their fucking baby. It’s all so fucked up.” Shane’s hands are shaking. “This wasn’t even my choice,” he sobs. “It wasn’t a heat, I wasn’t being reckless. It just… happened to me.”

That’s the part that cracks him open. He’s used to controlling his body. Training it. Mastering it. Pushing it past its limits. Now it feels like something has hijacked it.

Hayden pulls Shane to him, burying Shane’s nose into his neck.

“Hey, hey. It’s going to be ok.” Shane inhales Hayden’s comforting mint and evergreen scent. “The clinic screwed up, big time. That’s a lawsuit the size of Canada. And you have rights. No one is going to make you carry this baby, ok? You have options.” Shane swallows hard. “Plus you’re not alone, ok? You have me and your mom, and you know she won’t let the clinic or the Rozanov’s try to sweep this under the rug.”

Shane laughs, weak and wet. “I don’t know what to do.”

—

Moscow

Ilya is halfway through reviewing an acquisition report when his secure line lights up.

He answers without looking up. “Speak.”

There's hesitation on the other end, and that alone makes him pause.

"Mr. Rozanov, I apologize for interrupting, but we've received a formal notification from Ottawa Omega Health Clinic regarding your cryogenic storage contract."

His pen stills. "I thought we scheduled that for next quarter?"

A beat. "Mrs. Rozanova was seen last month."

"Oh."

Silence stretches too long. Ilya leans back slowly. "She is pregnant then?"

Another breath. "About that..."

"Out with it, I do not have all day."

"There was a chain-of-custody error involving your sample, sir."

"What do you mean by error."

"It was mistakenly introduced during a gynecological exam three weeks."

He frowns. "For Svetlana?"

"It was supposed to be, but no, sir." The lawyer's voice lowers. "It was used on a third-year university student."

The words don't compute.

"I don't understand."

"He was inseminated, Mr. Rozanov."

Ilya inhales slowly. "You are telling me," Ilya says carefully, "that my genetic material was used in error."

"Yes."

"And my wife?"

"Was not aware of the mix-up."

The silence that follows is cold and surgical.

"Is there a pregnancy?" Ilya asks.

"Yes."

"How far along."

“Very early. Confirmed implantation.”

He stands slowly, moving toward the window. Below, Moscow continues moving. Traffic. Order. Power. But somewhere in Canada, a stranger now carries his child.

“Name,” he says.

There’s a shuffle of paper. “Shane Hollander, twenty. University of Ottawa. Hockey player.”

Ilya’s jaw tightens. “Does he know it’s mine?”

“Yes. The hospital informed him as part of disclosure protocol.”

“And the media?”

“Not yet.”

That word settles heavily. Not yet.

“And my father?” Ilya asks quietly.

A careful pause. “Not to our knowledge.”

Good.

“Send me everything,” Ilya says. “Medical reports. Incident file. Internal investigation. And draft a liability claim against the hospital.”

“Yes, sir.”

He ends the call. His entire marriage had been structured around this—an heir. A timeline. An obligation. Sveta had agreed to the process clinically. Detached. Necessary.

And now—a university student? An omega athlete, at that, pregnant with his child.

The door opens without knocking and Sveta enters, elegant even in silk loungewear.

“You look like someone just informed you of a war,” she says lightly.

“There has been a complication,” he replies.

Her gaze sharpens instantly. “Medical?”

“Yes.”

She steps closer. “What happened?”

He studies her face, wonders how to say this.

“The clinic used my stored sample.”

A flicker of confusion. “I know. I had an insemination scheduled three weeks ago.”

“You did not.”

“What do you mean?”

“The clinic mishandled the sample. A college student was inseminated instead.”

Sveta goes still, her expression cooling into something brittle. “You’re telling me,” she says slowly, “that someone else is carrying your child.”

“Yes.”

She looks away. Not shocked, calculating. “Is it viable?”

“Yes.”

A long breath leaves her. “So,” she says quietly, “your father will get his heir.”

There’s no jealousy in her voice.

“That is not the point,” Ilya says sharply.

“Isn’t it?” She meets his eyes now. “This is exactly what Grigori wanted. A guarantee.” She studies him carefully. “Does the omega want it?” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

“And what do you want?”

That question lingers longer than either of them expect. Ilya turns back to the window.

In another country, a stranger is likely panicking. Scared and alone, carrying something that was meant to be a transaction.

“I want control of the situation,” he answers finally.

Svetlana gives a faint, almost sad smile. “This is not a merger, Ilya. It’s a person.”

The weight of that settles differently.

Somewhere in Ottawa, Shane Hollander is learning his life has just detonated, and Ilya realizes, for the first time, that this child will not be an arrangement. It will be a reckoning.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Please excuse any typos and shit I may have missed—I'm banging this bad boy out at work 🤦🏻

Shane is in class when the leak happens. His phone is set on 'do not disturb', so he does not know about the group chats and the missed calls and notifications stacked on top of notifications. He does not know about the headlines, about the gossip rags printing his picture and posting about the pregnancy he isn't even sure he'll keep.

He's too busy focusing on the slides at the front of the hall, something about economic policy, when the whispers start. He thinks nothing of it, blocking out the excited chatter around him as he takes notes on his laptop.

"Is that him?"

"Oh my God, it is."

"Holy shit!"

It isn't until a classmate nudges him, holding out their phone to read that Shane realizes what's happened.

ROZANOV HEIR SCANDAL — UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA OMEGA HOCKEY STAR PREGNANT AFTER "CLINIC ERROR"

There's a blurry photo of him leaving practice. His name, his age, his program tagged, and scholarship status.

Another notification banner slides across the top of his classmates screen:

CANADIAN UNIVERSITY ATHLETE CONFIRMED PREGNANT WIT CHILD OF RUSSIAN BILLIONAIRE ILYA ROZANOV

The room tilts, and his ears start ringing as he hears an uptick in the chatter around him.

No no no no.

The hospital said they were handling it. Had promised their lawyers would handle this. That he had time.

Shane stands abruptly, causing his professor to pause mid-sentence.

“Mr. Hollander?”

Shane doesn't answer, does not care that it's the middle of his professor speaking, He closes his laptop, throws his things in his bag, and high tails it out of the lecture. Once free he pulls out his phone, sees the texts and the calls and the notifications and calls the one person he knows will fix everything—his mother. Yuna Hollander answers on the first ring, listening to Shane's panicked breathing.

His hands shake so badly he nearly drops his phone as he scrolls to her contact, pressing call as he speedwalks his way away from campus.

It rings once. Twice. She answers on the third.

“Shane? Honey, I was just about to call—”

He breaks before he can stop it. “Mom, everyone knows.”

“What? Knows what, Shane?”

Shane inhales shakily “About the baby.”

“Baby? Shane, what baby?”

“Google me, I'm sure you can find out what happened.”

“Shane, you're not making any sense. Where are you?”

“On campus,” he says, swallowing hard. “I was in class... Everyone was whispering.” He laughs shakily. “I'm front-page news.”

Silence. Then the faint sound of a television turning on in the background. Shane hears his mother inhale.

“Oh,” she says softly.

“What do I do? I can't walk back in there,” he whispers. “They were looking at me like I'm some... I don't know golddigger or something.” Shane's voice breaks. “I didn't plan this. I didn't ask for this to happen... They're taking one of the worst moments of my life and turning it into gossip.”

“Oh baby, it's going to be ok.”

Shane sobs into the phone. .

“Shane, listen to me,” she says, and her tone sharpens. “You are still my son. You are still the boy who cried when we found that injured sparrow in the yard. You are still the kid who insists on calling me after every away game. No headline changes that.”

His breathing stutters.

“Mom...”

“Did the hospital warn you this might happen?” she continues.

“They said they were being careful.”

“Well, they clearly weren’t careful enough.” There’s movement on her end, drawers opening, keys jangling. “Where are you exactly?”

“Almost to my car. I’m heading home.”

“Good.” Shane hears the door close. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Mom, you don’t have to—”

“I absolutely do,” she cuts in. “You think I’d just let you handle this alone?”

Shane lets out a watery breath. “I’m scared,” he admits quietly.

There’s no judgment in her reply. Only warmth and steel. “Of course you are, baby. This is big. It’s unfair. It’s loud.” A breath. “But you are not alone in it.”

He wipes at his eyes with the sleeve of his hoodie.

“What if his family comes after me?”

“They can fucking try.” His mother says calmly. “If that billionaire thinks he can intimidate you,” she continues, voice tight with protective fury, “he’s about to learn what happens when someone messes with my child.”

Shane huffs out a shaky breath. “Mom...”

“I mean it, Shane. No one messes with my baby!” Her voice gentles at the edges. “How are you feeling? Physically?”

He glances down at himself like he might see something different.

“Still me,” he says. “Just... overwhelmed.”

“That’s allowed.” His mother pauses a moment. “Do you want this?” she asks carefully.

The question lands heavier than he expected. Does he? The answer should be no, but...

“I don’t know yet,” he whispers. “But it’s inside me. And that feels... real.”

She exhales slowly. “Then we take this one step at a time.”

He swallows. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

“For what, sweetie?”

“For dragging you into this.”

Her voice goes sharp again. “You did not drag me anywhere, Shane. Someone violated medical protocol and turned your life upside down. You are my son and I am walking into this beside you.”

His throat tightens all over again. “Ok.”

“Good,” she says. “Now hurry home, I’ll see you soon.”

“Ok.” Shane says again. “Love you, Mom.”

“Love you more.”

—

He doesn’t remember the ride home, but he knows something is wrong as soon as he turns onto his street. There are cars and news vans everywhere, reporters standing in front of cameras pointed in the direction of his apartment building.

They spot him as he pulls into his parking spot, and Shane barely has time to lock the doors before they swam his vehicle. Cameras flash, voices holler over each other to get his attention.

“Shane! Over here!”

“Are you keeping the baby?”

“Did Rozanov promise you money?”

His pulse pounds in his ears.

The light is blinding, rapid fire white bursts through the windshield. He ducks down, curling in on himself, forehead coming to rest on the steering wheel. He’s shaking, the panic in him rising as he starts gasping for breath. His car fills with the burnt scent of his distress.

This is too much. He’s trapped. He can’t breathe.

His fingers claw into his chest as he gasps. He hates that they’re catching him falling apart for the whole world to see, but he cannot breathe.

Someone knocks hard on his driver side window, and Shane flinches.

“Shane, just a comment!”

His phone rings as they continue to shout for his attention. He answers, fingers numb and shaking.

“Mom—” He sobs.

“Shane, where are you?” Yuna demands immediately.

“Outside.” He gasps. “They’re everywhere.” There’s a muffled curse on the other end. “I can’t get out.”

As if on cue, someone rattles his handle.

“Shane! Are you afraid of Ilya’s father?”

“Did you trap him?”

His vision tunnels, his breathing going shallow. “I can’t get out,” he whispers again.

“It’s ok, baby. I’m coming.” Yuna says sharply.

Shane nods, not that his mother can see. Tries to suck in lungfuls of air, but they get caught in his throat.

“I’m coming, baby. Just breathe.”

He hears her before she sees her. Hears the slam of the front door to his building, the crunch of footsteps on gravel.

Yuna Hollander steps out like a woman heading into battle. No hesitation, no fear. Pure fury wrapped up in a wool coat.

“Back up!” Shane hears her snap through the phone, her voice carrying from outside his Jeep as well.

The paparazzi pivot toward her. “Mrs. Hollander, can you confirm—”

“I said BACK.THE. FUCK. UP.” Her voice cracks like a whip.

A few actually take a step back, startled by the ferocity of the tiny omega in front of them. She marches straight to the Jeep, shoving and elbowing her way through the crowd to get to Shane’s door.

“Open the door sweetheart.” she says through the glass, her expression fierce but steady.

He nods, swallowing hard, and opens the door slowly. The second the door cracks open, the cameras surge forward again.

His mother’s hand slams against one of the lenses. “Get that out of my face!”

“Ma’am, we’re just asking questions—”

“You’re harassing me and my son. Now move.”

“Mrs. Hollander, is he afraid of Rozanov retaliation?”

She turns so sharply the reporter actually flinches, fire in her eyes. “You want a statement?” she says, voice low and lethal. “Here it is: if any of you follow him, touch him, or publish his exact location, I will personally see you in court.” That gives them pause. “Try me.”

Shane finally steps out of the car, making himself as small he possibly can behind her, hood up and head down. The flashes go wild, and Shane curls further into himself.

“It’s ok, baby,” she murmurs to him. “I got you. Just ignore them.”

Yuna forces her way through the wall of bodies, her hand in Shane’s as she pulls him behind her. Someone grabs Shane as they pass.

Yuna wheels around instantly. “Do not touch him!”

The building manager appears at the door as Shane and his mother make it through the bulk of the crowd, flustered and trying to help. He does his best to wedge his body between the door and the reporters pressing in at the door, trying his best to make enough space for Yuna and Shane to pass through.

Shane’s breathing is ragged by the time they stumble inside, the sound of the door slamming shut behind them making him jump. Yuna does not let him look back, even though he can still hear the muffled shouts of reporters outside, and see the flashes reflecting off the silver elevator doors as they wait for it to open.

As soon as they slide open, Yuna pushes Shane in ahead of her, doing her best to block him from view with her small body, and he takes his first real breath as they slide closed behind her.

He leans back against the cool elevator wall, knees buckling as he slides down. .

Yuna kneels in front of him, hands coming up to cup his cheeks, thumbs wiping away the tears on his cheeks.

“Sweetheart.” she says, softer now. “It’s going to be ok. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

His eyes are glassy as he looks up at her. “I couldn’t move. They were everywhere.”

“I know.”

“The things they said...”

“I know, baby. I know. You did nothing wrong, Shane. Nothing.”

His voice shakes and his chin wobbles. “I feel like I did... Just by existing.”

Her expression hardens again at that. Shane knows she’s not angry at him. That she’s angry at whoever leaked his pregnancy, at the reporters who trapped him in his car.

The elevator dings, doors sliding open to reveal Shane’s floor. Blessedly empty. From up here he can no longer hear the shouts of the crowd below, or the clicks and pops of camera shutters. He is safe. His mother is here. Hayden—

“Mom, what about Hayden?” Shane asks as panic floods him.

“I’ve already spoken with him. He’ll be staying with Jackie until things calm down out there.”

Shane sags in relief, hand pressing to his abdomen without thinking.

Yuna notices but doesn’t comment, only says that he and Hayden are safe as she opens the door to Shane’s apartment. Shane nods weakly, heading for the couch, tossing down his bookbag and his phone on the table in front of it.

After a moment, his phone buzzes. Unknown number. International.

Shane stares at it, Yuna following his gaze. “That’s him, isn’t it?”

Shane swallows. “I don’t know.”

The phone keeps ringing.

“You don’t have to answer,” she says quietly. “Not if you’re not ready.”

Shane looks at her, then down at his phone.

Bzzt. Bzzt. Bzzt.

“Ok.”

He lets it go to voicemail.

—

The leak reaches Moscow before sunrise.

Ilya is still in bed, reading article after article speculating on if this was actually a medical error or a cash grab, Shane’s face plastered across international sites, the twenty-one-year-old athlete dissected like a stock market chart in scathing articles and comment sections when he sees the clip for the first time.

The grainy cellphone video has already gone viral. Ilya watches as a beat up Jeep pulls into a parking space, as the reporters race towards it shouting Shane’s name. The omega trapped in his vehicle, completely surrounded as flashes go off and the shouting intensifies.

Then comes Yuna Hollander, the tiny dark haired woman sweeping in like an avenging angel, shoving and shouting as she fights her way to her son. Watches as Shane ducks his head against the flashes, and his mother whirls on the reporters, eyes bright and teeth bared as she hisses threats in their direction when they try to touch her son.

He watches again. And again. Jaw tightening and teeth grinding with each view, chest rumbling in anger. Something shifts inside him as he watches for a fourth time. Protectiveness flares inside him towards the omega he has never met. This isn’t a scandal, this is danger, and Ilya will not let anything happen to Shane Hollander.

He swipes away from the video and types out a message to his team. His phone rings a moment later.

“How did this get out?” he asks, not mincing words.

“We believe it originated within hospital administration.”

“I don’t care what you believe, I want confirmation.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Have we reached out to Hollander?”

“We’ve tried, he has not answered.”

Ilya hums. “Get me Ottawa.”

“Sir?”

“I will not let him face this alone.”

“Mr. Rozanov, I do not recommend—”

“I want private security contracted immediately. A local team. Make sure they are discreet but present. Background checks. No leaks.”

A pause. “For Mr. Hollander?”

“For my child,” Ilya replies evenly.

“Yes, sir.”

He hangs up. Swiping over to his email, to the contact information he has for Shane. He hesitates, debating on whether he should attempt to call personally.

Ilya decides against it, tapping out a quick message instead: You are not obligated to speak to me, but just know that you are not alone in this. I will have security positioned near your building within the hour.

The same footage plays on a different screen, in a stuffy office. Grigori Rozanov watches in silence, expression never changing.

He makes a call.

“You deployed assets without my approval.”

On the other end, Ilya’s voice is calm. “I do not require your approval, Father.”

Grigori scoffs.. “You are reacting emotionally.”

“I am reacting appropriately.”

“This boy is a liability.”

“He is the father of my child.”

Silence.

Cold.

“You will choose carefully how much you attach yourself to this,” Grigori says.

“Your opinion is noted, but unnecessary.” Ilya replies and hangs up

Grigori slams down the receiver, seething as his son’s insolence. If Ilya will not think rationally, then he will make sure this... pregnancy... is handled appropriately.

—

An hour later, there’s another knock at Shane’s apartment door. Shane freezes, terrified to open the door. Had the reporters somehow gotten into the building? Were they going to harass him outside his door now?

“Stay back,” she says, making her way to the door.

She checks the peephole and finds two men in dark coats. Calm posture. No cameras. She unlocks the door slowly, only opening it just enough to poke her head around the door.

“Yes?”

“Mrs. Hollander?”

“Who’s asking?”

“I’m Sergei Volkov, ma’am. My partners Andre and I have been contracted to provide protective presence for Mr. Hollander.”

Her eyes narrow. “By who?”

“Mr. Rozanov.”

Yuna studies them, assessing, measuring.

“Armed?” she asks bluntly.

“Yes, ma’am. Licensed.”

“Background checks?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She considers them for a moment longer before turning to address Shane. “He moves fast.”

Shane looks down at his phone, at the message from Ilyal glowing on his screen, typing out a quick 'thank you' before deleting it.

She turns back to the men outside the door. "You'll be staying outside."

"Yes ma'am."

"And no entering without permission."

"Understood."

Yuna nods. "Good... Thank you." and closes the door.

Chapter 3

With security in place, the crowd outside thins significantly. There are still a few stragglers—news vans and paparazzi with long lenses, and Yuna makes sure to keep the curtains closed. She hovers, fluffing pillows and offering to get Shane more blankets, even asks if he wants soup. Shane declines, certain that anything he puts in his stomach will come right back up with the way his nerves are eating him alive.

Shane sits on the edge of his bed, hoodie sleeves pulled over his hands, chewing on his hoodie strings as he stares down at the phone resting heavily in his palm. The calls from Ilya's legal team have stopped, and Ilya hasn't texted him since he let Shane know he is not alone in this.

Yuna knocks softly on the frame, pulling his attention away from his phone. "You okay, sweetheart?"

He nods, then shakes his head. "I don't know." He answers truthfully.

"Do you want me in here when you call?"

He hesitates for a moment, mulling it over before deciding he needs to do this on his own. Shane shakes his head. "I think I need to do this alone."

Yuna squeezes his shoulder, pressing a kiss to the top of his head as she goes and leaves to give him privacy.

Shane takes a centering breath, tapping to open Ilya's message, then taps his contact. His fingers hover over the call button as he psyches himself up.

"You can do this," he mumbles. "It'll be fine. Maybe. Hopefully." He hesitates. "Fuck, ok, I'm doing it." Presses call.

It connects faster than expected.

"Shane."

His name sounds different in Ilya's voice, lower and controlled.

"Hello," Shane says quietly.

A pause. "I'm surprised you called."

Shane huffs out a laugh. "I wasn't sure that I was going to, to be honest. Thank you," Shane adds quietly. "For the security."

"You should never have been cornered like that." There's a beat of silence. "I will make sure it does not happen again."

Shane studies the ceiling. "You don't owe me anything."

"That is incorrect." The firmness in that surprises him. "This situation was not of your making," Ilya continues. "But it is my responsibility."

Shane exhales slowly. "They think I did it on purpose."

"I know."

"Did you?" Shane asks suddenly, the question hanging there between them.

"No," Ilya says without hesitation.

Neither of them say anything for a moment, just listening to the other breathe into the phone.

"I don't know what I'm doing," Shane whispers eventually. "With any of this."

Neither does Ilya, but he doesn't say that.

"We will determine it step by step," he replies instead.

We. Shane notices that.

"I'm not a strategy," Shane says quietly.

"You are not," Ilya agrees. "You are... someone I intend to protect."

The words settle heavier than either of them expect, and Shane swallows.

"My mom threatened to ruin the press."

A faint exhale on the other end, almost a laugh. "I saw. She is formidable."

"Yeah."

Silence again. Softer this time.

"Are you ok?" Ilya asks.

"No." Shane whispers.

A beat. "I'm sorry."

"Me too."

There's silence again, almost comfortable.

"I am coming to Ottawa."

"You are?" Shane asks, confused.

“I told you that you were not alone in this.”

“But I thought you just meant that about the security.”

“Da, I did, but I would also like to meet you.”

“I don’t know...”

“There is no pressure, Shane. I will not force you.”

“Maybe... Maybe you could come to the clinic with me? I’m supposed to let Dr. Kline know my decision and figure out next steps.”

“Next steps...” Ilya murmurs.

“Yeah.”

Ilya hesitates for a moment. “Ok. When?”

“Friday. Will your wife be there?”

Ilya hums. “Yes.”

“Ok.”

“Ok... I will see you then, Shane.” Ilya say. “If you need anything, please let me know.”

“Ok.” Shane says again before hanging up.

—

The clinic arranged Shane’s appointment quietly, an after hours visit with minimal staff, with Shane coming through the employee entrance in the back. He almost backs out twice, terrified about not only the appointment but meeting Ilya and his wife.

God, she must hate me, he thinks.

He’s wearing Hayden’s hoodie again, hands shoved into the front pocket wishing he could crawl inside it and never leave. His mother comes with him, agreeing to wait out in the lobby, making him promise to text her if he needs her. Shane nods, squeezing her tightly, before heading towards the conference room.

It is the same room from before, just as cold and bright as the last time. Dr. Kline is there, as is the hospital’s lawyer, Ms. Vale. Across from them, looking stern and terrifyingly handsome, sits Ilya Rozanov. Beside him, his wife, Svetlana, gorgeous, breathtaking Svetlana, sits just as quiet and composed as her husband.

For a split second, their eyes lock, and in that moment Shane expects accusation and hatred for the omega who has stolen her pregnancy. Instead, Shane finds none of that in her golden

hazel eyes. He sees shock, of course, and pain, as he expected, but there is also cold calculation too.

Dr. Kline clears her throat, dragging Shane's attention from the couple seated in front of him.

"Thank you for coming, Shane. I know this has been... unexpected."

Svetlana snorts, murmuring something in Russian. Ilya shushes her.

Dr. Kline forces a smile. "If you could, please sit, I will make introductions before we make further plans."

Shane nods, coming to sit in the chair closest to the door in case he decides to bolt like he so badly wishes he could do.

"Shane, I would like to introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Rozanov, and their council Ms. Kozlova."

Shane notices the petite blonde beta woman for the first time, sitting back and to the left of Ilya. She nods, blue eyes sharp as she looks over Shane.

"Hello." He says after a moment.

Ilya nods, but Svetlana says nothing, just studies him.

"Before we go any further," Ms. Vale interjects. "I would like to apologize on the behalf of the hospital for your personal information being compromised and leaked to the press. We are currently working on uncovering who released the information to the media. We accept full responsibility for the procedural error, and the mishandling of not only Mr. Rozanov's information but Mr. Hollander's as well."

"That is a start," Kozlova replies smoothly. "Not a resolution."

Ms. Vale continues. "We would also like to discuss settlement structures before this escalates further publicly."

Shane's mother stiffens beside him. "Settlement?"

"Not hush money," she clarifies. "Liability compensation and structured medical support during the pregnancy."

Kozlova raises a hand gently. "You are speaking as if Mr. Hollander has decided to continue the pregnancy, which has not been confirmed as far as we have been made aware." She looks to Shane for confirmation, he nods. "While Mr. Rozanov is more than happy to establish immediate next steps regarding liability, confidentiality, and parental rights, Mr. Hollander has not made a decision."

Dr. Kline clears her throat. "Mr. Hollander's health remains our priority."

Shane appreciates that she says his name first. Not the baby, him.

Svetlana's gaze shifts fully to Shane once more, not hostile just assessing.

"You look exhausted," she says softly.

Shane blinks. "Yeah," he admits. "It's been a rough week."

A faint, almost sympathetic curve touches her lips. "Yes," she says not unkindly. "I'm sure it has."

Shane's hands tighten under the table.

"You are twenty-one, yes?" she asks after a moment..

He nods. "Yes."

"You did not choose this."

"No."

"And no one asked you to do this?"

It's not a question. Shane straightens in his seat and shakes his head.

"Sveta—"

"I needed to hear it from him."

Shane almost laughs at the absurdity. "You think I orchestrated being accidentally inseminated?"

Svetlana's gaze flicks to her husband then away. "No, I do not think that," she says firmly. "But I wanted to be sure."

There's tension between them, a fracture line barely concealed. Shane can see it in the way Ilya's jaw tightens, and how stiffly Svetlana holds herself.

"Are you angry at me?" Shane asks before he can stop himself.

The room goes very still. Svetlana inhales slowly, then shakes her head. "I am angry, yes" she says carefully. "At the clinic... At whoever leaked this..." She doesn't look away. "But not at you. You are simply an innocent bystander in the mess that has been created."

Shane nods, tapping his fingers on the table between them.

"We know you did not choose this, Mr. Hollander." Ms. Kozlova says, interrupting whatever moment has just passed between him and Mrs. Rozanova. "That you played no part in this error... But we must come to a decision on how to move forward."

Ilya clears his throat. "As I told you, there is no pressure. We do this how you want."

Svetlana looks to her husband before leaning forward. “What do you want?” she asks Shane directly.

No one else has asked him that yet..

“I don’t know,” he admits. “I haven’t had time to want anything. I’m still trying to process that my body was used without my consent.”

That lands heavily around the table.

“I will not allow you to be coerced,” Ilya says quietly, the guilt of what has happened to the young man in front of him eating at him. “By my family. Or anyone.”

—

On the other half of the world, Grigori Rozanov stares out the large glass windows that make up the back wall of his office, his expression hardening as he takes in the snow covered streets of Moscow hundreds of feet below him as he mulls over the confirmation he received of his son’s whereabouts—his unscheduled trip to Ottawa after their brief conversation about the Canadian omega.

“He met the boy?” he asks as he turns towards his assistant.

“Yes, sir.” She confirms with a nod.

Grigori makes his way to the bar cart, flipping over a rocks glass. He uncovers the ice bucket, using the tongs to pull out a large square cube of ice, before heavily pouring himself some vodka. He swirls the liquid around the glass, taking a long sip as he turns back to the window, savoring the cool burn of the vodka as it slides down his throat.

“Freeze his discretionary accounts,” he says after a moment..

“Sir?”

“Temporarily. I want to see how committed this farce of a pregnancy.” A pause. “And contact our media partners. Quietly.”

The aide understands immediately. Grigori wants to shift the narrative, to question the boy’s motives

If Ilya wants to choose the boy, Grigori will make it costly.

By noon the following day Grigori is alerted that Ilya has been notified of his discretionary accounts suspension. Grigori has tightened the noose further—corporate cards are frozen, his private aviation privileges restricted, and several investment signatures have been temporarily invalidated.

When the call comes through, he smiles.

“Throwing a tantrum, Father? How unlike you.”

“Tantrum? No. I told you to handle this Ilya, and you used the company jet to travel to Canada without consulting the board,” Grigori says mildly.

“I met the parent of my child.”

“You met a liability.”

Ilya laughs. “So you froze my accounts.”

“I paused your privileges,” Grigori corrects. “You appear to be making impulsive financial decisions.”

“I funded security.”

“You funded optics.” A pause. “This boy,” he says calmly, “has altered your judgment.”

Ilya scoffs. “He has not.”

“He has,” Grigori replies. “And perception matters more than truth.”

Ilya does not respond.

“You will disengage.”

“No.”

Silence. “Very well,” he says, disconnecting the call.

If Ilya does not want to listen to reason, Grigori will take matters into his own hands. He has a plan.

Step one: narrative contamination.

A private investigator is hired. Not to find dirt, Grigori knows there is nothing of importance to find about the omega. He is what he appears—a twenty-one year old hockey playing college student on scholarship, but not for much longer, not once Grigori is through with him,

The character assassination begins with manufactured ambiguity. Rumors about old teammates being interviewed off-record appear, a professor approached with an ‘anonymous concern’, and campus rumor forums seeded with carefully worded insinuations.

Wasn’t he asking about wealthy donors last semester? Didn’t he switch majors suddenly? He always talked about wanting out of hockey....

Step two: financial suspicion.

A wire transfer is drafted, large and conspicuous. It never reaches the omega, of course. Then comes the falsified internal documentation, quietly prepared and suggesting that Shane contacted a Rozanov subsidiary months before the ‘accident’. Emails are fabricated, metadata forged. Just a suggestion of premeditation.

Step three: psychological destabilization.

An advocacy group for alpha/omega exploitation publishes an op-ed: **ARE POWERFUL HEIRS BEING TARGETED BY STRATEGIC OMEGAS?**

Shane's name is never used, that would be too obvious, but it's very clear who they are referring to. The implications? Vicious. It paints omegas (like Shane) as unstable, manipulative and calculated. Leveraging their bodies for financial gain.

Step four: legal pressure.

Although Grigori isn't certain he'll need to use that one as the seeds of doubt have already been sown.

—

Yuna sees the headline while sipping coffee at the small table in Shane's kitchen.

SOURCES CLAIM PREGNANT STUDENT INITIATED CONTACT WITH ROZANOV ENTERPRISE MONTHS BEFORE INCIDENT

"What the hell is this?" she breathes, setting her coffee down.

She reads it twice, then a third time.

Shane stumbles into the kitchen on her fourth read, hair sticking up at odd angles, and pillow creases on his cheek.

"Morning, Mom." Shane mumbles, opening the refrigerator door and pulling out a gallon of chocolate milk that he chugs in front of the open door.

"Shane!"

He winces and shrugs, shoving the milk back in the fridge with a shrug.

"Sit." his mother says, pushing out the chair across from her with her foot. "We need to talk."

"I told you the meeting went fine. I still have time to decide on what to do about the pregnancy."

"It's not about the pregnancy."

"Oh." Shane takes a seat. "What is it?"

Yuna pushes her phone in Shane's direction. "They're implying you planned it." Shane's chest tightens as he skims the article before him. "They're saying you coerced him."

Shane pushes away from the kitchen table and runs to the bathroom, falling to his knees to retch into the toilet. Yuna rushes behind him, crouching down and rubbing soothing circles against his back, as Shane sobs, head pressed against the toilet seat.

The smear escalates throughout the day. Anonymous posts appear, claiming Shane sought wealthy partners, and edited screenshots start circulating, suggesting he joked about trapping someone rich.

Those who know Shane know this is a farce, a campaign fabricated to wreck his image, but those who don't? It's convincing. Rumors fly, complaints are made, and Shane is forced to stay home from classes until further notice, his classwork moving online.

He tries to stay away from his phone and computer outside of doing classwork, which is how he almost misses it. Buried between media requests and hate mail:

Subject: Academic Status Review – Immediate Attention Required

He stops breathing as he opens, skimming over lines like 'Due to emerging concerns regarding conduct and reputational impact, your athletic scholarship has been suspended pending investigation.' and 'You have also been placed on academic probation until review by the Board of Governors.'

The screen blurs the longer he stares, reading over and over again how his future is beginning to crumble.

"No," he whispers. "No no no no."

His mother looks up from the couch. "What's wrong, baby?"

Shane just hands her the laptop, watching as her face morphs from confusion to outrage as she reads.

"They can't do this to you."

Shane laughs wetly, waving at his computer. "They just did."

He presses the heels of his palms into his eye sockets, words like 'Integrity review' and 'Financial impropriety concerns' flashing in the static behind his eyes.

"I didn't... I just... My life is over." Shane breaks. "Everything I have worked for is completely fucked." He presses his palms in harder. "I can't do this. I can't..."

"They won't get away with this." His mother says, closing his laptop. "I won't let them."

She pushes away from the couch, and marches for the front door and swings it open. One of the security guards loops up from where he stands and pushes off the wall across the hallway.

"Everything ok, Mrs. Hollander?"

"No." Yuna says. "We need to speak with Mr. Rozanov."

Chapter 4

Ilya is in the middle of a meeting with six of the board members who are concerned about his father's behavior when he receives the call. He thinks nothing of it at first, just sends it to voicemail.

"Your father is overreaching," one of them says carefully.

"He's destabilizing external relationships," another adds.

Ilya's phone vibrates again. Once. Twice.

The room keeps talking, mentions of risk and optics and containment as he glances at his phone's screen.

Andre: Mrs. Hollander has requested to speak with you

Andre: Stressed that it was an urgent matter

Ilya stiffens, tuning back in as another board member says, "If this continues, we may have to formally censure him."

A pause. "That would fracture the company," someone else warns.

"It already is," Ilya replies as he pushes away from conference table he has been sitting at. "We will reconvene in forty-eight hours."

"We are mid deliberation—"

"You may be," he corrects evenly. "But I am not."

Ilya closes his laptop as the board members begin to speak at once and grabs his coat.

He arrives at Hollander's apartment within the hour, greeting Andre with a brief nod, hand raised to knock as the door is jerked open. An angry Yuna Hollander stands before him, face pinched into a frown.

"They're reviewing his placement," she says, not mincing words. "Not just the scholarship, his actual enrollment."

Ilya sighs. "I was hoping this would not happen."

Yuna narrows her eyes on him. "What do you mean?"

"It is my father."

The words land heavy, and for a second, Yuna does not speak. "Explain, now."

“Can we sit?” Ilya asks, and Yuna nods, heading towards the couch.

Ilya takes a seat, scrubbing a hand down his face before he replies. “My father would not have threatened them directly. We believe he leveraged a donor relationship tied to the board, framing the situation as reputational risk.”

Yuna’s jaw tightens. “So, he’s punishing my son.”

“It is an attempt to destabilize him.”

“Because you met him.”

“Yes.”

Silence swells between them. Yuna’s voice drops lower, more dangerous. “You said you were handling this.”

“I am.”

Yuna scoffs. “By letting my child lose everything?”

Ilya absorbs that without flinching. “I am trying to fight back in a way that does not escalate harm to him.”

She laughs once, sharp and angry. “It has already escalated, Mr. Rozanov.”

He nods slightly. “If I retaliate publicly, my father will go nuclear. Litigation. Media dissection. Character assassination... He will attempt to portray Shane as an unstable, manipulative predator.”

“He’s already doing that.”

“Yes,” Ilya says quietly. “But not at full scale.”

That chills her. “He’s holding back?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“For leverage?”

Ilya shakes his head. “For compliance.”

Yuna leans forward. “And what do you plan on doing about it?”

“I am consolidating board support from members who are tired of his tactics to formally limit his authority. If I move too fast, he retaliates.”

“And staging a coup helps Shane how?”

“It buys time,” Ilya replies. “If I move carefully, I can force my father to retreat without him retaliating further.”

Yuna studies him for a long moment. “Moving carefully,” she says softly, “might cost my son his future.”

His jaw tightens. “I am aware.”

“Then move faster Shane doesn’t have time for careful,” she says. “He’s drowning.”

A beat. “My father is not an easy man to outmaneuver Mrs. Hollander.”

Yuna’s eyes flick toward Shane’s door.

Ilya’s posture shifts slightly. “He is considering termination?”

Yuna nods. “He’s not sleeping,” she says. “He’s calculating tuition like it’s oxygen. He thinks if he removes ‘the ‘liability’ the school won’t have an excuse to cut his scholarship.”

“He is not a liability,” he says.

“Tell that to the board.”

“I will not pressure him either way,” he says. “But it will not stop my father.”

Yuna says nothing for a moment, just studies Ilya. “I was afraid of that.”

“My father believes pressure creates surrender,” he says.

“And does it?”

Ilya meets her gaze steadily. “No. My father is trying to prove a point...” Ilya sighs. “I... I am not the son he wanted to follow in his footsteps. Alexei did everything my father asked of him, and even though I try, it is not enough. This,” Ilya waves a hand around. “Is just another perceived failure in my father’s eyes, and until I comply with his wishes, he will do everything in his power to eradicate the problem.”

“I will not let you drag my son down with you just to spite your father, Mr. Rozanov.”

“Mrs. Hollander, I will fix this.”

“You better, or there will be hell to pay,” she says pushing off the couch. “Would you like some tea?”

In his room, Shane stares at his laptop unblinking, reading probation over and over until the words begin to blur.

Conduct under review. Scholarship suspended pending investigation. Continued enrollment subject to board decision.

“I can’t lose this,” he whispers, pulling up the tuition portal.

“Seventeen thousand,” Shane murmurs to himself. “Then housing costs...”

Legal fees. Although Rozanov would probably offer to cover those since he's the whole reason Shane is even in this mess. But if funding isn't reinstated, his athletic eligibility will be uncertain. And without hockey, Shane doesn't know what he'll do.

He leans back against the pillows, picturing the board meeting, frowning old men in suits saying words like, 'liability' and 'integrity' and 'exposure'. Pictures as they remove him quietly from the roster, his position filled just as quickly. Years of training reduced to nothing but a footnote, a blip.

Shane opens a new tab in the browser, typing in the clinic's website, then over to available appointments. The earliest is tomorrow afternoon. If there is no pregnancy then there is no scandal, no donor pressure, no reason for him to be called a liability.

He exhales shakily and begins filling out the form.

Name.

DOB.

Reason for the appointment.

All he needs to do is press confirm and everything will go back to the way it was.

When the confirmation page loads, his stomach drops.

Appointment confirmed.

Tomorrow. 3:40 p.m.

He stares at it for a long time before closing his laptop.

Yuna's standing in the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil when her phone buzzes softly on the counter. She glances at it, reading the text from Shane confirming his appointment, then back at Ilya, still sitting on the couch, taking in the dark circles under his eyes and his unkempt curls.

The kettle whistles and Yuna looks away, busying herself with making tea.

"Milk and sugar?" She calls out to Ilya.

"Please." Comes his reply.

"He scheduled it." Yuna says as she brings their cups into the living room.

Ilya doesn't react outwardly, but something hardens behind his eyes as he reaches for the proffered mug.

"Tomorrow." She says, relaxing back into the couch. Silence. "He thinks this will fix things." she adds.

Ilya nods slowly. “My father intended exactly this.”

The realization sits heavy between them.

“He wanted to make the pregnancy too expensive to keep,” Yuna says.

“Yes.”

“And if Shane ends it?”

“My father will still not stop,” Ilya replies. “He will simply shift targets.”

Yuna swallows. “Then my son will have given something up for nothing.”

It’s Ilya’s turn to look toward Shane’s door as he sips his tea, ignoring the burnt scent of distressed omega permeating the apartment.

“If he walks into that clinic because he believes he’s alone, I will never forgive any of you.”

Ilya’s voice is steady as he turns back to Yuna. “He is not alone.”

But down the hall, Shane lies on his bed staring at the ceiling, palm pressed against his stomach.

“I have to do this,” he whispers as a tear slips down his cheek, not knowing whether he’s convincing himself or saying goodbye.

A faint knock has Shane hastily dragging the sleeves of his hoodie across his cheeks.

He clears his throat, trying not to sound like he’s been crying. “Come in!”

Shane expects it to be his mother, but the scent of mint and evergreen fills his nose instead of her warm vanilla scent.

Ilya steps inside, closing the door behind him, nose wrinkling at the burnt lemon scent of omega distress. Beneath that though, there’s the faint smell of detergent, and the scent of another alpha—one Ilya smelled the moment he stepped into the apartment, the best friend. Ilya knows this, but the scent makes his hackles rise.

He ignores the urge to growl, letting his eyes sweep around the room instead, taking in the wall crowded with hockey posters, their edges curling slightly. There’s a faded jersey pinned up with careful pride too, and medals hanging from thumbtacks—not displayed for guests but for Shane himself. Near the window is a desk with textbooks stacked unevenly on top, sticky notes everywhere, and a cracked mug that says ‘World’s Okayest Student’ filled with pens and highlighters.

His eyes slide over the small packed closet, the duffle bag full of hockey gear, and the stick in the corner to the bed, taking in the piles of pillows, the twisted sheets and soft looking blankets and the unmistakable lump of an omega wrapped in a navy blue comforter in the middle.

“I can’t do this.” Shane says eventually, voice muffled beneath the covers.

Ilya doesn’t react immediately, doesn’t flinch, doesn’t argue, just stands just inside Shane’s room, arms hanging by his sides.

“Okay,” he says quietly.

Shane’s head pokes out from his cocoon. “That’s it?”

“What would you like me to say?”

“I don’t know,” Shane admits. His voice trembles despite how hard he’s trying to keep it steady. “Something.”

Ilya steps closer, but not too close. “Is this what you want?” he asks.

Shane hesitates, and that hesitation is loud. “I don’t know what I want,” he says, more honestly than he’s been with anyone. “I just know I can’t keep doing...this.”

“Doing what?”

“Feeling like everything I worked for is slipping through my hands.” One hand coming out to vaguely gesture between them. “They’re going to remove me,” Shane says, voice trembling. “Probation is step one. Investigation is step two. Quiet dismissal is step three.”

“I know.”

“If I lose my placement...” His voice falters. “I don’t have a backup plan.” Shane swallows hard, throat clicking. “If I’m not pregnant, there’s less scandal. Less pressure. Maybe the board backs off. Maybe your father loses interest.”

“I could cover tuition.”

“No, that would make it worse!” Shane snaps. “It proves I used you.”

“I do not care what they imply.”

“I do!” His voice cracks. “I care about my degree. My team. My future.”

Silence.

“I can’t fight your father and the university board while I’m pregnant,” he says more quietly. “I just can’t.”

Ilya nods once.

“I didn’t ask for this,” Shane whispers. “I didn’t even do anything wrong and he wants to ruin me.”

“I know.”

“I can’t do this when it’s going to cost me everything.”

Ilya steps forward then, closing the distance carefully. “If this is your decision,” he says quietly, “I will respect it.”

Shane searches his face. “You won’t hate me?”

“Why would I?”

“Because of the baby...”

“Shane,” Ilya says softly. “I never expected you to go through with the pregnancy. And I would never force anyone to have my child at the expense of themselves.”

Shane’s eyes sting. “I feel like I’m choosing between my future and...” He trails off.

“And what?” Ilya asks gently.

He shakes his head. “I don’t even know yet. “I just feel like I’m drowning.”

“You are not drowning, not alone.”

“But it’s my body,” Shane says. “My name on the probation letter. My scholarship on the line. You lose nothing!”

“I lose a baby.” Ilya says softly, and that guts Shane.

“I feel so selfish, but if I end this,” he continues, “maybe the school backs off. Maybe your father loses leverage.”

“Or he shifts tactics,” Ilya says.

“Then at least I’m not carrying the target,” Shane whispers.

The room is so quiet they can hear the refrigerator hum down the hall, the sound of his mother pattering around the apartment.

“If this is your decision,” he says quietly, “I will go with you tomorrow.”

Shane’s composure fractures. “I don’t expect... You don’t have to do that.

“Da, I know, but I will not let you go through this alone.”

Shane lets out a shaky breath. “Ok, thank you.”

“Do not thank me, Shane. It is the least I can do.”

After their conversation, Ilya leaves, promising to meet him and his mother at the clinic tomorrow afternoon.

Shane lies in bed staring at the ceiling.

He imagines two futures. One where this all ends quickly and quietly. The headlines fade. People still whisper, but less and less. Eventually it becomes an anecdote, a scandal that almost was. He graduates and moves on. There is no child tying him to an empire that wants him erased, no custody battles. No war. Just him and his future, as it should be.

Shane exhales shakily in the dark.

That future feels... clean. Contained and survivable.

In the second, he keeps it. He loses both his scholarship and hockey. Ilya and Grigori go to war as Shane is made into a spectacle, growing visibly pregnant under the whole world's scrutiny. The baby is born into chaos, a pawn to be used by the Rozanov patriarch who has Shane's rights stripped away.

Shane presses his palm to his stomach in the dark.

That future feels terrifying. Uncertain and heavy.

His phone lights up on the nightstand. He ignores it. It lights up again and again and again.

Shane groans, hand shooting out to grab it.

Someone in the hockey chat has shared a link. He taps it open and freezes.

UNIVERSITY SOURCE CONFIRMS REVIEW CONNECTED TO FOREIGN DONOR CONCERNS—NOT STUDENT MISCONDUCT

The article isn't sympathetic by any means. It is not kind, but it's factual.

It states that the investigation is tied to 'external pressure' from a donor linked to the Rozanov family. Not academic fraud, not financial manipulation by Shane, but external interference.

His breath catches. Holy shit.

Another notification comes in from a teammate: Dude what the hell.

And another: Donor politics???

Another: This is so fucked up

Shane sits up slowly as more messages roll in. Most are supportive and angry on his behalf, others are confused and concerned that something like this could happen so easily.

The narrative is shifting. Not because the pregnancy is gone, but because the truth is leaking.

Shane heads to Google, and finds a short, dry statement released from a corporate communications account associated with Grigori Rozanov:

The Rozanov Group denies exerting undue influence on academic institutions and has no involvement in the personal medical decisions of any private individual.

Shane's stomach drops—they know. They know about the appointment, preparing for it, positioning themselves.

If he goes through with it now, it won't be his decision. It will be a chess move they anticipated, a sacrifice already calculated into their strategy.

Tears burn hot and sudden.

"I'm not a pawn," he whispers, hand sliding to his stomach.

And for the first time all night he doesn't think about scandal, he thinks about control. About who gets to decide what happens to his body, his future, his child.

He imagines walking into that clinic tomorrow. Knowing somewhere in Moscow, someone is waiting for confirmation like it's a quarterly report, and something inside him snaps. Not hysterical, not reckless, but steady and defiant.

He swings his legs off the bed, heading for his desk to grab his laptop, before marching back to bed. He opens it, hands shaking as he waits for it to load and pulls up the appointment confirmation.

He hesitates, only for a moment, breath coming in angry uneven gasp.

"This has to be mine," he whispers.

Not Grigori's pressure, not the board's cowardice or media noise.

His.

He clicks '**Cancel Appointment**' at the bottom of the email.

Shane's hands start shaking harder now, not from fear but adrenaline. From the enormity of what he just chose.

There is no safety net in this choice. No guarantee the scholarship returns. No promise the board relents. He might still lose everything, but it will not be because he was cornered, it will not be because someone calculated his breaking point.

He sinks back into his bed, breathing hard. The fear is still there, eating him alive, but beneath it there is something steadier, surer.

His bedroom door creaks open a few minutes later, his mother standing in the doorway, eyes tired.

"Can't sleep?" she asks softly.

Shane sits up, "No." He pauses. "I canceled it."

His mother says nothing for a moment, then, “Are you sure?”

“No,” Shane admits immediately. Tears spill again, but he’s almost laughing through them. “I’m not sure about anything.”

“Rozanov didn’t pressure you did he?”

Shane shakes his head and wipes at his face roughly. “No. I realized if I did it, it wouldn’t be because I didn’t want to, it would be because Ilya’s father wanted me cornered.” His voice shakes. “And I’m done letting him make my decisions.”

His mother steps into the room slowly, coming to sit on the bed beside him, arms enveloping and warm vanilla scent soothing him as she squeezes him.

“Are you sure?”

Shane presses his hand against his stomach, and nods. “Yes.”

Chapter 5

Grigori's office is silent except for the ticking of the grandfather clock he had imported from Vienna.

His assistant stands frozen three feet from the desk, shaking like a leaf under Grigori's cold, calculating glare. On the tablet in her hands sits confirmation from a private contact in Ottawa Shane Hollander has opted not to continue with termination.

She swallows thickly. "Sir?"

Grigori's continues to stare, processing.

"What do you mean," he says softly, "canceled?"

The assistant swallows. "The clinic confirmed. The procedure did not take place. It was withdrawn at 03:18 local time."

Grigori leans back in his chair slowly. He had accounted for hysteria. He had accounted for tears. He had not accounted for the omega to have a spine, for him to be defiant.

Before the associate can blink, before she even sees his hands move, Grigori swipes an angry hand across his desk, sending paperwork and pen and paperweights flying. The assistant flinches, bracing for to Grigori turn his ire in her direction.

The clock continues ticking.

"Leave," Grigori says, his voice like ice.

The associate doesn't hesitate. She scurries away, heels clicking in rapid staccato as she escapes. The door shutting quietly behind her.

Grigori shoves away from his desk, his chair falling over at the force, paper tearing under his heels as he marches for the bar cart. He picks up the crystal decanter, throwing it against the opposite wall with a roar. Glass rains down, but Grigori is not satisfied.

He begins to pace, glass crunching under his feet as he goes. Back and forth, back and forth.

The omega was supposed to be weak. He was supposed to crack under Grigori's pressure. Instead he chose chaos. Defiance masked as autonomy. It angers him as much as it unsettles him.

Alphas do not bend to the will of omegas.

Grigori stops pacing. His breathing slows as his anger begins to cool. And when it cools, it calcifies into something worse—strategy.

He walks back to the desk, presses the intercom.

“Bring me Viktor.” A pause. “And legal.”

Thirty minutes later three men sit across from him. No one mentions the knocked over chair or papers strewn across the room or the bits shattered glass imbedded in the carpet.

Grigori leans against his desks, arms folded against his broad chest.

“If sentiment will not remove the problem,” he says calmly, “then we escalate.”

“Sir,” Viktor begins carefully, “public pressure is already drawing scrutiny—”

“Then we do not apply public pressure.”

His eyes are sharp now.

“We apply personal pressure.”

Silence.

He turns to legal. “The omega has opted out of termination. We begin documentation now.”

“Documentation of what, Mr. Rozanov?”

“Instability.”

Viktor’s brow furrows. “Sir?”

“Financial stress. Academic probation. Emotional distress. Public scandal.” Grigori ticks off in his fingers, as if listing grocery items. “Build a case that the environment is unsuitable.”

If the omega will not terminate, he will make the alternative unbearable.

“And if the younger Mr. Rozanov intervenes?” Viktor asks quietly.

Grigori’s jaw tightens. “Ilya will be handled.”

“How?”

For the first time, something truly vicious flickers in his eyes. “My son believes this is about morality.” Grigori lets out a small, humorless laugh. “It is about legacy.” He turns to the window overlooking the frozen river. “If he choose to defy me publicly, then he forfeits protection.”

The men exchange uneasy glances.

“Sir... protection from what?”

Grigori doesn’t turn around. “The markets,” he says softly. “The press. Old enemies who remember his face.” He is met with silence. “Remind my son,” he continues, “how quickly the world turns without my shadow over it.”

“Sir—“

“That will be all. You may go.”

When Viktor and the legal team leave, Grigori picks up his private phone. He cannot use the corporate line for this. He scrolls to a contact that hasn't been used in years. His thumb hovering just a moment before pressing.

When the call connects, he says only:

“I need a comprehensive background dossier.” A pause. “On everyone in that apartment building.” Another pause. “And the university dean.”

He ends the call. Walks back to his desk, bending over to pick up a pad of paper and a pen. He sits and begins writing name on the top sheet of paper.

Shane.

Ilya.

Yuna.

The dean.

Board members who think he does not know they are trying to undermine him.

He circles Shane's name once. Not with rage now, but calculation.

“You wanted to keep it,” he murmurs to the empty office. “Then you will learn what it costs.”

The clock continues ticking.

Somewhere across an ocean, Shane is exhausted but resolute. He has no idea that the cancellation of a single appointment just transformed a father's anger into a campaign.

And Grigori does not lose campaigns.

He wins them.

Or he burns the board.

—

When Grigori invited Svetlana to dinner at his residence, she knows something is up. The old bastard has never been kind to her once in the eighteen months she and Ilya have been married. Knows that he sees her and omegas like her as nothing but accessories, only meant to accomplish one thing, and Svetlana has failed.

She has watched Grigori carefully throughout dinner, nodding and smiling as he talks about the new hotel he plans on opening, as she picks at the food before her. When he's finally finished and waves for a glass for vodka, Svetlana braces herself for what is coming.

“You’ve been quiet,” Grigori says smoothly, taking a sip from his rocks glass. “About the boy.”

“I value my peace,” she replies, waving away the staff when they come to top up her untouched glass of wine.

A faint smile touches his mouth. “And yet peace rarely values us back.”

She says nothing, sitting poised and unflinching as he studies her carefully.

“Are you not worried about your marriage to my son?”

She raises a delicate eyebrow. “Should I be?”

“He embarrassed you, humiliated you publicly.” He tilts his head as he watches her, waiting for her to crack. “He has tethered himself to scandal. To instability. To a pregnancy that invites litigation, press, and opportunists.” A pause as he takes another pull from his glass. “You were meant to be security,” he continues softly. “Now you are... adjacent.”

The insult is surgical, but Svetlana does not let it show how deep it cuts.

Svetlana lets silence stretch a moment before, “I am not easily displaced.”

Grigori smiles. “Oh my dear, but you have been.”

The air cools several degrees. Her fingers tighten around the globe of her wine glass.

“I would not say that,” she murmurs, taking her first sip.

He presses gently. “Are you not concerned that this will follow you? You will be described as complicit,” he says. “As either naïve or calculating. Investors dislike ambiguity.” Grigori pauses. “Philanthropic boards dislike controversy.”

Her composure does not break, but she understands the subtext—social isolation, financial tightening, doors once open to her quietly closing.

“You are young,” he continues, voice almost paternal. “You deserve stability. Not to be attached to a boy making impulsive choices.”

“And you believe this pregnancy is impulsive?” she asks quietly.

“I believe it is leverage.”

He holds her gaze.

“Leverage against him. Against us. And you, unfortunately, are collateral.”

“And what is it you’re asking of me, Grigori?”

Grigori does not hesitate. “To help correct his mistake.”

Svetlana brushes a copper curl away from her face. “And what would you suggest I do?”

“Distance yourself publicly, express concern and disappointment as a wife and omega that has been humiliated.”

Her eyes flicker, giving just enough vulnerability to satisfy him.

“You want me to look wounded,” she says after a moment.

He gives the faintest smile, his tone calm. “You understand the dynamics of perception. Sympathy is powerful, and people would be very sympathetic to an omega scorned.”

She cannot keep the bite of her tone, “And what would I gain from playing the victim accomplish?”

“You’ll gain public empathy, invitations, and most importantly, independence from the fallout.”

She sips her wine, unhurried. “And what do I lose,” she asks quietly, “if I refuse to perform?”

His expression cools. “Influence.” A beat. “My protection.” Another. “And potentially your marriage, should my son’s defiance escalate.”

The threat isn’t shouted, it’s implied.

Svetlana sets down her wine glass. “You would dissolve our marriage?”

“If it becomes necessary,” he says calmly. “I will not allow this family’s stability to hinge on sentiment.” He continues, voice even softer now. “If you align yourself with him in this, you become collateral, but if you align yourself with me you become strategic.”

“And the child?” she asks.

His expression does not change. “Once the child is born custody will be addressed.”

Meaning: leverage, litigation and control.

He stands, signaling their meeting’s end. “Consider carefully what you have to gain,” he says. “And what you stand to lose.”

Svetlana finishes her wine, eyes narrowing on Grigori’s retreating form as he dismisses her. When she’s done, she hands her glass to the waiting staff with a smile, smoothing down the skirt of her dress as she stands.

She makes her way out of the dining room and down the corridor slowly, spine straight, head high as her heels click precisely against marble. She knows Grigori will be watching.

A car is waiting for her when she steps outside, one of Grigori’s men holding the door open for her. She gives him a nod and smile, tucking her dress beneath her as she slides into the car, smile sliding off her face the moment the door shuts behind her.

Her composure fractures. Not into tears, but pure unadulterated age. She stares straight ahead for a long moment, breathing hard. Anton, her driver eyes her in the rearview mirror but says nothing, just presses the button to slide up the partition between them as she pulls out her phone.

She doesn't hesitate, she calls Ilya immediately.

He picks up on the third ring. "Sveta? What—"

She laughs, a little unhinged. "Your father is fucking insane."

Ilya sighs. "What did he ask of you?"

"Nothing I am willing to do.

"Sveta—"

"He offered me a role." Her voice is razor-calm, which is far more dangerous than shouting. "He must think I'm angry enough to destroy, Lusha, because he play into the humiliated little omega wife angle, gain public sympathy leverage. Even outlined what I gain if I comply," she continues. "And what I lose if I don't."

"What did he threaten?" Ilya asks quietly.

Svetlana laughs bitterly. "Only my relevance and position as your wife if you continue to 'destabilize the family'. That bastard thinks I am afraid of being cut loose."

"You aren't?"

She scoffs. "You think your father is the first man who has tried something like this? I am furious. He sat across from me and explained my own survival as if I were too delicate to understand it," she says. "As if my only value is narrative."

Ilya doesn't interrupt.

"He believes I care more about proximity to power than autonomy, as if everyone's price is the same as his."

"And what is your price?" Ilya asks.

"My price," she says evenly, "is not being treated like property. I am no one's play thing, and I will not have a hand in destroying that boy's life no matter what your father threatens."

Ilya says nothing, just breathes heavy and angry into the phone.

Svetlana continues, "He is building documentation."

"I know."

"No," she cuts in. "You don't."

“He is not just preparing custody groundwork. He intends to make Shane appear fragile before the pregnancy progresses, and if Shane fractures under it...”

“He will not touch him,” Ilya says.

“He doesn’t need to,” she replies. “He will let systems do it.”

A heavy silence.

“I pretended to consider it,” she says. “To be hurt. Jealous.”

“You were convincing?” he asks.

“Convincing enough.”

“Why warn me?”

This time she doesn’t hesitate.

“Because Shane’s life is not a game. The baby is not a game. And I refuse to let him weaponize me in that,” she says.

“Thank you.”

“I would not thank me if I were you, not yet.”

“Why? What so you have planned?”

Svetlana smiles. “I am going to feed him.”

“Feed him what?” Ilya asks carefully.

“What he wants.” Her voice drops lower. “I will be the sad omega he wants me to be, long enough for him to assume compliance.”

“And?”

“And I will document everything.”

Ilya says nothing.

“He uses off-book firms,” she continues. “Private investigators. External legal consultants. None of it clean.”

“You’re thinking exposure.”

“I’m thinking leverage,” she corrects. “He survives because no one sees the pattern.” A pause. “I’ve been in this family long enough to know where the skeletons are stored.”

“Sveta—”

“I am not doing this recklessly,” she interrupts. “But he made a mistake tonight.”

“What mistake?”

“He assumed I fear exile more than humiliation. He implied I would cling to you for relevance. That without his protection, I am vulnerable.” A sharp inhale. “I built my own network before I ever met you.”

“Sveta, if you move against him, he will retaliate.”

“I know.”

“He will escalate.”

“I know that too.”

“He will come after you.”

“I am counting on it. He will show his hand,” she says. “And when he does, I will not be the only one watching.”

“Fuck, you’re serious,” Ilya says. “What do you need from me?”

“Time,” she says immediately. “Do not confront him yet.”

“And Shane?”

“Protect him.” she says. “Your father believes he is the weakest piece.”

“He isn’t.”

“I know.” She exhales slowly. “I will gather proof of coercion. Of influence. Of interference.”

“And when you have it?”

“Then we decide whether we burn him privately or publicly.”

“This will not be clean,” he says quietly.

“Neither is he. He wants me to play the victim? Fine. I will, but not the kind he expects.”

“He underestimated you,” Ilya chuckles.

“Yes,” she replies coldly. “He did.”

The car stops outside their home.

“Keep him safe.” She says again before ending the call.

Chapter 6

Shane's first trimester goes by uneventfully. The war waged against him by Ilya's father does not disappear, not entirely, but pauses momentarily. There are no new letters from the university, no more anonymous complaints, no strategic leaks.

The media is no longer camped outside his apartment complex, but Shane is only willing to leave the apartment if it is to see Dr. Kline. He refuses to go back on campus, refuses to be gawked at and whispered about, and his request to move his course load online is approved without fuss, anything to keep the stain that is Shane Hollander at bay.

He has not set foot in the rink since the story of his pregnancy broke, moved onto the long term IR list without preamble, has not heard from his coaches since. The hockey chat has gone quiet, his teammates reaching out less and less, until not at all. Shane wonders if they've started a new one without him.

The only constants in his life have been his mother and Ilya and Hayden, who finally moves back into the apartment. Followed by the nausea that rears its ugly head around week six.

It hits him like a truck, jolting him awake every morning around 5am, saliva thick and pooling in his mouth. A warning that he has exactly three seconds to make it to the toilet before the contents of his stomach make their appearance—ask him how he knows.

Hugging the toilet, Shane thinks that whoever came up with the name morning sickness is a liar. Morning sickness is a cruel mistress, violent and unpredictable.

By week seven, it consumes him from the moment he wakes up until he goes to bed at night, triggered by the scent of toothpaste and coffee, the combination of food in the fridge. Even the scents of his mother and Hayden, typically comforting, have begun turning his stomach.

The only things his body does not offend are saltines and ginger ale and the occasional cup of tea. And Ilya, but Shane will not admit that.

When he is not throwing up, the impulse to nest begins to ride Shane hard. At first it was subtle, Shane finds himself irritated with how bare his apartment feels. The couch is wrong, the lights too bright, the air smells...wrong.

It starts with him ransacking the apartment for blankets, then kidnapping the throw pillows his mother purchased for the couch, dragging them into the corner of the living room. His mother and Hayden do not comment, just watch as Shane's small fortress of soft fabric near the couch takes shape.

Shane is sitting in the middle of his nest when Ilya arrives, hugging one of the soft throw pillows as he sips slowly from a can of ginger ale..

“What is this?”

Shane hugs the throw pillow tighter. "... nothing."

Ilya hums. "May I come closer?"

Shane's cheeks pinken as he nods.

Ilya walks over, crouching down beside the nest, hand reaching out to smooth over the blankets thoughtfully.

"You are nesting," he says.

Shane sniffs indignantly. "I'm not a bird."

"No." Ilya chuckles. "But you are an omega in your first trimester."

The word makes Shane's stomach twist, not with nausea this time. "I've never made a nest before," he whispers. "Is it right?"

Shane had never been one to lean into his designation. It's not that he had been denying that part of himself. He just did not see the point in letting his instincts control him. His heats were perfunctory at best, weekends spent riding it out, locked in his room as his body burned and ached. There had been no soft nests, just twisted sweat and slick covered sheets in his darkened room.

He couldn't deny that part of himself now, his body is demanding it.

Ilya's mint and evergreen scent intensifies. "It's perfect, omega."

Shane preens, hating how pleased he feels.

Over the next week, Ilya brings Shane things he thinks he would like. First a set of twinkle lights, because he had noticed that Shane preferred soft lighting. Then a set of thin buttery soft muslin blankets, followed by a thick plush rug. Then clothes... First a scarf, then one of his sweaters, a shirt he'd worn to the hotel gym.

He never brings attention to the gifts he brings, which Shane is thankful for. He's not sure he could handle the alpha being smug, but as he weaves the proffered clothing in amongst the blankets and pillows, he feels content.

It is during week nine that things begin to shift. The nausea has been relentless all day, and Shane is exhausted, oversensitive, overwhelmed by everything. He's curled in the nest, knees tucked up, staring at the twinkle lights strung on the wall.

Shane glances over at Ilya, watching him where he sits on the couch, laptop balanced on his knees as he answers emails. He has been staying longer, having noticed the way Shane whines when he leaves to go back to his hotel—something that had made Shane want to crawl into a hole and die the first time it had happened.

It helps, although Shane hates to admit that. Eases the restlessness, the gnawing itch under his skin that he can't quite place.

“Ilya?”

He looks up immediately. “Yes?”

Shane hesitates, worrying his bottom lip with his teeth. God this is humiliating. “Can you—”
Shane fidgets. “Can you come sit with me?”

“I am sitting with you.”

“No.” Shane shakes his head. “I mean...In here, with me.”

Ilya closes the laptop without question and moves to the edge of the nest. Shane fidgets with the blanket, not meeting his gaze. “You are asking me to come into your nest, yes?”

“Please.” Shane nods and blushes. “Don’t make this weird.”

“I will not.” Ilya says toeing off his shoes. “I am honored, omega.”

Shane releases his knees to sit up, scooting back as Ilya lowers himself carefully into the nest for the first time. Something inside him tightens inside him as the space shifts, braces.

Until now this has been his. His safe space, and now there was a six-foot-something alpha folding himself carefully into it like he’s afraid to disturb the architecture.

“Ok?” Ilya asks, glancing up at Shane as he adjusts a pillow under his long legs.

“Yes.” Shane says, his voice coming out quieter than he means it to as he watches Ilya settle.

Watching the way he instinctively lowers his voice, the way his movements become deliberate and slow. As he smooths a blanket back into place instead of carelessly kicking it aside.

Ilya is respectful of the nest, of Shane, and that does something to him that he wasn’t prepared for.

When Ilya finally settles back against the wall of pillows, there’s a moment of awkward stillness—two bodies pressed into a space built for one. Shane feels exposed, pulse racing. Inviting someone into a nest isn’t casual. It’s special, a symbol of trust.

He hesitates only a second before shifting closer, not quite touching, just nearer. Close enough to be enveloped in the alpha’s mint and evergreen scent, to feel the warmth radiating off him through the blankets.

Shane hadn’t realized how incomplete the nest had felt before. It has been comfortable, a much needed anchor as his world has imploded, but now... With Ilya here, their scents mingling... Shane feels safe.

There’s an almost embarrassing surge of pride that flares in his chest. A strange, instinctive satisfaction at having the alpha inside the space his body demanded he build.

Shane perfumes, the scent of lemons and sugared ginger filling the small space between them.

Ilya shifts beside him, and Shane squeaks. "Sorry—"

"It's ok... You are happy? Ilya asks quietly.

Shane nods, but the truth is more complicated than that. Yes, he feels happy, calmer now that the alpha is in his nest, relieved. But beneath that? There's a possessiveness inside him that terrifies him..

He inches closer again without consciously deciding to, their thighs brushing. The contact is light, but his body reacts instantly, not sexually, Shane would really die if he began to slick. He just settles, like a restless animal finally curling into something familiar.

Ilya adjusts his legs so Shane can fit better against him, arm coming to rest across his shoulders. "This ok?"

Shane nods, loving and hating how easily they fit, and shifts closer, his head coming to rest on Ilya's shoulder. The sound that leaves him as he settles is small, but there. Almost a purr, but not quite. "Yeah."

He doesn't admit how right this feels. That letting Ilya into this space is the most intimate thing Shane has ever done with an alpha. Instead he just curls a little closer, fingers catching lightly in the fabric of Ilya's shirt like he needs something to hold onto.

Shane sits there, soaking up the comfort the alpha has to offer.

"Will you scent me before you go?" Shane feels Ilya go still, and he pulls back quickly, scent curdling. "Nevermind that was dumb. You don't have to," he rushes to say. "I just thought..."

Ilya reaches for him gently, "Shane." Shane looks over at him, eyes glassy. "I do not think it is dumb."

Ilya shifts closer slowly, giving him time to change his mind. Shane doesn't, just tilts his head slightly, awkward and vulnerable.

Holding Shane's gaze, Ilya leans in slowly. Shane closes his eyes as he feels the press of Ilya's face against his neck, his stubble tickling the sensitive skin as he brushes his jaw there, subtle and deliberate.

Shane's entire body softens, tension melting as his shoulders drop. He can't contain the purr that rattles in his chest, low and a bit rusty from disuse.

"That better?" Ilya murmurs against his skin, before rubbing his face against him once more.

Shane feels drunk, his words slurring. "Bet-ter."

Ilya pulls back, settling against the wall of pillows once more, pulling Shane down with him. Shane snuggles in closer as Ilya begins to rub his back in slow circles.

“Please don’t tell anyone I asked.” Shane murmurs drowsily into Ilya’s chest.

“I won’t.”

“Thank you.” Shane says after a moment.

Ilya pauses his rubbing, “Anytime, Shane.”

And he means it, scenting Shane often over the next few weeks.

By week twelve, Shane feels mostly human, his nausea replaced by ravenous hunger.

His mother makes his all favorite dishes—chicken parmesan and Tonkotsu ramen with thinly sliced braised pork belly and jammy eggs, poutine with extra gravy, and Nanaimo bars. Ilya brings Russian dishes for Shane to try—pelmini topped with sour cream and dill, blini and beef stroganoff, and for dessert, honey cake. Shane has never been happier in his life.

On the morning of his twelfth week appointment, Shane wakes to the smell of butter. For a moment he panics, bracing for the urge to throw up, but his stomach just growls, loud and angry instead.

From the kitchen comes the soft scrape of a spatula and the low murmur of Ilya speaking Russian under his breath—probably to the pan.

Shane pushes himself upright, quickly crawling over blankets and pillows as he makes his way out of the nest, unable to resist the siren song of whatever Ilya is preparing.

When he shuffles into the kitchen, he stops in the doorway to take in the view. Ilya is objectively handsome, even more so at the moment in his plain black button up shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, dark wash jeans, and bare feet. His hair is still damp, golden brown curls dark and brushed back from his face.

Watching him standing in Shane’s kitchen, hovering over the stove with the concentration of someone defusing a bomb, feels intimate. Something warm curls in Shane’s lower belly, followed by the sharp stab of guilt as he thinks about Ilya’s wife who has not come to visit since their first meeting.

He looks away from Ilya to the counter, covered in food. There’s toast, dry and buttered, scrambled eggs, a bowl of mixed fruit and yogurt, a sleeve of crackers and a of applesauce. A sweating glass of orange juice, a can of ginger ale, and Shane’s favorite flavor of Gatorade (Glacier Freeze) beside all of it.

“Um... Is that all for me?”

Ilya doesn’t look up. “You said yesterday that eggs were tolerable.”

“I said maybe tolerable.”

Ilya wobbles his head. “Same thing.”

Shane walks further in, eyeing the spread. “You made three different breakfasts.”

“Four,” Ilya corrects, motioning to the pan in front of him. “There is oatmeal just in case.”

Shane bites back a smile. “You didn’t have to do all this.”

“Is nothing.” Ilya shrugs. “Now pick out what you want.”

“You know this appointment isn’t a marathon, right?” Shane says reaching for the bowl of fruit and yogurt, the eggs and toast too.

Ilya finally looks at him.

“Yes, but Yuna said you nearly fainted at the blood draw last time.”

“Oh my god, my mother exaggerates.”

Ilya points the spoon he’s been using to stir the oatmeal at him. “She said that you said something about the room tilting aggressively.”

“But I didn’t faint.”

Ilya purses his lips and hums.

“It’s ok if you’re nervous.” Shane says, eyeing Ilya.

“I am not.”

Shane snorts. “You literally made emergency oatmeal.”

“It is strategic. Besides, I like oatmeal.”

Shane huffs a quiet laugh and sits at the table before stabbing at his eggs. The moment they hit his tongue, he moans.

“Good, yes?”

Shane nods, shoveling in another forkful.

“Small bites.” Ilya tuts.

Shane rolls his eyes, taking a large bite of toast. “I’m fine.”

“Small. Bites.”

He swallows. “Fine, whatever.”

Ilya nods with a smile. “Now, do you want orange juice, Gatorade, or ginger ale?”

Shane glares lightly.

“I’m thinking juice... Keep up your blood sugar.”

“Oh my god... Bring me the ginger ale you weirdo.”

“But your blood sugar—”

“Is fine! Bring me the drink and quit hovering.”

Ilya hands Shane the drink and sits down across from him, a bowl of oatmeal in front of him.

“Maybe I am a little nervous.”

Shane sets his fork down and snorts. “You don’t say.”

And then it hits him—this will be Ilya’s first time seeing the baby.

“I’m nervous too,” Shane admits.

Ilya nods and takes a bite of oatmeal.

By the time they need to get ready for the appointment, Shane has eaten all of the eggs and toast, all the fruit and yogurt, and a cup of apple juice, all the while Ilya pretends not to look pleased.

Shane and Ilya head through the staff entrance at the back of the clinic, avoiding the paparazzi out front, and the waiting room full of stares and whispers. Shane gets his weight taken and his vitals checked, before the nurse ushers them into the dimly lit ultrasound room.

Shane hops up onto the exam table as instructed, tugging his jeans low on his hips before raising his shirt as he lies back. He glances at Ilya, watching the alpha through lowered lashes as he stares at the smooth expanse of Shane’s stomach, the smell of mint and evergreen thickening.

Shane tries not to blush, doing his best to dampen his scent. Not wanting to reveal that the feel of the alphas eyes on him does something to him it shouldn’t.

“This will be a quick scan,” the tech says, interrupting Shane’s thoughts. “We’ll check growth, heartbeat, and make sure everything is measuring on track.”

He knows the cool gel is coming but flinches anyway as it splatters across his skin, wincing as the tech moves the wand around his lower belly. Ilya moves closer without being asked, watching static and shadows shift on the monitor.

“There,” the tech says gently and she adjusts the angle of the wand slightly.

The static and gray shadows shift revealing a small head in profile, the soft curve of a spine, tiny limbs wiggling.

“That’s your baby,” the tech says softly.

Your baby.

Not a crisis. Not a scandal. Not a complication.

A baby.

Shane feels something click into place inside him, beneath the fear and uncertainty is a tiny thread of awe.

“Oh,” he whispers. It’s bigger than the last ultrasound. More defined, more real.

Shane hears Ilya’s shaky inhale.

“Baby is very active,” the tech says with a smile, as the image flickers with movement.

On screen, a tiny arm jerks, little body shifting.

“That’s normal?” Shane asks quickly.

“Very,” she assures. “Strong heartbeat too.” She presses a button and the room fills with the rapid, rhythmic whoosh-whoosh-whoosh of a heartbeat.

Shane reaches for Ilya blindly, fingers tangling for the man standing silently beside him, jaw tight, eyes locked on the screen like he’s memorizing every flicker.

—

That night in his hotel room, Ilya sits propped up in bed, a strip of ultrasound photos in hand, thumb brushing over the image without touching the printed surface, hovering instead, reverent and careful and in utter awe. For the first time in years, Ilya feels completely unmoored.

He has built his entire life on control, on anticipating threats before they surface. On keeping his emotions compartmentalized where they cannot be weaponized. Has helped build hotels from the ground up, has held billion dollar contracts with steadier hands than this, and bore the weight of his father’s impossible expectations and not buckled.

And yet this... This glossy strip of paper that weighs next to nothing means more than anything he could ever accomplish.

The slope of its skull in greyscale, its tiny ribcage, and a spine that curves in a way that makes his chest ache. He replays the ultrasound in his mind—the sudden flicker of movement on the screen, the tiny jerk of a limb, and the heartbeat that filled the room like a drum. So fast, so strong, so real.

In the clinic, Ilya had stayed still, as measured and controlled as he could be for Shane, but something inside him had shifted violently.

The baby was no longer abstract in his mind. No longer just words on paper labeled as a clinical error, no longer cells diving in theory. Because this is no longer a situation to

manage. It was tangible. It was life. His life, threaded into someone else's body. Someone he needed to protect.

His father would see this tiny, grainy image and speak about legacy and heirs and leverage. He would see an extension of his empire, a pawn for him to shape and manipulate. See only something he could use.

Ilya feels something sharp and immediate at the thought. He will not let his father destroy this. Will not let him take this. His child will not know the pain of being in Grigori Rozanov's family.

Ilya would rather die than let the tiny person, currently no bigger than the span of his palm, floating inside the omega who has already begun to change him in ways he did not anticipate, be used as a bargain chip for his father's ill-gotten schemes.

His phone vibrates against the nightstand beside him, pulling him from his thoughts. The name on the screen makes him straighten. Svetlana. Svetlana does not call without purpose.

He answers. "Yes?"

Her voice is controlled, the cold edge beneath it is unmistakable. "I had dinner with your father again."

Ilya's expression does not change, but his spine straightens. "And?"

A small exhale on the other end, not quite a laugh. "He believes I have accepted the role he wishes me to play as the scorned omega with wounded pride," she says dryly. "It is exhausting."

Ilya almost smiles. Grigori's oldest weakness has always been his certainty about how omegas respond to betrayal.

"And he believed you?" Ilya asks.

"Of course he did. The fool does not believe an omega would ever be able to undermine him." There it is, the shift. Svetlana is not reacting, she is maneuvering. "He let slip that he has begun consolidating assets," she says. "Quietly, of course. Securing votes in case he needs to publicly censure you."

Ilya is not surprised.

"He believes I will testify on his behalf of your instability," she adds.

That makes him still. "Instability?" he repeats.

"Yes. He wants the board to see you as emotionally compromised, that this pregnancy has made you reckless."

His gaze flicks to the ultrasound again, huffing out a laugh. Emotionally compromised? If only Grigori knew.

“And what did you tell him?”

Svetlana’s voice lowers slightly.

“I told him I am devastated, that you have embarrassed me, and I do not recognize the man you are becoming.”

The words could cut, but Ilya hears the strategy beneath them. “You are giving him what he wants to hear,” he says.

“I am giving him exactly enough to think he has recruited me.”

“Should I be worried?”

Svetlana lets out a quiet breath that is almost a laugh. “I should be offended, but no, Ilyusha.” She continues. “I have requested access to the internal communications under the pretext of protecting our public image, he approved it immediately.”

Of course he did. Grigori trusts control over empathy every time.

Ilya leans back against the pillows, processing. “What are you building?” he asks.

“A case for coercive influence over board decisions, and misallocation of funds that were supposed to be shielded.” She replies calmly. “I have already met with two board members privately,” she adds. “Framed my concerns as reputational risk.”

“You are positioning him as liability,” Ilya realizes.

“Yes.”

“And if he discovers your angle?” Ilya asks.

“He won’t,” she replies without hesitation. “Not until it is too late.”

“You’re sure?”

“Trust me, Lusha, I know what is at stake. I will not let anything happen to you or your omega and his baby.”

“Sveta—”

“You are my husband... My best friend...I will not let you lose everything because of your father’s arrogance.”

“He is not my omega.”

Svetlana laughs. “But you want him to be.”

“It does not matter what I want, I would not disrespect you.”

“Lusha...” Svetlana sighs. “I love you, very much.”

“And I love you, that has never changed.”

“I know.”

“Then you must know that I will not do anything to harm our marriage,” he says clearly. “Not politically. Not legally. Not personally.”

“And emotionally?” she asks softly.

“I...” Ilya sighs, slumping further into the pillows. “The lines are blurring.”

Svetlana is silent for a moment then hums. “When we married,” she says slowly, “we agreed on partnership, stability, protection.”

“Yes.”

“But we did not promise exclusivity of the heart.”

He closes his eyes briefly. “No, we did not.”

“Lusha, I have never doubted that you would stand beside me when it mattered.”

“I always will.”

“I know.”

“Which is why I am telling you now that I am willing to step back... I will not let you be miserable for the rest of your life.”

“I am not miserable!”

“But you are not as happy as you could be.” Svetlana clears her throat. “Is of no matter. I will continue playing the wounded wife for now. I will feed your father exactly the narrative he expects, and I will document every irregularity.”

“And when you have enough?” Ilya asks.

“I will force a vote. Your father has ruled through fear for far too long.”

“And then what?”

“Then we divorce.”

“Sveta—”

“Don’t Sveta me.”

“My feelings for Shane do not diminish what you are to me,” he says quietly.

“I know that,” she replies. “Just do not lie to yourself about the direction this is moving. We will divorce, and you will raise your baby with a very adorable and very young omega.”

“Sveta, we made vows...”

“And? We can break them.” She says with finality. “Now I need to go to bed, it’s late.”

Ilya sighs, resigned. “Goodnight, Sveta.”

“Night my Lusha.”

The line clicks off, and the hotel room returns to silence as he tosses his phone onto the bed beside him. The ultrasound photo catches his eye again and he picks it up, running his thumb lightly along the edge. Just for a moment he allows himself the most dangerous thought of all: I want this.

With Shane.

Not because it is right or because it is expected of him or because his father has cornered him, but because he chooses to. Because he wants this—the pup. Because he wants to be there with Shane, keeping him safe and watching him as he grows round and complains about swollen ankles.

And the wanting terrifies him, because wanting can be taken.

His father has always known how to remove what Ilya values most, but not this time. The alpha instinct to protect rides Ilya hard, and if Grigori continues to frighten Shane... Ilya will light the match and watch his father burn.

Chapter 7

As Shane's first trimester blends into his second, he begins to notice the changes happening to his body.

His face is softer and more round, his cheeks fuller. His chest is sore, nipples tender and aching and puffy in a way he has never experienced before. The slightest brush against them makes Shane hiss, and finding fabric that does not irritate them has become increasingly impossible.

The pregnancy isn't visible yet, not really. Shane's once well defined abs that he had worked so hard for in the gym are softening, making him look like he's carb loaded a little too hard. And when he presses his finger tips into the pudge, he's surprised at how firm it feels despite its appearance.

Worst of all, Shane can feel the way his center of gravity is shifting, a slow deep stretch he can feel in his joints that makes his hips ache. Which causes him to anxiously fixate on how all these changes to his body will affect him on the ice... If he ever gets back on the ice.

His body wasn't the only thing Shane noticed changing...

Emotionally... Well, those changes are a bit more unpredictable.

He cries now.

All. The. Time.

He cried when he got the Instacart notification that the grocery store was out of his favorite yogurt, and the suggested substitute by the shopper was a brand that Shane found too watery making the texture all wrong and unpalatable.

He cried when one of Hayden's socks got too close to his nest, making the scents all wrong, and had spent an entire morning being worriedly watched by Ilya and his mother as he rearranged the nest while inconsolably sobbing.

He cried after snapping at Hayden for finishing the milk and not replacing it, then apologizing ten minutes later with tear stain cheeks and wobbling bottom lip, a plate of reheated pizza in hand. Hayden had just sighed and accepted the plate of pizza, mumbling about pregnancy hormones being brutal, which had only made Shane cry harder.

He cried when Ilya brought him ramen from his favorite noodle shop near campus. When a pet rescue commercial came on the television asking for money. When his favorite pair of jeans wouldn't button any longer and the only pair of sweats he could find weren't the right color. When the butter didn't spread on his toast the right way. When the ginger ale he was drinking wasn't cold enough.

And he cries when sleep alludes him, curled on his side in the middle of his nest, surrounded by blankets and pillows that smell like him and faintly of Ilya. Cries harder because Ilya's scent is fading and it's late at night and he is not there to fix it. Then because he should not want Ilya to be there. Because he is not Shane's alpha. He is Svetlana's.

He's so deep in his self hatred spiral, hands curled protectively around himself, that he almost doesn't notice the soft flutter in his lower belly. It's not until there's another faint flick, like a tiny bubble popping beneath the skin, that Shane freezes. Waiting.

Another light tap.

The realization hits him all at once.

"Oh my god." He hiccups, pressing a hand to his stomach. "Oh my god!"

The baby.

The baby just moved.

His chest tightens so suddenly it hurts. Tears flood his eyes once more and trail down his cheeks as another tiny flutter answers the warmth of his hand.

"Hi, little one." he chokes out, a shaky laugh slipping through his tears.

Emotion crashes over him in a tidal wave. Relief. Awe. Terror. And Love. Love so fierce it feels like it might split him open. Before he realizes what he's doing, Shane rifles through the blankets to grab his phone, scrolling to Ilya's contact and pressing call with a trembling thumb.

The phone rings.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

On the fourth ring the line clicks open.

"Rozanov," comes the groggy voice on the other end, thick with sleep.

Shane tries to speak, but instead a sob escapes him.

"Shane?" There's a sharp rustle of sheets on the other end of the line, Ilya's voice is instantly awake now. "Shane, what's wrong?"

Another sob tears out of him before he can stop it.

"I— I—" His breath hitches.

"Shane, please." The Russian accent thickens with urgency. "Talk to me."

Shane presses a hand to his mouth, trying to calm down, but the tears won't stop.

"I—something happened," he manages.

There's the sound of movement on the other end of the line. Closet doors opening. Fabric rustling.

"I am getting dressed," Ilya says immediately. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

"No!" Shane blurts, panic spiking. "No, wait—!"

Silence. Then, carefully, Ilya asks, "Are you hurt?"

Shane shakes his head before remembering the man can't see him.

"No."

"The baby?"

"No!"

Ilya exhales slowly. "Then why," he asks cautiously, "are you crying like the world is ending, moy solnishko?"

Shane laughs wetly, because of course that's how this sounds. He wipes his face with the sleeve of his shirt, staring down at his stomach. Right on cue—a flutter.

His breath catches again. "Oh my god."

"What?" Ilya says immediately, voice tense once again.

Shane's voice cracks with a mix of laughter and tears. "He moved."

Silence falls on the line. "What? Who moved?"

"The baby," Shane whispers, caressing his hand up and down his lower belly. "I felt him." His throat tightens. "Or her, I guess." Shane laughs through his tears. "I know they're so little, but I swear I felt it." Shane is greeted with silence. Pulls the phone away from his ear to see if the call has dropped. "Ilya?"

"You felt our child move." Ilya says, his voice softer than Shane has ever heard it before.

Shane swallows hard. "Yeah."

A long breath passes through the phone. "Are you alone?"

"Yeah, Hayden's at Jackie's and Mom went home for the night."

Another pause, then Ilya says quietly, "I am coming."

Shane startles. "You don't have to do th—"

“I am coming, Shane.” There’s no hesitation in his voice now. “Because I want to be there.”

Shane presses a hand over his eyes, overwhelmed all over again. “Okay,” he whispers.

On the other end of the line, Shane can hear Ilya grabbing his keys and the door to his hotel room snicking shut before they end the call.

Shane isn’t aware of how much time has passed as he lays there in the nest, smiling up at the ceiling as he trails his fingers over his stomach as another flutter rolls faintly beneath his palm and his breath catches all over again. He feels as if his call with Ilya has just ended by the time he hears the three soft taps announcing Ilya’s arrival.

Shane carefully untangles himself from the nest and pads across the apartment in socked feet, taking a deep breath before he unlocks and opens the door. Ilya stands there, glancing in the direction of the guard down the hallway, running a hand through his disheveled curls.

The adorable alpha is a sleep rumpled mess, looking like he got dressed in the dark in his improperly buttoned long sleeve shirt, gray and black plaid sleep pants, and mismatched loafers. Like he came straight out of sleep and into panic.

The moment he notices Shane has opened the door, his eyes snap toward him, scanning over him quickly. Face. Arms. Stomach. Then back up.

“You are alright?” Ilya asks immediately.

Shane nods quickly. “I’m fine, I promise.”

Some of the tightness in Ilya’s shoulders releases. “Good,” he murmurs.

For a moment neither of them moves. The air between them is strange—fragile, charged with something neither of them quite knows how to name.

Finally Shane steps back and gestures inside. “Sorry, come in.”

Ilya steps into the apartment, his gaze drifting immediately toward the sprawling mass of blankets and pillows that has overtaken half the living room.

“The nest grows,” he observes quietly.

Shane huffs a weak laugh, rubbing at the back of his neck. “Yeah, it’s getting a little out of hand.”

Ilya shakes his head. “No, it looks comfy.”

Ilya kicks off his shoes before heading for Shane’s nest without hesitation, like he’s done it a hundred times before instead of just the once. Shane blushes as he watches Ilya step inside, folding himself gently in amongst the blankets and pillows, His omega preening that the alpha is pleased with their nest.

Shane double checks the lock behind him and then follows, climbing back into the nest to curl against the pillows, suddenly feeling shy under Ilya's focused gaze.

"Tell me what happened?" Ilya ask gently, pulling Shane's socked feet into his lap.

"I couldn't sleep... The nest smelled wrong, and I was lonely, and..." His hand drifts down to his stomach again. "And then I felt... something."

Ilya watches his hand move over the small curve of his belly, something softening in his expression. "Like what?"

Shane frowns, trying to explain. "Like little tiny bubbles? Maybe flutters." he says uncertainly.

Ilya hums. "I've read that first movements are often like that."

Shane looks up sharply. "You've read about it?"

Ilya's brows draw together slightly. "Of course. I read the entire developmental timeline from week eight to week forty"

Shane stares at him like he's grown a second head. "You can't be serious."

"I assure you, I am."

"You're a billionaire hotel mogul... And what? A secret pregnancy expert?"

Ilya lifts one shoulder, the corner of his mouth twitching faintly. "Maybe."

Shane whacks him with a pillow. "Be serious. You really read about the pregnancy?"

"Yes."

"What did you read?"

"Books. Medical papers. Articles written by obstetricians. Omega pregnancy forums."

Shane's eyebrows shoot up at that. "You went on omega forums?"

Ilya hesitates. "A few."

Shane bursts out laughing. "Oh my god."

Ilya looks mildly offended. "They are very informative."

"I'm sorry but imagining a Russian billionaire lurking in omega pregnancy forums at two in the morning is hilarious."

"I did not lurk." he says grumpily.

Shane cackles harder. "You absolutely lurked."

“I was researching.” Ilya says, squeezing Shane’s foot.

Shane wipes his eyes, still chuckling. “Sure...” He settles back into the nest, wiping the last of his tears away. “But seriously,” he says after a moment. “You didn’t have to do all that.”

Ilya tilts his head slightly. “Why would I not?”

Shane shrugs, suddenly feeling a little shy again. “I don’t know. Most guys wouldn’t.”

Ilya studies him quietly for a moment, then he says something that makes Shane’s chest tighten. “I want to understand what you are going through.”

The words are simple, but the sincerity in them is unmistakable. Shane looks down at his stomach again, absently rubbing the spot where the baby had kicked earlier.

“Why?”

“Because.”

Shane stares at him again. “Because...”

“It matters to me... You matter to me.”

Shane blushes furiously, doing everything in his power not to purr at the alpha’s words. “Oh.”

“Yes, ‘Oh’.”

As if pleased as well, the baby kicks, another small flutter. Shane gasps softly.

Ilya leans forward instantly. “You feel it now?”

He nods, grabbing Ilya’s wrist before he can think too hard about it and pulls his hand toward his stomach. “Right here.”

Ilya hesitates, his large hand hovering uncertainly just above the thin fabric of Shane’s shirt.

He glances up. “May I?”

Shane bites his lip and nods.

Slowly, carefully, Ilya lays his palm over the small curve of Shane’s belly, the contact sends a strange warmth spreading through Shane’s chest.

They both go very still, waiting.

Seconds pass.

Nothing.

Shane groans softly. “I swear it just moved.”

Ilya's mouth twitches. "Performance anxiety?"

"Or stubbornness," Shane mutters.

Another minute passes. Then—tap, tap.

Shane watches his face anxiously. "There!" he whispers. "Did you—"

Ilya shakes his head, his thumb shifts slightly, almost unconsciously brushing the curve of Shane's stomach. "It might be too soon."

"Oh." Shane says, voice laced with disappointment.

Ilya drags his eyes away from Shane's stomach and looks up, their faces are suddenly much closer than he realized. Shane gulps, aware of the warmth of Ilya's hand, of the quiet apartment, and the way the nest surrounds them like a private little world.

Ilya's gaze drifts to Shane's mouth for the briefest moment, something electric crackles in the air.

Shane feels it like a spark landing in dry grass.

His heart pounds, lips parting slightly without him meaning to. For one suspended moment, the world narrows to the quiet space between them. If either of them leaned forward... That would be it, the line would disappear.

Ilya's voice is barely more than a whisper. "Shane..."

Shane flinches, pulling back to break the moment.

"We shouldn't," he blurts, his lemon and ginger scent turning bitter.

Ilya blinks, startled.

Shane forces himself to meet his eyes. "You're married."

The words hang in the air like a wall slamming into place.

The warmth drains from the air.

Ilya's fingers curl into Shane's shirt for a moment before his hand slowly withdraws from Shane's stomach.

"I know," he says quietly.

Silence fills the nest, but neither of them move, and despite the distance Shane just tried to put between them, they're still sitting close enough that their knees touch.

"I'm sorry," he mutters as Ilya says, "I should go..."

“Oh...” Shane pulls back now. “Yeah... Yes, you should.” He avoids Ilya’s eyes. “Sorry for making you come for nothing.”

“It was not for nothing.”

Shane hums, still not meeting Ilya’s gaze.

Ilya watches him for a long moment, then he carefully pushes himself to his feet. The movement leaves the nest feeling strangely colder.

Shane’s stomach twists.

“You will call me, yes? If the baby moves again?”

“Yeah.” Shane nods, still staring at the floor. “I will.”

At the door, Ilya pauses. “Good night, Shane.”

Shane says nothing, eyes on his lap where he twists the edge of a blanket between his fingers.

The door closes softly, and just like that the apartment feels empty.

Shane sinks back into the nest, chest tight. His hormones are a mess, and his emotions are even worse.

He hates that he can still picture the way Ilya looked at him. Like he mattered. Like the space between them meant something.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he mutters to himself, pressing the heels of his palms against his eyes.

He almost kissed a married man. A married man whose wife has done nothing but support this entire mess.

Because that’s what this is.

A mess.

A married man.

A baby that wasn’t supposed to exist.

And Shane catching feelings like a complete disaster.

“You almost kissed him,” he whispers to himself. The words feel heavier when he says them out loud. “You almost kissed someone’s husband.”

His stomach twists sharply. Not from the baby this time.

From guilt.

Svetlana's face flashes in his mind.

Elegant.

Calm.

Kind to him when she had every right not to be.

The woman whose marriage Shane is accidentally tearing apart simply by existing.

"God." His throat tightens. "I'm the fucking worst."

The baby shifts faintly, a small flutter. Shane freezes, then releases a shaky breath.

"Don't do that," he whispers hoarsely. "You're making this harder."

Another faint movement answers him. Like a tiny nudge.

His eyes burn suddenly, because that's the other part of this spiral. He's starting to love this baby, and that fact terrifies him. Because loving this baby means being tied to Ilya forever. And loving Ilya...

Shane groans and curls tighter into the nest. "Stop thinking about him."

But his brain won't listen.

The way Ilya came immediately when Shane called. The way his hand looked over Shane's stomach.

Shane presses a pillow over his face. "I hate everything."

His hormones surge like a tidal wave behind the words. The scent glands at the base of his neck flare without him realizing.

Omega distress rolls into the apartment air like smoke.

Sharp.

Overwhelming.

Burnt lemon and ginger—his normally bright and clean scent twisting into something acrid and frantic.

It saturates the blankets. The couch. The hallway.

Shane doesn't notice though, too busy spiraling.

"What if I ruin everything?" he whispers into the pillow. "What if I ruin their marriage?"

What if he already has?

His mind starts racing down darker paths.

Maybe the baby would be better off without this chaos. Maybe Ilya would be happier if Shane just—

“No,” he whispers quickly, panic spiking.

He pulls the pillow away and clutches his stomach protectively.

“I’m sorry,” he tells the little life inside him, his voice shaking. “I didn’t mean that.”

Another flutter answers him. Tiny and alive. And Shane’s breathing grows uneven, a keening noise starts low in his throat as the scent of his distress thickens, sour and biting.

—

The smell hits him before he even reaches the front door. Lemon and ginger—Shane’s usually sweet scent now twisted, sharp and acrid with panic and distress.

Hayden panics, shooting a glance at the security guard standing by the elevator. “Did something happen?!” The security guard looks confused. “You don’t smell that?”

The man shakes his head, pulling down the collar of his shirt to reveal a scent patch.

“Fuck.” He curses, shoving his key into the lock with shaking fingers, and slams open the door.

The scent smacks him in the face as the door swings wide, thick enough to make his eyes water.

“Jesus!” The grocery bag slips from his hand and hits the floor with a dull thud. “Shane?!”

No response.

His pulse spikes instantly, his alpha chafing at scenting an omega in distress. Hayden follows the scent trail down the hallway at a near run.

“Shane!” he shouts again, rounding the corner into the living room and stops dead.

The nest is a disaster. Blankets half pulled apart, pillows scattered, the careful cocoon Shane built ripped open like something clawed through it. And in the middle of it—Shane, curled tight into himself, shaking, one arm wrapped protectively around his stomach while the other grips a blanket like it’s the only thing holding him together.

“Holy shit.” Hayden crosses the room in two strides and drops to his knees beside the nest immediately, hands hovering in the air above Shane’s prone body worriedly. “Shane…”

Shane startles slightly, but says nothing. His face pale, gaze blank, eyes unfocused and glassy.

Hayden’s heart drops straight into his stomach.

The scent is worse up close—sharp panic, guilt, hormones all tangled together.

Shane moans weakly.

“Fuck.” He mumbles as he kicks off his shoes and climbs into the nest, knowing that Shane is too far gone to care.

Shane’s scent spikes again, and Hayden’s instincts kick in immediately.

“Okay,” he mutters, forcing his way deeper into the nest, ignoring the way pillows collapse under his weight.

Shane doesn’t react. Doesn’t snap at Hayden for coming into his nest uninvited, or about his scent ruining everything like he normally does. Just lays there looking so small and fragile and scared.

Hayden pulls Shane’s trembling body firmly against him back to chest, one arm wrapping around his shoulders while the other presses protectively across Shane’s stomach. He presses his face into Shane’s hair and releases a steady stream of calming scent, letting his warm cedar and orange scent mix with the bitter lemon and ginger.

“It’s ok, bud.” Hayden murmurs.

Shane moans again, low and keening, his body shaking harder against him. Hayden shifts, settling deeper into the nest until they’re surrounded by blankets on all sides. Then he does the one thing that always works when Shane is spiraling—he starts to purr. The sound vibrating through his chest and into Shane.

The effect is almost immediate. Shane’s rigid posture softens a little, his breathing evening out as the vibration hums through him.

“Good,” Hayden murmurs quietly, continuing the low rumble. “That’s it. Just breathe.”

The scent in the apartment slowly begins to soften as Hayden’s steady presence grounds him again. Less sharp. Less frantic.

They lay there, Hayden purring and Shane clutching the arm banded around his stomach like a lifeline, until the trembling stops and Shane’s breathing slows.

“Wanna talk about it?” Hayden rumbles out.

“We almost kissed.” Shane’s voice is quiet, wrecked.

His purring stutters. “...I’m sorry, you almost did what now?”

Shane groans miserably, burying his face in a pillow, mumbling incoherently into the pillow.

Hayden stares at the back of Shane’s head for a long moment before the purring resumes, though now it has a slightly strained edge to it.

“Oooooookkkk... I’m going to need you to unpack.. All of that...”

Shane snuffles, curling tighter into him. “We almost kissed,” he says again, quietly. “But I stopped it.”

“Good.”

“But I wanted to.”

Hayden sighs heavily and shifts closer, automatically pulling Shane closer.

“Yeah, I figured.”

“I feel like a terrible person.”

“You’re not.”

“He’s married.”

“Yeah,” Hayden mutters darkly. “Trust me, I’m very aware.”

Shane snuffles again. “He drove over here at two in the morning because I felt the baby kick.”

Hayden pauses. “...okay that’s actually kind of adorable.”

“I know.”

Shane sounds devastated about it.

Hayden pulls away from Shane’s stomach to rub a slow hand up and down Shane’s arm, still purring steadily to keep him grounded.

“Look,” he says gently. “You’re pregnant. Your hormones are trying to fight God right now. and dealing with a ridiculously attractive Russian billionaire who keeps showing up like some kind of tragic romance hero would make anyone's emotions a mess.”

Shane groans. “Don’t say it like that.”

“I’m just saying the situation is...complicated.”

“But he’s married.”

“Yeah,” Hayden mutters darkly. “Still not my favorite detail.”

Shane presses his deeper into Hayden. “I feel awful.”

Hayden squeezes him tighter. “Don’t, nothing happened.”

“It feels like it.”

“You’re not a homewrecker, Shane.”

But Shane isn't so sure.

Because the truth, one he can't admit out loud, is sitting there, a heavy and terrifying weight on his chest. He's falling in love with a man he can't have, and he has no idea what to do about it.

—

The cold night air hits Ilya the moment he steps out of Shane's building.

It should help clear his head, but it doesn't.

His mind is still inside that apartment. Inside the nest. Inside the quiet moment where Shane's breath caught and his lips parted and for one suspended second the entire world narrowed to the space between them.

Ilya exhales slowly as he unlocks the car and slides into the driver's seat, gripping the steering wheel until his knuckles turn white as he stares out through the windshield at the empty Ottawa street.

The image won't leave him. Shane's small smile when the baby kicked. The way he grabbed Ilya's wrist and pulled his hand to his stomach without thinking. The warmth of Shane's smooth skin beneath his palm. And then Shane's voice breaking the moment.

You're married.

The truth sits heavy in Ilya's chest.

He reaches for his phone, knowing there is only one person he needs to call about this..

The line rings once. Twice.

Then—

"Ilya?" Svetlana's voice is soft with sleep but instantly alert.

He closes his eyes briefly. "I am sorry to wake you."

"You never apologize before calling at this hour," she says calmly. "So something has happened."

A faint smile pulls at the corner of his mouth despite everything. "You know me too well."

"I married you," she replies dryly. "What happened?"

Ilya exhales slowly. "Shane called me tonight."

That wakes her fully. "Is he alright? The baby?"

"Yes," Ilya says quickly. "He is fine. The baby is fine."

A pause. “Then why did he call you in the middle of the night?”

Ilya leans back in the seat. “He felt the baby move.”

Silence fills the line, then Svetlana’s voice softens in a way it rarely does. “The first kicks.”

“Yes.”

“And he called you.”

“He was crying,” Ilya admits quietly. “He thought something was wrong,” Ilya continues. “So I drove there.”

Svetlana hums thoughtfully. “You went to his apartment.”

“Yes.”

Another pause. “And?”

Ilya stares at his hands on the steering wheel, the words come out rough.

“He wanted me to feel the baby kick.”

He hears Svetlana exhale slowly on the other end of the line. “Did you?”

“No, too soon.” Ilya swallows, rubbing his thumb against the steering wheel absently. “We almost kissed,” he says quietly.

For a long moment the line is silent.

“Almost?” she asks after a moment.

“Yes, but he stopped it.” Svetlana exhales through her nose. “He said we cannot cross that line while I am married to you.”

“And he’s right.”

“I know.” Ilya’s voice is quieter now.

“But that does not change the truth.”

Svetlana waits.

“I do not think I can keep pretending,” he admits finally.

“Pretending what?”

“That I do not feel what I feel.” He leans forward slightly, resting his forehead against the steering wheel. “My alpha wants him.” The confession comes out raw. “Not just because of the baby. Because of Shane.”

Svetlana is silent for a moment. “And what does the rest of you want?”

Ilya doesn't hesitate. “The same thing.” The honesty sits between them. Heavy and unavoidable. “I find myself thinking about him constantly,” Ilya continues quietly. “Whether he has eaten. Whether he slept. Whether the nausea has returned. Whether he is afraid.” A breath passes through the phone. “And tonight,” he says, voice lowering, “when he pulled my hand to his stomach... I realized something.”

“What?”

“I would do anything to protect them.”

Them.

Shane and the baby.

Svetlana absorbs that. “And you think that means you cannot continue pretending our marriage is something it isn't.”

“Yes.” He finally lifts his head from the wheel. “I do not want to hurt you.”

“You won't.”

“I mean it, Sveta.”

“I know you do.”

Her voice softens slightly. “We've never lied to each other, Ilyusha. I'm not about to start now.”

He exhales slowly.

“I don't think I can keep fighting my alpha.”

Svetlana considers that. “And Shane?”

“He feels guilty,” Ilya says quietly. “He thinks he is destroying our marriage.”

She huffs softly. “That poor boy.”

“He refused to kiss me because of you.”

“I appreciate his morals.” A small silence passes. Then she says something that makes Ilya blink. “You should court him.”

He straightens slightly. “Svetlana—”

“I'm serious.”

“You are my wife.”

“Yes,” she says calmly. “Your arranged wife. Your political wife. Your friend.” Her voice warms slightly. “But not the woman you’re in love with.”

He closes his eyes briefly. “No.”

“And that’s okay.” Another quiet breath. “Besides,” she adds lightly, “I’ve been married to you long enough to know when your mind is already made up.”

Ilya stares out at the dark Ottawa street. “I think I decided the moment I saw the baby.”

Svetlana smiles faintly on the other end of the call. “Then stop pretending you didn’t.”

Silence settles between them again.

Finally she asks, “Are you heading back to the hotel?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“And tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” he says quietly, “I start figuring out how to be the man Shane deserves.”

Svetlana chuckles softly. “Good luck with that.”

He smiles faintly despite everything. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For understanding.”

There is no hesitation in her answer. “Always.”

The line clicks off.

Ilya sits in the car for a moment longer, then starts the engine.

For the first time since this entire situation began, he allows himself to admit the truth.

He isn’t just protecting Shane anymore.

He’s falling in love with him.

Chapter 8

Moscow wakes slowly in winter. The sky outside the penthouse windows are still dark when Svetlana ends the call with Ilya. Snow drifts against the tall wall of windows of her bedroom, the city quiet beneath a coming pale blue dawn.

She does not move yet, still processing her conversation with Ilya, phone resting in her hand as his voice echoes through her mind.

The baby kicked.

We almost kissed.

I don't think I can keep fighting my alpha.

Svetlana exhales slowly and sets the phone down on the desk. None of this surprises her, not really. She has known Ilya for years—long before their wedding, long before politics and family expectations turned their lives into a business arrangement dressed up as a marriage. She knows the tone of his voice when something matters, and tonight, when he spoke about Shane—there was no mistaking it.

He's already gone.

Not recklessly.

Not selfishly.

But completely.

Her gaze drifts to the laptop on her desk, and she reaches for it without hesitation, the soft glow of the waking screen casting her in shades of blue.

Rows of folders fill the display—financial transfers, offshore holdings, shell corporations, private security payments, and bribery ledgers. Every crime Grigori Rozanov thought he buried splayed out before her.

She has been building this archive quietly for months. Patiently and carefully as not to arouse suspicion, ingratiating herself to her father-in-law and his colleagues as she played the part of the weak willed omega.

The plan was meant to have been slower, safer. A long, quiet dismantling of her father-in-law's empire that would take years to complete. But tonight changed things.

Grigori will not stop, not while Shane exists. Not while that baby threatens his control of the Rozanov dynasty, and if there is one thing Svetlana knows about powerful men like her father-in-law—it's that they become most dangerous when they start losing.

She closes one folder, then another. A contact list appears—investigators, journalists, and political allies. Men and women who have spent years trying to bring Grigori Rozanov down, but had lacked the evidence.

Until now.

Svetlana rests her fingers on the keyboard.

“Well,” she murmurs softly to herself. “Let’s stop waiting.”

She begins typing. Emails first. Encrypted attachments. Financial records. Shipping manifests. Evidence linking Grigori’s business empire to illegal trade networks and bribery across three continents.

Her phone buzzes.

One of the recipients responding almost instantly: *Are you serious?*

She types back calmly: *Completely.*

Another message arrives: *If this is real, he’s finished.*

Svetlana allows herself a small smile: *That’s the idea.*

By the time the sun rises over Moscow, the first domino has already fallen.

Across the city, Grigori Rozanov is finishing his morning espresso when his assistant bursts into his office without knocking. That alone tells him something is wrong.

“What is it?”

Her face is pale. “Sir... you need to see this.”

She sets a tablet on the desk. Grigori glances down. The headline is already spreading through financial media.

FEDERAL INVESTIGATION OPENED INTO ROZANOV HOLDINGS

His expression doesn’t change. He reads the article. Then the next one. Then the next. More are appearing by the minute.

Investigations. Financial audits. Questions about corruption and illegal transactions. Information that could only have come from inside the family.

Slowly, very slowly, Grigori sets the tablet down, his voice is calm. “Who leaked this?”

“We don’t know yet, sir.”

But he does. Of course he does. There is only one person in his orbit clever enough to do this without him noticing. Only one person who had access to the necessary records. Only one person patient enough to wait for the perfect moment.

His daughter-in-law.

Grigori leans back in his chair. For the first time in years he feels something close to surprise, even impressed.

“Well,” he murmurs. “That was unexpected.”

His assistant swallows nervously. “Sir... the board is already asking questions.”

“They can ask.”

“Investigators are requesting access to company accounts.”

“They can request.” His voice remains perfectly calm, but his eyes have gone cold.

Because if Svetlana has decided to start a war then he knows exactly why. She could not—would not—bring his foolish son to heel.

That is of no matter. It's time Grigori took things into his own hands. He had warned Ilya, Svetlana too. Had bided his time patiently believing the lies his daughter-in-law had fed him, thinking that sooner than later his son would abandon the little Canadian omega and his foolish dreams of having a happy family.

But Grigori would show them both that the omega carrying the child that threatens Grigori's carefully planned succession, the omega who has already stolen his son's loyalty, could be crushed in more ways than one.

Grigori steeples his fingers thoughtfully.

“You know,” he says quietly, “I warned Ilya what would happen if he allowed this situation to continue.”

His assistant doesn't answer.

“Apparently,” Grigori continues calmly, “my son believes he can defy me without consequence.” A faint smile spreads across his face. It isn't pleasant. “Very well.”

With a wave of his hand he dismisses his assistant and presses a button on his desk phone with the other, a new voice answers.

“Yes, sir?”

Grigori's tone is soft, measured. “Find Shane Hollander.” A pause, his smile sharpens slightly. “And arrange... an accident.”

The man on the other end of the line doesn't hesitate. “What kind of accident?”

Grigori looks out the floor-to-ceiling window at the city below, at the snow drifting quietly across Moscow.

Far away, in Canada, an omega is carrying the child that threatens everything he built. Svetlana may think she has moved first, but Grigori Rozanov has been playing this game far longer.

“Nothing dramatic,” he says calmly. “Just something unfortunate.” His voice lowers slightly. “Pregnancy can be so...fragile.”

“As you wish, sir.”

Grigori hums and the call ends.

And somewhere thousands of miles away, in a dimly lit room, Shane sits on an exam table, a thin paper sheet pulled over his lap, fingers nervously twisting the edge of it while he waits, he is completely unaware that plans have been set into motion that will soon put him directly in harm’s way.

He cannot believe that he’s been pregnant for twenty weeks now. Halfway through his pregnancy. The number feels unreal.

Across the room, Ilya stands near the window speaking quietly into his phone in Russian, his voice low and clipped as he finishes whatever business call he’s trying to squeeze in before the appointment.

Shane watches him for a moment. Tall. Broad shoulders in a dark coat. Curls still a little messy from the cold wind outside. For some reason the sight settles the restless knot in Shane’s chest.

Ilya notices him looking and ends the call immediately.

“I am finished,” he says, slipping the phone into his pocket.

Shane raises an eyebrow. “You hung up fast.”

“The board will survive.” He says, crossing the room to take the chair beside the exam table just as the door opens.

Dr. Kline enters with a warm smile and a tablet tucked under her arm, followed by an ultrasound tech. “Good morning, Shane. Ilya.”

“Morning,” Shane says, trying to sound normal despite the flutter of nerves in his stomach.

Ilya says nothing, just nods.

“This is the big one,” Dr. Kline says as the tech wheels the ultrasound machine closer. “Your anatomy scan. We’re going to take a detailed look at the baby’s organs, spine, limbs—make sure everything is developing the way it should.”

Shane nods, mouth suddenly feeling dry. “Okay.”

Ilya moves his chair closer without thinking.

The tech lifts Shane's shirt slightly and squeezes cool gel onto his stomach, pressing the wand down as the screen flickers to life. Static shapes at first, then shadows and gray waves.

Shane's breath catches, still amazed at the sight before him, as a perfect tiny form appears on the monitor. The baby moves, shifting lazily like they're floating in slow motion.

Ilya leans forward slowly, his expression shifts into something softer. Just as in awe as Shen is as the tiny figure stretches and kicks.

Shane laughs under his breath. "They're showing off."

The technician tilts the wand slightly, capturing a better angle.

"Everything looks excellent so far. Brain structure is developing normally...heart chambers look great..." She clicks measurements into the tablet while the baby wriggles on the screen.

Shane glances sideways. Ilya hasn't taken his eyes off the monitor. Not once.

"You okay?" Shane whispers.

Ilya nods slowly. "Yes."

His voice is quiet, almost reverent.

The tech shifts the wand lower. "Would you like to know the sex?"

Shane's head snaps up. "You can tell already?"

The technician laughs, "Very clearly."

Shane glances at Ilya. "Do you want to know?"

Ilya looks at him instead of the screen. "Only if you do."

Shane nods. "Okay." He turns to Dr. Kline who stands behind the technician, offering her a wobbly smile. "Yes, then. Please."

Dr. Kline smiles back as the technician angles the wand slightly.

"There we are." She gestures to the screen.

Shane squints and laughs. "I have no idea what I'm looking at."

But Ilya does.

Dr. Kline chuckles. "You're having a boy."

The words hang in the air.

Shane blinks. "A...boy?"

He stares back at the screen. The tiny body. The little kicks.

A son.

“Oh my god.” A laugh bursts out of him, shaky and disbelieving. “We’re having a boy!”

Beside him, Ilya exhales slowly.

A boy.

His father’s first grandson.

Except this child will never belong to Grigori.

Only to them.

Shane wipes his eyes quickly. “Sorry,” he mutters.

“No apology necessary,” Dr. Kline says kindly.

The scan continues another fifteen minutes as she and the technician check the spine, lungs, kidneys.

Everything is perfect.

When it’s finally done, and several ultrasound photos have been printed, Dr. Kline congratulates them as she heads out the door.

“Congratulations,” she says warmly. “You’ve got a very healthy baby boy.”

Shane is still in disbelief as he wipes off his stomach and fixes his shirt. Cannot wrap his head around the fact that he has a son as Ilya helps him into his coat as they head for the door.

The cold air outside the clinic hits Shane’s face as Ilya guides him out of the building, snow crunching lightly underfoot. He’s staring at the ultrasound picture in his hands, cataloguing their son’s features.

“He has a nose,” Shane says in disbelief.

Ilya glances over and chuckles. “Yes.”

“Like a tiny nose.”

“That is generally how noses work.”

Shane glances up at him and bumps his shoulder lightly. “Shut up, I’m being serious.”

Ilya’s mouth curves faintly. “I know.”

They reach the edge of the parking lot. Shane looks down again at the image.

“Our son,” he murmurs.

The words feel strange.

Wonderful.

Terrifying.

Neither of them notice the van parked two rows over, too wrapped up in the excitement of finding out they are having a boy. They do not notice the door slides open as they, or the man stepping out quickly behind them.

It happens fast. A hand grabs the back of Shane’s jacket. Shane barely has time to react before he’s yanked backward.

“Hey—“ he yelps, ultrasound photos scattering across the slushy pavement.

Ilya spins instantly. “Shane!”

The man shoves Shane hard, trying to drag him toward the van.

Shane gasps, instinctively curling his arms around his stomach. “Get off me!”

Ilya moves like a weapon. Two strides before he’s yanking the man away and slamming a fist into the attacker’s jaw with brutal force.

The man staggers back, knocking into Shane who tumbles backwards, his body twisting to avoid his stomach as he falls onto the pavement.

The attacker recovers and swings wildly. Ilya blocks the punch and drives his shoulder into the man’s chest, slamming him against the side of the van. Metal dents with the impact.

“Who sent you?” Ilya demands, hands fisted into the man’s shirt. “Tell me!” Ilya roars as the man struggles against him.

Shane moans, the sound distracting Ilya enough for the attacker to shove him off and bolt back into the van. The door slams, and the vehicle roars out of the lot before Ilya can stop it.

For a moment everything goes still.

“Fuck!” Ilya curses, crouching down beside Shane who lays curled protectively around his belly on the dirty slush covered pavement. “Moy solnishko, are you hurt?”

Shane shakes his head shakily. “I—I don’t think so.”

Ilya gently grips his shoulders, pulling him up into a seated position as she scans him for injuries. “Did he touch your stomach?”

“No.” Shane’s voice trembles. “I protected it.”

Ilya's chest tightens. He gathers the ultrasound pictures quickly and presses them back into Shane's shaking hands before scooping him up to head back into the clinic.

"That wasn't random, was it?" Shane says quietly, fear finally breaking through the adrenaline as Ilya marches into the clinic.

Ilya's jaw tightens. "No."

Shane nods, pressing his forehead to Ilya's chest. They both know exactly who sent him.

"We need a doctor," Ilya barks as they step into the front office.

People in the waiting room stare, their phones coming out as nurses rush forward to help him, but Ilya doesn't care.

The only thing that matters is the omega trembling in his arms, and their son growing inside him.

—

Grigori Rozanov watches the footage later that evening. The clip is grainy, but the moment is clear: a masked man comes up behind Shane and Ilya and grabs Shane. A struggle ensues between Ilya and the attacker, with Shane being shoved to the ground.

He watches as his son rages against the attacker, slamming him into the side of the van before his focus is stolen by the omega. Watches as the man gets into the vehicle and pulls away, as Ilya picks up the omega and carries him back into the clinic

Grigori sighs. "So predictable."

His assistant shifts nervously.

"From what we have been informed, the boy was not seriously injured."

"No," Grigori agrees calmly. "But now we know how easy he is to reach." He folds his hands. "And how violently my son will react." A slow smile forms. "Good."

Because this was never about killing Shane or the baby, not yet at least. It was about testing the perimeter, and now Grigori knows exactly where the cracks are.

Chapter 9

Shane sits curled deep in the middle of his nest, blankets pulled tight around his shoulders, one hand resting protectively over the gentle curve of his stomach as he watches Ilya pace back and forth across his living room, speaking quietly in Russian, voice calm, but the edge beneath it is unmistakable.

Commanding.

Controlled.

Dangerous.

Shane looks away, glancing down at the ultrasound from earlier.

A boy.

His son.

Their son.

Sparks of elation fizz in his stomach as he draws a trembling finger down the slope of the tiny nose so much like his own, and over adorable pursed lips.

The memory should feel joyful, but every time he closes his eyes he feels it again—the sudden jerk on the back of his jacket. The panic. The instinct to curl around his stomach as someone tries to drag him away.

Even now, hours later, his omega is still screaming inside him.

Danger!

Protect the baby.

Stay close to safety.

And right now, safety has a very specific scent: mint and evergreen.

Ilya stands near the kitchen counter now, reviewing something on his phone, nodding along at whatever Shane's mother is saying too low for him to hear, sandy curls falling slightly into his eyes.

He hasn't left, not once since the attack. Shane doesn't think he's relaxed since they left the parking lot.

After Dr. Kline had given Shane and their son the all clear, Ilya had insisted on bringing Shane straight home. Insisted on walking him up to the apartment. Insisted on checking every door, every window, every lock like a man expecting another attack at any moment.

Shane knew Ilya's alpha was awake now. That it was angry and on edge screaming for him to protect his omega and the child in his womb.

Ilya wasn't the only one whose instincts were riding him hard.

Shane's omega had practically latched onto him the moment Ilya had finished securing the apartment. Had dragged Ilya into the nest and forced himself into Ilya's lap, rubbing his face against Ilya's chest and neck, keening in distress every time Ilya had attempted to move away.

Once his head had cleared and his panic had subsided for the most part, Shane had launched himself away from the alpha, his face burning from embarrassment at his behavior. Even now he has to fight the urge to whine and beg for the alpha to join him back in his nest.

His distressed scent spikes again, and he flushes as Ilya and his mother stop talking to glance over in his direction, both of their bodies strung tight as they scan him from head to toe.

Satisfied that he is ok, Ilya turns back to his phone, but Shane watches as his mother fights the urge to come to him, trying his best to not let it rankle him. He knows that she's doing everything she can not to hover, knowing that his mother is more than likely fighting her own omega just the way he is.

He had seen the way she'd slammed into his apartment, her eyes wide and wild, her sharp and acidic battling his own, and her typically calm face a mask of panic and rage. As soon as she had seen Shane, she had rushed towards him, throwing her keys and purse as she went, enveloping him in a tight embrace as she whimpered.

Once he and Ilya had explained what had happened and her own omega had been satisfied, his mother had spent her time flitting between the living room and the kitchen, making sure he had enough food and water and blankets to ease his unsettled omega.

Only all he and his omega want right now is Ilya.

Shane huffs, flopping back into the nest, throwing an arm over his eyes as he grumbles at his omega.

He is fine.

The baby is fine.

Ilya is there, and he will not let anything happen to them

"Everything ok?"

Shane jumps at Ilya's voice, lifting his head to find the alpha hovering outside the nest.

"I'm fine." he mumbles, head dropping back into the pillows.

"You do not smell fine."

Shane says nothing for a moment, just wiggles into the blankets beneath him, unable to get comfortable.

“I’m fine,” he says, more insistently.

Ilya hums, shoving his hands into his pockets as he stares down at Shane.

“You don’t have to stay, you know.”

Neither of them believes that.

Right on cue, Shane’s scent shifts again—subtle but unmistakable distress creeping into the air just at the thought of Ilya leaving. He bites back a whine, angry at himself and his omega. He hates how needy he feels.

Ilya sighs softly. “Shane…”

“I’m fine.”

“That is the third time you’ve said that, and I am not so sure.”

Shane grumbles again, rolling onto his side to face Ilya. “My mom is here, and Hayden will be home soon… I’ll be—”

“Do not say fine.”

Shane glares up at the alpha indignantly but says nothing.

“I think it would be best if I stayed here for a while.”

Shane blinks, his omega perking up at that. “What?”

“I would like to move in.” Ilya clarifies calmly. “For now, just until the situation stabilizes.”

“You can’t just move into my apartment!” Shane jackknives out of the nest.

Ilya gives him a lazy smile. “You will find that I can, omega.”

Shane sputters. “Absolutely not.”

“It has already been arranged.” Ilys shrugs.

“Then un-arrange it!” He growls.

“No.”

“Yes!”

“No.”

“You can’t decide something like this without asking me, Ilya!”

Ilya lifts one eyebrow slightly. “Would you prefer I leave?”

Shane opens his mouth, then shuts it again because the idea of Ilya walking out that door right now makes something inside his chest seize in panic.

“Don’t you dare use my designation against me like that!”

“Shane—”

“I don’t want you here.”

Lie.

Shane’s omega whines, his distress perfuming around them.

Ilya pulls his hands out of his pockets and crouches down beside the nest. “Have you ever stopped to consider that I want to be here, Shane? That my alpha will not let me leave, even if I wanted to?”

He had not, not really. “Oh.”

Shane’s omega all but purrs at the alpha’s words.

“Yes, ‘oh’.” Ilya says softly. “You are not the only one in distress, malen’kiy.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You do not need to apologize.”

“I do,” Shane resists the pull to reach out to Ilya. “ I didn’t—”

A knock on the front door interrupts him.

Ilya pushes off on his knees to stand, and heads towards the door, intercepting Shane’s mother before she can open it. “I’ve got it.” he says, halting Yuna in her steps.

At the door is Sergei, one of the armed guards, who says something to Ilya in Russian. Ilya steps back, pushing the door wide, as Sergei pushes in a trolley filled with luggage.

“Did you steal a trolley from the hotel!?”

“It’s not stealing when you own the hotel, solnishko.” Ilya retorts with a smirk.

Shane rolls his eyes, biting back a retort, as he watches Ilya turn back to Sergei, telling him, Shane assumes, where to put Ilya’s belongings.

It’s on Sergei’s second trolley trip that Hayden returns, stopping dead in his tracks in the doorway as he takes in the luggage trolley and the hulking guard heading towards Shane’s room, nearly dropping the takeout containers he had been balancing.

Hayden kicks the door shut behind him, saying nothing until he sets the food down on their tiny dining room table.

He turns to face Shane and Ilya, hands on his hips. “Can someone please tell me why there is luggage in my living room?”

Shane winces, eyes darting to Ilya.

“I will be staying here for the time being.” Ilya answers calmly.

Hayden blinks, then barks out a laugh. A sharp, disbelieving sound. He shakes his head, “No.”

“Hayd—” Shane starts.

“You cannot be serious.” Hayden cuts him off,

“I am.”

“No.” Hayden looks at Shane.

Shane shrinks slightly deeper into the blankets. “It’s just temporary.”

Hayden turns back to Ilya slowly. “You can’t just move in!”

“I told him that.” Shane snipes.

“This isn’t a hotel.” Hayden says to Ilya, glaring at the larger alpha.

“I am aware.”

Hayden crosses his arms. “You’re not even on the lease.”

Ilya tilts his head slightly. “I can rectify that.”

Hayden scoffs. “That’s not the point!”

Shane groans softly. “Guys—”

Hayden holds up a hand without looking at him. “Nope. This conversation is happening.”

He jerks his head toward the hallway. “You. Russian. Walk with me.”

“HAYDEN!”

“Just let them go, honey.” Yuna says from the kitchen as she pulls down plates from the cabinet.

“Mom...”

“It’s fine, Shane.” Ilya says quietly, motioning for Hayden to step outside.

—

The moment the door closes behind them, Hayden turns.

“Alright,” he says bluntly. “What the hell are you doing, Rozanov?!”

Ilya doesn’t flinch. “Protecting him.”

Hayden scoffs. “From who?”

“My father.”

Hayden rubs a hand down his face. “I’m assuming something happened.”

Ilya nods. “There was an attack.”

“A WHAT!?”

“It’s fine... Shane and the baby are fine.” Ilya sighs. “My father is testing his boundaries.”

“Jesus fucking—” Hayden tugs at his hair. “Look, I appreciate the whole...” Hayden waves in Ilya’s direction. “billionaire bodyguard routine you’ve got going, but—”

“This is not a routine.” Ilya interjects.

Hayden huffs. “Whatever you want to call it then.” He points at the front door. “But he’s been barely holding it together when you’re not around, and now this? You’re the whole reason he’s in this fucking mess, and you think moving in and sleeping ten feet away from him every night is the solution? Especially after you almost kissed?!”

That makes Ilya stiffen slightly. “Shane told you?”

“Of course he did!” Hayden shouts. “I came home and he was fucking unresponsive! What do you think is going to happen when you inevitably leave and go back to your wife?! You think Shane’s going to be able to handle that?”

Ilya says nothing.

Hayden shakes his head at him. “I won’t let you break him.”

Ilya meets his gaze calmly. “I have no intentions of hurting my omega.”

Hayden scoffs. “Your omega? You’re fucking married.”

“I know.”

“Do you not see the problem? You’re going to confuse him, he’s already falling for you as is, and you want to come in and fucking play happy family like your wife doesn’t exist?! This isn’t a fucking game!”

Ilya goes very still. Hayden notices immediately.

“This is not a game to me.”

“No,” Hayden drags a hand down his face and groans. “This is a fucking disaster.”

“I am aware.” Ilya finally replies.

“And yet you still plan to move in?”

“His omega is distressed,” Ilya says quietly. “He does not want me far away.”

Hayden studies him for a long moment, then sighs heavily. “I do not care who you are, if you fucking hurt him—”

Ilya’s voice cuts in immediately. “I won’t.”

Hayden meets his eyes. “You can’t promise that, Rozanov.”

“I can.”

“Oh fuck me, it’s like talking to a goddamn wall. You have a wife, an omega—”

“She wants a divorce.” Ilya says, voice clipped.

Hayden snorts. “Can you blame her?!”

“Pike, it is not like that...”

“What is it like then, huh? You can’t honestly expect me to believe your *wife* is ok with you moving in with another omega!”

“Sveta... Is my best friend, but our marriage was... *is* an alliance. I love her, but not—”

“Like Shane?”

Ilya swallows, but says nothing, just nods.

Hayden stares at him for a moment, assessing. “Fuck, fine.” he says after a moment. “But if you break his heart, Rozanov...”

Ilya raises an eyebrow. “You will what?”

Hayden cracks his knuckles. “I’ll make whatever your father has planned look like child’s play, you understand?”

For the first time that night, Ilya almost smiles.

—

In Moscow, the Rozanov Holdings boardroom is full, but not officially.

No assistants taking notes.

No staff bringing in coffees and taking lunch orders.

Just the twelve men who control one of the largest hospitality empires in the world, sitting quietly at the long glass table, each seated in their usual place. Only one chair remains empty—Grigori Rozanov's seat.

No one dares to touch it.

Not yet.

Svetlana stands at the far end of the room instead, her posture elegant and calm as ever, a tablet resting lightly in her hands.

She doesn't try to take his place, that would be too obvious. But make no mistake, this meeting belongs to her.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice," she says calmly.

Svetlana has never called a private meeting before. Never been present for one without Ilya or Grigori at the head of the table.

Around the table, the board members trade uneasy glances.

They all know what this is about. They've seen the headlines. They've seen the preliminary inquiries. They've seen the documents. What they don't want to say out loud, refuse to acknowledge, is that the empire they helped build might be about to collapse.

"I will be direct," she says, tapping the tablet once, the screen behind her lighting up.

Bank transfers. Encrypted communications. Security payments routed through shell companies. A timeline of corruption laid out with surgical precision, clear and damning.

No dramatics. No embellishment. Just facts.

The room grows colder with every document.

"Everything you are seeing has already been submitted to federal investigators," she addresses the room.

A murmur ripples through the room.

One of the older directors leans forward, his voice tight. "If this is verified—"

"It will be." Her tone is calm, certain.

Another board member speaks, quieter. "Is this retaliation against the...incident in Canada?"

Svetlana's gaze sharpens slightly. "The attempted abduction of Shane Hollander has been linked to a private security contractor retained through one of these shell companies, it is not a mere incident."

“You’re saying Grigori authorized this?” one director asks quietly.

She nods. “Yes.”

“To attack his son’s pregnant omega?”

Svetlana gives him a frosty smile at his choice of words. “Yes.”

Silence slams down over the room. No one interrupts her this time. Because now this isn’t just corruption and corporate scandal, this is violence and criminal liability. A legal disaster with international scrutiny.

Another director exhales slowly.

A board member exhales heavily. “If this becomes public…”

“When,” Svetlana interrupts. “It is only a matter of time before this becomes public, and it is up to you whether Rozanov Holdings survives the fallout.”

She lets that settle.

None of the board members respond, they don’t need to. With public knowledge comes regulators and criminal investigations. Shareholders panicking and withdrawing their support, and the empire they have spent decades building dismantles right before their eyes.

Svetlana sets the tablet down, smoothing a hand down her skirt. “For years Grigori has operated under the assumption that his position was untouchable.” She pauses. “He was wrong.”

One of the older directors rubs his temple. “You’re proposing what exactly? To remove him?”

“Yes.” Svetlana folds her hands in front of her. “A private vote of no confidence.”

Someone actually laughs nervously. “You can’t be serious.”

Her gaze doesn’t waver. “I am completely serious.”

The man’s laughter fades. “He built this company.”

“And he will destroy it if he remains in charge.” Svetlana folds her hands calmly in front of her. “This vote will not be public, of course, but if we remove him quietly now, we prevent the scandal from swallowing the entire company.”

Svetlana’s voice never rises. It doesn’t need to.

“That is not a small decision.” says another.

“No,” Svetlana agrees. “It’s not.”

Another director shakes his head. “And if we do not comply?”

Svetlana meets her eyes and shrugs. “Then the investigators arrive... they take the whole empire with him. Are you really that willing to go down with him?”

At that there's a shift in the room, subtle but unmistakable.

Fear has a way of clarifying priorities.

“If the motion passes,” she continues, “Grigori Rozanov is immediately removed as chairman, effective before the investigation becomes public record in full.”

“And replaced by?”

“An interim chair selected by this board.”

She doesn't volunteer a name, she doesn't need to. Everyone in the room understands who just orchestrated this.

Silence lingers for a long moment, then one of the directors nods, leaning forward to address the room. “I would like to call a vote.”

It's quiet, but final.

Svetlana inclines her head once in acknowledgement.

Ballots are distributed. Paper, of course. Deliberate and untraceable.

One by one, each member marks their decision, the sound of pens against paper feels deafening in the silence.

When they're finished, Svetlana circles the room, collecting ballots from the silent board members, handing them to the senior director.

Then the count begins.

No one speaks while it happens, not even Svetlana. She stands perfectly still, hands clasped in front of her, watching. Waiting.

Finally, the senior director looks up, his expression grave as he clears his throat. “The motion passes.”

The words echo in the room.

Grigori Rozanov—removed. Just like that. No ceremony. No confrontation. No warning. A man who ruled for decades dethroned in a silent vote behind closed doors exactly as she had expected.

Svetlana exhales slowly, not relief or satisfaction. Something colder, resolute.

“Then we proceed immediately,” she says.

Chairs shift, phones are picked up. Lawyers will be called and statements drafted. Damage control initiated.

The machine moves quickly now, it has to. Because when Grigori finds out—and he will—there will be nothing quiet about what comes next.

Svetlana gathers her tablet, then she turns, walking out of the room as the empire begins to reshape itself without him.

Grigori thought he started the war, but he underestimated one thing: his daughter-in-law.

—

The sun is setting when Shane finally drifts into a restless nap in the nest, his belly full of the Chinese food Hayden had brought home, his son shifting lazily beneath his ribs.

Across the room, Ilya sits in a chair beside the couch, watching him. Not working. Not answering emails. Just watching, his alpha keeping him vigilant despite his own exhaustion eating away at him.

His phone buzzes, and Ilya glances down—Svetlana.

He answers immediately. “Yes?”

Her voice is calm. “It’s done.”

He straightens. “What is done?”

“The board just voted.” A beat of silence. “Grigori has been removed as chairman of Rozanov Holdings.”

Ilya blinks. His father has been dethroned. “How?”

“I explained the situation,” she says lightly. “They prefer their billion dollar empire not be associated with an attempted kidnapping.”

He exhales slowly. “You did this for us.”

“For the company,” she corrects, then softer. “And for Shane.”

Ilya glances toward the nest, watching Shane shift in his sleep, one hand resting over his stomach. Protective even while dreaming.

His chest tightens at the sight. “My alpha wants to lock him in a tower,” Ilya admits quietly.

Svetlana laughs softly. “Very medieval of you.”

“He could have been hurt.”

Sveta hums. “But he was not.”

“Not this time.” A pause. “My father won’t take this quietly, Sveta.”

She sighs, “I know. Which is why I’m not finished yet.”

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

this is gonna be a shorty, unfortunately. but the next chapter is about to be hella long!

Grigori does not rage when the call comes. Does not shout or throw things. Does not even speak, just listens quietly as the head director relays the news. He has been removed. His chairmanship has been revoked, effective immediately. Interim leadership has been installed, and transition procedures have begun.

He ends the call as the director continues to speak, not caring to hear more.

A slow breath leaves him, then he smiles. Not pleasantly, not warmly, but genuinely. He has to hand it to her, his daughter-in-law, she is more vicious than he anticipated, has more balls than the weak alpha he calls a son.

A worthy opponent.

Pity that she is an omega.

“Well,” he murmurs to himself, leaning back to recline in his desk chair. “That was beautifully executed.”

Flawless, really. Not an ounce of chaos in her strategic maneuvering. No panic or lashing out. Not once did she slip.

She was patient, collecting evidence while biding her time, feeding it to the right people. Timed the release so perfectly that it forced the board into a corner where removing him became the only logical choice. No theatrics or confrontation, just...checkmate.

Grigori lets out a quiet, almost admiring laugh. “Ilya chose well,” he says to the empty room.

And for a fleeting second, there is something like pride in his voice. Because that level of calculation? That patience? That willingness to burn a man’s empire down while smiling across the dinner table? That is something he understands, something he respects.

His admiration twists, curdles into something sharper. Because she did not simply outmaneuver him. She *betrayed* him. Had taken everything she had learned from him and then used it against him.

He laughs, soft and wrong, a sound that doesn’t belong in a human throat, and he stands slowly and walks to the window.

Forty floors up, the city stretches beneath him—everything he built, everything he controlled, everything that used to answer to his name. And she's taken it in a quiet little coup wrapped in legality.

His reflection stares back at him in the glass, older than it used to be. Harder, but still just as dangerous.

He begins to pace, slow at first, steps measured, But there's an edge to it now. Energy building beneath the surface, because this is what they don't understand—the board, Svetlana, even Ilya.

They think removing him from a title removes him from the game. They think legality equals power. They think that they can take everything he has built, piece by piece, and that he will just accept it?

Grigori stops suddenly, just stands there processing, recalculating. Because this is not just a power move, this is a declaration of war.

A quiet laugh slips from his chest, low and dangerous.

"They forget," he murmurs to the empty room, "who taught them how to play this game."

His gaze drifts to his desk, to the phone. To the network of contacts that still exists beyond boardrooms and votes and public optics. Because titles can be taken and positions revoked. But power, real power? That does not simply disappear overnight. And Grigori still has plenty of it.

"Children," he mutters, the word is almost affectionate. Almost.

He stalks towards his desk then, picking up the phone. Dials a number not listed in any company directory.

The line answers on the first ring. "Sir?"

"She moved sooner than expected."

"We saw."

"And?"

"Everything is in motion."

He exhales slowly. "Good."

There's a pause. "Do you want to wait until things settle?"

Grigori stills, then laughs again. This time there's no warmth in it at all. "No." The word is immediate, absolute. "They think they've destabilized me, that they've taken something from me." His voice drops low and controlled, unhinged beneath the surface. "So now we take something from them."

Silence answers him, because there's only one thing that matters enough, one vulnerability big enough, one choice Ilya made that can be turned against him—the omega.

“The omega is under increased security after the last attempt, sir.”

Grigori's eyes darken. “I assumed as much.” Grigori's voice doesn't waver. “There will not be any improvising, and certainly no more grabbing him in a parking lot like an amateur. Am I understood?”

“Yes, sir.” A pause. “What's the target then?”

Grigori doesn't hesitate. “The vulnerability—their routine, their trust, their moments of weakness. My son believes distance will protect him.” A faint, humorless smile touches his mouth. “He is wrong.”

Grigori turns slowly back toward the window, watching the city like a man already planning his next move, resting a hand against the back of his chair, fingers curling slightly.

“He's frightened now,” he says. “That's good. Fear makes people predictable. They will stay inside more, stick to a routine.” Then adds, almost thoughtfully. “He is twenty weeks, yes?”

“Yes, sir.”

Grigori nods to himself. “Good. You will wait until he thinks he's safe again before you make a move.” Grigori exhales slowly. “I do not want an accident this time... The omega must be removed.”

The voice on the other end hesitates. “...permanently?”

Grigori doesn't answer right away, just looks out at the city again.

“I am not interested in half measures anymore.” He says finally, quietly.

The implication settles like a weight. Heavy. Final.

“You will not fail me again, is that understood?”

A beat. “Understood, sir. That won't happen again.”

He ends the call and sets the phone down. The office feels different now, not like something he's lost but something he's outgrown. Because this is no longer about reclaiming a chair at a table, but about making a point. A lesson.

But despite everything—the betrayal, the loss, the shift in power—he is still thinking about Svetlana. About the elegance of it. The precision. The audacity.

“You really are remarkable,” he murmurs. “Which makes this so much more disappointing.”

Because she chose the wrong side.

Because Ilya chose the wrong life.

Because Shane Hollander has become the center of a war he doesn't even fully understand.

Grigori straightens his cuffs, smooths down the lapels of his jacket, and composes himself like nothing has changed, like he hasn't just decided something irreversible.

Because in his mind this isn't escalation, this is correction.

He moves with purpose now, gathering his coat, his gloves, his phone, taking one last glance at the office that is no longer his, and smiles coldly.

"You want to build a life without me." Grigori's voice is almost a whisper. "Let's see how long it lasts."

Chapter 11

The reality of Ilya sharing Shane's space for the foreseeable future does not fully sink in until after his mother heads home for the night and Hayden has gone to Jackie's, leaving the two alone in the now uncomfortably quiet apartment.

Ilya had excused himself to change into something more comfortable, stepping out of Shane's room and into the hallway a few moments later, in a pair of faded grey sweatpants and a long sleeved white t-shirt, his feet bare.

Shane flushes at the sight, eyes glued to where Ilya's long toes curl against threadbare carpet as he stands there, and in this moment he finds seeing Ilya's bare feet more intimate than the moment they shared in his nest.

Ilya clears his throat, and Shane jerks his gaze up to meet his, cheeks flushing a deeper shade of red at being caught gawking at Ilya's toes like he's never seen feet before.

"Do you need anything?" Ilya asks quietly.

Shane shifts slightly on top of his blankets. "No, I'm ok."

Ilya nods. "Well, I will be in your room if you need me."

"Ok...goodnight."

Something in Ilya's chest tightens unexpectedly at that. "Goodnight, Shane."

He lingers half a second longer, before turning off the lights and heading down the hall.

Shane listens as Ilya pads quietly away, as his bedroom closes softly, and pulls a pillow close to cuddle, throwing his leg over the giant pregnancy pillow Ilya had given him so his hips don't hurt. And he lays there, exhaustion pulling at him but sleep will not come.

Oh but he tries. He really does.

He pulls the blankets tighter around himself, shifts deeper into the nest, focuses on the familiar weight of it, the softness, the faint lingering scent of Ilya that's already soaked into the fabric over the past few days.

It should be enough. It *was* enough. At least it used to be... Before the parking lot. Before hands grabbed him out of nowhere. Before the world reminded his omega just how unsafe it can be. But now the absence is loud. Wrong.

Shane's chest tightens, his breathing unsettled and his omega whining in his head. The apartment feels too big, too open, too quiet.

He glances at his phone.

Eight minutes.

Ilya has been out of the for all of eight minutes and he's crawling out of his skin.

Shane sighs, worrying at his bottom lip as he pushes himself up in the nest, glancing down the darkened hallway where Ilya rests in his room.

"...Ilya?" The word slips out before he can stop it, soft and uneasy.

No sooner have the words left his mouth does the door to the bedroom open, footsteps quick but controlled as he comes back down the hall.

"I'm here." Ilya flips on the kitchen light, bathing him in a soft yellow glow. "What is wrong?"

Shane exhales sharply, like he's been holding his breath without realizing it, and rubs his face, frustrated.

"I don't know." His scent says otherwise—faint distress creeping into the air, sharp and restless.

Ilya steps closer, eyes scanning him automatically. "Ok.

"I thought I was fine," Shane admits quietly. "But it just feels..." He gestures vaguely at the space around him. "Off."

Ilya understands immediately. His alpha has been restless since the moment he stepped away, urging him to go back, that the distance between him and his omega was wrong.

"I can sleep on the couch, if you want?" Ilya offers.

Shane hesitates, then shakes his head. "You should sleep in a real bed."

"It's fine," Ilya says, turning back to the hallway.

Shane whines, not meaning to.

"I'll be right back, omega. I promise." Ilya says soothingly. "I'm just grabbing a pillow and a blanket."

Shane nods, rubbing at his chest, embarrassed at letting his needy omega slip out like that.

Ilya disappears down the hall, returning quickly, a pillow under one arm, a blanket thrown over another.

"I will be right here, ok?" he says, settling the blanket over the couch with precise, deliberate movements.

Close. Visible. Within reach.

“That’s better,” Shane says with a nod, watching him from the nest, trying to convince himself that this is enough as he settles back down.

He lasts longer this time. Fifteen minutes, maybe twenty.

Long enough for Ilya to close his eyes and almost drift. Almost.

Shane does his best to keep his breathing slow and even, to not toss and turn as the feeling of wrongness creeps back in. His omega stirs again, restless and unhappy, pressing insistently at the edges of his mind.

Not close enough.

Not safe enough.

“Ilya?” Shane whispers into the dark.

“Yes, Shane?”

“This isn’t working either.”

“I am right here.”

“I know,” Shane groans. “That’s the problem. I can’t—” Shane swallows, voice cracking as his fingers tighten in the blankets. “I can’t get my omega to settle... It doesn’t like that you’re that far away.”

The words are quiet, embarrassed and honest.

“Can you come closer?” Shane’s voice is small, barely a whisper. “Please?”

Ilya’s alpha surges at that, immediate and possessive.

Stay. Close. Protect.

He exhales slowly through it.

“You are sure?” He asks, watching Shane nod against the pillow in the dark.

“Please.” he says again.

And that is all it takes.

Ilya doesn’t climb *into* the nest, unwilling to cross that line just yet no matter how angry his alpha is at him for keeping space between him and his omega. He lies on the floor beside it, one arm resting over the edge, close enough that Shane can reach him.

Which he does, almost immediately, fingers curling into the sleeve of his shirt tightly, like letting go would mean something terrible happens.

They lay like this for a while, Shane relaxing into his nest, Ilya's mint and evergreen scent blending with his own, his omega mostly satisfied but not quite. It wants the alpha closer. Needs it.

He sighs.

"What's the matter, solnishko?" Ilya's sleepy voice rumbles softly through the dark.

"I can still *feel* the distance," Shane mutters, frustrated. "It's stupid, I know it's stupid—"

"It is not stupid," Ilya cuts in quietly. "Your instincts are trying to keep you safe."

"It is!" Shane lets out a frustrated groan, "You're literally right there, and my omega still isn't happy."

Ilya says nothing for a moment, then, "What would make your omega happy?"

Shane swallows, throat clicking. Opting to say nothing, he scoots back in the nest, and after a moment's hesitation pats the space in front of him.

"You are sure?" Ilya asks, pushing up on an elbow to peer into the nest, meeting Shane's eyes in the dark.

Shane nods, worrying his bottom lip once again.

Ilya moves slowly, deliberately, giving Shane time to stop him as he comes to kneel beside the edge of the nest.

He doesn't, just watches, eyes a little wide, a little uncertain—but not pulling away.

"If I do this," Ilya says quietly, "you have to tell me if it is too much."

"Ok." Shane whispers.

Carefully Ilya shifts into the nest, doing his best not to crowd or overwhelm Shane, settling beside the omega, hesitating for a moment before lifting his right arm.

Shane goes still for half a second, warring with his omega who is all but screaming at him to cuddle closer to their alpha, before scooting into Ilya's side.

"Oh," he breathes, settling his head on Ilya's bicep, nose pressed into the alpha's armpit.

The relief Shane feels is immediate. His entire body relaxes, like a switch has been flipped.

"Okay. Yeah. Yes. That— oh yes." Shane shifts slightly, instinctively curling toward him, one hand resting against Ilya's side like it belongs there.

Ilya chuckles as Shane babbles and presses himself closer. Ilya's alpha settles for the first time all night, satisfied now that the omega is in his arms.

After a moment, Shane's eyes start to drift closed. "You're not allowed to leave," he mumbles sleepily.

Ilya's mouth twitches faintly. "I was not planning to, solnishko."

"Good." Shane mumbles. "Thank you."

Ilya looks down at him. At the way the tension has finally left his face. At the way his hand still rests protectively over the small curve of his stomach. At the quiet trust in the way he's already drifting off.

Something in Ilya's chest tightens, not uncomfortably..

"You are safe," he murmurs, pressing a barely there kiss into the omega's hair.

Shane hums, half-asleep. "I know."

Ilya lets out a pleased purr, as he soaks up the feeling of the soft and trusting omega in his arms. Loses all of sense of time as Shane drifts asleep, staring up at the glittering twinkle lights above them, imagining a future where every night is like this.

Nights where Shane is curled into him, back pressed to his chest, one of Ilya's arms draped around his middle—his hand resting low and protective, just beneath Shane's shirt over the curve of his stomach where their son shifts faintly under his palm.

His breath catches at the thought. Knows that wanting this with Shane is dangerous, but having his omega this close... It stirs something deep and primal within him. It rises sharp and immediate from his alpha, curling through his chest like heat.

The urge to protect. To keep. To claim.

Ilya exhales slowly through his nose, tightening his control.

"No," he murmurs under his breath.

Shane shifts slightly in his sleep at the sound, pressing closer. The contact sends another jolt through him, and his alpha surges harder this time.

Omega.

Mine.

Ilya's jaw tightens.

He tells himself that that what he feels... This bond... It is just proximity and instinct, a connection formed because of the child. Lies when he tells himself it has nothing to do with the way Shane trusts him enough to sleep like this—unguarded, vulnerable, safe, or because of everything *else* building between them that neither of them has fully said out loud.

He closes his eyes briefly.

This is a line, a dangerous one.

One he is already standing on, maybe already over it.

Because the urge to court is there now. Not subtle or ignorable. It sits under his skin, persistent and insistent.

Stay with him. Care for him. Make him yours.

“You are not helping,” he mutters quietly—to himself, to his alpha, to the part of him that wants to lean into this instead of holding the line.

Shane sighs softly in his sleep, completely unaware of the war happening beside him. So trusting. But that is the part that anchors Ilya—that trust.

He will not take advantage of that. He will not blur this into something Shane hasn’t chosen fully, clearly, and without the weight of fear and instinct pressing on him. Even if every part of him is pulling in the opposite direction. Even if his alpha is practically pacing inside his chest.

He presses his face briefly into Shane’s hair, breathing in the soft citrus warmth of his scent. It is softer in his sleep, and calm. It wraps around Ilya, settles into his lungs, into his chest, into something far more dangerous than he wants to name as it grounds him.

His alpha quiets, and Ilya forces himself to close his eyes, to keep his breathing slow and even. It takes a long time, longer than it should, but eventually the steady rhythm of Shane’s breathing and the quiet weight of his body begins to pull Ilya under when he feels it—a sharp, sudden movement against his side.

At first, he thinks Shane shifted against him, until it happens again—a distinct, unmistakable kick, right where Shane is pressed against him. Right where their bodies meet.

Ilya inhales sharply, eyes popping open as the rest of him goes completely still. He doesn’t move, doesn’t breathe, like shifting even slightly might make it stop. Then, slowly, carefully, he brings his free hand over to rest on the curve of Shane’s stomach where it’s pressed to his side.

He waits. One second, then two, waiting for another kick to come. And it does, stronger this time. Certain and real.

His breath leaves him slow and shaky. “That’s you,” he murmurs, voice so quiet it barely exists.

His son.

Alive.

Moving.

Shane makes a soft sound in his sleep, shifting closer, pressing even more firmly into him like he's unconsciously offering the moment. Like he's trusting him with it, with everything.

Ilya's hand stays where it is, spread carefully over the movement beneath, another kick meeting his palm, and something deeper settles into place.

His alpha stirs once more, not with urgency or that sharp, demanding edge from before, but with something steadier now. Clearer.

Stay. Care for him. Make it known.

Ilya exhales slowly, gaze dropping to Shane where he sleeps against him without a single guard left up.

He could take advantage of this, of the closeness. Of the way Shane fits against him like he belongs there. Of the way his instincts are practically asking—begging—to go further, but he doesn't. He won't. Because this... This matters too much to rush.

His thumb brushes lightly, unconsciously, over the curve of Shane's stomach, another small kick answering him as he finally drifts off to sleep.

—

He isn't sure how long he's been asleep when the sound of the front door opening and quiet footsteps pull him into wakefulness. He doesn't move, feigns that he is still asleep, as he feels Hayden's presence loom closer, but Ilya is sharp and alert.

"What the fuck!" Comes a whisper-shout from somewhere near the couch.

Ilya knows exactly what Hayden is looking at, can feel it. Some time in the middle of the night he and Shane switched positions. Shane's back is pressed to Ilya's chest, his body curls around the smaller omega, one arm under the omega's head, the other curled possessively around Shane's stomach. Shane's hand rests atop his own, their fingers intertwined as they cradle his stomach.

"Dude, seriously?" Hayden's voice drops to a whisper, somewhere between exasperated and horrified.

Ilya carefully—*carefully*—slides his hand from under Shane's, adjusting the blanket so the movement doesn't wake him. Shane stirs anyway, murmuring faintly but stays asleep. Ilya slowly extricates his other arm, easing out of the nest with practiced control when he's sure Shane is completely settled.

Hayden opens his mouth to speak, but Ilya cuts him off with a sharp shake of his head before jerking it toward the kitchen. He glares, jaw snapping shut, but follows as Ilya heads toward the kitchen, making sure to move as quietly as possible.

Pike does not even give him a full minute to wake up before turning on him.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." quiet fury lacing his words.

Ilya leans against the kitchen counter, arms folded. “He would not settle.”

“Sure,” Hayden shoots back. “So you took it upon yourself to spoon him?!”

“I was ensuring he felt safe.”

“With your hand under his shirt?”

Ilya’s jaw tightens. “That was not—”

“Intentional?” Hayden cuts in. “Really?”

Silence. Because no, not entirely. But also not entirely *not*.

Hayden exhales sharply, dragging a hand through his hair. “You promised me you would watch yourself.”

“I am trying!” Ilya hisses.

“Are you?” Hayden challenges. “Because from where I’m standing, it looks like your instincts are running the show.”

Ilya’s expression hardens slightly. “I am in control.”

“Barely,” Hayden mutters.

That lands, because it’s not entirely wrong.

Hayden studies him for a long moment, then shakes his head.

“Look, I get it, ok? He’s shaken, he needs you, whatever, but he also trusts you, and if you cross that line when he’s like this?” Hayden continues quietly. “That’s not just messy—that’s messed up.”

“Do you think I am not aware?!” Ilya says, voice low and cold. “Do you think I am not constantly battling myself? I cannot help how I feel but I will not take his choice away.”

“Good, just wa—”

“Ilya?” comes Shane’s sleepy voice from the living room.

Both of them turn.

“Ilya?!” The second time filled with panic, the sound of blankets rustling and panting reaching their ears.

Ilya bolts from the kitchen, Pike not far behind.

Shane stands in the middle of his nest, arms wrapped around himself as his chest heaves, his brown eyes wide and disoriented.

“Solnishko—”

Shane’s eyes snap in his direction, tears spilling down his cheeks. “I woke up and you weren’t there.”

Ilya moves immediately, enveloping Shane into his arms. “Shhh, I’m here, malen'kiy.”

Shane snuffles, fingers curling into Ilya’s shirt. “Why did you leave me?”

Ilya glances back at Hayden, giving him a pointed look before replying. “To start breakfast, malen'kiy.”

“Oh.” Shane wipes his nose against Ilya’s shirt embarrassedly.

“Yes, malen'kiy.” He squeezes Shane once more. “Better?”

Shane nods into his chest, then, a little sheepish—“If you squeeze any harder I’m going to pee myself.”

Hayden snorts under his breath, and Ilya chuckles, releasing Shane.

“Go.” He pushes him in the direction of the bathroom. “I will make breakfast. Any requests?”

“Strawberry pancakes?”

“I can do that.”

“Thank you.” Shane gives him a small smile before shuffling towards the bathroom.

The minute the door closes behind him, Hayden looks back at Ilya, his expression serious again.

“Watch yourself,” he says quietly. “I mean it.”

Ilya holds his gaze, then nods once. “I know.”

Hayden studies him for another second then sighs. “Can I have pancakes too?”

Ilya huffs out a laugh and nods, heading back towards the kitchen.

—

They fall into it slowly, not all at once and certainly not easily, but day by day, something resembling *normal* begins to take shape inside the apartment. Ilya settles into the space like he was always meant to be there. Not intrusive. Not overwhelming. Just... present. He doesn’t take over, doesn’t push, but little things start to shift.

By this third week there, Shane no longer freaks out when he wakes up alone in the nest because he knows by now that Ilya was an early riser, and his omega is not nearly as clingy, no longer whining when he and Ilya are more than three feet apart. Until bed time, that is.

Their nights together are more complicated now.

Shane's nest becomes shared without ever being formally discussed, not that he or his omega will complain about that.

After the first night Shane and Ilya had shared his nest, Ilya had done his best to keep space between them. Shane notices, of course. Notices the careful, deliberate gap Ilya maintains. Knows that he's doing his best to be respectful and controlled given the situation, but in the middle of the night the pair always ends up drifting together. Their bodies drawn to one another like magnets.

So many times he has woken to find his back pressed lightly to Ilya's chest, Ilya's even breaths tickling his neck. Or his head pressed to Ilya's chest, hand curled into Ilya's shirt and his knee hooked loosely over Ilya's leg.

Ilya never pulls away, but he never pulls Shane closer either. Much to Shane's omega's dismay. Shane is thankful though, that Ilya keeps to the line drawn between them. Even at night.

What Shane doesn't know is that keeping his alpha in check is killing Ilya. Not literally, of course, but the urge to keep and to claim grows stronger each night spent with Shane wrapped around him.

His alpha doesn't quiet just because he's trying to be disciplined. If anything, proximity makes it worse. The scent of Shane in the nest, his soft warm body, the quiet sounds he makes in his sleep, and the way he leans into Ilya without thinking... It all feeds something deep and instinctive.

But Ilya doesn't push, doesn't take. He channels it instead, into quieter things. Safer things. Courting Shane, in the smallest ways.

Shane notices, but he isn't quite sure Ilya is even aware he's doing it.

It starts with food. Not just making sure Shane eats, but remembering what he *likes*. Preferences. Patterns. Cravings.

Shane mentions once, offhand, that he's been thinking about strawberries. The next morning, Ilya places a bowl of the sliced berries in front of him.

"How do you always know what I need?" he asks when Ilya, eyeing the bowl of cut fruit

"I pay attention," Ilya replies simply.

Shane huffs. "That's annoying."

Ilya shrugs, "But you are eating them."

Then comfort.

Shane dozes off on the couch one afternoon, one arm thrown over his head. Ilya drapes a blanket over him without waking him, adjusting it when Shane shifts, making sure his back is supported.

Then it's presence.

Ilya starts sitting closer. Not touching unless Shane initiates, but near enough that the option is always there. And Shane does, more and more. A hand on his arm. A lean into his shoulder. Fingers curling into his sleeve without thinking.

Shane tries to blame it on his omega, that it is the one who needs to touch and scent and feel, but that is a lie.

Hayden notices all of it, of course he does.

He watches from the kitchen one evening as Shane sits on the couch, absentmindedly leaning against Ilya while talking, completely unaware of how natural it looks. How easy. How *intimate*.

Ilya listens, one hand resting carefully on the back of the couch behind Shane—not touching, but close. Always close.

Confronts Ilya one night while Shane is showing.

“You know you’re courting him, right?”

Ilya glances at him, brows furrowed. “What?”

“You’re courting him.” Hayden repeats.

“I’m not—”

“Ilya.” A look. Flat. Certain. “You *are*.”

The word hangs in the air. Ilya doesn’t deny it again, can’t, but he doesn’t confirm it either. Just leaves Hayden to think what he will, and heads back to join his omega.

Chapter 12

The nest is too warm for thinking—too soft, too quiet, too still. Ilya can't sleep despite the way Shane is curled into him, half on top of him really, one leg thrown over legs, his face tucked into the space beneath Ilya's jaw like he belongs there. The blankets are piled high, soft and dense around them, carrying that warm, grounding scent that's become so distinctly *Shane* that Ilya feels it settle into his bones.

His hand rests low on Shane's stomach, fingers splayed without thought. Protective. Possessive. *Instinctive*. But Ilya stares at the ceiling, mind restless. Hayden's annoying voice echoing in his head on a loop.

"You know you're courting him, right?"

His jaw tightens. Courting.

The word feels too deliberate, too intentional. And that's the problem, isn't it? Because he *hasn't* been intentional. Not consciously. He swallows, thumb shifting slightly where it rests against Shane's stomach, brushing absent, slow circles without even realizing it.

Except—Except he brings him tea in the mornings now. Not just once, not just when Shane asks. Every. Morning. Knows exactly how he likes it.

Has been helping Shane build the nest out more now that they've been sharing it and Shane is nearing the end of his second trimester—adding softer blankets, better pillows, and making sure it stays warm even when Shane isn't in it.

Checks the doors twice, and the windows, searches for threats in the street below. And when they leave the apartment to see Dr. Kline, he walks half a step closer to Shane in public without thinking.

Ilya squeezes his eyes shut briefly. Fuck, he *has* been courting Shane, hasn't he? Maybe not loudly or obviously, but steady and deliberate in all the ways that matter. And he didn't even realize he crossed the line.

Shane shifts in his arms, soft and sleepy, nose brushing against Ilya's throat as he resettles. A quiet sound leaves him—content, unaware. So trusting, his little omega.

Ilya's chest tightens. "Fuck," he breathes under his breath.

The baby moves again, just a small shift beneath his palm, but it's enough. His hand spreads a little more instinctively, like he can shield something that small just by being there. Something in his chest settles again—heavy, grounding.

Mine.

His phone buzzing somewhere in the tangle of blankets disrupts his thoughts, pulling him out of the guilty spiral he was heading down.

Ilya doesn't move at first, not wanting to disturb Shane, but the phone buzzes again. With a careful breath, Ilya shifts pawing around the covers in search of it, doing his best to keep Shane tucked against him with his other arm.

He doesn't have to look to know who it is. Knows there is only one person who would call him this late—Svetlana.

He presses a kiss absentmindedly into Shane's hair, freezing a moment when he realizes what he's done, before easing himself out of the nest, replacing his warmth with blankets, careful not to wake him.

Shane murmurs softly but doesn't wake, curling instinctively into the space Ilya leaves behind. That ache in Ilya's chest returns, low and constant.

Ilya steps quietly in the kitchen.

"Sveta," he says, voice low and rough with sleep he didn't get. "It's late."

There's a quiet hum on the other end—glass clinking faintly, like she's pouring herself something, her soft exhale answers him—amused, familiar. "It's never too late to talk to me, Lusha." Svetlana replies.

A corner of his mouth lifts. "So you say. Always calling at inconvenient times."

"Please," she scoffs lightly. "If it were truly inconvenient, you wouldn't have answered."

That's true, always has been.

He leans against the kitchen counter, eyes drifting back to the dark living room. To Shane who has shifted in his sleep, one arm tucked under the pillow now, the other resting protectively over the curve of his stomach.

Ilya hums.

There's a pause, easy and unforced. "You alright?" she eventually asks.

"I'm fine."

"Ilyushka." She does not believe him.

He huffs quietly. "Sveta."

"Tell me."

He sighs. "I'm fine, Sveta. Just thinking."

"Oh, Lusha, that is usually when you are least fine."

A ghost of a smile pulls at his mouth, but he does not comment, just asks, “What is it you need, Sveta?”

“I cannot call to see how you and my nephew are doing?”

Ilya hums. “Unlike you as of late just to call to catch up.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” And it was. “We have both been busy.”

“Ilya—”

“Sveta, why did you call?”

Svetlana laughs quietly. “I really did want to see how you were doing, but straight to business, I see.”

“Always.”

There’s another pause, the faint sound of a glass being set down.

“Grigori’s gone,” she says, quieter now. “Or at least pretending to be.”

Ilya tenses. “What do you mean gone?”

“Gone.” She repeats. “Disappeared. Hiding, perhaps. I do not know.” She sighs, her frustration bleeding through the phone. “Security footage shows him leaving the building, but he did not return home. The company jet has not left SVO. There’s been no transfers or withdrawals from the accounts that I can see, at least. He’s just gone.”

“Fuck!” Ilya hisses.

“I underestimated him, I’m sorry.”

“We both did.”

“I have people looking,” Svetlana continues.

He laughs once—short, humorless. “You will not find him.” Ilya drags a hand down his face. “My father does not vanish unless he’s planning something that requires *time*.”

“I was afraid you would say that.” Ilya hears her shift through the phone. “Listen, Lusha, do not worry—”

Ilya’s jaw tightens. “Do not tell me not to worry! My father has already come after Shane once. You do not think he will come after him again, especially now?”

“I’m sorry, that was a poor choice of words.”

Ilya scoffs.

“I know this is not what we expected, I’m just as worried as you are—”

“You do not sound worried.”

“I *am*, but I refuse to panic.” she corrects. “That’s the difference between you and I.”

He lets out a slow breath, forcing his voice back down. “Panic keeps you alive when the rules stop applying.”

“And control keeps you alive when they start again,” she shoots back. “Ilya,” she says, softer now—not gentler, but more *focused*. “Listen to me.”

He doesn’t respond, but he doesn’t interrupt this time.

“Grigori disappearing like this?” she continues. “It’s not an attack.”

“Not yet.”

“No,” she concedes. “Not yet, because if it were, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“You’re assuming he’s coming for you first?”

“He will, if you agree to sign over your shares to me.”

“Sveta—”

“No, listen to me.” Svetlana continues. “I can protect you better if you’re separate, legally and financially. If you do a full transfer,” she continues. “Voting power, controlling interest—everything tied to your name, I can take full control.”

“Sveta—”

“It will draw Grigori’s attention away from you and Shane, will it not?”

“But at what cost? I do not want any harm coming to you either.”

“I can handle whatever your father throws my way.”

Ilya hums noncommittally, thinking over Sveta’s plan. “And if I agree?”

“I offer you a clean divorce,” she says matter of factly. “Quiet. No mess, no attention. I’ll handle the filings in a way that keeps it... invisible.”

Ilya exhales slowly, tipping his head back to look at the sky. “You really do have this all thought out don’t you?”

“Of course, Ilyushka. You know how I hate loose ends.”

“And I am the loose end in this situation?”

“Always were,” she replies, but there’s a smile in her voice.

He huffs out a laugh. “You wound me, Zayka”

Sveta inhales, “You haven’t called me that in a very long time.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she clears her throat, back to business. “If you’d like, I could keep you in. A Silent partner, on paper only, of course.”

“I was never meant to run Rozanov Holdings, you know this. *If* I agree, the company is yours in full. I want no part of it.”

“You’re sure? It is your family’s legacy after all.”

Ilya barks out a laugh. “Legacy? I would burn my father’s empire to the ground before I carried on this family’s ‘legacy’.”

Sveta hums. “What you have now is much better.”

There is no hurt in her words. No accusation or dismissal. No jealousy. Just acknowledgement that her and Ilya’s paths are diverging and their futures are no longer entwined.

He glances back towards the nest, where Shane lays amongst the rumpled sheets, hair mussed and mouth slightly open.

“Yeah,” Ilya says quietly.

He considers it then. Not the deal itself—that part is simple, but what it means. What it closes and what it opens.

“You’ll be alone in it,” he says after a moment.

Svetlana exhales softly. “I’ve been alone in it for a long time, Ilya.”

That lands heavier than anything else she’s said.

“I know, but you don’t have to be,” he says, quieter now.

It slips out before he can stop it, and for a second, neither of them speaks.

“That’s kind of you,” she says gently. “But it’s not true.”

Silence again. Familiar. Sad, in a way that isn’t sharp—just... known.

“Ok.” he says finally.

“Ok?” Svetlana asks, confused for a moment. “You accept?”

“I accept.”

“I’ll—” Svetlana clears her throat. “I’ll send the documents in the morning. All you’ll need to do is sign.”

“Ok.” Ilya says again. “I’ll sign.”

No hesitation. No bargaining. Just certainty.

Svetlana lets out a breath—relief, maybe. Or something close to it, tinged with sadness.

“I’ll make sure everything is taken care of,” she says.

“I trust you.”

“I know, thank you.”

They both breathe into the phone, neither of them speaking.

“Ilya?”

“Hmm?”

“You deserve this,” she says. “Whatever it is you’re building there.”

He looks at the nest one more time—at Shane, at the quiet, fragile, *real* thing waiting for him in the other room.

His chest tightens, then settles. “Yeah,” he says, almost to himself. “I do.”

“Goodnight, my Lusha.” Sveta says softly, a smile in her voice.

“Goodnight, Zayka.” her murmurs.

When the call ends, Ilya doesn’t move right away. Just stands there in the kitchen staring out into the dark living room, every instinct in him wired tight. Waiting. Listening.

Shane stirs faintly in the nest, brow furrowing as his hand searches the spot Ilya had been occupying.

“Ilya?” he mumbles sleepily.

“I’m here,” Ilya says quietly, padding towards the nest.

“Come back to bed.”

Sleep brown eyes blink up at him, and Ilya cannot resist. “I’m coming, solnishko.”

He climbs back into the nest, sliding under the covers. Shane relaxes instantly, curling back into him without hesitation, like it’s instinct. Like it’s *home*.

Ilya shifts closer, his hand resting on Shane’s stomach again, the baby shifts beneath his palm as he presses a slow kiss into Shane’s hair. He lingers there just a second longer, arm

tightening around him—careful, grounding before finally drifting off to sleep.

—

Ilya avoids the envelope sitting on the counter for hours, before finally caving and opening it. He knows what's inside, doesn't need to read it to understand what it means, but he does anyway.

The papers are clean, precise. Exactly what Svetlana promised—full transfer of his shares in Rozanov Holdings with complete relinquishment of voting power. No hidden clauses. No traps. And the divorce—quiet, efficient, almost impersonal if you didn't know better. No public spectacle, no drawn-out proceedings. Just signatures and silence. An ending, reduced to ink.

He signs his name without hesitation.

Once. Twice. Initials here. Initials there.

The pen doesn't shake.

For a moment, Ilya just sits there at the kitchen counter, the documents spread in front of him, the weight of it settling in slowly—not regret, not doubt, just... awareness. Finality. An entire lifetime cut clean.

Shane lounges in the nest in the other room, quietly reading some book about the history of Canadian hockey, completely unaware that all the obstacles that have kept him from Ilya no longer exist. No roadblocks, no interference.

Ilya exhales, gathers the papers into a neat stack, fitting them back into the envelope, and sets them aside. He looks at them for another brief moment, then gets up to join Shane in the nest where it's warm and soft and safe.

Shane tucks against him immediately, half sprawled across his chest, absentmindedly tracing shapes into the fabric of Ilya's shirt.

"You were quiet tonight," Shane murmurs, voice low, thoughtful.

Ilya hums softly. "Just had some things I needed to handle."

Shane tilts his head, looking up at him, eyes searching in that way he does—gentle, but not blind.

"What kind of things?"

There's no suspicion in it. Just that blind trust he so freely offers Ilya.

Ilya's hand comes up to brush a piece of hair back from Shane's face, fingers lingering a second longer than necessary.

"Svetlana sent over a few documents for me to sign," he says finally.

Shane stills slightly. "...ok? What kind of documents?" Shane asks, quieter now.

Ilya holds his gaze. "Transfer of my shares," he says. "And divorce papers."

The words settle between them. Not explosive, but heavy.

Shane blinks, processing. "You're... divorced?" he asks, a little breathless.

"The paperwork will need to be finalized," Ilya replies. "But soon, yes."

"And the company will be hers?"

Ilya nods with a hum.

Shane studies him for a long moment. "You just... gave it up?"

There's no accusation, just disbelief.

Ilya's thumb brushes lightly along Shane's cheek. "I didn't give it up," he says quietly. "I walked away from it."

"For me?" Shane asks before he can stop himself.

The second the words are out, he looks like he wants to take them back. Ilya doesn't let him.

His hand shifts, cupping Shane's face more fully, grounding him there. "No," he says, honestly. "Not just for you, but you were a deciding factor."

Shane's breath catches, just slightly. "You didn't have to do that," Shane murmurs.

"I know."

"Then why—"

"Because I wanted to," Ilya cuts in softly.

Shane's gaze flicks down, then back up again. There's something in his expression now—something softer, deeper. Something that's been building for a while. Neither of them naming it. Until now.

The space between them feels different now, charged and fragile as Ilya's hand slides from Shane's cheek to the back of his neck, fingers threading lightly into his hair. A question in his darkened gaze.

Shane answers it by leaning in, slow at first. Careful.

Their lips meet softly—tentative and testing. It's warm and gentle and real.

And then something shifts, clicks.

Shane exhales softly against Ilya's mouth, and Ilya responds without thinking, pulling him closer, the kiss deepening, turning warmer, fuller. Hungry in a way that surprises them both.

Shane's hand slides up Ilya's chest, gripping slightly, grounding himself as the kiss turns dizzying, overwhelming in the best way.

"Ilya—" he breathes, barely pulling back before being pulled right back in.

Ilya's control slips, stretched thin by the way Shane leans into him, the way he responds without hesitation. His hands move—one steady at Shane's back, the other sliding down, pulling him closer, fitting him against him like he's meant to be there.

The blankets shift around them, the nest loosening as they move, bodies aligning, heat building fast and undeniable. Shane's fingers find the hem of Ilya's shirt, pushing it up slightly, hesitant only for a second before Ilya lifts his arms just enough to let him. Encouraging. Answering.

The kiss breaks just long enough for breath. Foreheads press together. Air shared.

"Tell me if—" Ilya starts, voice rougher now.

Shane shakes his head immediately, breath uneven. "Ilya—don't—just—"

And then he's kissing him again.

It's not soft anymore. Not careful. It's heat and want and fire.

Ilya shifts, guiding Shane gently back into the nest, pressing him into the soft layers of blankets, following without breaking contact. His mouth trails—jaw, cheek, the line beneath Shane's ear, each touch deliberate now, grounding, reverent even as the heat builds.

Shane gasps softly, fingers tightening in Ilya's shirt, then sliding lower, pulling at fabric, at barriers, like he doesn't want anything between them anymore.

"Ilya..." His voice is quieter now.

Ilya stills for half a second, just enough to look at him. Really look. The urgency is still there—burning, insistent—but the moment he sees Shane like this, soft and open beneath him, something deeper takes over. Something steadier. Reverent.

He doesn't rush. He *can't*.

Shane meets his gaze without hesitation, flushed and breath uneven, one hand still tangled in Ilya's shirt like he's not ready to let go of him completely.

"Ilya..." he murmurs again, voice softer now, almost unsure—but he doesn't pull away.

Doesn't close off. If anything, he opens more.

His hands don't leave him as he moves, sliding slowly over Shane's sides, grounding, reassuring.

"You okay?" he asks quietly, voice rough but controlled.

Shane nods, breath catching. "Yeah... I'm—yeah."

Ilya's hands move again, slower now but no less certain, easing fabric out of the way, but this time it isn't about urgency. He presses a kiss low, just beneath Shane's ribs, above the gentle rise of his stomach, then another on the swell of his stomach. Not lower, not yet. Just there—warm, soft, the gentle curve that's changed over time.

Ilya presses a slow kiss there, lingering. Then another. Slower, deeper.

Shane's breath catches, fingers threading into Ilya's hair, holding him there—not stopping him. Not even close.

"Ilya—"

Ilya's hands follow the shape of him, thumbs brushing lightly along the sides of his belly, careful, steady—like he's mapping something precious. Because he is.

His mouth moves again, not hurried, not searching—*devoted*. A trail of soft, deliberate kisses across Shane's stomach, each one unhurried, each one intentional. Like he's memorizing him.

"You are..." Ilya starts, then stops, like the words don't quite come out right. He exhales instead, pressing another kiss, softer this time. "So beautiful," he finishes quietly.

Shane's breath stutters. No one's ever said it like that. Not like it's *true*.

His head tips back slightly, chest rising and falling faster now, one hand still in Ilya's hair, the other gripping the blankets beneath him.

"Ilya..." he whispers again, softer this time. Not questioning. Just... feeling.

Ilya lets his lips linger one more moment over the curve of Shane's stomach, his hand splaying there protectively, instinctively—feeling the warmth, the life beneath his palm. Something in his expression softens even further. Almost awed.

Then, slowly it shifts.

His kisses begin to travel lower, unhurried, never breaking that same careful reverence, that same grounding presence. Nothing rushed. Nothing taken. Everything *given*.

Shane's breath catches again, sharper this time, his grip tightening instinctively as anticipation builds—not overwhelming, not sudden, but *deepening*, pulling him under in a way he doesn't fight. Doesn't want to.

"Ilya..." he breathes, quieter now, almost fragile.

Ilya pauses just long enough to glance up at him, to check. To make sure.

Shane meets his gaze, open and certain. That's all the permission he needs as he presses a kiss to Shane's hip, then the soft place where thigh meets groin, inhaling the sweet lemon and ginger scent of his omega as he buries his nose in the trimmed thatch of dark hair at the base of Shane's cock.

And when Ilya finally takes Shane into his mouth, it's with the same care. The same devotion. The same quiet, steady worship of everything Shane is and everything he's becoming.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The second trimester ends quietly, shifting easily into the third. No flare. No sudden complications, no late-night panic, no emergency calls. Just steady weeks that pass one into the next, marked by small, subtle shifts. Nothing dramatic or alarming—but enough that Ilya notices immediately.

Shane is a little heavier in his movements now, a little slower getting up from the nest, a little more careful when he turns. His center of gravity has shifted, his body rounding in a way that makes everything realer.

Ilya watches him constantly.

Too constantly.

“You’re staring,” Shane murmurs one evening, not even opening his eyes where he’s stretched out in the nest.

“I am not.”

“You are.”

A pause. “Ok, maybe.” he finally admits. “But you are just so beautiful. Your body looks so different.”

Shane cracks one eye open, amused. “Good different or bad different?”

Ilya huffs quietly, reaching out to rest his hand over Shane’s stomach. “Just different... Mine.”

Shane smiles softly at that, letting his hand settle over Ilya’s.

Their son grows stronger, noticeably so.

There’s no more mistaking it—no more soft flutters that could be dismissed. Now it’s solid, insistent movement that makes Shane pause mid-sentence sometimes, breath catching in surprise.

Ilya feels it more often. Seeks it out, even, sliding his hands under Shane’s shirt every change he gets.

Shane laughs softly. “You’re obsessed.”

“Shhh.”

They both quiet when the baby shifts again—firm, undeniable.

Ilya leans down, pressing a slow, lingering kiss to Shane's stomach. Then another. And another. Which more often than not devolves into losing themselves in each other, much to Hayden's chagrin.

Which is how Hayden ends up standing in the kitchen one morning, staring at the ceiling like it personally offended him as Shane hurriedly covers himself in the nest.

"I'm going to need you both to develop shame," Hayden announces flatly.

Ilya gives him a smug smile, lounging unashamed, naked as the day he was born. "No."

Hayden points towards his room. "I can hear everything."

Shane's face goes bright red immediately. "You cannot—"

"I can," Hayden cuts in. "And I did. And I wish I hadn't." Hayden stands in the doorway, arms crossed, looking deeply betrayed. "I am being psychologically damaged, Shane. Irreparably."

Ilya scratches low on his stomach, and shrugs. "Then stop listening."

"I'm not listening, it's just—there," Hayden says, gesturing vaguely. "Echoing. Haunting me."

Shane buries his face in his hands. "Oh my god."

Hayden looks personally victimized. "Do you know what it's like to wake up at three in the morning to—" he cuts himself off, visibly shuddering. "No. You don't. Because you're the problem."

Shane groans from the nest, dragging a blanket over his face. "Go away."

"I can't," Hayden fires back. "I live here. Unfortunately."

"You'll survive." Ilya replies.

"I won't," Hayden says immediately. "I'm changed. Fundamentally."

"Then move out."

"I'm considering it." Hayden snaps, then points accusingly. "THREE TIMES, SHANE! Three times in one night! I checked the clock."

Shane makes a strangled noise under the blanket.

Ilya hums thoughtfully. "Was it three?"

Hayden stares at him like he's a villain. "I hate you."

Shane groans, dragging his hands down his face. “We are so sorry—”

“No, you’re not,” Hayden says the same time as Ilya replies, “No, we are not.”

Shane peeks out just long enough to glare at Ilya. “Stop encouraging him.”

“I’m not,” Ilya replies calmly.

“You are!”

Hayden narrows his eyes. “At least light a candle or something. Set a mood. Warn a guy.”

Ilya shrugs. “Noted.”

“You’re not going to do that.”

“No.”

Shane lets out a helpless laugh, still flushed. “We’ll try to be quieter.”

Hayden points at him. “You specifically.”

Shane makes a strangled sound. “I hate this conversation.”

Ilya reaches over, hooking a hand lightly around the back of Shane’s neck, pulling him in just enough to press a quick, unapologetic kiss to his temple.

Shane huffs, but leans into it anyway.

Hayden watches them for a long moment, then sighs, long-suffering throwing his hands up as he turns away.

“I’m buying noise-canceling headphones and invoicing you both!”

“Denied,” Ilya says immediately.

Shane laughs helplessly, face still flushed.

Ilya doesn’t stop touching him after that. If anything—he gets worse and try as he might, Shane can’t pretend he doesn’t love it.

But despite their happiness, Grigori’s shadow looms. Weeks later and there have still been no sightings. No whispers. Nothing concrete enough to chase. And somehow, that’s worse.

Ilya checks the locks every night. Twice, sometimes three times. He rotates routes when they leave the apartment to see Dr. Kline, keeps his body half-angled toward Shane without even thinking about it, always just slightly between him and everything else. Always watching, always waiting.

Shane notices, of course. Does his best to ease the alpha’s growing anxiety while his omega revels in his protectiveness.

“Hey,” Shane murmurs one night, catching Ilya’s wrist gently when he goes to check the door again. “It’s okay.”

Ilya stills, looks at him, at the soft, steady certainty in his expression.

“I know.” Ilya says, but he checks it one more time anyway before slipping into the nest.

The anxiety is worse at night, leaving Ilya restless and on edge. He does his best to keep it from Shane, but it’s hard when every shift and sound of Shane beside him has him jolting into wakefulness. Instantly alert, heart racing.

He checks him immediately. Hand to stomach. Watches the slow rise and fall of his chest.

Shane stirs, blinking sleep-heavy eyes. “Ilya...?”

“You’re okay?” Ilya asks, too fast.

Shane frowns slightly, still half-asleep. “Yeah... I’m fine.”

A small pause. “Are you ok?”

Ilya doesn’t know how to answer, so he says nothing.

“You need to sleep,” Shane murmurs, reaching up to brush his fingers along Ilya’s jaw.

“I will, solnishko.”

“Now.” he demands, tugging Ilya into the nest, whining when he tries to resist.

“You’re clingy,” Ilya murmurs, not unkindly.

Shane hums sleepily. “You like it.”

“I tolerate it.”

Shane smiles. “Liar.”

Ilya doesn’t argue. Instead, he leans down and kisses him—slow, warm, unhurried, Shane melting into him immediately.

“Yeah,” Shane murmurs when they pull apart. “Thought so.”

Grigori’s silence isn’t peace, it’s pressure. It eats at Ilya.

At thirty-four weeks, everything about Shane feels closer—more real, more fragile, more urgent. The baby moves stronger now, visible shifts beneath skin that make Shane laugh sometimes, breathless and amazed.

Ilya watches every single one, counts them without meaning to, memorizes the rhythm.

And underneath all of it—nothing. No sightings. No whispers. No movement. Grigori is gone. But Ilya does not believe in ‘gone’. He believes in waiting.

It gets under his skin in ways he can’t shake.

He sleeps lighter. Wakes faster. Checks doors more often than he’ll admit. His phone is never out of reach, his attention never fully relaxed—not even when Shane is laughing, not even when he’s tucked safely into the nest, warm and steady and here. Especially then.

“You’re doing it again,” Shane murmurs one night, eyes half-lidded as he watches Ilya cross the room to check the lock.

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

Ilya tests the handle anyway. Once. Twice. A third time. When he turns back, Shane is still watching him—soft, patient, a little tired.

“I’m ok, baby.” Shane says quietly.

Ilya nods, smiling at the pet name, but it doesn’t fix it. Because ‘ok’ isn’t something he trusts anymore.

So he starts planning.

At first, it’s small. Just looking. Late at night, when Shane is asleep against him, breathing slow and even, one hand curled loosely over his stomach. Ilya scrolls through listings with his free hand, brightness turned low, movements careful so he doesn’t wake him.

He tells himself that it’s for the baby. That they need more room than what Shane’s apartment has to offer. That he needs to establish a permanent Canadian address so he can eventually apply for citizenship.

But the more he looks, the more specific it becomes. He did not want just any house. It needs to be a safe one. One his father does not know about, where he and Shane and their son can live without fear.

He studies layouts like he’s mapping a threat.

Entry points. Exit routes. Sightlines from windows. Distance from neighbors. Trees for cover. Fences that can be reinforced. Basements with secondary access.

He eliminates anything too open. Too visible. Too easy. Saving only a handful.

He doesn’t tell Shane. Part of it is strategy—Shane would worry if he knew how far Ilya’s mind has already gone, how close he is to uprooting everything. But part of it is something softer—a surprise.

Ilya imagines it sometimes. Shane stepping into a quiet house that's theirs. No watchers. No tension in the walls. No sense that something is waiting just outside. A place where Shane can build his nest without looking over his shoulder. Where the baby can exist without being part of a war.

The thought settles deep, dangerously close to hope.

"You're thinking too hard," Shane murmurs one evening, shifting closer in the nest until he's half on top of him.

Ilya blinks, dragged back.

"Am not."

"You are," Shane says, smiling faintly. "I can feel it."

Ilya huffs quietly, sliding an arm around him automatically, pulling him in.

"You're imagining things."

Shane tilts his head, studying him. "What things?"

Ilya hesitates, just for a second, then his hand moves, resting over Shane's stomach, grounding himself there.

"The future," he says finally.

"Our future?"

"Of course," Ilya answers.

"Tell me about it?"

Ilya smiles, "Maybe later."

Shane rolls his eyes. "Ok." He murmurs, settling back down, pressing a soft kiss to Ilya's jaw before relaxing into him again.

Ilya exhales slowly, holding him a little tighter. Because that trust— that quiet, unshaken trust, is exactly why he can't afford to be wrong.

Grigori is out there. Somewhere. Silent. Patient. And Ilya refuses to let the next move land anywhere near Shane. So he keeps looking. Keeps planning. Keeps building an escape Shane doesn't know he might need. Because if the silence breaks, he wants them already gone.

The first home he views is quiet in a way Ilya doesn't trust.

He moves through it slowly, the realtor a few steps behind as he checks corners, sightlines, angles.

“Entry point here,” he says, more to himself than anyone else, gaze flicking to the front windows. “Too exposed.”

“It’s a very safe neighborhood,” the realtor offers lightly with a smile pasted to her rose colored lips.

Ilya doesn’t respond to that. Safety isn’t a neighborhood statistic. It’s control.

He steps into the kitchen, eyes already tracking exits.

“Back door?” he asks.

“Just through here—” the realtor says, heading down a short hallway to a mudroom.

He’s studying the room with a frown when his phone buzzes against his palm. He glances down, insides freezing—Shane

He answers immediately, already turning slightly away from the realtor.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hi to you too, Ilya,” Shane says, faintly amused.

Ilya exhales through his nose. “Hello, solnishko. Is everything ok?”

“No.”

Ilya panics, already heading for the front door as Shane continues.

“I can’t wait for delivery. The baby wants Cumberland pizza right now.”

Ilya halts, relaxing. Of course. He closes his eyes briefly, pinching the bridge of his nose as he turns to head back to what is likely a very confused realtor.

“I would prefer if you ordered in.”

“I can’t wait to wait,” Shane repeats. “It’ll take too long.”

Ilya glances at his watch, already calculating distance, time, traffic.

“I can be back in twenty—”

“No,” Shane cuts in gently. “You’re already out. It’s fine.”

It’s not fine. Nothing about it feels fine.

“Is Hayden there?”

“Yeah, just got back.”

“Have him drive, please.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Ew gross.” Comes Hayden’s voice from the background.

Shane giggles.

“Stay on main roads,” Ilya says. “Don’t stop anywhere else.”

“Ilya—”

“And keep your phone on you.”

“I always—”

“And call me when you get there.”

Shane exhales softly, not annoyed—just fond. “Okay, baby.” he says. “I promise.”

Ilya hesitates, just a fraction.

“Can you bring home dessert though?” Shane adds, lighter now.

Despite everything, Ilya huffs a quiet breath. “Of course. Anything in particular?”

“Something chocolate.”

“That can be arranged.”

“Thank you, love you!” Shane says ending the call.

Ilya blinks.

They’ve never outright said it, this thing too new between them. Knows that Shane’s words were more than likely a slip of the tongue, but oh how he loved them.

He doesn’t go back to the realtor right away. Instead, he scrolls once—fast—then taps a different contact.

Sergei.

The line picks up on the second ring.

“Sir?”

“I need eyes on Shane,” Ilya says immediately, already moving toward the back of the house, lowering his voice.

“Location?”

“They’re leaving the apartment now,” Ilya replies. “Cumberland pizza place—direct route only. Hayden’s driving.”

A beat. Sergei processes fast. “I’m two blocks out,” he says. “I’ll fall in behind them.”

“Not too close,” Ilya adds. “I don’t want them noticing.”

“They won’t.”

Ilya pauses at the back door, scanning the yard automatically. Fencing. Partial. Not enough.

“You think something’s wrong?” Sergei asks.

Ilya doesn’t answer right away. Because the truth is he doesn’t know.

“I think he’s exposed,” Ilya says finally.

Sergei hums once. Agreement.

“I’ll keep him safe.”

Ilya’s grip tightens slightly on the phone. “I know.”

Ilya ends the call, stepping back into the mudroom where the realtor stands scrolling on her phone.

“Sorry about that.” He says with a polite smile. “The basement?”

His attention is split now. Part of him still here—mapping exits, counting steps, and planning locks. While the other is already on the road. Following. Waiting. Watching through someone else’s eyes.

Because until Shane is back, he won’t relax. Not even for a second.

—

“Thank you, love you!” Shane ends the call.

Silence.

It takes exactly half a second for his brain to catch up with his mouth, then it registers.

Shane freezes. Eyes going wide as he slowly, slowly pulls the phone away from his ear like it might explode.

Oh.

Oh no.

“Fuuuucckkkk!”

He stares at his phone in horror.

“Holy shit, did you just—“ Hayden cackles in disbelief.

“I—” Shane makes a strangled sound, burying his face in his hands. “Oh my god.”

“Dude! I can’t believe you just did that.”

Shane grimaces. “Do you think he noticed?”

“Oh, definitely.”

“Fuck! I didn’t mean to say it... It just slipped out.”

“It’s fine, chill.”

“We have literally never said that to each other before, how am I supposed to ‘chill’?! This is a big deal. Oh my god, what if he’s freaked out?”

Hayden places both of his hands on Shane’s shoulders and gives him a shake. “Dude stop, it’s fine. I’m telling you. I accidentally said Professor Hastings ‘Love you, bye’ while walking out of class a few weeks ago, it happens.”

Shane snorts. “I bet he loved that.”

Haden shrugs. “I got a lecture on what is and isn’t appropriate to say to professors before class, but it was no big deal.”

Shane makes a helpless noise. “But this is different...”

Hayden considers that a moment. “I mean yeah, a little, because you two are snacking up—“

“We are not shacking up!”

“Whatever you need to tell yourself, bud.” Hayden lets go of him and steps back. “He has been living in our apartment for weeks. You are literally nesting together, fucking like it’s your full-time job, and you’re pregnant with his baby...”

Shane glares at him. “Don’t make it sound like that.”

“What? I’m just being honest.”

Shane drops down onto the couch, staring at the threadbare carpet like it personally betrayed him.

“I said it so casually,” he mutters. “Like it was normal. Like we say it all the time.”

“Have you ever thought that maybe you want it to be normal?” Hayden offers.

Shane goes very still. “No...”

Hayden scoffs.

“I mean—” Shane scrubs his face again. “I just—he didn’t even say anything.”

“Don’t! You literally hung up right after you said it.”

Shane lets out a long, suffering exhale, dropping the phone onto his chest. “I can never speak to him again.”

“Bold strategy when the man lives in our apartment.”

“Maybe I should just pretend it didn’t happen...”

“You think he’s going to let that happen?”

Shane pauses, grabbing a pillow to smother himself with. “Fuck... No. Damn it! I hate everything.”

Hayden snorts as Shane presses a pillow over his face.

“Might as well move countries,” he mumbles incoherently. “Change my name. Start over.”

“Don’t you think you’re being a bit dramatic?”

Shane whips the pillow away from his face. “I am not being dramatic.

Hayden pinches his index finger and thumb close together, not quite touching. “Little bit.”

Shane chuckles the pillow at his head.

Hayden shakes his head, batting the pillow away. “For what it’s worth, you’re an idiot.”

“Helpful,” Shane says, muffled.

“The man is clearly in love with you, Shane. He’s not going to care that you told him ‘I love you’ accidentally.”

Shane says nothing, just rubs his hand up and down his belly while Hayden’s words soak in.

“Now if you’re done losing your mind. Let’s go get pizza before you get hangry.”

“I do not get hangry!” Shane says as he makes grumpy hands in Hayden’s direction, needing help getting off the couch.

“Sure bud.” He says tugging Shane into a standing position.

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

Shane huffs. Because no, he doesn’t.

“Whatever, let’s go get pizza.” He says marching to where Hayden waits at the front door.

“After you, your majesty.” He was waving him through the door.

“God you are such an idiot.”

“Takes one to know one.”

“Clever.” Shane says, giving a nod to the security guard posted at the end of the hallway.

“Thank you, I try.”

The elevator is thankfully empty when the doors open, making their trip down smooth. The parking lot too. Things have mostly died down, Shane’s pregnancy no longer front page news, but sometimes there’s someone with a camera lurking outside the door, waiting for a glimpse of Shane’s growing belly.

Which, at the moment, is currently making getting into Hayden’s car a whole ordeal.

He turns carefully, lowers himself a certain way then swings his legs into the passenger seat, adjusting as he goes. The seatbelt is a process too—he pulls it across, guides it under his belly, shifts it until it sits right. Secure, no pressure on his belly.

“You good?” Hayden asks, starting the car.

“Yeah,” Shane says, settling back. “Just try not to hit any potholes.”

“I swear to god if you piss in my seats...”

“Oh my god, it happened ONE time.”

“I spent \$75 bucks to get my seat cleaned.”

“I paid you back AND I said I was sorry! You know I can’t help it.”

“Mhmmmm.”

“Shut up and take me to get my pizza.”

Hayden chuckles and pulls into evening traffic.

Everything is normal. The drive is slow given everyone is trying to head home from their nine to fives. Streetlights flicker on. The radio murmurs quietly. Cars pass in both directions, steady and predictable.

Shane relaxes a little, shifts again to adjust the seatbelt where it presses slightly too firm against his hip, earning him a kick. He hisses, pressing a hand to his belly.

“Everything okay?” Hayden asks, catching the movement.

“Yeah,” Shane says. “Just a kick.”

Hayden opens his mouth to say something, his eyes going wide.

Headlights flash in Shane's peripheral vision, drawing his attention. Too fast. Too close. He turns, but there is no time to process. No time to react.

The impact detonates against the passenger side. A deafening CRASH—metal folding inward with violent force as the other car slams directly into Shane's door.

Shane's body jerks hard to the left, the side airbag exploding outward between him and the impact.

"SHIT—!" Hayden yells, the wheel wrenches in his hands as the car is shoved sideways across the lane, tires screaming against asphalt.

"Hayden—!" Shane chokes out, instinct overriding everything as his hands fly to his stomach.

The seatbelt locks instantly, cutting across his chest and hips, jerking him forward before slamming him back into the seat with bone-rattling force.

The airbag deploys in front of him—a violent burst of pressure and fabric, knocking the breath clean out of his lungs.

Shane blinks, still processing as pain spikes sharp across his ribs. His head snaps forward, then back. The world fracturing into noise and motion as car keeps moving. Spinning now, out of control.

Shane registers Hayden fighting the wheel, vision blurred, ears ringing, right arm going numb from the impact.

"Shane!"

The tires lose grip completely, the car careening sideways into oncoming traffic. A horn blares—long and terrified.

Another impact, the front-end this time. The hood crumples inward with a brutal crunch as another vehicle collides with them, the force snapping both of them forward again despite the restraints.

Glass explodes. The windshield spiderwebbing before it gives, fragments spraying inward.

Shane cries out—a broken, breathless sound—as the force drives him back into the seat, pain flaring sharper now, lower, deeper.

The car jerks again, spinning once more before slamming to a stop at an angle across the road, and for a moment everything goes still.

The engine ticks. Something hisses. Distant voices shout outside the car. But inside Shane can't breathe.

He sucks in air in short, panicked pulls, chest tight, ribs aching with every movement. His ears ring so loud it drowns everything else out. His hands still on his stomach. Clutching.

Protecting.

“Shane?” Hayden’s voice is strained. Hoarse.

Shane turns his head slowly, vision swimming.

Hayden is slumped slightly over the wheel, the deployed airbag deflating in front of him. There’s blood at his temple, a slow line running down past his eyebrow.

“Hayd—” Shane swallows hard, voice shaking.

Pain blooms again—his side, his back, a deeper ache low in his abdomen that makes his breath hitch.

“Don’t move,” Hayden says immediately, forcing himself upright with a sharp inhale, and unbuckles his seatbelt. “Just—don’t move.”

He tries to open his door. It doesn’t budge.

“Fuck—” Hayden shoves harder, teeth gritting as pain shoots through his shoulder.

It still doesn’t budge.

Outside, chaos is building fast. Car doors slam. People shout. Someone yells about calling an ambulance.

Shane barely hears it, only focused on one thing. He presses his hand harder against his stomach. Waiting. Desperate.

Nothing.

Panic floods in, cold and immediate.

“Hayden,” Shane whimpers, voice breaking now. “Hayden—”

“I’m here,” Hayden says, grabbing for Shane’s left hand. “I’m right here.”

“The baby—” Shane panics, blinking blearily down at his belly. “He’s not moving,” Shane whispers.

Hayden’s expression shifts—fear flashing, quick and sharp—but he pushes it down.

“He will,” he says immediately. “He will, ok? Shock. It’s just shock.”

Shane shakes his head slightly, breath hitching. “Please...”

“Shhhh, it’s going to be ok. Just breathe for me, ok?”

Sirens start in the distance. Getting closer.

Across the street, behind the growing crowd, a man watches. Still. Silent. His gaze flicks over the wreck. The damage. The blood. Calculating. Then, without a word, he turns and disappears.

Chapter End Notes



Chapter 14

The basement is the only part of the house Ilya almost likes.

Concrete. Limited access. One staircase down, one secondary exit at the back. Small windows—high enough that no one’s getting in easily, narrow enough that no one’s seeing much from outside.

He walks the perimeter slowly, already cataloging improvements.

“You’d need a better lock here,” he says, gesturing toward the back door. “Reinforce the frame, steel plate. Motion sensors in both corners.”

The realtor nods quickly, trying to keep up. “That’s definitely something the owners could negotiate—”

“And cameras,” Ilya continues, barely listening. “Interior and exterior. Motion sensors in both corners.”

“Of course.”

He turns once more, scanning the space. It could work. Not perfect—but secure enough with the right adjustments.

For a split second, he lets himself picture it—Shane here. Safe and untouched. A nest in the corner, blankets piled high, soft and warm instead of tense and temporary. No watchers outside. No constant edge under Ilya’s skin. Their baby safe and secure.

His phone rings—Sergei, and the happy image collapses instantly.

Ilya answers without hesitation. “Report.”

There’s a pause, and wrong .

“I’m sorry, sir, but there’s been an incident.”

Everything in Ilya’s body goes still, muscles locking tight.

“What kind of incident?” he asks, voice low and controlled.

“A collision, sir,” Sergei says. “High-speed. Passenger-side impact.”

Ilya’s stomach drops.

“Shane?”

“Alive,” Sergei says immediately. “Both of them are. They’ve been extracted from the vehicle.”

“Status,” Ilya snaps.

“Shane was on the passenger side at impact,” Sergei continues, voice steady, clinical. “Primary force came through that door. Airbag deployed. Seatbelt engaged.”

Ilya’s grip tightens around the phone, too tight.

“Possible rib fractures,” Sergei continues. “Significant chest trauma from restraint. He’s reporting abdominal pain. Possible blunt force trauma from the belt and secondary impact.”

The words hit like blows, punching the air from Ilya’s lungs.

“Any other injuries?”

“Head strike—uncertain severity. He’s conscious, responsive, but disoriented,” Sergei says. “Right arm braced during impact—possible fracture or sprain. He’s not using it fully.”

Ilya’s vision tunnels. “And the baby?”

A pause, longer this time.

“No confirmed movement at the scene,” Sergei says carefully. “Paramedics are aware. They’re expedited transport.”

Something inside Ilya snaps.

“What do you mean no confirmed movement?” he bites out, voice rising, sharp enough that it echoes off the basement walls. “You were supposed to be on them!”

“I was,” Sergei replies, still controlled. “The strike was fast. Deliberate. No lead-up.”

“I told you to keep them safe!”

“And I am,” Sergei says. “They’re alive and conscious. Shane’s been transported—”

“Where?”

Ilya is already halfway up the stairs, doesn’t remember moving. Barely registers the realtor calling something after him.

“St. Michael’s,” Sergei answers. “The ambulance left the scene less than three minutes ago. I’m right behind.”

“I want constant updates,” he snaps. “Vitals. Movement. Everything.”

“You’ll have them.”

“Do not let them out of your sight.”

“I won’t.”

The call ends. For half a second Ilya just stands there, then everything hits at once.

Passenger-side impact.

Chest trauma.

Abdominal pain.

No movement.

“Fuck—” He drags a hand through his hair hard enough to sting. “FUCK!”

His chest feels too tight, too small, like there’s not enough air to fill his lungs.

“No, no, no,” he mutters, already moving, already unlocking his car with shaking hands. “No, he’s fine. He’s fine.”

The door slams and the engine roars to life too hard.

His hands are shaking. They never shake.

“Get it together,” he snaps at himself, gripping the wheel like it’s the only solid thing left. “Get it the fuck together.”

But his thoughts are spiraling too fast. Shane, in the passenger seat. Impact hitting his side. Seatbelt locking. Force driving into his chest—his stomach. The words ‘no movement’ echoing in his head.

Ilya’s breath stutters.

“Fuck!” he slams his palm against the steering wheel, rage and panic crashing together. “I should’ve been there—I should’ve—”

He cuts himself off, jaw locking hard. Because that doesn’t matter. It doesn’t fix anything.

The car lurches forward. Too fast. Too aggressive. Lights blur past him. Horns blare. But he doesn’t slow down. He doesn’t care. Nothing matters except getting there.

“Hold on,” he mutters under his breath, voice rough, breaking at the edges. “Just—hold on.”

And then it hit him.

Yuna.

“Fuck!” Ilya shouts again, gripping the steering wheel tighter.

“Siri!” He snaps.

“Uh-huh?”

“Call Yuna Hollander.”

“Calling Yuna Hollander.”

The call rings loudly through the car once. Then Twice. Then—

“Ilya?” Her voice is alert immediately. “Everything ok? Has something happened?”

“Shane’s been in an accident,” he says as he weaves his way through traffic, ignoring the way horns blare around him.

No preamble, no softening.

A sharp inhale on the other end. “What?”

“He wanted pizza. Hayden took him, I had one of my men following him. I—“

“Where were you?” She asks, no accusation in her voice.

Ilya pauses.

“Looking at a house.” He says finally.

“Oh, Ilya.” Her voice softens.

“I should have been there... This wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t left him.”

“Honey, you don’t know that.” A shift on her end—movement, keys, urgency snapping into place. “Do you know where they’re taking him?”

“St. Michael’s.”

“Ok. I’m leaving now,” Yuna says immediately. “I’ll call ahead, see if I can find out any information.”

Ilya swallows once, hard.

“Sergei said the hit was on his side,” he says. “Door intrusion. Seatbelt engaged—he took the impact across the chest. Said there may be possible rib fractures.”

Yuna inhales sharply.

“He reported abdominal pain too,” Ilya continues, voice cracking.

“And the baby?” Yuna asks softly.

“No movement.”

Yuna says nothing, the silence heavy between them.

“Alright,” she says finally, voice shifting—focused, clinical. “That doesn’t mean worst-case yet. Could be shock, or maybe be positioning. We don’t assume anything until we know for sure.”

Ilya exhales sharply through his nose.

“Ilya—listen to me.” Her voice is calm but firm.

He doesn’t want to, but he does.

“I know you’re scared and you’re blaming yourself, but you can’t fall apart right now. I need you focused when you walk in. Panicking is only going to scare Shane further, and he needs you to be strong for him. For both of them.”

“I—I just need them to be okay.” Ilya says quietly.

“I know, sweetie.” Yuna says softly.

“What if—“

“No,” Yuna cuts him off. “No thinking like that. They’ll be ok.”

Ilya lets out a shaky breath, “Ok.”

“Ok.” Yuna’s voice is final. “I’m getting in the car now. I’ll see you soon.”

He doesn’t answer, chest still too tight, thoughts still moving too fast, just hums as the line goes dead.

“Hold on,” he mutters under his breath, pressing harder on the gas. “Just—hold on.”

—

The hospital doors slide open too slowly, or maybe Ilya is just moving too fast.

He’s barely aware of anything except the harsh fluorescent lights spilling out onto the pavement, the sharp smell of antiseptic, and the sound of his own pulse pounding in his ears.

“Rozanov!”

He turns sharply, spotting Yuna as she crosses the lot towards him at the same time, coat half-buttoned, hair pulled back hastily, phone still in her hand.

She takes one look at his face and her entire posture shifts.

“Stay with me,” she says immediately, stepping into his space, forcing his attention onto her. “You don’t get to spiral right now.”

“I’m not—” he starts, but his voice is already too tight, too thin.

“You are,” she cuts him off. “So you’re going to focus on me instead. Got it?”

Ilya exhales once, sharp, then nods.

“Good,” Yuna says, already turning, already moving. “Let’s go.”

They push through the doors together, but from that point on, Yuna takes control.

“Trauma intake,” she says, voice clear, authoritative as she marches toward the intake window.

The nurse looks up, startled by the urgency. “I’m sorry, who—”

“We’re looking for Shane Hollander. He was brought in not too long ago from a car accident. Where is he?”

“Are you family—?”

“Yes, I’m his mother.” Yuna answers immediately. “Yuna Hollander.”

“Just a moment, please.” The nurse hesitates only a second before picking up the phone, speaking quickly to someone on the other end.

Beside her, Ilya is too still, too quiet, hands clenched so tightly his knuckles have gone white.

“Breathe,” Yuna murmurs under her breath without looking at him.

“I am breathing,” he mutters back.

Barely.

The nurse hangs up. “A doctor will be down shortly to speak with you,” she says, pushing back from the desk. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll take you to one of our family rooms.”

“Thank you.”

The nurse leads them past the waiting room, down a short hallway to a small, dim room filled with two uncomfortable looking loveseats, a small table between them holding a lamp and a box of tissues.

“Dr. Anderson will be with you shortly.” the nurse says, giving them a small tight smile.

Yuna nods, surveying the room around her before taking a seat, as the nurse pulls the door closed behind her.

The room is too small, too quiet. Suffocating in a way that Ilya cannot bear.

Instead he paces in tight, sharp lines like if he slows down, something worse will happen.

“Fuck,” he breathes out, dragging his hand through his hair as he tips his head back against the wall he’s braced against.

“Stop that.” Yuna says sharply.

He freezes, popping open an eye to glance in her direction.

Ilya drops his hands.

“I don’t understand how you are so calm.” he says after a moment.

Yuna stares at him, her warm brown gaze so much like her son’s. “I’m not calm,” she says.

Ilya frowns slightly, like he doesn’t believe her.

“I just look like it,” she adds.

“That doesn’t make sense,” he mutters.

Yuna tilts her head slightly, considering him. “It’s because I’m a mother,” she says finally.

Ilya stills.

“What does that have to do with anything?” he asks, sharper than he means to.

“Everything,” Yuna replies simply. “When something happens to your child, you don’t get the luxury of falling apart right away. Someone has to stay functional,” she adds. “Someone has to ask the right questions, make the right calls. Right now that person is me.”

“I—I just can’t stop thinking about it.”

“I know, and that’s ok.” Yuna says softly. “You’ll learn how to compartmentalize. You take the fear, the panic, the worst case scenarios, and you shove them somewhere else.” She taps lightly against her chest. “Not gone. Just... contained.”

“It doesn’t stop, does it?”

Yuna shakes her head once. “No, you just get better at carrying it.”

Ilya looks down for a moment, then back up at her. “And after?” he asks.

After surgery.

After waiting.

After knowing.

“After,” she says, “you can fall apart. I’ll even give you permission.”

Ilya snorts. “Thanks. I really appreciate yo—”

A knock interrupts Ilya. The door opens again, a young doctor in navy blue scrubs and cap stepping in—calm and composed.

“Mrs. Hollander?” She says as she extends her hand.

Yuna stands and nods, giving it a shake.

“And Mr...?” The doctor turns to him, eyebrows raised.

“Rozanov,” Ilya supplies, offering his hand out to her.

“I wish I were meeting you both under better circumstances,” she says, letting go of Ilya’s hand. “But I’m Dr. Anderson, I’m part of Shane’s surgical team.”

“Surgery?”

Dr. Anderson nods. “He was brought in with multiple injuries from the collision,” she says. “Primary concern on arrival was fetal distress—there were signs of placental abruption.”

Ilya goes completely still.

“Due to the impact, the placenta began to separate from the uterine wall prematurely,” the doctor continues. “There were concerns about the oxygen levels the fetus was receiving and we opted to move immediately to an emergency cesarean.”

“Where is he now?” Yuna asks.

“In surgery still.” Dr. Anderson answers.

The words land heavy.

“How long?” Yuna asks.

“About twenty minutes in.”

She nods once, processing. “And Shane’s other injuries?”

“Blunt force trauma to the chest—likely multiple rib fractures from the seatbelt,” Dr. Anderson says. “He also has a probable fracture in his right arm, currently immobilized.”

Ilya’s jaw tightens as she continues.

“Signs of concussion—he was disoriented on arrival, and abdominal trauma consistent with both the crash and the abruption. There was internal bleeding—we’re addressing that surgically.”

“Is he stable?” Ilya asks, voice low, rough.

Dr. Anderson gives him a sad smile. “He’s critical,” she says carefully. “But he’s in the best place he can be right now.”

“And the baby?”

“Severe distress on arrival,” Dr. Anderson says. “The neonatal team is standing by.”

Ilya says nothing. Afraid that if he opens his mouth again that all that would come out is a scream.

Yuna steps forward, pressing a gentle hand to his back and rubs.

“Thank you.” she says, “Will you please keep us updated?”

“Of course. I’ll come out as soon as we have more information for you.”

Yuna nods, her hand still rubbing slow circles against Ilya’s back.

With that Dr. Anderson leaves, the door snicking shut quietly behind her.

Ilya turns sharply away, pacing hard, one hand fisting in his hair.

“Ilya—”

“I should’ve been there, Yuna.” he mutters, voice cracking now. “I told him not to—”

“Ilya—”

He doesn’t stop. “I should’ve—”

“ILYA!” Yuna snaps, stepping in front of him, her small soft hands coming to cup his face.
“Stop.”

He freezes.

“This is not helping him,” she says, soft but firm, grounding. “Or you, for that matter.”

His chest heaves, “He’s in surgery,” he says, like he still can’t process it.

“I know, sweetheart.” she replies, softly.

“And the baby—” his voice cracks

“I know.” Her thumb strokes gently against his cheek. “They’re going to be ok.”

Ilya leans into her touch. “What if—”

A knock interrupts them.

The door opens again, and Sergei steps inside looking composed as always, but there’s tension in the set of his shoulders, something tight in his expression.

“Sir.” he says with an incline of his head. “Ma’am.”

Yuna pats Ilya’s cheek once before dropping her hands. “I’m going to check on Hayden.”

“He’s being seen. His family is in the waiting room.” Sergei supplies.

“Thank you,” Yuna says, patting Sergei on the arm as she passes. “Text me if there’s any updates.”

Ilya doesn’t argue, doesn’t move, just nods once as he stares down Sergei.

Sergei remains silent, waiting.

“What happened.”

It’s not a question, it’s a demand.

Sergei doesn’t flinch.

“Targeted strike,” he says. “The driver approached from the left, accelerated through the intersection. No attempt to brake.”

Ilya’s jaw tightens. “Vehicle?”

“Sedan,” Sergei replies. “Stolen plates, driver wore a cap—face obscured. Impact was immediate.”

“You were supposed to be on them.” Ilya says, voice low, dangerous.

“I was,” Sergei says. “Two cars back. The driver came out of a side street.”

Ilya’s hands curl into fists.

“They aimed for Shane.”

The words land heavy, deliberate.

Ilya exhales once through his nose, sharp. “Walk me through it.” “Hayden’s vehicle entered the intersection on green,” he says. “The striking vehicle ran the light at speed—hit the passenger door directly.”

Ilya’s vision narrows.

“The force pushed them across three lanes,” Sergei continues. “Hayden attempted correction, but the rear lost traction. They spun into oncoming traffic.”

“Second impact,” Ilya says.

“Front-end collision,” Sergei confirms. “Lower speed than the initial strike, but enough to compound injuries.”

Ilya drags a hand down his face. “Time to response?”

“Under three minutes,” Sergei says. “Bystanders called immediately. I was on scene within seconds.”

“And the driver?”

“Gone,” Sergei says. “Vehicle abandoned two blocks out. Fire started—likely intentional.”

Clean. Planned.

Ilya lets out a low, humorless breath. "Of course."

Ilya plops heavily onto a loveseat, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

"This was my father's doing," Ilya says.

Not a question.

"Yes."

"I told Svetlana he wouldn't stay quiet," he mutters, pacing once, sharp and restless. "He waited," Ilya continues. "Watched. Found an opening."

"Opportunity presented itself," Sergei says. "You weren't with them."

The words hit.

"Say that again," he says quietly.

Sergei doesn't hesitate. "You weren't with them."

Ilya laughs, short and bitter. "No, I wasn't."

"It wouldn't have changed the strike," Sergei replies.

"I could've—" Ilya cuts himself off, jaw locking hard.

Could've what? Taken the hit? Prevented it?

The answer doesn't matter.

Because it didn't happen.

He wasn't there.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Because I'm not a complete asshole, here's the next chapter

TW: emergency surgery, child birth, emotional damage

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

Everything comes in fragments.

Sound first—metal screaming, a violent, tearing shriek that rattles through his bones, through his teeth, through everything.

Then the impact. His body jerks hard to the side, the world snapping sideways with it, seatbelt biting into him so sharply it steals the air from his lungs. The airbag explodes in front of him—violent, blinding, and white.

Then comes the pain—sharp and flaring. His chest, his side, and somewhere deeper as the world spins around him followed by another impact—the front this time. A crushing jolt that snaps his head back, vision bursting white at the edges.

Then—stillness.

Shane blinks, slow and disoriented. The windshield is wrong, cracked and spiderwebbed. There's glass everywhere.

“Hayd—” he tries, voice thin, breath shaky.

No answer, or maybe there is and he can't tell. There's too much noise now. Too much ringing in his ears.

His chest hurts. Breathing hurts. His hand moves before he thinks about it to his stomach. He presses there, waiting for kicks that don't come.

The panic hits fast—sharp and immediate.

“No,” he whispers. “Nononono.”

“Hayden!” Nothing. “HAYDEN—”

“I'm here,” His muffled voice breaks through the ringing in Shane's ears, as Hayden grabs his hand. “I'm right here.”

“The baby—” Shane panics, blinking blearily down at his belly. “He's not moving.”

Time warps, or something close to it. Because Hayden is replaced with light—bright and shining, and hand. Everywhere.

Shane can't make sense of any of it.

His ears are still ringing, high and constant, like something inside his head won't settle. His vision blurs in and out, shapes moving over him—faces, maybe—but none of them stay long enough to focus.

There are voices now—too many, overlapping, urgent.

“Don't move—” ... “Stay with us—” ... “Can you hear me?”

Shane blinks, slow, disoriented.

“...yeah,” he tries, but it comes out thin. Wrong.

“Stay with me, okay?” another voice says. “What's your name?”

He knows that. He knows that.

“Shane,” he manages after a second, breath hitching. “Shane—”

“Good,” the voice says immediately. “Good, Shane. You're doing great.”

Great doesn't feel like the right word.

“He's conscious—”

Pain starts to settle in. Not sharp at first—just pressure. Tight across his chest, like something is sitting on him. Every breath feels wrong, shallow, like he can't pull enough air in.

“Shane, I need you to look at me—”

Shane blinks up at a face he can't quite place—a paramedic, maybe?

“He's not moving,” Shane says, voice breaking, eyes darting unfocused. “I can't feel him—he's not—”

“We're taking care of you,” they say. “You need to stay still.”

“I can't feel him—” Shane chokes out.

“We're going to make sure you and your baby are safe, ok?” the voice cuts in firmly. “You need to stay calm.”

Calm.

Shane lets out a shaky breath that turns into something too close to a sob.

His seatbelt is cut. He feels the shift, the release, hands steadying him immediately so he doesn't move too much. Pain spikes as they adjust him, sharp and bright and too much.

He gasps, body trying to curl instinctively—

“Don't move—don't move—”

“I can't—” he breathes.

“I know. I know.”

They slide something behind him. A board, he thinks, hard and unforgiving.

“On three,” someone says. “One—two—”

The movement is awful. Everything hurts. His chest screams, his side burns, something low in his abdomen twists wrong enough that his breath breaks completely.

“—three.”

He cries out this time, can't stop the broken sound that punches out.

“Got him—ok—easy—”

They strap him down, tight and secure, and Shane cries out again. His arm. Something's wrong with his arm. He goes to move it and pain lances up instantly, black spots dancing across his vision.

“Try not to move that arm, ok?” someone says quickly.

“We have a possible fracture.”

The word floats but don't stick.

They lift him and the world tilts again. Cold air hits his face, the sky above him is dim, fading into evening. His good hand finds his stomach again and presses. Still nothing.

“Please...” he whispers, panic rising again. “Pleasepleaseplease...”

“Hey, stay with me ok?”

He tries. He really does. but things are already slipping.

They wheel him fast. The ground bumps beneath him, each jolt sending pain through his body in sharp, disorienting bursts. Voices and faces blurring.

“Vitals dropping—” ... “Let's move—” ... “We need to get an IV in—”

Shane's head lolls slightly to the side, everything beginning to feel distant. He asks for Ilya, at least he thinks he does.

“Ilya—” he whispers again, or maybe he already did.

Someone answers, but he doesn’t remember what they say.

Time starts to break apart again. He’s in the ambulance now, but doesn’t remember how he got inside.

The hands are still there. Still on him. Blood pressure cuff tightening on his left arm, as

“BP low—” ... “Fluids running—”

His chest rises and falls too fast, or maybe not enough. He can’t tell. His stomach hurts. That’s new, or maybe it isn’t.

He presses his hand there again, still nothing.

Tears slip sideways into his hairline, wetness pooling in his ears. He doesn’t remember crying.

“Please,” he whispers, the word barely existing.

Lights flash overhead—red and white and blue.

The voices keep talking, asking him questions.

“Can you feel this?” ... “Where does it hurt?” ... “Stay with me—”

Some he answers, others he misses. But he tries.

He hears someone say fetal distress.

“No,” he whispers again, weaker now.

Then more words follow—abruption, bleeding, and we’re moving.

Moving where? He doesn’t know. He doesn’t understand.

His hand slips from his stomach, but he’s too tired to lift it back.

He blinks slowly.

They’re pushing him now. Lights streak overhead again.

“Ilya,” he tries one last time, the name barely forms.

Something comes down over his face.

“Breathe,” someone says.

He does, or at least he thinks he does.

In. Out. In. Out.

The world tilts, and then it's gone.

—

“There is nothing you could have done differently,” Sergei says. “Nothing.”

Ilya opens his mouth to retort when the door opens again, and Yuna steps back in.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Sergei says, stepping back and pulling out his phone, readying to set things in motion—damage control, retaliation, containment.

Ilya nods, dismissing him with a wave.

“How’s Pike?” He asks after the door closes behind Sergei, the plastic loveseat creaking as he leans back.

“Banged up,” she says, already crossing toward him. “Clavicle fracture likely, mild concussion. He’ll be fine. Any news?”

Ilya shakes his head once. “Nothing.”

He exhales sharply, dragging a hand through his hair again, knee bouncing.

Yuna takes a seat beside him, hand coming down to rest on his knee. “No news is good news.”

Ilya hums. He isn’t so sure.

Yuna gives his leg a pat before settling deeper into the loveseat. Silence settles around them, heavy and suffocating once again.

Time slows as they wait, at least it feels that way to Ilya as he stares at the door hoping for a doctor to come through.

Ten minutes goes by, then twenty.

After forty minutes have passed, a knock sounds at the door before the doctor steps in, a different one from before. He’s slightly older, composed, steady in a way that immediately commands attention.

Both Ilya and Yuna stand expectantly.

“Mr. Rozanov? Mrs. Hollander?”

“Yes,” Ilya says, too quickly.

“I’m Dr. Patel,” he says. “I’m part of the OB surgical team.”

Yuna straightens beside Ilya, focus snapping in.

Dr. Patel doesn't waste time. "Your son has been successfully delivered."

The world stops. Ilya lets out a sharp exhale, the air punching out of his lungs. Yuna gasps beside him, clasp ing her hands against her chest.

"He's alive," Dr. Patel continues. "And stable."

At that Ilya can breathe again.

His son is ok.

His son is alive.

"Given that he's early," Dr. Patel says. "About six weeks premature, along with the significant distress when we began, we've admitted him to the NICU for observation."

"But he's ok?" Ilya presses, voice rough, almost breaking. "He's—"

Dr. Patel nods and gives Ilya a warm smile. "He is. He's breathing on his own, heart rate is strong. He's small, but he's a fighter."

Ilya's shoulders drop just slightly. Not relaxed, but something loosens.

"Ok," he breathes.

Yuna glances at him briefly, something softer in her expression now.

"And Shane?" she asks.

Dr. Patel's expression shifts—more serious.

"He's still in surgery," he says. "The placental abruption was more severe than we initially thought, and there was significant hemorrhaging."

"You were able to get it under control?" Yuna asks.

"Yes, but it required additional intervention."

Ilya goes still at that. "What do you mean? What kind of intervention?"

Dr. Patel gives him a grim smile. "To stop the hemorrhaging, we had to perform an emergency hysterectomy."

Everything inside Ilya stop as the words land.

"No," he says, barely audible.

"It was necessary," the doctor continues gently. "The bleeding was life-threatening. There were no other viable options."

Ilya shakes his head once, sharp, like he can undo it. “No, that’s—” he cuts himself off, jaw tightening hard.

Because he understands exactly what that means.

No more children.

No more pregnancies.

No choice in the matter.

Something twists hard in his chest. “He didn’t consent to that,” Ilya says, voice low, strained.

“In emergency situations like this,” Dr. Patel explains, “when a patient is unable to provide consent and their life is at immediate risk, we act in their best interest.”

Best interest. The words make him rage. The phrase feels clinical, too clean for what it really means.

“It was the only way to save him,” he adds.

Silence fills the space.

“He’s going to wake up and it’s just—gone,” Ilya says, voice rough, barely controlled. “No warning. No choice.”

Dr. Patel doesn’t interrupt, just nods.

“That’s not something you just—decide for someone,” Ilya continues, anger threading through now. “That’s not—”

“It’s not a decision we take lightly,” he says, still calm, still steady. “But when the alternative is losing the patient—”

Ilya exhales sharply, looking away, jaw clenched so tight it aches.

“He wouldn’t have wanted that,” he mutters.

Dr. Patel’s expression softens slightly. “I understand this is difficult,” he says. “But Shane is alive because of that decision.”

Alive.

The word echoes.

“Thank you,” Yuna says, finally speaking. There’s a tightness in her voice, anger. “For letting us know. Will Shane be in surgery much longer?”

“We’re finishing the procedure and stabilizing his other injuries. He has multiple rib fractures, a fractured right arm, and signs of a concussion,” the doctor continues. “The trauma team was working to stabilize everything when I left.”

“Is he—” Ilya starts, then stops, forcing the words out. “Is he going to make it?”

Dr. Patel pauses. “He’s still critical, but he’s responding. That’s a good sign.”

Not a promise, but it’s something.

“I’ll have Dr. Anderson come find you as soon as there’s an update,” he adds.

Ilya doesn’t respond right away, just nods.

“Thank you.” Yuna says again.

The doctor steps back, giving a final glance. “I would recommend,” he says gently, “that you go see your son.”

Ilya blinks. “The NICU?” he asks.

The doctor nods.

“He’s stable, and they’ll allow you to hold him,” he says. “It may... help to focus on something you can be present for right now.”

Ilya doesn’t respond. Because Shane is still in surgery. Because leaving feels wrong.

Yuna steps in quietly. “Ilya,” she says.

He looks away from the door to her.

“You should go,” she says gently. “Shane is ok right now. And your son—” she pauses, just slightly. “Your son needs you. He needs his Papa.”

The words settle differently.

Your son.

Ilya exhales slowly, something unsteady in it.

“But Shane—Are you sure?” he says.

Yuna nods. “Go. If anything happens I’ll let you know.”

“I’ll have someone take you up.”

“Ok.” Ilya says.

Dr. Patel nods and heads out the door.

“I need to call Sergei—“

“Ilya, I’ll be fine.”

“Yuna, please—“

“Go,” Yuna says softly. “I’ll be ok.”

—

A nurse leads him through the halls and up several floor, before stopping at a set of secured doors outside the NICU.

“There are a few rules to the NICU, Mr. Rozanov.” The nurse says—April, her badge reads. “Each time you come to visit, you need to press the call button here.” She points to a black box with a speaker, with a laminated sign that says ‘Press Here’. “One of the nurses will ask who you’re coming to see, and will ask for a code.”

She swipes her badge and the doors unlock with a hiss, swinging open slowly for them to enter.

Ilya steps inside like he doesn’t belong, taking in row after row of tiny incubators and cribs.

The air feels different here—warm, sterile, filled with the soft hum of machines and the faint, steady rhythm of tiny lives being kept alive one breath at a time.

He doesn’t belong here. He feels that immediately. Too big. Too loud. Too much for a place built for things so small.

“Once you’re inside, you need to sign in at the front desk and a visitor’s pass will be printed for you.” April points to the nurse sitting at the front desk, who gives him a kind smile as he approaches. “Hey Jesse, we’re here to see Baby Hollander.”

“First time?” Jesse asks.

Ilya nods, unsure what to say.

“Alright, I just need to scan your ID and get you a pass, and then you can go see that sweet baby of yours!”

Ilya pulls out his wallet with shaky hands, and pulls out his license.

Jesse thanks him, types in his information and scans the ID, and prints him a pass before he can blink.

“Thanks, Jess!” April chirps as she hands Ilya his license and sticks the pass to his shirt. “Next you need to scrub up.” April leads him to a large industrial sink. “Make sure you wash to the elbow for at least sixty seconds, scrub under your nails too. When you’re done, keep your hands up and use your elbow to wave under the paper towels.”

Ilya rolls up his sleeves and follows April’s command.

“Now, it’s time to meet your little guy!” She leads him through the room, past incubators and monitors and impossibly small bodies wrapped in blankets and wires, to a small covered

incubator near the back.

Up close the incubator is smaller than he expects. Everything is smaller than he expects.

“Here you go,” April says, pulling back the blanket draped across for Ilya to see him for the first time, and gazing fondly down at the tiny body inside.

Ilya follows her gaze, and the world narrows.

Ilya doesn’t move at first, just stands there, staring at the baby so small it almost doesn’t make sense.

Wrapped in a soft blanket, skin still flushed and delicate, his tiny chest rising and falling in quick, shallow breaths—too fast, too fragile-looking, but steady.

Ilya takes a step closer, then another, pressing his hand against the top of the isolette.

“Privet, moy malen'kiy prints.” he says quietly.

His voice sounds wrong in the space, too rough. Too heavy.

His son shifts slightly at Ilya’s voice, a tiny movement, barely there—but enough. Enough to make something in Ilya’s chest tighten painfully.

“Isn’t he precious?” April says softly.

Ilya swallows hard, eyes tracing every detail like he’s trying to memorize him all at once. The small curve of his cheek. The faintest hint of wispy dark hair. The way his fingers curl instinctively, tiny and perfect.

“So small,” Ilya murmurs.

“But he’s strong.”

Ilya nods once, barely.

“Would you like to hold him?” she asks.

Ilya hesitates, just for a second. He’s held a lot of things in his life. Weapons. Power. Control.

Nothing like this.

“Yes,” he says finally, voice quieter than it’s ever been.

“We typically recommend kangaroo care for the first hold.”

“Kangaroo what?” Ilya asks, confused.

“It’s what we call skin to skin. It’ll help regulate his body temperature, heart rate, and breathing. He’s still learning how to do all of that on his own,” she continues. “And being close to you will make it easier for him.”

Ilya swallows, unsure.

“It also helps with bonding,” April adds. “For both of you. He’ll recognize your scent, your heartbeat. It’ll reassure him.”

Ilya looks down at his son, something shifting quietly in his chest.

“And for you,” April says a little softer, “it can help ground you too. Slow things down a bit.”

A small, almost humorless huff leaves him. “That would be nice.”

April smiles faintly. “Would you like to?”

Ilya nods, “Please.”

April nods, moving gently, guiding him into the seat he’s just now noticing beside the incubator.

“Recline back for me and unbutton your shirt.” She instructs. “I’ll place him right against your chest.”

Ilya does as she requests, fingers shaking as he undoes each button, watching as the top of the incubator rises.

April scoops up his son, cooing at him as he begins to fuss at the movement.

“Ready Dad?”

No, but Ilya nods anyway.

April turns his son carefully, placing him gently in the center of Ilya’s chest, repositioning him until his tiny ear is pressed just above Ilya’s heart.

His son settles against him, tiny fingers curling against his chest, little body warm and real.

Ilya sucks in a quiet breath. He feels so small against Ilya’s chest, barely any weight at all, but somehow it feels like everything at once.

“Oh,” he murmurs.

April smiles softly. “Yeah,” she says. “That’s usually the reaction.”

“He’s so warm.” Ilya says quietly as he adjusts instinctively, one hand cradling the back of his head now, the other spanning his back, holding him closer.

“He’ll stay that way with you,” April replies. “You’re exactly what he needs right now.”

The words settle deep.

Ilya looks down, watching the tiny movements, the way his son fits against him like he belongs there.

Because he does.

April steps back with another soft smile and leaves Ilya to hold his son.

“I’ve got you, malen’kiy prints.” Ilya whispers again, softer this time.

The NICU fades into the background. The soft beeping, the quiet voices, the steady hum of machines—none of it reaches him the way it did before.

All Ilya feels is the small, warm weight against his bare chest. His son is tucked close, skin-to-skin, tiny breaths brushing faintly against him, each one a quiet reminder that he is alive and ok despite his father’s efforts.

Ilya’s hand moves slowly over his back, careful, protective, like he’s afraid even the smallest pressure might be too much.

For a long moment, he just watches him. Memorizes him, and for the first time since Shane’s accident, Ilya’s alpha awakens.

His son shifts faintly, then shifts again, settling into him, tiny breaths brushing faintly against his chest as Ilya begins to purr.

“You look so much like your Daddy,” he murmurs, voice rough as he smooths down the downy soft hair on his son’s head.

“You scared me,” he whispers. “You and your daddy.” His voice catches for a second, then steadies. “He’s still fighting, but he’s strong. Stronger than anyone I know. You get that from him.”

He shifts slightly, adjusting the baby closer without even thinking.

“He loves you,” he murmurs. “So much. You don’t even know yet.” A faint, almost sad smile pulls at his mouth. “He’s been talking about you for weeks,” Ilya says. “Arguing with me about names, about where your crib should go... about everything.”

His son’s tiny fingers twitch against his chest.

“Yeah,” he whispers. “That’s him. Always has an opinion, but I love him.”

The words hang there for a second. Unhidden and uncomplicated.

“And I love you,” he adds, voice roughening slightly. “More than I ever thought possible.”

He exhales slowly, gaze drifting for just a moment—like he can see something beyond the sterile walls of the NICU.

“I was looking at a house this morning,” he murmurs. “Before all of this. Your Daddy doesn’t know about it yet,” he admits. “I was going to surprise him.”

His thumb moves again, slow and steady against the baby’s back.

“It’s got a basement,” he says. “Solid foundation. Good security. Room for a nest where no one can get to you. There’s a window in the back that gets morning light,” he adds. “I think he’d like that.”

He swallows, throat tightening just slightly. “We’ll go there,” he continues. “All of us. When all of this is over. You’ll have your own room,” he murmurs. “Even if you end up in ours half the time.”

A faint, tired smile flickers.

“And he’s going to spoil you,” Ilya adds, lowering his head slightly, pressing a careful kiss to the top of his son’s head. “We both will.”

Chapter End Notes

Came back to edit and add this note:

I will have y’all know that when I plotted this fic out, it was supposed to be a little angsty but mostly fluff. Then I started writing and all of this happened 😊

I am super sorry for the emotional damage, just know I’m going through it as well (pulling somewhat from my own experience with birth and the NICU for Shane has been rough but healing)

I promise their happy ending is coming and everyone will be ok.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Grigori doesn't take the call at first.

He lets it ring.

And ring.

And ring.

The safehouse is quiet, tucked deep in the outskirts of Ottawa, surrounded by bare trees and too much space. Temporary. Disposable. The kind of place no one looks twice at.

The phone keeps buzzing against the table, and Grigori stares at it like it's something alive.

Then, finally he answers. "Speak."

"The hit was executed as planned. The vehicle made contact with the passenger side. There was significant damage, but—"

The voice on the other end is careful. Too careful.

Grigori smiles, slow and sharp. "But," he repeats softly.

A pause.

"The target survived the initial impact. Emergency response was immediate."

"And the child?" he asks.

Silence stretches just a fraction too long.

"He survived the delivery, sir."

The words land, and something inside Grigori snaps. He barks out a laugh, but it's wrong. Too loud in the quiet space. Too jagged, like it's tearing out of him instead of being chosen.

"I'm not sure I understood." Grigori says quietly. "Could you say that again?"

"The baby is alive," the voice confirms. "Premature, but stable. The omega, however, is still in surgery."

Grigori exhales slowly, free hand curling into a tight fist. "Unfortunate," he says. "The omega and his spawn are proving to be most resilient."

“The omega’s condition is listed as critical. There was significant hemorrhaging from the placental abruption—”

“Good,” Grigori cuts in.

He begins to pace, restless energy bleeding through every step.

“Good,” he repeats, softer now, eyes bright with something unhinged. “Let him feel it. Let him break a little before he goes.”

“Sir—”

“What of the driver?” He cuts them off.

“The vehicle was abandoned and burned,” the voice says. “No identification yet, but—”

“They were seen,” Grigori cuts in again.

“We believe they may have been, yes.”

Grigori closes his eyes briefly, jaw tightening just enough to betray the crack in his control.

Two attempts now and both have failed.

“Clean it up,” he says finally. “Loose ends don’t get to exist.”

“As you wish, sir. Anything else?”

“No.” The word is immediate, sharp. “Not yet.” His eyes flick toward the window, toward the empty stretch of land beyond it. “I want them to feel safe first. Let them breathe,” he continues. “Let him hold the child. Let them start imagining a future.” His smile sharpens. “Then we take it away.”

“Understood.”

Grigori ends the call and lowers the phone slowly. For a moment, he just stands there, breathing uneven, energy still crackling under his skin. He laughs again, quieter this time. Disbelieving.

“They made it through the crash,” he murmurs to himself. “Good.” His fingers flex at his side. “Let’s see how they survive me.”

—

In Moscow Svetlana receives a call. She is not one to answer calls on the first ring, she likes to let people wait. But when Sergei’s name flashes across her screen, she answers immediately.

“What happened?”

No greeting, no pretense.

“There’s been an incident,” Sergei says.

Svetlana goes still. “Define ‘incident’.”

“There was a targeted vehicle strike against Shane this evening.”

Everything inside Svetlana freezes. “Status?”

“Alive,” Sergei says. “Both of them.”

Svetlana exhales slowly.

“The baby was delivered early,” he continues. “Emergency C-section. He’s in the NICU, but stable.”

Her hand tightens slightly around the phone. “And Shane?”

“Last I checked he was still in surgery. Critical, but holding.”

Silence stretches. She tips her head back against the seat, eyes closing briefly—not in weakness, not in grief, but in calculation gone wrong.

“I thought he’d come for me,” she says, almost to herself.

It made sense.

Grigori had lost control of the company. Lost influence. Lost ground. Lost the hold he thought he had on her. Retaliation should have been direct. Clean. Personal. She had prepared for that. Had her security tightened, kept her movements controlled.

Every possible angle accounted for—except this one.

“You couldn’t have known,” Sergei replies.

“I should have.” Svetlana snaps, eyes shooting open again. “I should have known he wouldn’t have gone after the most obvious target, that he would choose the vulnerable one. I should have known this was not about me... It never has been.” Something cold settles inside her. “I promised to keep them safe, Sergei, and instead I handed him over to Grigori on a platter,” she says.

Because that’s exactly what happened.

Svetlana had assumed the rules would hold, that Grigori would play within a certain logic. He didn’t, and instead of her paying the price like she had expected, Shane paid for it instead.

“Hey may have outplayed you this time, but he will not win. Not after this.”

Her throat tightens just slightly. “I should’ve seen it, Sergei. I know how he thinks!”

“Svetlana—”

“Don’t. Don’t try to make me feel better about this. It’s my fault Shane got hurt.”

“No, it isn’t.” Sergei doesn’t hesitate. “It’s Grigori’s.”

Svetlana hums, not bothering to argue that. “Were you able to locate the driver?”

“Eventually. The vehicle dumped two blocks away from the scene, lit it on fire to cover his tracks, but we were able to find footage of him on one of the nearby street cameras.”

“And?”

“Lead us right to Grigori.”

Svetlana sits forward. “What do you mean? You’ve located him?”

Sergei grunts in affirmation. “He’s in Ottawa. Has a house outside the city.”

“You’re sure?”

“We have evidence he’s there—multiple pings. Short in duration, but consistent.”

Svetlana’s lips press into a thin line. “Does Ilya know about this?”

Sergei barks out a laugh. “Of course not. He’s right where he needs to be.”

“Good,” she says.

Sergei goes quiet for a second. “Do you want me to tell him?”

“No.” Svetlana replies immediately. “He doesn’t get pulled into this while he’s there. His focus needs to be on Shane and their son, not this.”

“I’ll handle it.”

“No, we will.”

Sergei exhales slowly. “Understood.”

“What are the details on the property?”

“Rural,” Sergei replies. “Limited perimeter.”

“Security?”

“Light. Two, maybe three men with him. He’s hiding, not fortifying.”

That is Grigori’s mistake.

Svetlana’s mouth curves faintly, not quite a smile. “He’s getting sloppy. Thinks he has time,” she murmurs.

“He doesn’t,” Sergei agrees.

“No, he doesn’t.” Svetlana replies, voice cold. “I want this done quickly. No law enforcement. No noise. This doesn’t leave the family.”

“Already arranged,” Sergei replies.

She hums. “Entry?”

“Two teams,” Sergei says. “Perimeter first. Cut off exits. Then we move in.”

Svetlana considers it. “No, that’s too clean,” she says.

Sergei waits.

“I want him to be aware,” she continues. “I want him to understand exactly what’s happening before it ends.” There’s something colder than anger in her voice now, something precise.

“He targeted Shane,” she says. “He doesn’t get to die confused.”

Sergei nods, even though she can’t see it. “Then we draw him out,” he says. “Trigger movement. Flush him.”

“Yes.” Svetlana reclines back in her chair. “Block the road first,” she adds. “No escape routes. I want confirmation before we move.”

“You’ll have it.”

“I want to be there,” she says.

Sergei pauses. “Svetlana—”

“You will not stop me.”

“Understood.” He says, disapproval thick in his voice. “He won’t come quietly.”

A faint, humorless breath leaves her. “I don’t expect him to.” Her grip tightens on her phone. “But I expect him to bleed.”

Her words are met with silence.

And Sergei understands exactly what that means. There will be no negotiations. No second chances.

“Yes ma’am.” Sergei says quietly.

The line with Sergei goes dead, and for a moment, Svetlana just sits there, mind already ten steps ahead.

Then she moves, phone back in hand before the silence can settle too deeply. One contact, dialed without hesitation.

The line rings once, twice— “Ms. Rozanova,” her assistant answers immediately.

“Clear my schedule,” Svetlana says.

A pause on the other end—brief, but telling. “For how long, ma’am?” her assistant asks carefully.

“Indefinitely.” The word lands with weight. “I don’t want calls. I don’t want meetings. I don’t want anything reaching me unless it is critical to the company remaining operational.”

“Yes, ma’am,” her assistant says quickly.

Svetlana’s gaze fixes forward, distant, already somewhere else entirely. “And have the jet prepared for Immediate departure.”

Another pause, slightly longer this time. “Destination, ma’am?”

“Ottawa.”

There’s a faint shuffle of papers on the other end, the clacking of keys. “I’ll have it ready within the hour,” her assistant says. “Do you require a full crew?”

“Yes.” No hesitation. “Let it be known that I require complete discretion,” Svetlana adds, voice dropping slightly. “No filings, no public flight plans beyond what’s necessary. I don’t want this drawing attention.”

“Understood.”

Svetlana exhales slowly.

“I will be unreachable during this time,” she says. “If anyone asks—” She pauses, just long enough to decide how this gets framed. “I’m handling a personal matter.”

The phrasing is deliberate, clean and unquestionable.

“Yes, ma’am,” her assistant replies. “Is there anything else?”

Svetlana’s grip tightens slightly on the phone. “No, that will be all,” she says.

Because everything else she’ll handle herself.

The call ends, and Svetlana is already moving. Shutting her computer down, grabbing her keys.

Ottawa waits, and so does Grigori.

Who is still breathing. Still planning. Still thinking he’s in control.

But not for long.

—

The moment the call with Svetlana ends, his entire posture shifts—less restrained, more kinetic.

Sergei spreads the map across the table, one hand braced against it, the other tracing the perimeter lines with quiet precision. He studies it for half a second, committing everything to memory.

Rural, isolated. Good for hiding, bad for escaping.

“Here,” he says, tapping the edge of a wooded stretch just outside Ottawa. “The property line runs uneven. Tree coverage is dense on the north side—good for approach, bad for visibility.”

The team leans in, no one interrupts.

“Main structure here,” he continues, marking the house. “Single access road. If he tries to run, it’s through this choke point.”

“Or on foot,” one of the men adds.

Sergei nods once. “Which is why we don’t leave gaps.”

He straightens slightly, gaze sweeping over them. “Team One takes the perimeter. I want eyes on every exit—road, tree line, anything he could use.”

A nod.

“Team Two with me,” Sergei says. “We hold until confirmation. No movement inside until she arrives.”

They all understand who she is.

“What if he bolts early?” someone asks.

Sergei’s expression doesn’t shift. “Then we guide him,” he says. “Not chase. Push him where we want him.”

Another man glances at the map. “He’ll be armed.”

“Yes,” Sergei replies. “And unstable, especially after his last failure.”

“That makes him dangerous,” the man adds.

“That makes him predictable,” Sergei corrects.

Silence settles around the room.

“Lights stay off once we’re close,” Sergei continues. “Engines cut before final approach. We go in quiet.”

“And if he has backup?”

Sergei's gaze sharpens slightly. "Intel shows two men with him."

"And if there's more?"

"Then we deal with it," he says simply.

No elaboration. None needed.

He checks his watch. "She'll be in the air soon," he says. "We are in position before she lands. No delays." A final look around the room. "No mistakes," Sergei adds.

The weight of it lands.

Because this isn't just another job.

This is personal.

Chapter End Notes

Thought I'd give yall a little break (kind of?) from the trauma and get a glimpse of Grigori's impending end

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I apologize in advance for the medical inaccuracies, I'm just going off what Dr. Google told me 🙏

The family room is quiet in the way hospitals always are—never truly still, just muted. A distant intercom. A cart rolling past. A door opening somewhere that doesn't quite close softly enough.

Yuna sits alone, hands folded in her lap, staring at nothing in particular. The loveseat is uncomfortable, plastic cushion biting in the back of her thighs through her jeans, but the lighting is dim and soft. Everything about the room is designed to be calming, but it doesn't help.

She exhales slowly. Hospitals have always carried a weight for her—not fear, not exactly. Memory.

Too many hours spent in a place just like this, a little bit older than Shane is now. Too many quiet rooms. Too many closed doors. Too many conversations that began with 'we're sorry' and ended with silence that stretched too long.

Her hands tighten slightly together. She remembers the waiting, the hope that didn't quite hold. The losses that came one after another, each one leaving its own imprint, its own absence. The machines. The sterile air. The feeling of being suspended in something that never fully resolved.

Until Shane.

Before him she had learned how to sit in that space. How to breathe through it. How to keep moving after it. But being here again brings it all back in quiet waves. A reminder of how easily things can go wrong. How quickly.

Her eyes lower to her hands.

And now here she is once again. Waiting. Hoping. Only this time she can take comfort in knowing that while Shane may still be in surgery and her grandson in the NICU, both fragile in different ways, they are alive and breathing. That thought alone steadies her, just slightly.

A soft knock comes, interrupting her train of thought. The door opens as Yuna looks up, Dr. Anderson steps inside. There's something in her expression now that wasn't there before, not urgency or concern, but relief.

“Dr. Anderson.”

“Hello again, Mrs. Hollander.”

“How is he?” Yuna asks.

Dr. Anderson exhales quietly, taking a seat beside Yuna before answering. “He made it through surgery,” she says. “Which is the most important thing.”

Yuna nods once, absorbing that.

“But,” she continues. “It was extensive. I know Dr. Patel came in and spoke with you and Mr. Rozanov about the placental abruption and the measures we had to take to prevent hemorrhaging.”

Yuna nods once more, her hands tighten slightly together. “You performed a hysterectomy,” Yuna says quietly.

Dr. Anderson nods. “Yes ma’am. It was the only way to control the hemorrhage,” she says. “There was no alternative that would have preserved his life.”

“I understand,” Yuna replies, and she does.

Even if it doesn’t make it easier. Even if thinking about it fills her and her omega with rage—not at the doctors, she knows they had no choice, but at Grigori for taking one more thing away from her son.

Dr. Anderson continues. “With his rib fractures, which will make breathing painful for a while,” she says. “We’ll be managing that carefully to avoid complications like pneumonia. His right arm is fractured as well,” she adds. “Ortho will evaluate in the next few days, but it appears stable for now.”

“And the head injury?” Yuna asks.

“Mild to moderate concussion. We’ll monitor closely, but there’s no indication of severe brain injury at this time.”

“That’s good.” Yuna exhales slowly, her shoulders easing just a fraction. “May I see him?”

Dr. Anderson inclines her head slightly. “He’s currently in recovery in the ICU” he continues. “Sedated, for now, but I see no problems with you sitting with him.”

“How long will you be keeping him under sedation?”

“Likely the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours, just to keep him comfortable while his body stabilizes and give him a little time to heal.” She says. “Possibly longer depending on how he responds.”

Yuna shifts slightly in her seat. “When he does, he’s going to have a lot of questions.

Dr. Anderson meets her gaze. “I’m sure he will. It’s a significant loss, even in situations where it’s medically necessary.”

Yuna looks down briefly, then back up. “Is there anything else we should be prepared for?”

“Physically, recovery will take time,” she says. “Pain management, monitoring for infection, supporting his breathing with the rib fractures.” She pauses. “Emotionall... It varies. Some patients process it quickly. Others don’t process it at all.”

Yuna is afraid Shane will be the latter.

“I’ll have psych consult available if needed,” she continues. “And Dr. Patel and myself will be more than happy to speak with as well, but more than anything, he’s going to need support from the people closest to him.”

Yuna’s gaze softens slightly at that. “He has plenty of that.”

“Of that I have no doubt.” Dr. Anderson pushes to her feet. “I’ll come get you when he’s ready for visitors.”

“Thank you,” Yuna replies softly.

She pauses briefly at the door, turning back to Yuna. “He’s strong,” Dr. Anderson adds. “I think he’ll be ok.”

Yuna allows herself a small, quiet smile. “I know.”

Dr. Anderson gives her a nod and steps through the door.

For the first time since she stepped in the hospital, Yuna exhales fully, letting the weight shift just slightly. Not gone, it never will be, but lighter.

—

Yuna hesitates at the threshold of the NICU, just for a moment.

The doors have already opened, the quiet hum of the unit spilling out to meet her—but her feet don’t immediately follow. This fragile, too small, too delicate place pressing against those one jagged edges inside her. She exhales slowly, shaking out her hands, then steps inside.

The air is warmer here, quieter. Carefully controlled in a way that makes everything feel more precious. Her eyes move, taking it all in—incubators, monitors, all the tiny forms wrapped in blankets and wires.

Then she sees him—Ilya. Reclined back, feet crossed at the ankles, his shirt open, and shoulders hunched around where his son is tucked against his bare chest, a soft looking blanket thrown over them.

Yuna stops, eyes watering as she takes him in. The size of him. The way he holds his son so carefully, like the world might shatter if he gets it wrong. The way he's murmuring in Russian, voice low and soft. And the baby—her grandson—so small. So impossibly real.

"Ilya," she says gently, breath catching softly as she moves closer, slower now, like she's afraid of disturbing something sacred

His murmuring halts as his eyes snap in her direction, tension flickering across his face.

"What is it? Is Shane—" his voice cracks. "Is Shane ok?"

Yuna gives him a small smile. "He's stable," she says. "They just moved him into recovery."

Ilya exhales, something in his shoulders finally giving way. "Good, good."

Yuna steps closer, until she's standing right beside him, and finally looks down at her grandson for the first time. Something in her shifts into instinct—old, familiar, deeply rooted.

Her expression changes instantly. "Oh," she murmurs, lips trembling into the faintest smile. "He looks just like Shane."

Ilya lets out a soft, disbelieving huff, glancing down at his son's dark head of hair. "Yeah."

"He has Shane's coloring too."

That soft, warm tone to his skin—not pale but not quite golden, something in between. Already hinting at the same tanned undertone Shane carried even as a baby.

Yuna's fingers hover near his cheek, not quite touching. "And his hair," she adds quietly.

Dark and full. A softer shade of black than Shane's, with wispy waves that she knows will turn into Ilya's wild curls.

"He had so much hair," she says.

Ilya glances down, watching more closely now.

Yuna leans in just slightly. "And here," she says softly, finger finally brushing over his tiny cheeks. So round and soft. "Freckles," she murmurs.

Not fully formed yet, just the barest hint beneath the skin—but she sees them. Because she remembers.

"They'll come in later, when he's older," she says, tracing over the bridge of his nose. "Like Shane's did, right across here."

Ilya smiles at that, and Yuna's expression softens further.

"And his mouth," she adds, as she studies the shape of it. The way it rests, the faintest downturn at the corners when he's still. "That's his too," she says. "Exactly the same."

Yuna sighs. "I used to watch him sleep."

Ilya glances up at her, but Yuna doesn't look away from the baby.

"It's strange," she admits quietly. "How much comes back."

Because it does. All those early days. All the tiny details. All the things no one else would have noticed.

Her gaze flicks briefly upward, meeting Ilya's. "He has you too," she says.

Ilya looks almost startled, and shakes his head. "No, no."

Yuna nods once. "He does." She reaches out again, this time letting her fingers lightly brush over the baby's head, careful and slow. "These waves... All you. The way he settles and leans into warmth instead of pulling away." Her eyes drop back to the baby. "That's not Shane," she adds gently. "That's you."

Ilya goes quiet.

"But his face..." she murmurs, a softness in her voice now. "It's like looking at Shane all over again."

Ilya glances back down at his son, gaze lingering on his son's face, hand tightening just slightly where it rests on that tiny back.

"I wish she were here," he says after a moment.

The words come out low, unsteady.

Yuna stills, eyes flicking back up to Ilya but he doesn't look up.

"My mother," he adds, like he needs to clarify. "She—" his voice falters. "She would've—" he stops, swallowing hard. "She would've loved Shane."

Yuna's expression softens deeply. There's no dismissal. No quick reassurance. Just understanding. She just nods, her hand resting lightly against his son's head now, her thumb brushing once over soft, dark hair.

"Both of them," he murmurs.

Yuna glances at him gently. There's something different in his expression, not just grief but something warmer.

"Of course she would."

"She was young," he says quietly. "Too young, honestly. Much younger than my father when she had me and my brother."

Yuna doesn't interrupt.

“She laughed a lot,” he continues, voice softening. “At everything. Even things that weren’t funny.” A faint, almost disbelieving smile tugs at his mouth. “She used to sing, all the time. Around the house. In the kitchen. It didn’t matter if anyone was listening.”

Yuna’s expression shifts—something gentle, something understanding. “She sounds wonderful.”

“She was,” Ilya replies, his thumb moves slowly over the baby’s back. “She’d pick me up and just... dance around with me. No music. Just her voice.” The memory lingers. “For a long time, I thought that was what everything was supposed to feel like,” he admits.

Yuna’s gaze softens. “And then?” she asks quietly.

Ilya’s jaw tightens slightly. “My father.”

The warmth doesn’t disappear, but it dims.

“Grigori didn’t like noise,” Ilya continues. “Didn’t like laughter. Said it was...careless.”

Yuna’s hand stills against the baby.

“He corrected it,” Ilya says.

The word is careful.

Too careful.

“She stopped singing first,” he adds. “Then the laughing. By the time I was older, she barely spoke unless she had to.”

Yuna exhales quietly. “Oh, Ilya...”

Ilya shrugs faintly, but there’s no dismissal in it. “I remember her before,” he says. “That’s the part that matters.” His gaze drops to his son again. “She would’ve held him all the time. Talked to him like he understood everything.” A faint breath of something almost like a laugh. “Spoiled him completely.”

Yuna smiles softly. “Sounds about right.”

Ilya glances at her, something fragile in the look. “I don’t want him to lose that,” he says quietly. “That... lightness. I don’t want him to grow up in something that takes that away.”

Yuna shifts closer, her hand settling against Ilya’s arm again. “He won’t,” she says gently.

Ilya exhales, something rough catching in it. “You don’t know that.”

Yuna meets his gaze, steady. “I know the people raising him,” she says.

“I don’t even know what I’m doing,” he admits, quieter now. “And she—she would’ve known. She would’ve—”

His voice breaks off again, and Yuna's hand shifts from the baby to Ilya's arm, steady and grounding.

"You're doing everything you can," she says softly. "Right now."

He shakes his head slightly. "It doesn't feel like enough."

Yuna squeezes his arm gently. "It never does," she says. "But love is enough to start."

Ilya finally looks at her, gaze watery and unshielded. "He'll never get to meet her," his voice breaks.

Yuna's gaze softens further. "No," she says quietly. "But he'll get to know her through you."

Ilya's breath catches, as a tear rolls down his cheek.

"He'll know who she was," Yuna continues, reaching up to wipe it away. "Because you'll tell him about her every day. You'll tell him about the laughing and the singing, and how happy she was, and he'll know how much she loved you."

Ilya sniffs, looking down at his son again, his hand shifting, more deliberate now. "I just wish she could see him, just once."

Yuna's hand cups his cheek, "I know sweetheart," Ilya closes his eyes for a second, leaning into her touch as the words land. "But he is a part of her, and a part of Shane, and a part of you..." Ilya exhales slowly, and nods against her palm. "She would be so proud of you, Ilya. Don't ever doubt that."

Ilya pulls away as another tear slips down his cheek, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of his son's head.

"Thank you," he says after a moment. "For listening about my mother." The words come quieter now. "I don't—" he hesitates briefly, searching. "I don't talk about her much anymore."

Yuna nods, understanding settling easily in her expression. "Some memories feel safer kept close."

Ilya huffs faintly. "Maybe, but it was good saying it all out loud."

Yuna's lips curve just slightly. "I'm glad," she says.

He nods once, then looks back down at his son.

Yuna lets the silence sit a second longer before stepping back. "I'm going to head back to the family room," she says. "I should be able to go see Shane soon."

Ilya looks up again, something steadier in his expression now. "Keep me posted?"

“Of course.” She hesitates for just a second, then blends down, brushing a soft kiss to her grandson’s head. “I’ll be back soon,” she murmurs.

The baby stirs faintly, settling again as Yuna straightens. She gives Ilya one last look—something warm, something reassuring, and turns toward the door.

As she walks out of the NICU to head back to the family room, the familiar weight of the hospital settles in again. But it’s different now. Not as sharp, not as heavy. Because this time, she isn’t waiting for loss. She’s waiting to see her son, and he is alive.

The room is still empty when she returns, no signs of Sergei or his replacement. So Yuna sits, hands folded neatly in her lap again. Posture straight and just as composed as before. This time though, there’s something steadier underneath it.

Shane is alive, the thought keeps her anchored. He’s stable. The surgeries were successful. His son is alive and safe and in Ilya’s arms.

So she waits, but not for long.

A nurse appears at the doorway, smiling softly as her eyes settle on Yuna.

“Mrs. Hollander?”

Yuna nods, already standing.

“Right this way, please.” the nurse says gently.

Yuna follows, doing her best to keep up as they move deeper into the hospital this time—past the softer edges, past the waiting areas and recovery rooms, into something more clinical, places meant for survival.

The nurse attempts to make small talk, updating Yuna on Shane’s condition, but all she can do is nod along. The nurse doesn’t seem to mind though, still chattering along as she waves her badge to open the doors.

They swing wide with a low mechanical hiss, and Yuna shivers. The air is cooler here, sharp and astringent. There’s a constant undercurrent of sound here—monitors beeping in staggered rhythms, ventilators cycling in distant rooms, the soft shuffle of nurses moving with practiced urgency.

Everything feels... heightened. Alive, but precarious.

Yuna’s steps do not falter, but she feels it. That old, familiar tension curling quietly in her chest.

They stop outside a room, and the nurse pauses, glancing at her. “I just want to prepare you.” she says softly, like she knows what Yuna is bracing for. “He’s stable, but he’s pretty banged up.”

Yuna inhales, nodding once. “Ok.”

The door opens, and Yuna steels her spine as she steps into the room.

It's dim, lit mostly by monitors and a single overhead light angled away from the bed. Machines surround Shane—not overwhelming, but enough to make it clear how much support his body still needs.

A cardiac monitor tracks his heart in steady, rhythmic beeps—green lines pulsing across the screen. Another monitor displays oxygen saturation, numbers blinking softly. An IV pole stands beside the bed, multiple lines running down—fluids, medication, something thicker that moves more slowly.

But it's the ventilator that draws the eye. A clear tube is secured at Shane's mouth, taped carefully in place, connected to the machine at his side. It breathes for him, a steady, mechanical rhythm—air pushed in and released. Again. And again. His chest rises with it, more pronounced than before—but not his own doing.

Yuna stops for just a fraction of a second. Because seeing him like this—still, silent, breathing because something else is making him... It hits her somewhere low and deep. Anger coils through her, and grief, but she doesn't step back. She moves forward.

Shane looks smaller like this. Not physically, not really, but diminished. The sedation has taken everything sharp out of him—the quick expressions, the constant movement, the life that usually sits just beneath his skin.

His skin is pale. Not lifeless—but drained, the warmth of his usual tone muted beneath everything he's been through. The freckles across his cheeks standing out more now against the paleness, like something fragile holding on.

Dark bruising shadows his face, a deep purple mark along his jaw. Another near his temple, partially hidden beneath strands of dark hair that have been pushed back unevenly. Strands still clinging faintly to his forehead like someone had wiped away blood or sweat in a hurry.

His lips are parted slightly around the tube, dry, the corners faintly cracked. And a crease between his brows—persistent even in unconsciousness. His body unwilling to completely let go.

Yuna's gaze moves lower as she steps to his side. Eyes roving down to where his right arm is secured in a rigid brace, wrapped tightly and immobilized against his side. The other arm free, though not untouched—IV lines taped carefully into place, faint bruising already forming where needles had gone in.

His hospital gown sits loosely on him, but not enough to hide the bandages wrapped around his midsection, just visible at the edge of the fabric. Her gaze travels lower, knowing what hides underneath, the aftermath of a surgery her son never should have had to receive.

Yuna exhales slowly, and reaches out, her hand hovering for just a moment before settling gently against his forearm—avoiding the IV.

Warm and alive and whole... Mostly.

The ventilator continues its steady rhythm beside them. Breathing for him. Keeping him here.

“Oh baby,” she says softly, a shaking hand reaching out to brush back his dark hair.

He doesn’t respond. Knows that he can’t thanks to the sedation, but oh how she wishes to see his freckled nose wrinkle, to hear him grumble about her messing up his hair. Instead the monitor answers in his place—steady beeps, unwavering.

“You made it,” she murmurs, voice calm as her eyes trace every detail again.

The bruising. The stillness. The unnatural rise and fall of his chest. Her son, held together by machines and skill and sheer will.

“Your son is here.” She says. “He’s ok.” Yuna leans down carefully, pressing a soft kiss to his temple—avoiding the bruised skin, choosing a place that’s still untouched. “He’s so beautiful, Shane, strong. Looks just like you did.”

Then she straightens, moving back to take the seat beside his bed. Her hand doesn’t leave him, not even as she scoots closer.

“He’s in the NICU.” Yuna says, thumb moving in slow, absent strokes over warm skin, voice quiet, careful not to disturb anything—even though she knows he can’t hear her.

Or maybe he can. No one ever really knows.

“Don’t worry, he’s ok. It’s just a precaution since he’s early. Ilya’s with him.” Yuna smiles. “I can’t wait for you to see them. He’s absolutely smitten, Shane. Scared out of his mind too, but he’s so in love.”

She glances toward the ventilator for a moment, listening to it breathe for him.

“He’s so careful,” Yuna continues. “Like he’s afraid to get it wrong. It’s literally the cutest thing. I think you’ll think so too.” Her gaze drifts back to Shane’s face. “He talked about his mother,” she says after a moment. “Has he told you about her? She sounded lovely,” Yuna continues. “Young. Warm. He said she laughed a lot. I think... I think your son would’ve liked her. I think you would have too.”

Her thumb stills for just a second before resuming its slow movement.

“He misses her,” she adds quietly. “More than he lets on, but I think that pushes him to want to do this right. For you and for the baby.” Her gaze softens again, something deeply maternal settling into her expression. “I know you didn’t get much say in how this all started, but you chose well,” she murmurs.

Yuna says nothing for a moment. Just watches Shane’s chest move up and down before she leans in slightly, her voice dropping just a fraction.

“I know you’re healing, but you need to come back, ok?” she says gently. “He’s waiting for you,” she adds. “Both of them are.”

The ventilator breathes in.

Out.

Yuna presses a soft kiss to his temple again, careful, lingering just a second longer this time, and sits back.

She stays there, beside the bed. Listening to the ventilator breathe. Watching the monitors flicker.

Waiting.

Chapter 18

The jet touches down smoothly, wheels kissing the runway with barely a jolt. The private airstrip is quiet. No crowds. No attention. Just a lone black SUV waiting on the stretch of dimly lit tarmac.

The engines wind down to a low hum, but Svetlana doesn't wait, already up and moving the moment the stairs are lowered. Bracing against the cold night air that hits her—sharp enough to bite, carrying the faint scent of fuel and night, grounding enough to steady the storm under her ribs.

Sergei waits at the base of the stairs, a dark silhouette against the floodlights, hands clasped behind his back, posture straight but not stiff.

"Madam," he greets, inclining his head as she steps onto the tarmac.

"Report," she replies immediately. They fall into step without pause, boots echoing softly against the pavement as they move toward the waiting vehicles.

"Location confirmed," Sergei says. "Rural property. Tree cover on three sides, one access road. We have it locked down."

Svetlana says nothing, but her pace doesn't slow.

"Everything is in place," he says, voice low. "Teams are positioned. Surveillance confirms Grigori is exactly where we expected and unaware." He pauses a moment. "We're waiting on your command."

Svetlana gives a small, tight nod as they reach the SUV, the door open and waiting for her. "Good," she says, gaze fixed somewhere beyond him—already seeing the end of this.

Sergei studies her for a moment. "How do you plan on handling this?" he asks carefully.

Svetlana turns toward him, her expression composed, almost eerily calm as the wind tugs at her coat. The question hangs in the cold air between them, but her gaze doesn't waver.

"You're asking what I intend to do?"

"Yes."

She exhales slowly, and for a split second all she can do is picture Shane bruised and broken, breathing through a machine in a hospital bed, while Ilya sits in the NICU, holding their son while doing his best to hold it together.

Something settles inside of her, hardens.

"I want him taken alive."

Sergei nods once. “And then?”

Svetlana steps closer. Her voice, when she speaks again, is quiet and controlled. “Then he’ll answer for what he did.”

Sergei says nothing, waits.

“I don’t want him to die quickly,” she continues. “I want him to be aware. He doesn’t get the mercy of not understanding.” Her jaw clenches. “He hurt Shane...nearly killed him, and he put their son at risk.” Each word lands sharper than the last. “I will not let him do to Shane and his son what he did to Irina and brush it off as some unfortunate accident.”

Svetlana’s gaze flicks briefly toward the dark horizon, then back to Sergei. “He doesn’t deserve a clean ending, so he will not get one.”

Sergei studies her before asking, “What does he get?”

Svetlana holds his gaze, unflinchingly. “He gets time. He gets to understand exactly what he’s done—every lie, every order, every consequence, every life he’s tried to break...” Her tone doesn’t rise, doesn’t waver. “He will answer for all the hurt he’s caused, and when he realizes there’s no escaping it... When he understands that no one is coming for him...” Svetlana shrugs. “Then he meets an ill-fated end.”

“You want to make it look like an accident?”

Svetlana’s face breaks out into a cold, sharp smile. “Yes.” she confirms. “Only fitting that Grigori’s life ends in one of those tragic little accidents he’s so fond of concocting.”

Sergei exhaled slowly, nodding once. “And his men?”

“Detain if possible,” she says. “They answer for their part. If they resist—”

Svetlana shrugs again, not finishing the sentence. She doesn’t have to, the message is clear enough.

There will be no loose ends.

Sergei inclines his head. “As you wish.”

Svetlana smiles again, this time warm and affectionate. “Thank you, Sergei.” she says as she slides into the back of the SUV, the door shutting behind her with a quiet, final sound.

Sergei rounds the front of the SUV before sliding into the driver's seat, glancing back at Svetlana in the rearview mirror. She meets his gaze as he hesitates and nods her confirmation one last time.

He reaches for his phone in the middle console, pressing a button before placing it to his ear. It rings once.

“Sir?”

“Cargo is secured.”

“Do we have confirmation to proceed?”

“Permission granted.”

Sergei ends the call, placing the phone back in the console, his grip tightens on the steering wheel, knuckles turning white, and then he exhales and puts the car in drive.

They cut through the outskirts of Ottawa like shadows, tires whispering over wet pavement. Inside the vehicle, Svetlana sits in silence, eyes fixed on the blurring darkness out her window, listening to the chatter coming from the ear piece Sergei had handed her the moment they’d hit the highway.

“Perimeter teams in position.”

“Thermal confirms two inside, one near the perimeter.”

“Grigori is in the main structure.”

“Window open. Outer patrol moving in.”

Svetlana doesn’t respond, she doesn’t need to. Her part in all of this is done.

For now.

In front of her, Sergei clears his throat and breaks the silence. “The turn off is ahead.”

Svetlana hums, but says nothing.

“Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

“It’s what needs to be done.” She replies matter of factly.

“Sveta... You don’t need to get your hands dirty.”

Anger burns inside her at his words. “Of course I do!” she snaps. “He is a stain that must be removed, and I will not let him hurt Ilya any longer. You will not change my mind.”

Sergei nods and says nothing else.

The SUV slows, turning off the highway onto tightly packed gravel, the vehicle moving at a crawl as Sergei cuts the lights. Ahead, barely visible in the darkness, beyond a thick line of trees, the home Grigori has been holed up in comes into view.

Under different circumstances, Svetlana might find the home cute—a moderately sized a-frame cabin, dimly lit and surrounded by forest. Quaint. Quiet. Somewhere to relax. Or in Grigori’s case, hide.

The SUV comes to stop between two others, in staggered positions hidden just out of sight by the treeline. Svetlana reaches for the door, but Sergei holds up a hand to stop her.

“Here, take this.” He says, opening the glove compartment and pulling out a small handgun.

She reaches out, hand steady, wrapping her fingers around the cool metal. Svetlana pulls back, eyeing the gun in her hand, checking the safety before tucking it into her boot.

She takes one breath, slow and controlled, then opens the door, stepping out in the cold night air. Sergei follows, taking the lead, his own weapon drawn as they make their way silently through the thinning trees.

The cabin sits in the center of a small clearing, its steep roof cutting sharply into the night sky. Warm light spills from the tall front windows, glowing gold against the dark woods. Smoke curls lazily from the chimney.

It looks peaceful.

It isn't.

Figures move in the shadows—Sergei's people, already in position. The perimeter is tight. No gaps. No escape.

Sergei slows, raising a hand. They stop.

A voice murmurs through Svetlana's earpiece, low and steady. “Threat at perimeter has been neutralized.”

“All units in position.”

“Three confirmed inside. One moving near the rear exit.”

“Awaiting command.”

Svetlana's gaze stays fixed on the cabin as Sergei glances back at her, searching her face one last time. “Say the word.”

She doesn't hesitate. “Go.”

Everything moves at once. Operators break from the treeline, closing in on the cabin from all sides. Silent. Precise. Two circle toward the back. Another pair takes the front. Sergei moves with the side team, Svetlana just behind him, her steps quiet against the forest floor.

Inside, a shadow crosses one of the windows, completely unaware.

Sergei gives a sharp nod, and the front door splinters inward with a controlled snap, wood cracking under force as the team floods inside. The man barely has time to react before he's disarmed and slammed face-first into the floor.

A second comes from the kitchen, gun half-raised. His shout stops abruptly as he's slammed back against the counter, weapon ripped from his hand. Quickly caught and restrained.

“Second secured.”

“Ground floor clear.”

Silence rushes back in, the chaos collapsing as quickly as it begins.

At Sergei’s nod, Svetlana steps inside.

The cabin is warm, the air thick with the scent of woodsmoke and something half-cooked on the stove. A mug sits abandoned on the table. A jacket thrown over a chair. So ordinary.

Her gaze lifts immediately to the upper level, watches as the team travels up the stairs, guns raised. Staircase creaking under their weight as they ascend. No one rushes. No one speaks.

At the top, a single door stands ajar, light spilling out into the hallway.

Sergei positions himself to one side, another operator to the other as Svetlana pushes open the door.

Grigori stands near the wide front windows, the sharp angle of the A-frame framing him in shadow and light, hands clasped behind him. A pistol resting loosely in his hand.

He turns as they enter. Slow, calculated. Not at all surprised. Icy blue gaze cold and assessing as he takes in Svetlana and the men behind her.

“Zdravstvuy, nevestka.” Hello, daughter-in-law.

Svetlana steps forward, unarmed, her expression calm. Behind her, weapons remain trained, unwavering.

“Drop the weapon,” Sergei orders.

Grigori doesn’t even look at him. His gaze stays locked on Svetlana, studying her like he’s trying to understand how this moment exists.

“You come all this way,” he says slowly. “For revenge?”

Svetlana stops a few feet away. “For accountability,” she replies.

A faint, humorless smile touches his mouth. “Call it whatever helps you sleep.”

For a split second, Shane flashes in her mind—bruised, broken, fighting to breathe. Ilya, trying to be strong for their son. Something inside her settles further. Harder.

“You hurt people who couldn’t fight back,” she says, voice steady. “You hide behind orders. Behind power you don’t earn.”

Grigori’s grip tightens slightly on the pistol. “And now you think you’ve won?”

Svetlana tilts her head, just a fraction. “No,” she says. “Now I know you’ve lost.”

The room feels smaller somehow. Tighter. Grigori looks at the door. The windows. The men behind her. Three of his own—gone. No exits. No options.

He exhales slowly. The fight drains out of him—not dramatically, but enough. Enough to understand.

Slowly, deliberately, he lowers the pistol. Sets it on the table beside him.

Sergei moves instantly, closing the distance, shoving him to his knees none to gently, binding his hands behind his back.

Grigori doesn't resist. His eyes lift back to Svetlana.

"What happens now?" he asks.

She steps closer. Close enough that he has to look up at her. Her expression is calm. Certain. Final.

"Now, you answer," she says. "For everything."

Grigori lets out a dry breath. "And if I don't?"

Svetlana holds his gaze. "You will."

Not a threat. A promise.

Outside, the first hint of dawn begins to bleed through the trees. Inside the cabin, the fire still burns.

The operation is over, but for Svetlana... This is only the beginning. But for Grigori? It's the end of him.

—

The room hasn't changed.

It still smells faintly of woodsmoke. The fire downstairs has burned lower now, the warmth lingering but no longer comforting. The tall A-frame windows frame the early light of dawn, pale and cold against the glass.

Grigori sits where they put him—hands restrained in front of him, secured to the heavy wooden table that had once held his drink, his plans, his illusion of control. Now it holds him. The same chair. The same space. Nothing to hide behind.

Footsteps approach, the door opening as Svetlana steps inside.

Alone.

Brave.

The door closes behind her with a quiet click.

Grigori watches her cross the room, slower this time, more deliberate. The faint smirk he wore before is still there—but thinner now. Tighter. He's already been sitting here long

enough to feel it. The stillness. The weight of the room.

“You didn’t even bother moving me,” he says. “Efficient.”

Svetlana pulls out the chair across from him and takes a seat. “No need,” she replies calmly.

Her gaze flicks briefly around the room—the windows, the table, the walls, before settling back on him.

“You chose this place,” she adds. “It seems appropriate.”

Grigori shifts slightly in his seat, the restraint giving a soft, unmistakable sound against the wood. He stills it quickly.

“You’ve secured the house,” he says, like he’s taking inventory. “My men?”

“In custody.” Svetlana looks at him for a moment, assessing. “They’re being treated better than you deserve,” she adds.

His jaw tightens—just slightly as silence settles between them.

Not empty, but heavy. The kind that fills the space whether you want it to or not.

Svetlana doesn’t rush. She lets him sit in it. Lets him hear the quiet crackle from downstairs. The faint creak of the cabin settling. The absence of voices that should be there.

Grigori’s gaze drifts, just for a second, to the window. Dawn. Time moving forward. Without him.

“You came alone,” he says finally, looking back at her. “Brave.”

Svetlana folds her hands on the table. “I don’t need anyone else for this.”

He huffs a quiet breath. “You think this is already over.”

“I know it is.”

No hesitation. No edge. Just fact.

That unsettles him more than anger would.

Svetlana studies him. Not as a threat. Not even as an enemy. Just... a man who hasn’t caught up yet. A cocky alpha afraid to accept the truth.

He shifts again, testing the restraint without thinking. The wood holds. The metal doesn’t give. The sound echoes faintly in the room.

Svetlana notices, of course she does.

“You’re still trying to calculate your way out,” she says. “There isn’t one.”

Grigori's eyes narrow. "There's always one."

"Not this time."

The silence stretches again. Longer. More uncomfortable.

Grigori's fingers flex against the restraint, tapping once against the wood. Then again. A small, unconscious rhythm.

Svetlana lets it continue, lets him feel the lack of control.

"You're not going to threaten me?" he asks eventually. "No dramatics?"

"No."

That answer comes too easily, throwing him. He expected something to push against, but there is nothing. Just cold, icy calm.

"So you came here already decided." he says after a beat, voice low.

Svetlana tilts her head slightly. "I came here already informed."

Grigori shifts, the restraint giving a soft sound against the wood. "You think you understand what happened."

"I understand enough. I understand what happened to Irina."

That name changes the air. Grigori's jaw tightens, subtle but immediate.

Svetlana watches it happen.

"You remember her," she continues quietly. "Your first wife? Of course you do. Courted a young and beautiful omega, spoiled her with gifts and kindness, trapped her with promises of forever and a family of her own..." Svetlana's lip curls in disgust. "And then you broke her. Reveled in the pain you caused with your words and your fists. Took everything inside of her that was happy and good, and twisted it into something cold and empty. Broke her down that the only way she felt like she could escape was to kill herself. Swept it all under the rug, labeled her as troubled, as sick... That her death was an accident, but it wasn't was it?"

Grigori says nothing, just looks away for half.

"Then you built a pattern," she says. "Irina wasn't the exception. She was the beginning."

Grigori exhales sharply. "You're simplifying something you were never part of."

"I don't need to be part of it to see it," she replies. "I just need to follow what's left behind."

Her gaze doesn't waver.

"Damage," she says. "People. The same story, over and over."

Grigori's shoulders shift, tension creeping in. "You're trying to make this personal."

"Then came Polina," Svetlana continues. "Another young omega that you bent until she broke. Another tragic little accident."

"I had nothing to do with Polina's death."

"You might not have been the one who pulled the trigger, but her death is on your hands. Just like Alexei."

Grigori's expression hardens—but it's thinner now. Defensive.

"You used him," she says. "Pushed him where you needed him. Let him carry consequences you created."

"He made his own choices."

Svetlana studies him. "Under pressure you applied," she says. "With outcomes you controlled." A beat. "That's not choice, that's manipulation."

Grigori doesn't answer. Because he can't—not without unraveling the whole thing.

"What was it you told Ilya when you broke the news of Alexei's overdose?" Svetlana pauses, but Grigori says nothing. "Oh that's right, that he was weak just like his mother. And then you wrote it off, turning his death into a tragedy that benefitted you once again. Then you turned your sights on Ilya. He stepped into Alexei's shoes and did everything you asked. Never pushed back. Never fought. But you underestimated him."

Grigori's voice is lower now. "My son is not as innocent as you think."

"I don't think he's innocent," she replies. "I think he survived you."

That lands. Hard.

Grigori exhales slowly, something in his composure slipping another fraction.

"And then Shane," she says.

Grigori's eyes flick back to her.

"You nearly killed him," she continues. "Not because you had to. Because it was easier than doing anything else."

"That was—"

"A decision," she interrupts. "Yours."

The word hangs there. Unavoidable.

"You reduced him to a variable," she says. "Something to move. To break. To discard."

Grigori's jaw tightens again, but there's less certainty behind it now. "He was in the way."

"And that justified it?" Svetlana leans forward slightly. "Or did you just stop needing justification?"

Silence stretches.

Grigori's fingers flex against the restraint, slower now. Less controlled.

"Do you see the pattern?" Svetlana asks.

It's not really a question.

"You take what you want," she continues. "You justify it with position. With hierarchy. With being an alpha. But that's not what this is."

Grigori's eyes narrow. "You don't get to define that."

"I don't need to," she says. "Your actions already have. Because you confuse authority with entitlement," she continues. "You think being an alpha means you don't answer to anyone."

Grigori leans back slightly, but it's not relaxed. It's distance. "That's how power works."

"No," she says. "That's how it corrupts."

Grigori looks at her, really looks this time. And for the first time, there's something uncertain in his expression.

"You let it blind you," Svetlana continues. "You stopped seeing people. You started seeing assets. Obstacles. Collateral. And now," she adds, "you're sitting in a room you thought you controlled, with someone you mistook for a pawn, and no one coming for you." A beat. "And you still think this is about power?"

Grigori's breathing shifts. "You're wrong," he says.

Svetlana doesn't argue. Doesn't push. Just watches him, letting the silence close in again.

"I did what was necessary," he says after a moment.

"For what?" she asks.

Simple. Direct. No accusation.

"Irina was a liability," he says after a moment. "She was unstable. Sick. One minute she was happy and laughing, the next she was drunk and sobbing in the bathtub. Some days she couldn't even get out of bed. I may have been too harsh on her," he admits. "But I needed someone stronger."

"So when she failed to meet expectations, you removed her," Svetlana says.

"I made a decision," he corrects, expression hardening "A necessary one."

“There you go again with that word. ‘Necessary’. Necessary for what?” she asks.

He does not hesitate. “For stability. For order. We were building something with Rozanov Holdings. I couldn’t let her taint the company’s image.”

“So you thought it was best that she died?”

“Irina killed herself!” Grigori hisses. “I did not make her swallow those pills.”

“Because of YOU, Grigori. Because all you did was belittle her. You ground out what spark she had and tried to make her into your perfect little doll.”

Grigori exhales sharply, something in him bristling back to life. “You don’t understand what it takes to hold something together when everything is trying to pull it apart. People hesitate. They doubt. They fracture. Control is the only thing that keeps it from collapsing.”

Svetlana tilts her head slightly. “Control,” she repeats.

“Yes,” he says, seizing it. “Decisive. Absolute. Without it, you lose everything.”

She studies him for a moment. “You mean you lose everything.”

Grigori’s jaw tightens. “It’s the same thing.”

“No, it isn’t.” She replies. “And Polina? Was she just another Irina?”

“Something like that.” Grigori says.

“And Shane?”

Grigori exhales, slower this time. “Was a threat to everything.”

“How?”

“He complicated things.”

Svetlana doesn’t react. “That’s not an answer.”

Grigori’s jaw tightens.

“He’s young,” he says. “Inexperienced. Still in университет University—“

Svetlana’s gaze doesn’t waver. “So being twenty-one is a liability now?”

“It is when someone like him is pulled into something like this,” Grigori snaps.

Svetlana leans back slightly. “He wasn’t pulled into anything. What happened to him was not his choice.”

Grigori’s expression flickers—irritation, discomfort. “He is still a complication,” he insists. “An unpredictable one.”

Svetlana tilts her head.

“Unpredictable,” she repeats. “Or visible?”

Grigori exhales, slower this time. “You’re ignoring the implications,” he says. “A situation like that in the public eye—”

“There it is,” she cuts in softly.

Grigori’s jaw tightens. “It creates exposure.”

“How?”

“He doesn’t belong in our world,” Grigori says, more forcefully now. “Not with that level of visibility. Not with what he represents.”

Svetlana’s eyes narrow slightly. “And what does he represent?”

“A mistake. A liability to the Rozanov reputation. To continuity. To control.”

Svetlana doesn’t blink. “No,” she says. “Try again. That’s still vague.”

“He’s an outsider,” Grigori snaps. “Young, untested, connected to the organization through circumstances no one planned for—circumstances that can’t be managed cleanly.”

Svetlana leans forward slightly now. “So all of this is because he exists,” she says.

Grigori doesn’t respond.

“Because he is young and an omega and male.” She continues. “And people will ask questions. You don’t like questions.”

Grigori’s fingers tighten against the restraint.

“You think this is about discomfort?” he pushes. “It’s about stability. Optics matter. Structure matters. If people start questioning leadership, succession—”

“Ah.” Svetlana’s expression shifts—just slightly, something sharper settling into place. “Succession,” she repeats.

Now it’s clear.

“He disrupts the narrative,” Grigori says, quieter now but more intense. “A situation like that introduces doubt. Complication. It weakens perception.”

Svetlana studies him. “So a twenty-one-year-old college student,” she says slowly, “who had no choice in what happened to him... is a threat to a multi-million-dollar organization.”

When she says it out loud, it sounds exactly as hollow as it is.

Grigori’s jaw tightens. “You’re minimizing it.”

“No,” she says. “I’m clarifying it.”

“He is an abomination. That thing growing in his womb should not exist.” Grigori spits. “He was a threat and he needed to be neutralized.”

Svetlana leans forward slightly. “He is a person,” she says. “Who had a terrible thing happen to him. And that thing? Is your grandson whether you like it or not. And you turned them into collateral damage.”

Grigori exhales through his nose, irritation breaking through. “Don’t pretend you care about collateral damage.”

“I don’t,” she says simply. “I care about patterns, and yours is predictable.” She leans forward now, just slightly. “You create distance. You give orders. You let other people take the consequences.” Her gaze holds his. “You tell yourself it isn’t personal.”

Grigori chuckles. “You think you’re better than this?” he presses. “You think you wouldn’t make the same calls if you were in my position?”

“I am in your position,” she says calmly. “And I didn’t do what you did,” she continues. “I didn’t reduce people to tools.”

Grigori shakes his head, frustration slipping through. “Then you’re naïve.”

“Or I’m not corrupted.”

“You’re twisting this,” he says. “You’re taking decisions that had to be made and turning them into something else.”

“I’m not twisting anything,” she replies. “I’m removing your justification.”

Silence. Heavy and unavoidable.

“You needed control,” she says. “That’s what you keep telling yourself. But you weren’t holding anything together,” she continues. “You were tightening your grip until everything around you broke.”

“You don’t understand what it’s like to carry that kind of responsibility.” Grigori says, voice low and rough.

Svetlana meets his gaze. “I understand it better than you think, and I know it doesn’t require destroying people to maintain it.”

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Did I cry while writing this? Yes.

At first, there's nothing.

No pain. No thoughts. No sense of time.

Just a vast empty darkness cocooning him.

He floats there, suspended in it—untethered and weightless, like he's been set adrift in something endless.

There's no up. No down. No sense of where his body begins or ends.

Only the quiet dark.

Until it isn't.

Beep... Beep... Beep...

The sound cuts through the blackness. Slow and steady, but out of place. It doesn't belong here.

Or maybe he doesn't.

He listens to it without understanding, the rhythm threading through the void like something trying to reach him. It echoes strangely, hollow and distant, as if it's traveling a long way to find him.

Beep... Beep... Beep...

The darkness shifts. Not visibly, or in any way he can name, but something is different.

The beeping grows louder, closer now. Closer to him. Or maybe he's the one moving. He doesn't know. Perhaps he is being pulled slowly and inevitably toward it.

He feels it then. A settling sensation, like gravity returning piece by piece. A pressure building slowly then all at once too much.

He can feel it now.

Feel his body.

Or what he thinks is his body.

It feels wrong. Heavy and unfamiliar in a way he's never experienced before. Like it's been left behind too long and he's only just found it again—like it isn't his. Like he's been put back into something that doesn't quite fit.

Beep... Beep... Beep...

The sound is faster now. Racing. Echoing in the darkness. No longer distant, but right there—too loud, too sharp, cutting through everything.

It hurts.

Not in a way he can place. Not in one spot. Just... everywhere. Like the sound itself is pressing into him, splitting the silence apart and dragging him with it.

He struggles against it.

It isn't a choice, but instinct.

His body jerks somewhere far away as panic surges up fast and violent. He tries to breathe and something blocks it, something deep in his throat that doesn't belong, doesn't move, doesn't let him pull in air the way he needs to.

His chest tightens, straining around it as he tries for another breath. It catches, his lungs refusing to expand, to work the way they should.

“...he's starting to fight the tube—”

A broken, choking reflex tears through him, weak but desperate, and it only makes everything worse. Pain blooms deeper now—dull and wrong, spreading through his ribs like they've forgotten how to move.

Beep—beep—beep—beep—

“He's bucking the tube—”

“—heart rate's spiking!”

“Pull it—”

Something moves, sudden and wrong.

It slides out of his throat, dragging against something raw and oversensitive, and his body reacts violently to the absence. A broken, choking gasp tears into his lungs.

The absence is worse.

Air slams into his lungs all at once.

Too much. Too fast. Too cold.

He gasps—no, chokes—his body seizing as he tries to pull it in, coughing weakly, unevenly, every muscle in his chest locking up around the effort.

It burns.

His throat is shredded, every inhale scraping, every exhale uneven and shaking apart before it finishes.

“Good, that’s good—”

“Easy...easy, you’re ok—”

It doesn’t feel ok. It burns.

A mask settles over his face—cool oxygen flooding in, artificial and thin.

“Slow breaths, Shane. That’s it.”

He can’t follow it. Not really.

He tries.

God, he tries.

Each breath stutters, catches, then forces its way through anyway. His body is still too far ahead of him, lungs dragging in air too fast. His chest rising and falling in sharp, uneven pulls that don’t quite match what he’s trying to do.

Beep... Beep... Beep...

The beeping starts to slow—just slightly.

Still loud, still there, but no longer spiraling out of control.

“He’s stabilizing—”

The darkness around him shifts. Cracking, splitting open at the edges to let light filter in.

At first, it’s faint. Just a dull glow pressing against the black, like something waiting on the other side. Then brighter. Too bright. Bleeding through in thin fractures, sharp and blinding, forcing against his closed eyes even though he hasn’t opened them yet.

“Stay with us, Shane.”

His eyes move beneath heavy lids. Everything feels thick. Slowed. Like he has to fight through something just to exist.

“Can you hear me?”

He can.

At least he thinks so.

He tries to respond.

It hurts.

Everything hurts.

His fingers twitch, and his lips part. At least he thinks they do.

“There—see that? He’s responding. Dial back the sedation further.”

The darkness thins further. Not gone entirely, but lighter, pressing in at the edges.

“Shane, can you try to open your eyes?”

He tries.

His lids twitch, resisting at first. It feels like too much. Like dragging something weighted, something not meant to move yet.

They crack open finally.

Light floods in, blinding and harsh. Too white. Burning across his vision and forcing his eyes to squeeze shut again almost immediately.

A weak, strained sound escapes him—more instinct than intention. A weak, broken rasp that barely exists outside of him.

“Someone lower the lights.”

“Sorry about that, Shane. Can you try again?”

He does, slower this time. Eyes opening just enough to let the light in without overwhelming him completely.

Everything is blurred—smears of color and movement that don’t quite form into anything real.

A ceiling above him. Fluorescent lights. Shadows shifting at the edges.

His head shifts slightly, sluggish, like it takes effort just to exist.

The blurs sound him being to sharpen—edges forming slowly, painfully, like the world is being put back together in front of him.

Shapes become figures. Figures become faces. Not clear yet. Not fully. But close.

Beep... Beep... Beep...

The familiar sound anchoring him.

He blinks again, vision struggling to focus as awareness pushes in harder now, sharper, bringing something else with it—confusion. Fear.

The beginning of panic curling low in his chest.

Where...where is he?

His breathing stutters.

The monitor answers immediately—

Beep—beep—beep—beep

“Shhhh. Honey, it’s ok. It’s ok.”

The voice is different now. Gentle and familiar.

His mom.

The blur shifts, sharpens just enough for him to make out her face leaning over him—eyes red, exhausted, relief breaking across her features all at once.

“Oh Shane,” her voice waivers, tears streaming down her face. “I’m so happy you’re awake, baby.”

Her hand is suddenly in his, soft and warm—but it doesn’t ground him.

Because something’s wrong.

Something is—

“Ilya–Honey!” she calls, her voice breaks. “He’s awake!”

Ilya.

The name hits like a spark.

Shane’s gaze jerks, searching, unfocused and frantic until he sees him, a whine building in his torn throat.

“Hey, hey, solnishko, I’m here.” Ilya croons, voice low and urgent as he swoops in beside Shane’s mother. “I’m here.”

The room is wrong.

Too bright. Too white. Too loud.

His body is wrong.

Heavy. Aching. Disconnected in pieces that don’t quite fit together.

His head throbs, a deep, pulsing ache behind his eyes—but beneath that, deeper than the pain, there's something else.

Something missing.

He knows it. He doesn't understand it yet, but he knows.

And then it hits. Not slowly. Not gently. But all at once.

Headlights. Too bright. Too fast. Horns blaring. Tires screaming. Hayden's wide panicked eyes. The violent crushing screech of metal on metal.

Shane's breath stutters violently, a broken gasp tearing through his aching throat.

"No—" he rasps.

Or tries to. His throat too shredded to make a sound.

His eyes go wide, panic detonating in his chest as the memory crashes into something else—the baby.

His hand jerks, weak and uncoordinated, ripping free from where it had been resting as he tries—tries—to reach down. To feel, to check. Clumsy, shaking fingers dragging across the blanket until they reach his stomach.

His flat stomach.

No, no, no, no.

His fingers press in harder, frantic now, sliding over unfamiliar contours—bandages, tight and wrong beneath his touch.

Gone.

It's gone.

An almost silent strangled, broken sound rips out of him, panic surging so fast it steals what little breath he has.

"If he doesn't calm down we'll need to sedate him again."

"Shane, honey, please—"

beepbeepbeepbeep

"Solnishko, it's ok—"

Tears spill from his eyes, blurring everything as his hand claws weakly at the bandages, like if he just presses hard enough it'll change—like it'll undo it—

"He—where—" Shane chokes, each word ravaging his throat. "I—I—I—where—"

His whole body trembles, weak but desperate, trapped in a panic he can't escape.

"I—lost—" he gasps, shaking his head, tears slipping into his hair. "I lost—him—"

A broken sound tears out of his throat.

He can't breathe.

He can't breathe.

His chest heaves, panic clawing its way up his throat, his heart racing so fast the monitor spikes—

beepbeepbeepbeep

"Shane—hey, hey—slow down—"

"Sir, you need to move."

"Solnishko."

Ilya's hands come up to bracket either side of his face, grip gentle but firm.

"I lost him—" Shane whimpers.

"No, you didn't."

Shane barely hears him. Or maybe he doesn't believe him. Because the panic is louder. Because the guilt is louder.

"I—should've—" Shane gasps. "I couldn't—"

"Shane." Ilya barks. "Look at me."

Shane's eyes flicker, unfocused, desperate—but they find him.

"He's ok."

"He's—" he asks, barely a whisper, like saying it too loud will make it real. "I—I didn't lose him?"

Ilya's expression softens, something fragile and relieved breaking through the tension.

"No," he says, quieter now but just as sure. "You didn't lose him."

Shane's chest stutters. "What—?"

"He's in the nursery," Ilya continues quickly, like he knows Shane is hanging on every word. "He's safe. He's breathing on his own. He's—" His voice catches for half a second before he forces it steady again. "He's perfect."

The words don't land all at once.

They sink in slowly.

Piece by piece.

Shane's breathing falters, uneven, like his body doesn't know what to do with that kind of relief.

"He's... alive?" he asks, tears still spilling, voice trembling.

"Yes, solnishko."

Something in Shane breaks. Not panic this time, but relief. His body goes slack against the bed, a sob tearing out of him—raw, exhausted, overwhelmed. His shoulders shake, breath hitching as the tension that's been holding him together snaps all at once.

"I thought—I thought he—"

"I know," Ilya murmurs, his thumb brushing gently against Shane's cheek, trying to steady him. "I know."

Instinctively, Ilya leans closer.

Closer than he should in a hospital room.

Closer because his alpha is screaming for him to fix this, to calm his omega, to wrap him in something familiar and safe.

His scent should be there. Should be grounding. Should be enough to pull Shane out of the spiral. But it isn't. The air is sterile. Flat. Filtered. Scent blockers dulling everything down to nothing.

Ilya feels it immediately.

The absence.

The way Shane keeps shaking, keeps gasping for breath like he can't quite come back down.

It's wrong.

"Hey—hey, you're ok." Ilya says softly, trying anyway, his voice taking over where instinct can't. "I've got you, ok? I've got you."

Shane nods weakly, but his hands still tremble, fingers curling uselessly against the blanket.

"I need—" he chokes, not even sure what he's asking for. "I need—him—"

"You'll see him," Ilya promises immediately. "As soon as they clear it, I swear."

Shane lets out a shaky, broken exhale. His grip tightens weakly around Ilya's sleeve, like letting go isn't an option.

Ilya feels the tremors still running through him. Sees it in the way Shane's chest won't quite settle, in the way his fingers cling to his sleeve like letting go means losing something again.

So he doesn't let the silence come back.

"He's small," Ilya says quietly, a faint, almost disbelieving smile breaking through his voice. "So malenkiy... I didn't think someone could be that small and still be so... loud."

Shane's breath stutters, but he smiles.

"He hates being cold," he continues. "I held him for hours and not a peep, and then the second they moved him, he started yelling at everyone like he had a personal vendetta."

Shane lets out a weak, broken huff of breath—something that almost resembles a laugh, even through the tears.

"Yeah," Ilya whispers, softer now, encouraged. "Already so dramatic." His fingers tighten slightly around Shane's hand. "He's got your nose," he adds after a beat. "And your mouth—like, exactly. And his hair..." Ilya exhales, something warm settling into his tone. "It's dark. Not as dark as yours. Softer. Your mother says it'll curl."

Shane's grip tightens just a little more. His breathing still isn't steady—but it's slower now. Less frantic.

"He curls his fingers around everything," Ilya continues, voice dropping quieter, more intimate. "My hand, the blanket... anything he can reach. Like he doesn't want to let go." He glances down where Shane holds on to him. "I think he gets that from you."

Shane's eyes squeeze shut, another tear slipping free—but this time it isn't sharp with panic.

"He's strong," Ilya says, more firmly now. "Stronger than they expected. He's breathing on his own. They kept him in the NICU for a few days..." He leans in closer, forehead almost brushing Shane's temple. "But he's ok," he repeats gently. "I promise you. He's ok."

Shane's chest rises, then falls—still uneven, still fragile—but no longer spiraling.

"He fits right here—" Ilya shifts slightly, pressing a hand lightly to his own chest. "—like he already knew where he belonged."

Shane's fingers curl tighter in his sleeve and Ilya brushes his thumb along Shane's cheek one more time.

"—and he's got this little wrinkle right here when he frowns," Ilya murmurs, brushing his thumb gently along Shane's cheek. "Like he's already judging everyone in the room."

A faint, breathless sound escapes Shane—something softer than before, almost there.

“And his hands—” Ilya starts again, but—

“Oh, his hands,” Yuna cuts in softly from the other side of the bed, her voice warm despite the tears still clinging to it.

Shane’s gaze shifts—slow, unfocused—but finds her.

She smiles at him, shaky and bright all at once.

“Shane, baby... he looks so much like you,” she says, her voice catching just slightly. “I mean it. The second I saw him, I thought—that’s my boy all over again.”

Shane’s brow knits faintly, like he’s trying to picture it.

“He has your cheeks,” she continues, reaching out to gently smooth his hair back from his forehead. “And the same little pout you had when you didn’t get your way.” A soft, watery laugh escapes her. “You used to make that exact face at me,” she adds. “Like the world had personally offended you.”

Ilya huffs quietly under his breath, the corner of his mouth lifting.

“Still does,” he murmurs.

Yuna smiles wider at that, glancing at Ilya briefly before looking back at Shane.

“And his nose—oh, it’s yours,” she says, more certain now. “Not even a question. I’d recognize it anywhere.”

Her thumb brushes lightly over Shane’s temple, grounding, affectionate.

“He’s beautiful,” she whispers. “Just like you were.”

Shane’s throat works around the words, emotion rising again—but softer this time, less sharp. “...really?” he rasps.

“Really,” Yuna says immediately, nodding. “I promise.”

A beat.

“I can’t wait to hold him,” she adds, her voice softening even more, something full and aching and hopeful threading through it. “I’ve been waiting for this since you were just a baby yourself.” Her smile trembles, but it holds. “And now I get to hold your baby?” she exhales, almost disbelieving. “It doesn’t feel real.”

Shane’s eyes flutter, overwhelmed again—but not with panic this time. With something warmer. Something steadier.

“...I wanna see him,” he whispers again, voice fragile but clearer this time.

“You will,” Ilya promises immediately. “As soon as you’re able to, I’ll have them bring him up.”

Yuna nods beside him, her hand still resting gently against Shane’s hair.

“It won’t be too much longer, sweetheart. ” she says softly. “He’s right here and he’s not going anywhere.”

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

I felt like we all needed some happiness

Every day since waking feels like a lifetime, and nothing at all.

The ICU fades into something quieter, less urgent—but not better. Just... slower.

Shane is moved to a step-down unit, the lights softer, the machines fewer, but the damage still there—mapped across his body in ways he can't ignore. His right arm is immobilized in a cast, heavy and useless at his side. Every breath reminds him of his ribs—sharp, deep aches that bloom with even the smallest movement.

Turning hurts.

Sitting up hurts.

Existing hurts.

Bruises bloom everywhere—dark, mottled reminders of something he still can't fully bring himself to remember all at once.

And beneath it all...the absence.

The first day after he's woken up, they explain it to him.

Careful in that clinically detached way that all doctors have, but also gently. Too gently for something that big. Using words like emergency, necessary, complications. And the big one, the one that leaves Shane feeling carved out and raw—hysterectomy.

It lands, but doesn't fully sink in.

Just scrapes at the bruised and broken bits inside him. Hovering at the back of his mind, not gone but not completely forgotten. Just distant, like the word and all that entails didn't happen to him. Like it and the tragedy it brings belongs to someone else.

Shane nods when they talk. Lets them explain. Lets them check him over. Answers when he can, voice still raspy and throat still aching, but it doesn't touch him the way it should. Not yet. Not now. There is no space for it. Not when every thought keeps circling back to one thing—his son.

He asks about him constantly.

At first gently.

Then insistently.

Then desperately.

“Please,” Shane rasps the third morning he’s awake, voice still rough, still not quite recovered. “Please, I just—I need to see him.”

The nurse hesitates in the doorway, clipboard tucked against her chest, eyes flicking briefly to the monitors, then back to him.

“You’re still recovering,” she says carefully. “Dr. Anderson hasn’t cleared you to hold him yet—”

“I don’t need to hold him,” Shane cuts in quickly, the words scraping on the way out. His breath catches, ribs protesting, but he pushes through it. “I won’t touch him if you don’t want me to, I just—please. I just need to see him.”

The room goes quiet. Ilya shifts beside him but doesn’t interrupt, his hand resting lightly against Shane’s shoulder—steady, grounding.

Shane swallows hard, throat raw, eyes already shining.

“Please,” he says again, softer this time. “I’m not above begging. I just—I haven’t seen him... I need to know he’s real.”

Something in the nurse’s expression softens, just slightly. She exhales, glancing toward the hallway like she’s weighing it, calculating risk versus need.

“You really won’t try to hold him?” she asks.

Shane shakes his head immediately—too fast, wincing as it pulls at everything. “No. I swear. I’ll stay still. I just—please.”

She glances from Shane to Ilya, who nods.

“Alright.”

The word hits him like air after drowning.

“I’ll call down to the nursery,” she says, reaching into her pocket. “But he stays in the bassinet. No lifting, no contact unless Ilya or I am there. Understood?”

Shane nods quickly, breath hitching again. “Yes. Yes, I understand.”

It takes too long. Every second stretches, heavy and unbearable, as Shane stares at the door like he can will it open. His fingers twitch against the blanket, restless, anxious.

“What if—” he starts, voice breaking slightly. “What if he—”

“He’s ok, moy solnishko.” Ilya says quietly, squeezing his shoulder. “You’ll see.”

Shane nods, but it doesn’t stop the tension coiling in his chest.

Not until the door opens, and Shane’s nurse rushes to hold the door for a small rolling bassinet to be guided into the room.

“Hey Daddies!” greets the nurse bringing his son closer. “I brought a present for you!”

Ilya moves closer—hovering, steady, anchoring him in place as Shane’s breath catches at the sight, so hard it almost hurts worse than the ribs.

“You ok?” he asks quietly.

Shane nods again.

He’s not, not really, but that doesn’t matter.

His nurse cloves the door behind them, moving to adjust his bed, raising it just enough so he can sit at an incline without putting too much strain on his ribs. Even that makes him wince, breath hitching as pain flares through his chest.

“Remember, no lifting... No sudden movements...” she says.

Shane nods, barely a dip of his head. He’s afraid to move at all. Doesn’t think that he can. His eyes stay glued to the bassinet as it’s wheeled into position beside him, angled just enough so he can see inside.

A sob hiccups out of him as he finally sees—really sees his son for the first time.

His breath stutters, catching painfully in his chest as his ribs protest, but he doesn’t look away. He can’t.

“Oh my god” he whispers, voice breaking completely.

His son is tiny.

Smaller than Shane imagined.

Smaller than anything he was prepared for.

Swaddled tightly in a soft hospital blanket, his face barely visible—pink, delicate, impossibly fragile.

So small it almost doesn’t feel real.

Shane’s vision blurs instantly. Tears spill over before he can stop them, his chest rising in a shaky, uneven breath that he tries—and fails—to steady.

“Oh,” he whispers, the sound barely there.

He leans his head slightly, just enough to get a better look, careful of every movement, every breath. Like too much might break something.

Their son shifts faintly, a small movement beneath the blanket, his face scrunching for a second before settling again. Shane lets out a soft, broken sound that almost turns into a laugh.

“He’s—” Shane swallows, voice catching hard. “He’s so little.”

Ilya nods, “Our little malen'kiy prints.”

Shane nods weakly, unable to look away. His left hand lifts instinctively—then stops halfway. Hovering. Remembering.

He clenches his fingers slightly, pulling it back toward himself instead, respecting the boundary even though every instinct in him screams otherwise.

“It’s okay, here,” the nurse says gently, reading the way Shane’s hand hovers and pulls back, unsure. She steps closer, careful, and reaches into the bassinet. “You can touch him.”

Shane freezes, not sure he heard her right.

“You’re sure?” he asks, voice barely there, fragile with disbelief.

The nurse smiles softly, already adjusting the blanket as she carefully lifts his son.

“Of course,” she says gently. “He’ll stay supported. Just be careful not to strain your sutures.”

Shane’s breath catches as they move closer, everything in him going still.

“Alright,” the nurse murmurs, lowering his son slowly, one hand supporting his head, the other steadying his body as she settles him across Shane’s lap, angled so he can see him clearly. “We’ve got him—just don’t try to lift him.”

His left hand hovers uncertainly near the edge of the blanket, trembling, not quite touching. His right stays useless in the cast at his side, heavy and frustrating—but it doesn’t matter.

Not right now.

Because he’s here.

The weight of him in Shane’s lap is barely anything, but it feels like everything. A small, warm presence resting across his lap, real in a way nothing else has been since he woke up.

“Go on, Dad, it’s ok.” The nurse says, smiling at him softly. “You won’t break him.”

Shane’s breath catches. His hand trembles as he lifts it again—slow, cautious, like he’s approaching something sacred. Like he’s afraid even the air might hurt him.

The nurse keeps a steadying hand beneath his son, making sure he's secure as his fingers hover for a moment over that tiny, pink face. Then he exhales, bringing his fingers closer in a barely there touch. Just the softest brush of his fingertips against his son's cheek.

"Oh..." he whispers, voice breaking all over again.

His son stirs at the contact, mouth opening in a small, searching motion, and Shane lets out a broken, breathless sound that's half sob, half laugh.

"That's it," she says softly. "You're doing great."

Shane barely hears her.

His eyes are locked on his son—on the tiny rise and fall of his chest, the soft golden skin, the dark wispy strands that cling lightly to his head in some places while sticking up in others, already hinting at something more.

Shane can picture it in his mind even now, thickening, curling, falling into messy waves that refuse to be tamed. Just like Ilya's.

"Hi," he whispers, tears slipping freely down his cheeks. "Hi, my little love. I'm here. Dad—" his voice catches, "Daddy's right here."

His fingers tremble as he brushes them lightly over his son's downy-soft hair. A little more confident now. A little less afraid.

The strands are impossibly soft beneath his touch, fine and warm, and Shane lingers there—like he's memorizing the feeling, like he's afraid he might forget it if he lets go too soon.

He settles again, calm beneath Shane's touch.

Shane exhales shakily, his chest rising just enough to remind him of the ache still threaded through his ribs—but it feels distant now. Secondary.

"You know me already, don't you?" he murmurs, voice soft and uneven, but steadier than before.

His thumb brushes gently along the side of his head again, careful, reverent.

"You're so beautiful," he whispers.

His son shifts slightly, turning just a fraction toward the warmth of Shane's hand before his eyes open.

A quiet, breathless laugh slips out of Shane, fragile but real as he takes them in. Dark. A deep, warm brown, the exact same shade as his own.

"Oh..." His breath leaves him in a quiet, shattered exhale.

His son blinks slowly, unfocused, but awake. Looking somewhere in Shane's direction, like he's trying to understand the world he's just entered.

Shane's entire expression softens, something in him melting completely at the sight.

"Hi," he whispers again, voice low and full of something new. Something steady. "There you are, Maksim."

He blinks again, slow and quiet, his tiny face relaxing as he settles under Shane's voice. Shane smiles through his tears, something fragile but whole breaking through for the first time.

"Maksim? Is that his name?" the nurse asks softly, glancing between them as she keeps a steady hand beneath the baby.

Shane nods, the movement small but certain.

"Yeah," he breathes, his gaze never leaving his son. "Maksim."

The name feels different out loud now.

Real.

Anchored.

"It suits him," the nurse says gently, a quiet warmth in her voice.

Shane's lips tremble into something that almost resembles a smile. "Ilya and I—we talked about it," he says, voice soft but steadier now. "It means... strong. Resilient...felt right."

Maksim shifts faintly, settling deeper, his tiny face smoothing out as he rests beneath Shane's touch.

Shane remembers the night they chose it.

They were laying in his nest—blankets tangled, soft and familiar, the faintest traces of both their scents wrapped around them. Shane lay half sprawled across Ilya, skin to skin, his head tucked into the space beneath Ilya's chin, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

It was late. Or early, depending on how you looked at it.

But they had laid there, soaking in the quiet. Just breathing. Just being.

"What about names?" Shane murmured, voice drowsy, absentminded as his fingers traced lazy patterns across Ilya's chest.

Ilya hummed softly, his hand moving slow and grounding along Shane's back. "You've been thinking about it?"

“Maybe,” Shane admitted, a small smile in his voice. “We should probably, you know... figure that out before he gets here.”

Ilya huffed a quiet laugh, pressing a kiss into Shane’s hair. “That might be helpful, yeah.”

They toss out a few.

Some serious.

Some not.

Shane wrinkled his nose at one. “No. Absolutely not. That sounds like a CEO, not a baby.”

Ilya laughed quietly beneath him. “He will be a CEO one day.”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t need to sound like one fresh out of the womb.”

They settled again after that, drifting in the quiet.

“Maksim,” Ilya said, almost offhand. Like it just came to him.

Shane stills slightly against him. “...Maksim?”

Ilya hummed. “Maksim. It means strong. Enduring.” His hand smooths slowly up and down Shane’s back. “Like you.”

Shane blushed, as he rolled the name around in his head.

Let it sit.

“Maksim,” he repeated, tilting his head up slightly, just enough to look at Ilya. “Maksim Hollander-Rozanov,” he murmured, testing it.

Ilya smiled—small, but real. “Maksim Hollander-Rozanov... I like that.”

Shane settled back down against him, something warm and certain blooming in his chest. “I like it too,” he whispered.

Ilya pressed another kiss into his hair, holding him a little closer. “Then that’s his name.”

The memory fades gently, folding back into the present.

“Oh, absolutely perfect for this little guy then!” she chuckles.

Shane nods.

The movement is small, careful—but there’s nothing uncertain about it now.

“Maksim,” he repeats under his breath, like he’s grounding himself in it as he stares down at his son.

Ilya's hands move into Shane's line of sight, pulling his gaze towards him as steps closer, one hand sliding carefully beneath Maksim's head, the other supporting his small body. It's instinctive—gentle, practiced in a way that says he's already done this a dozen times in the past few days because he has.

Unlike Shane.

Ilya glances at the nurse for permission, and she nods with a smile.

"I've got him," Ilya murmurs softly, more to Shane than anyone else.

Shane's hand lingers for just a second longer before he lets go, his fingers trailing lightly over the blanket like he's reluctant to break contact as Maksim is lifted.

The absence is immediate. A brief, sharp ache in Shane's chest that has nothing to do with his ribs.

Quickly erased as Ilya shifts again, lowering himself onto the edge of Shane's bed, angling himself so Maksim is still right there between them, supported securely in his arms but close enough that Shane can still see every detail.

Close enough to be together.

"There," Ilya says quietly, adjusting the blanket slightly. "Much better."

Shane exhales shakily, something in him easing again as he looks at Ilya, then Maksim.

His family.

He shifts just slightly, wincing as his ribs protest, but he doesn't stop. His left hand lifts again, slower this time, more certain, coming to rest lightly against Maksim's side where Ilya holds him.

Not holding.

But there.

The three of them settle into it.

Not perfect. Not easy.

But real.

The nurse lingers nearby for a moment, watching the quiet way they fit together—Shane propped carefully against the pillows, pale and bruised but smiling through it; Ilya steady at his side, their son cradled securely between them.

Something about it makes her pause.

"Do you... want me to take a picture?" she offers gently.

Shane blinks, like the idea hasn't even occurred to him. "A—picture?" he echoes softly.

Ilya glances up, then back at Shane. "Please."

The nurse smiles, already pulling out a phone. "I'll make it quick."

Ilya shifts just slightly, angling himself so Shane can lean in without straining too much, one arm still securely supporting Maksim while leaving space for Shane to be close.

Shane leans as much as he can, his left hand resting gently against the blanket, his head tipping just slightly toward them.

It hurts.

Everything still hurts.

But he doesn't care.

"Ready?" the nurse asks softly.

Shane looks down one more time—at Maksim, then up at Ilya, and something settles fully into place.

"Ready," he says.

The moment freezes—Shane, tear-streaked and fragile but smiling. Ilya, steady and close, something fierce and soft in his eyes as he looks at Shane. Maksim, small and perfect between them.

Together. A family at last.

Chapter 21

The room is quiet, not in that suffocating way that presses in on your ears, but full, weighted.

Grigori sits slouched, eyes still sharp—still defiant. Still convinced he'll somehow get the upper hand.

Svetlana studies him in silence. Watching. Waiting. Giving him every opportunity to show something—*anything*—that resembles understanding.

He doesn't.

"They were necessary," Grigori says again, like repetition will turn it into truth. His voice is rough, but there's no hesitation in it. "Weakness spreads if you allow it. I corrected it."

Svetlana tilts her head slightly. Bored, now.

Utterly and truly bored.

Her shoulders relax almost imperceptibly, like something inside her has finally settled into place.

Not anger. Not even satisfaction. Just... finality.

"You truly believe that, don't you?" she murmurs.

It's not a question. Not really.

Grigori lifts his chin slightly. "I know it."

Svetlana nods, brushing her hands along her black pants, picking off a bit of fuzz before she stands.

Grigori watches her, dark eyes growing wary.

Svetlana smiles at that. It's not warm. It's not kind. Its sharp and razor edged.

"I was hoping," she says lightly, almost conversational, "that somewhere in all of this, there might be a moment of clarity. A flicker of self-preservation, at the very least." She lets out a quiet breath, shaking her head once as she smoothes an invisible crease from her sleeve. "But no. Do you know what I find most interesting, Grigori?"

He doesn't answer.

He watches.

"How easy this part is going to be," she continues.

A flicker—small, but there, etches itself across his face.

Confusion.

Svetlana's gaze sharpens just slightly, something almost amused threading through it now.

"You've already done half the work for me," she says. "A man under pressure. A man losing control. A man whose... less than savory habits have begun to surface." She steps a little closer, her voice lowering—not threatening. Just *certain*. "Tell me," she says, almost thoughtfully, "how do you think it will look when everything comes out?"

Grigori's brow furrows. "What are you talking about?"

Svetlana's smile sharpens further.

"Oh you do not know?" She tuts. "Rozanov Holdings is no longer yours."

She watches that land.

His posture stiffens, eyes narrowing. "That's not possible."

"It is," she replies simply. "You see, control has been transferred. Signed away..." She watches the gears turning behind his eyes. "And not to someone you would consider... worthy."

He stares at her now. Fully focused. Face flushing. Jaw tightening as she leans, her voice softening into something almost intimate.

"A lowly omega," she says, watching the reaction carefully. "Imagine that."

"You're lying," he snaps, sharper now.

"Am I?" she hums lightly. "By tomorrow, it will be public. A full announcement. Restructuring. New leadership." She pauses, letting it settle. "Alongside a few... other revelations."

Grigori's jaw tightens. "What revelations?"

Svetlana folds her hands neatly in front of her. "The kind that tend to follow men who overestimate their own control," she says.

Her tone remains calm.

Measured.

"Evidence," she continues, "that suggests a pattern."

A slight tilt of her head.

"Your wives."

Silence.

“Your son.”

His expression shifts—quickly suppressed, but not fast enough.

“Your intent to remove your other son’s omega before he could become... inconvenient.”

“He is not—“

Svetlana lifts a hand to silence him. “It’s already been compiled,” she says. “Documented. Prepared for release.” Her gaze holds his, unflinching. “Tell me, Grigori... how do you think the world will interpret that? They’ll see a man unraveling,” she continues. “A man losing his grip on power. A man capable of doing anything to maintain control—until even that slips through his fingers.” A soft breath. “Unhinged.”

Grigori stares at her now, something darker creeping in behind the anger. “You think you can rewrite this?” he says, quieter.

Svetlana’s expression doesn’t change. “I don’t have to rewrite anything. You did that all by yourself.” she replies. “I simply have to... present it correctly. And when it’s announced that you’ve lost everything,” she adds, voice dropping just enough to sharpen the edge beneath it, “that the people around you have turned, that the truth of what you’ve done is no longer contained—” She tilts her head, a faint, knowing smile touches her lips. “Well, I imagine it will all become a bit too much for you to bear.”

The room has gone quiet again.

Not the heavy kind from before—this is thinner. Sharper. Like something has already been decided and is just waiting to be acknowledged.

Svetlana reaches into her coat and pulls out a pair of gloves.

Black. Smooth. Precise.

She slips them on slowly, one finger at a time, adjusting them with care that feels almost ceremonial.

Grigori watches her now, something uneasy finally threading beneath his composure.

“What are you doing?” he asks, quieter than before.

She doesn’t answer right away.

Her gaze drifts instead—to the table beside him. To the gun resting there. He follows her gaze, realizing her intentions and she moves slowly.

Grigori reacts instantly. Not with composure now. With panic.

“Svetlana—“ He jerks against the restraints, chair scraping hard against the floor as he strains forward, breath coming faster. “This is insane—you can’t—” His eyes snap to hers, sharp and desperate now. “You can’t do this.”

Grigori fights harder against the bindings, the earlier confidence collapsing into something raw and frantic.

“You think anyone is going to believe this?” he snaps, voice rising now. “You think this ends with *me* as the problem? I own half of this system—people will *know*—”

She ignores him, reaching to pick up the pistol. Not hesitant. Deliberate.

Svetlana studies it for a moment. A soft, mechanical click breaks the silence as she checks it. The sound echoes more than it should.

“You misunderstand something,” she says finally, calmly, pressing the muzzle of the gun under his chin as she steps closer.

Her gaze settles on him fully now. Steady. Detached.

Grigori’s breathing is uneven now. Controlled slipping into something closer to desperation.

“This isn’t possible,” he says again, but it’s weaker now. Less conviction, more repetition. As if saying it enough times might make the situation bend back into something familiar. “You can’t—this doesn’t end like this.”

His wrists strain against the restraints, chair scraping faintly against the floor.

“I *am* this company,” he snaps suddenly, voice rising again, trying to claw back authority through volume alone. “You think people will accept this? You think they’ll follow *you*?”

Svetlana watches him like a scientist observing a failing reaction.

No rush.

No reaction at all, really.

“That’s the part you never understood,” she says quietly. “You were never irreplaceable.”

Something in him shifts at that. Not anger now, but panic.

Grigori goes still for a fraction of a second, as if his body has finally realized what his mind is still resisting.

“No,” he says sharply, voice cracking at the edges. “No, no, you don’t get to decide that—after everything I’ve built—after everything I’ve—” He strains harder against the restraints now, chair legs scraping more loudly.

Svetlana tilts her head slightly, pressing the gun in harder.

“I will not be erased like this!”

“You won’t be erased,” she says quietly. “You will be remembered as a cautionary tale. An alpha so corrupted by the thirst for power that it ate at him until there was nothing left but a weak man who valued his own self importance than his family's well being.”

Grigori strains again against the restraints, voice breaking through the edge of control.

“You can’t rewrite what I built—”

“I’m not rewriting anything,” Svetlana interrupts gently. Her tone is almost calm enough to be mistaken for reason. Almost. “I’m illuminating it.”

Grigori’s breath stutters, eyes darting briefly toward the door, as if he’s expecting someone—anyone—to interrupt this, to restore the version of reality he still believes he can force into place.

But the door stays closed.

Because no one is coming.

Svetlana watches that realization settle in.

“You’ve spent your entire life calling it control,” she continues, voice even, precise. “But what it really was... was fear dressed up as authority, and now there’s nothing left to dress it in.”

Grigori’s jaw tightens hard enough to tremble.

“You’re naive if you think this ends with me.”

“It already has,” she repeats softly.

Grigori’s voice drops again, thinner now. “This won’t stand,” he says, but it’s no longer a threat. “They’ll see through it.”

Svetlana’s expression doesn’t change. “They will see exactly what we show them,” she replies. “What you gave us to show.”

Grigori says nothing, just stares at her full of hatred.

“Any final words?” she asks.

The question lands between them, stark and unmistakable.

Grigori opens his mouth. Whether to argue, to threaten, to justify, Svetlana will never know because she pulls the trigger.

—

The evening air is sharp when Svetlana steps out of the car, but she barely notices it. What lingers isn't the cold. It's the quiet, a peculiar kind of stillness that follows the end of something decisive.

Not relief. Not satisfaction.

Just... absence.

People always imagine that endings are loud. That they echo. That they leave something behind.

In her experience—they don't.

Narratives, though... Those are easy. Far easier than anyone wants to believe.

A shift in tone. A careful arrangement of facts. A man already under scrutiny, already unraveling in the public eye.

Pressure. Exposure. Isolation. A breaking point.

Svetlana exhales softly as she adjusts the sleeve of her coat. No guilt follows the thought. Only that same clear, distant certainty. What needed to be done has been done. And what remains... is presentation.

By morning, there will be statements.

Carefully worded. Tragic. Predictable.

A man who could not withstand the consequences of his own actions.

And the world will accept it, because the world always does.

She reaches into the back seat before heading inside, lifting two carefully arranged gift bags. They are... softer than anything she typically carries. Neutral fabrics. Gentle colors. Things chosen with more thought than she would ever admit aloud.

Small clothes. A blanket. Something plush and unobtrusive.

And for Shane—things meant for comfort. Soft materials. Loose fits. Items meant for someone healing, for someone newly tethered to something fragile and all-consuming.

The hospital doors slide open with a quiet hiss, warm air meeting her as she steps inside.

Everything here feels different.

Brighter.

Lighter.

Alive.

By the time she reaches the room, the door is already slightly open. Voices drift through—soft, familiar.

“...careful, careful—” Yuna’s voice, warm and steady.

A small shift of fabric. A quiet, sleepy sound.

“There we go,” Yuna murmurs, gently passing the baby back. “He wants his Daddy.”

A snuffle reaches Svetlana’s ears.

“I wish David were here to see this,” she adds softly, something tender threading through her voice. “He would have been so proud of his son.”

The words settle in the space like something fragile, something remembered.

Svetlana stills just outside the doorway for a fraction of a second. Just long enough to understand the weight of what’s been said. Long enough to see through the narrow opening—Shane, propped carefully against the bed. Pale. Bruised. Still healing. Holding everything together anyway.

The baby is placed back into his lap, small and impossibly delicate, and Shane’s entire expression shifts the moment he looks down at him. Softens. Breaking open.

There are tears on his face. Not loud. Not uncontrolled. Just... there. Falling quietly as he looks at his son like nothing else exists.

Something in Svetlana’s chest tightens—sharp and unexpected. Not guilt, never that. But something close to...recognition.

She clears her throat lightly as she steps fully into the room. The sound is soft, but it draws attention immediately.

Heads turn—Yuna first, then Ilya, and finally Shane.

Svetlana’s expression is composed, but warmer now. Softer in a way she allows for very few people.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” she says gently, lifting the bags slightly. A small, almost fond smile touches her lips as her gaze flicks briefly to the baby. “I brought gifts.”

For a split second after she speaks, the room just *holds*—that soft, fragile quiet still wrapped around Shane and the baby, then Ilya moves.

He’s on his feet before he’s even fully aware of it, crossing the space between them in two quick strides. “Sveta—”

And then he’s pulling her into a hug. It’s not restrained. Not formal. It’s tight. Grounding. Real in a way he rarely lets himself be.

She stills for half a breath before her arms come up around him in return, one hand settling briefly between his shoulders. Solid. Familiar.

“I didn’t expect you,” Ilya admits quietly, pulling back just enough to look at her, his hands still resting on her arms like he’s making sure she’s actually there. “Not so soon. Not with everything going on...”

Svetlana’s expression softens just slightly. “I had something important to take care of nearby,” she says, her tone even, almost casual.

Ilya’s brows knit together immediately. There’s a question there—sharp, instinctive.

He knows her too well for that to be nothing.

“What do you—” he starts, confusion threading into his voice as he searches her face.

Svetlana meets his gaze, holds it.

Ilya stills, understanding landing as he takes her in. For a second, something flickers across his face—surprise, realization, something heavier just beneath it.

Then he exhales slowly, shaking his head once. “Nevermind, I don’t want to know.”

“It’s better that way.” She says softly.

No explanation. No elaboration. Because she knows he understands enough.

For a moment, the room settles again after that quiet exchange. The weight of what isn’t said lingers—but it doesn’t suffocate the space. Not here. Not around *this*.

Ilya exhales, like he’s choosing—very deliberately—to step past it, taking the bags from Svetlana’s hands, glancing toward the bed, toward Shane, toward the small bundle resting in his lap. Something softer takes over his expression.

“Would you like to meet him?” he asks, looking back at her. “Officially.”

Svetlana blinks, just once—like the question catches her slightly off guard. Her gaze flicks to the baby. To Shane. Then back to Ilya.

“Careful,” Shane murmurs as he moves, hands sliding gently beneath Maksim. Shane’s fingers linger for a second as the baby is lifted from his lap, reluctant to let go even as he allows it.

“I’ve got him, solnishko.” Ilya smiles down warmly at Shane then his son.

And before Svetlana can say a word he’s placing him into hers.

It’s instinctive.

Unquestioning.

“Support his head,” Ilya says quietly, guiding her hands just slightly.

Svetlana’s tuts, shooing him away. Her breath catches as she takes in the tiny being in her arms.

She’s held many things in her life.

Power. Control. Weapons. Decisions that reshape entire futures.

Nothing—*nothing*—has ever felt like this.

He’s so small.

Warm.

Alive in a way that feels almost impossible against her chest.

Her hands, so often steady without thought, adjust carefully, almost cautiously now—like she’s afraid she might do something wrong.

Maksim stirs faintly, his tiny face scrunching for a second before settling again. Then his hand lifts, small and searching. His tiny fingers curling right around hers.

Svetlana inhales sharply.

Something breaks. Not outwardly. Not dramatically.

But deep—quiet and sudden and *real*.

Her eyes sting. Before she can stop it. Before she can *control* it.

“Hello, prekrasnyy prints.” she whispers, her voice softer than it’s been all night. Softer than it’s been in a long time.

Maksim’s grip tightens faintly around her finger, reflexive. Trusting.

And it hits her, all at once, how different this could have been.

A different set of choices. A different path. A different man holding power over all of them. This—this small, fragile life would have been something else entirely under Grigori’s control. Something managed. Something dictated. Something shaped by fear instead of... this.

Her throat tightens.

She looks down at him again, really *looks*—at the soft curve of his cheek, the dark wisps of hair, the tiny fingers wrapped so securely around hers like she’s something safe.

And for the first time since stepping into this room, since stepping off that plane, since everything—Svetlana feels it. Not just clarity. Not just certainty. Something dangerously close to *grief*. For what almost was. For what could have been taken.

Her hold on him shifts just slightly—subtly more protective now, though she’s still careful, still learning the weight of him.

“Aunt Sveta will always keep you safe, my beautiful little prince,” she murmurs softly in Russian, so quietly it’s almost lost to the room.

Not a promise.

Not a hope.

A fact.

No harm will ever come to him.

Or Ilya.

Or Shane, ever again.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The room is dimmed to a soft amber glow, the kind hospitals use at night to pretend it isn't still a place of pain and recovery. The machines hum quietly.

Beep... beep... beep...

Shane is half-reclined against the pillows, exhaustion pulling at him in slow, heavy waves. Every breath still aches, every shift reminds him of his ribs, but he is still because Maksim is between them. So small. Bundled carefully, tucked into the space where Shane's left arm can curl just enough around him without hurting.

Ilya is close on the other side, careful of everything—his arm braced behind Shane's shoulders, his other hand resting lightly over the blanket near Maksim, always there, always ready.

They don't speak for a while. They don't need to.

Shane watches Maksim breathe.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

Each one steady. Each one something he can hold onto.

Ilya watches Shane. The way his face softens. The way his guard drops without him realizing it.

He hesitates, hating to break the quiet peacefulness between them.

"So your dad is gone?" he asks quietly.

Shane still, glancing away from Maksim to meet Ilya's soft gaze. "Yeah..." he says after a moment, voice low, almost blending into the quiet of the room before his gaze strays back to Maksim. "He passed away a few years ago," he adds. "Work trip."

"You didn't tell me," he says, not accusing, just... noticing.

Shane huffs out a quiet breath, something that almost sounds like a laugh but doesn't quite make it. "I know."

Maksim shifts faintly between them, a soft sound slipping from him before he settles again. Shane's hand adjusts immediately, instinctive, gentle.

"When we talked about my mama..." Ilya starts carefully. "You didn't mention him."

Shane swallows, throat feeling tight all of a sudden. "I didn't want to," he says simply. "That night was... good. You know?" A faint, fragile smile touches his lips. "It was one of the first times I didn't feel like everything was... complicated."

Ilya's hand shifts slightly, thumb brushing once against Shane's side. "I remember," he murmurs.

Shane nods, just a small dip of his head. "And if I'd brought him up..." he continues, voice quieter now, "it would've changed it. I didn't want to make it sad."

Ilya studies him for a moment, something gentle and understanding settling into his expression. "It was already sad, solnishko. Talking about my mama is always sad."

Shane's shoulders shift slightly, a small shrug that pulls just enough at his ribs to make him wince faintly. He ignores it. "And it's just..." He trails off again, his fingers curl lightly into the blanket around Maksim. "It's easier to pretend he's still away," Shane admits, his voice dropping even lower, like saying it too loud might break it. "Like he's just... on another trip. Like he's gonna come back and knock on the door and tell me I forgot to call him," he adds, a small, broken smile tugging at his mouth.

Shane's eyes flicker shut for a second. When they open again, they're glassy. "I know it's not real," he says quickly, like he needs to get that out there before Ilya can say it for him. "I know he's not coming back."

Ilya shifts closer, carefully, his forehead brushing lightly against Shane's temple. "I know," he murmurs.

Shane exhales, the tension in him loosening just slightly at the lack of correction. "It just... makes it easier to carry," he says. "If I don't say it out loud."

Maksim stirs again, and both of them instinctively look down. Shane's fingers smooth gently over his back, grounding himself in the movement.

"His name was David," he says softly, eyes still on Maksim. "He was a beta." His fingers shift lightly against the blanket, smoothing it where it doesn't need smoothing. "He met my mom at university—McGill," he continues, a faint smile pulling at his mouth. "He played hockey, and—" Shane snorts softly, "Mom hated him."

Ilya huffs quietly, a hint of a smile breaking through as he listens.

"Said he was too soft for the sport," Shane goes on, voice warming just slightly with the memory. "Too kind. That he didn't have the edge for it." His lips twitch again. "But my dad—" He shakes his head, just a little, fondness threading through the motion. "My dad said it was love at first sight."

Ilya's brow lifts faintly. "At first sight?"

Shane nods, a quiet breath leaving him. "Yeah," he murmurs. "He said he knew while he was getting absolutely ripped apart by her at some kegger." A soft, breathy laugh escapes him. "Apparently she went on this whole rant about his weak backhand and how he'd never make it past college hockey, and he just—" He gestures slightly with his fingers, like he's still trying to picture it. "—stood there and decided she was the one."

Ilya lets out a quiet laugh under his breath, shaking his head. "Your father sounds..."

"Insane?" Shane offers, the corner of his mouth lifting.

Ilya huffs. "A little."

Shane smiles—really smiles, even if it's small and fragile around the edges. "Yeah," he says softly. "But he was right." The smile fades slowly after that, but not completely, just softens into something quieter. "He was like that with everything," Shane adds after a moment. "Didn't need to prove anything. Didn't... force things." His gaze drops more fully to Maksim now, something deeper settling into his expression. "He just showed up. Stayed. Loved people the way they were."

Shane exhales, the sound a little unsteady now, and Ilya's hand shifts slightly against his side, grounding him.

"I think he would've loved him," he says after a moment, voice softer as he watches Maksim's tiny fingers curl against the blanket. "He wouldn't have cared about any of it," Shane continues. "Not the circumstances. Not the... how. He would've just looked at him and decided—yeah, that's mine too."

Ilya's chest tightens at that, something unspoken passing through his expression.

Shane swallows, his voice drops just slightly. "He would've been really good at this," he admits. "He loved kids," he says, voice softening in a different way now—less guarded, more... remembering. "He used to—He used to talk about... when I'd have one someday," he finishes, quieter.

Ilya's hand tightens just slightly against his side. "He'd be so proud of you," Ilya says gently.

Shane's breath stutters. "...I hope so," he whispers. "I wish he got to meet him."

Ilya leans in, pressing a soft kiss to Shane's temple, lingering there. Shane leans into it, careful of the pain, careful of everything, but not pulling away.

"He would've loved you," Shane murmurs. "Both of you."

Ilya hums softly. "Yeah?"

Shane nods, slow and careful, his gaze still fixed on Maksim like everything he's saying is anchored there.

“Yeah,” he repeats, a little more certain this time. His fingers drift gently over Maksim’s back, tracing small, absent patterns through the blanket. “He would’ve seen you—really seen you—and just decided you were his too.”

Ilya goes still beside him.

Shane’s lips press together faintly, like he’s choosing his next words carefully. “He was like that with me,” he adds. “Didn’t matter what I was. Didn’t matter what I did. He just—” He exhales softly. “loved me anyway.”

“He would’ve loved you,” Shane says again, quieter now, like it’s something he needs Ilya to understand. “Not tolerated. Not... adjusted to. Just—loved you. Probably say something cheesy about having a bonus son.”

Ilya swallows, something tight flickering across his face before he smooths it away. “Sounds like a good man,” he says softly.

Shane huffs a small, breathy laugh. “He was,” he murmurs. “The best, actually.”

Shane’s eyes flicker shut for a second, his head tipping just slightly toward Ilya.

“He would’ve been so proud of you,” he adds, almost as an afterthought—but it isn’t one.

Ilya’s hand tightens gently against his side. “Of me?” he asks quietly.

Shane nods. “Yeah,” he whispers. “For taking care of us. For staying.”

Ilya leans in, pressing a slow, steady kiss to Shane’s temple, lingering there a second longer than before. “...I wish I could’ve met him,” he murmurs.

Shane’s lips curve faintly, something soft and aching and warm all at once. “Me too, you would’ve liked him.”

—

The room feels wrong after Maksim is taken back to the nursery. Too quiet, too empty. The absence of him settles immediately, pressing into the corners of the room in a way Ilya feels beneath his skin. The blankets still warm where their son had been tucked between them, the faint scent of milk and newborn lingering in the air just enough to make the emptiness worse instead of better.

It sets his nerves on edge instantly. Not panic, but something deeper. Older. A restless agitation crawling beneath his ribs that refuses to settle now that his omega and child are no longer both within reach.

Beside him, Shane is fading fast. He tries to stay awake. Fights it in that stubborn, quiet way of his, but exhaustion drags at him harder now that the adrenaline has worn off. His eyes get heavier between blinks, his speech softens and slurs at the edges, and eventually he stops trying.

“I’m not tired,” Shane murmurs, words already slurring softly together.

Ilya huffs quietly through his nose. “Obviously.”

Shane hums faintly at that, a sleepy little smile ghosts across his mouth at that before his face softens completely.

Gone only a minute later.

Ilya stays still beside him for a long time after that, one hand resting lightly against Shane’s waist over the blanket as he watches him sleep.

Shane shifts faintly, body instinctively curling toward him despite all the pain, his breathing deep and uneven, lashes resting against cheeks still pale from blood loss and trauma and days spent trapped somewhere between consciousness and sedation.

Even asleep, he looks exhausted.

Fragile.

Ilya’s gaze drifts downwards. Over the bruising still shadowing his throat and collarbones. The cast on his arm. The careful rise and fall of his chest that still catches occasionally when his ribs pull wrong beneath healing skin.

His hospital bracelet catching faintly in the low light every time he moves. Something about that bothers Ilya more than it should. That thin strip of plastic reducing Shane to a patient. A chart. A room number. As if any of this could ever be small enough to categorize.

A dark purple bruise disappears beneath the collar of Shane’s gown, and Ilya’s jaw tightens instantly at the sight of it.

He remembers every single one. Every mark. Every tube forced down Shane’s throat. Every machine attached to him. Every second spent standing beside that hospital bed while Shane lay motionless beneath fluorescent lights that made him look too pale, too cold, too still.

The memory claws at him even now. Walking into the ICU and seeing Shane intubated for the first time. The ventilator breathing for him. The swelling. The blood. And for one horrible moment, Ilya had genuinely thought he was already too late.

The image still follows him every time he closes his eyes for too long. Tubes and wires everywhere. Machines breathing and pumping and monitoring for him because his body had been too broken to do it alone.

It hadn’t looked real. Hadn’t looked like Shane.

And the worst part, the part Ilya thinks will haunt him for the rest of his life, was how small Shane looked in that hospital bed. Not weak, never that, just young. Too young. Twenty-one years old and cut open on an operating table because of his father. Because Grigori had looked at Shane—kind, soft-hearted Shane, carrying a child he didn’t ask for but already loved, and decided he was disposable. An inconvenience to eliminate.

Ilya's jaw tightens hard enough to ache.

God, if his father wasn't already dead, Ilya thinks he would take care of it himself for what he did to Shane... to their son.

The thought comes cold and immediate. Not explosive rage. Something quieter. More final. Because Grigori did not just hurt Shane, he shattered lives like it meant nothing.

Again and again and again.

His mother. His brother. Polina. Shane. Even Maksim, before he had even taken his first breath.

Everywhere his father went, he left damage behind him and called it necessity. Called it leadership. Called it strength, when really it had just been cruelty sharpened into habit.

Ilya feels something ugly twist low in his chest as he looks at Shane sleeping beside him, still bruised and healing because of choices Grigori made without hesitation. His soft-hearted omega who hadn't chosen any of this. Who had suffered over and over but still somehow cried over tiny sweaters and crooned off-key lullabies to his stomach, and loved a baby he never wanted. And Grigori had looked at him and decided he deserved to die for existing.

The fury that rises in Ilya then is almost blinding.

Fuck that man.

For every bruise left behind on people who never deserved it. For every life he ruined. For every person forced to survive him. For turning love into something dangerous. For making Shane afraid. For nearly taking him away forever.

And God—fuck him for touching their son before he was even born.

Ilya's hand tightens unconsciously against the blanket over Shane's waist before he forces himself to loosen it immediately, thumb smoothing once in apology even though Shane is asleep. Careful, always careful with him now.

Shane stirs, pressing closer toward the warmth at his side. Still trusting him despite everything tied to the Rozanov name. Because even after everything, Shane still feels safest beside him.

But Shane shouldn't trust him this easily. Not after Grigori. Not after the accident. Not after waking up broken apart in a hospital bed because of Ilya's father. But Shane still reaches for him anyway. Still softens the moment Ilya touches him. Still instinctively chooses him as safety.

The protectiveness inside Ilya sharpens almost painfully beneath the weight of that trust, and his alpha reacts instantly. Riding him hard with it now, no longer just angry or restless, but deeply territorial in the way of something that has nearly lost everything important to it once already.

Ilya exhales slowly through his nose, doing his best to calm himself as his hand slides beneath the blanket, broad palm spreading carefully over Shane's warm skin. He makes a small sound in his sleep at the contact, tension easing visibly from his face as he settles deeper into sleep.

Mine, his alpha purrs.

His omega.

There.

Safe.

Within reach.

His to protect until his last breath if necessary.

The hospital room suddenly feels too exposed all over again. Not a place for his omega and newborn. There are strangers everywhere here. Open doors. Constant interruptions. Nurses lifting Maksim from Shane's arms while Shane quietly tries not to panic every single time.

Ilya hates it.

His alpha revolts against every second of it. Furious they are still recovering in a place full of strangers and open doors and noises that keep making Shane tense in his sleep. His instincts scream for walls. For quiet. For a home that smells like Shane's lemon and sugared ginger scent soaked into blankets and furniture instead of antiseptic and bleach. Somewhere Shane can finally let his guard down completely without fear waiting around every corner, where he can finally heal. Somewhere Maksim will only ever know safety and love instead of fear and violence.

A den.

Safe and warm.

Private.

Theirs.

And suddenly, more than anything in the world, Ilya needs to get them home. It settles into him so deeply it almost feels physical. He wants soft lighting because Shane hates harsh fluorescents. Thick blankets for nesting. A bassinet in their bedroom so that Shane never has to panic, for Maksim to always be within arms reach. Locked gates. Security. Privacy. Somewhere no one can ever hurt them again.

Shane sighs in his sleep as Ilya presses a soft kiss into his hair.

"I've got you, solnishko." he murmurs quietly into the dim hospital room.

A promise. A vow. One his alpha sinks its claws into immediately.

Ilya reaches for his phone, the screen lighting up pale blue against the dim room as he pulls up the realtor's email thread about the last house had viewed before the accident.

He remembers walking through it with detached criticism then, making note of every security flaws as contingency plans spiraled through his head.

The neighborhood had been too quiet. That bothered him immediately. Quiet neighborhoods meant fewer witnesses if something happened. Longer response times. Fewer people paying attention.

The windows had irritated him too. Too large. Too open. Floor-to-ceiling stretches of glass looking out over a wide backyard bordered by trees and a white picket fence. Beautiful to most people, but a glaring vulnerability to Ilya. Too many sightlines into the home. Too many angles someone could watch from.

He'd mentally catalogued every weakness within minutes of entering, and had nearly written it off entirely until the realtor had shown him the basement. Even now, sitting beside Shane's hospital bed in the dim quiet of the room, Ilya can remember the immediate shift inside him the second he stepped downstairs.

Cool air and concrete walls. Small reinforced windows set high enough that no one could easily reach them from outside. Narrow enough that no one could see in beyond muted shapes and shadows. Easy to secure. Easy to defend.

Something instinctive inside him had settled at the sight of it. Had pictured Shane there, safe and untouched. At the time, he'd shoved the thought away almost immediately. Had intended to find something better.

But now all he can think about is that house. That imaginary den. Him and Shane curled up amongst a pile of oversized blankets on a sectional big enough to disappear into, surrounded by soft things and warmth instead of hospital machines and fluorescent lights. Their scents soaked into every inch of the room until it smells unmistakably like home and family and safety. Maksim sleeping nearby in a bassinet while Shane dozes against Ilya's chest without fear riding beneath every breath.

Ilya pulls the listing photos back up and studies them differently this time. Not as a businessman. Not as Grigori's son trained to identify weaknesses. Not as a terrified alpha trying to build a safe place to hide his omega and child. But as an alpha looking for a home. A place to fill with love and laughter. A place to watch his son grow.

The backyard is large enough for privacy fencing, but also for a swingset and maybe a trampoline. The treeline could easily hide additional perimeter security. Motion sensors. Cameras. Controlled access points. But would also be the perfect spot for a treehouse.

The oversized living room would work for nesting. Shane would like the fireplace. The kitchen had enough room for Shane to hover nearby with Maksim tucked against his chest while Ilya cooked. The upstairs master bedroom had thick doors and an attached bath large enough for Shane to disappear into when overwhelmed.

Home.

Ilya's chest tightens painfully at the thought of giving Shane and Maksim that.

His alpha sinks its claws into the idea instantly, and Ilya starts typing before he can overthink it.

I want to move forward on the property immediately. Full asking price. Expedited closing, if possible. The home needs to be move-in ready within two weeks.

His thumb hovers for only a second before he hits send.

The email disappears from the screen, but the pressure inside his chest doesn't ease. Because buying the house is only the beginning. A structure means nothing if it cannot protect them, and after what happened to Shane, Ilya's alpha is no longer willing to tolerate almost safe.

He switches immediately to his messages with Sergei.

Ilya: Property offer submitted. I want security upgrades started immediately once accepted.

Ilya: Full perimeter coverage. Gated access. Cameras on all approach points. Reinforced doors and windows. Motion sensors throughout the property and treeline. No blind spots.

Ilya: The basement is priority. I want it secured first. Reinforce entry points and soundproof it. Replace lighting. Furnish it fully. Soft furniture. Rugs. Storage. Climate control. It needs to be comfortable and secure enough for Shane and the baby to stay there if necessary.

Ilya: Nursery upstairs near the primary bedroom. No sharp furniture edges. Air filtration throughout the house.

Ilya: I want the property fully operational before they're discharged.

Sergei's response comes less than thirty seconds later: Understood. I'll oversee it personally.

Ilya exhales slowly through his nose, some of the tightness in his chest loosening for the first time since the accident. Because now there's a plan. Walls. Locks. A nursery. A den. A place where Shane can finally stop flinching every time someone opens a door unexpectedly.

His gaze drifts instinctively back toward the hospital bed. Shane still asleep beside him as the restless energy beneath his skin sharpens again.

Soon, he promises silently.

Soon there will be no nurses waking Shane in the middle of the night. No fluorescent lights or antiseptic. No more fear soaked into every surface. No more strangers wheeling his son away.

Just warmth and soft blankets. Shane curled into a nest on the couch, Maksim asleep against his chest while snow falls quietly outside and the rest of the world stays locked out beyond reinforced gates and concrete walls.

Home.

The thought settles deep into Ilya's chest, heavy and certain.

And for the first time since seeing Shane unconscious in the ICU, since his father's attacks, since learning about Shane's pregnancy... Something inside him settles.

Chapter End Notes

I killed David, IM SORRY 🙄

Please don't hate me!

I'm gonna level with yall about it though. I completely forgot about the man until a couple people asked about him and then I was like fuck it's too late to add him now, so I gave him the chop.

My bad 😊

Chapter 23

By his fifth day after waking, the hospital no longer feels unreal.

The first few days had been blurred by pain medication, exhaustion, and the overwhelming relief that Maksim was alive. Shane had floated through most of it in fragments—holding his baby for the first time, crying in Ilya’s arms, sleeping whenever his body demanded it. But now the fog is thinning, and reality is beginning to settle in around the edges.

That morning starts with a nurse entering quietly just after sunrise, Maks tucked against Shane’s chest at the time, wrapped in one of the soft swaddles Svetlana brought, his tiny face pressed sleepily beneath Shane’s chin.

Shane’s barely awake himself, still warm and drowsy from sleep, when the nurse smiles gently and says the words that make his chest tighten instantly. “He’s being discharged today.”

For one brief, shining second, Shane feels pure relief. His baby is healthy enough to leave. Healthy enough to go home. Then reality crashes into him so hard it almost hurts.

Home.

Maks gets to go home and Shane doesn’t.

The realization hollows him out immediately, his arms tightening instinctively around the baby before he can stop himself. “Oh,” he says softly.

The word cracks halfway through.

The nurse’s expression gentles immediately, like she understands exactly where his mind went. “He’s doing beautifully,” she says carefully. “And you’ll follow soon.”

Soon.

But soon suddenly feels unbearable.

Because Shane has spent every second since waking up terrified to let Maksim out of his sight, and now someone is telling him his baby gets to leave the hospital while he stays behind.

The panic settles low and ugly beneath his ribs. Ilya notices immediately from the chair beside the bed.

“Hey,” he murmurs softly, already moving closer. “Solnishko.”

Shane shakes his head quickly before tears can spill over. “I know it’s good,” he says too fast, voice thin and uneven. “I know it is, I just—” His breath catches hard. “I don’t want him leaving without me.”

God. The words break something open inside him the second he says them aloud.

Maks stirs sleepily against his chest at the sound of Shane's voice tightening, tiny face scrunching briefly before settling again. Shane immediately lowers his head, pressing his lips shakily against his baby's soft hair like he's apologizing for upsetting him.

"I know," Ilya says quietly.

And he does know. Shane knows that, but every instinct inside in him is screaming that he should be going with his baby. Carrying him out himself. Bringing him home tucked safely against his chest where he can see him and touch him and know he's breathing every second. Instead, Shane can barely walk to the bathroom without assistance.

The helplessness of it sits like broken glass inside him all morning.

Later, after Maksim is temporarily taken down to finish discharge paperwork with Ilya and one of the nurses, another nurse quietly offers Shane something that should feel normal—a shower. His first real shower since the accident.

At first Shane just stares at her blankly. Then emotional relief crashes over him so suddenly his eyes burn. Because he feels disgusting. Sticky and sore and wrong in his own skin. The hospital wipes and sponge baths have helped, but not enough. Nothing feels clean anymore.

"Ok," he whispers.

It takes time to get him there. Everything takes time now.

His mother helps slowly guide him to the bathroom while the nurse prepares the shower chair. Shane hates how weak he feels almost as much as he hates how much it hurts to move. Each careful step sends deep aches pulling through his ribs and abdomen. His cast feels heavy. His legs shaky beneath him.

By the time he reaches the bathroom, he's already exhausted.

The nurse explains everything gently—don't scrub any of the incisions, avoid twisting too much, push the call button if he begins to feel dizzy, but Shane barely processes most of it. Because for the first time since the accident, there's a mirror directly in front of him, and suddenly there is nowhere left to look except himself.

Shane freezes.

For a second, his brain genuinely doesn't recognize the reflection staring back at him.

The bruising is worse than he imagined. Dark yellow and purple shadows still stain his ribs, collarbones, and hips. Healing cuts scatter across skin that looks too pale beneath harsh bathroom lighting. His right arm is trapped in a cast.

And his stomach... "Oh my god," comes out in a choked whisper.

His breath stutters violently.

It had been round before. Warm and full and alive beneath his hands every time Maksim kicked.

He remembers laying in bed with Ilya at night, guiding his hand lower with sleepy smiles and quiet laughter whenever the baby moved hard enough to see beneath skin. He remembers rubbing lotion over stretched skin after showers. Complaining half-seriously about back pain while secretly loving every ache because it meant their son was growing.

There had been life there. Movement. Purpose. Now there's only swelling and bruising. A thick bandage low across his abdomen hiding the healing incision beneath it. And the subtle hollowing above it makes something inside Shane go cold.

His hand lifts shakily toward his stomach before stopping halfway there, fingers trembling violently. Because the body in the mirror does not feel like his anymore. It looks carved apart and broken open.

His body doesn't feel like home anymore. It feels like evidence. Proof of violence, of survival. Proof that someone cut him open to save his life and his son's while he lay unconscious and helpless beneath operating room lights.

His knees nearly buckle.

"Oh my god," he says again, weaker this time, voice splintering apart around the words.

Because suddenly he understands why everyone kept looking at him with those careful eyes. Why nurses moved gently around him. Why doctors spoke softly. Why Ilya and his mother watched him like he might break apart if left alone too long.

Shane grips the edge of the sink hard with his good hand, trying desperately to steady himself against the violent wave of emotion crashing through him. But it keeps coming. Because underneath the bandages is a scar that will exist on his body forever. A reminder of not just the accident. Not just the surgery. But what was taken from him.

Something inside him breaks violently at the realization. Because it's not temporary. There is no healing from that part. No recovering what's missing.

He will never carry another baby again. Never feel tiny kicks beneath his ribs. Never fall asleep with Ilya's hand spread protectively over a swollen stomach while they whisper about names and futures and who the baby might look like.

The grief is instant and catastrophic.

Shane chokes suddenly, shaking his head hard enough tears spill immediately down his face. "No, no, no—"

His body folds instinctively inward despite the pain, one shaking hand hovering over his abdomen protectively like some desperate part of him still expects Maks to be there. But there's nothing there anymore except bandages and aching emptiness.

His breathing turns sharp and panicked instantly. Because suddenly all he can see is loss. Everything his body used to be before the accident feels impossibly far away now.

His hands shake violently. “Mom—”

The sound that leaves him barely sounds human. A keening, broken wail torn straight from somewhere deep and raw inside him.

“Mom!”

Yuna rushes into the room immediately. Her face crumpling the second she sees him standing there in front of the mirror, pale and shaking and folded inward around himself like he’s trying to physically hold himself together.

“Oh my baby,” she breathes.

The words undo him completely.

Shane makes another broken sound and reaches for her instinctively with his good arm, and Yuna is there before he can fully collapse, wrapping both arms around him carefully despite the tubes and bruises and healing injuries.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she whispers shakily, holding him against her chest. “Oh honey, honey...”

Shane buries his face against her shoulder instantly, sobbing hard enough his entire body shakes.

“I don’t—” he chokes out helplessly. “Mom, I don’t look like me anymore.”

Yuna’s eyes squeeze shut briefly at the devastation in his voice. Because she knows exactly what he sees standing in front of that mirror. Not survival but damage.

“You do,” she says immediately, voice breaking around the words even as she smooths trembling fingers through his hair. “You do, Shane.”

But Shane just shakes his head violently against her shoulder.

“No,” he sobs. “No, I don’t—” His breath catches sharply. “They took everything—”

The words rip out of him with horrifying force. Because that’s what it feels like right now. Not healing. Not recovery. But loss.

His stomach is empty. His womb is gone. There’s a scar stretching across him that will never fully disappear. And standing in front of the mirror, Shane suddenly feels twenty-one in the worst possible way. Too young. Too overwhelmed. Too devastated to know how to carry something this enormous.

“I was supposed to keep him safe,” he cries, curling tighter into himself despite the pain shooting through his ribs.

Yuna pulls him closer immediately, tears burning in her own eyes now as she cups the back of his head protectively. “And you did,” she says fiercely through the crack in her voice. “Shane, look at me—you did.”

But Shane can’t stop crying. Can’t stop staring past her shoulder at the reflection in the mirror. At the body that no longer feels familiar.

“I can’t do this,” he whispers suddenly, panic flooding every word. “Mom, I can’t...I can’t... I don’t know how to be in this body anymore—”

“Oh sweetheart...” Yuna’s face crumples harder as she pulls him carefully against her chest, rocking him instinctively like she did when he was little and feverish and scared after nightmares. “You don’t have to figure it out today,” she whispers shakily. “You hear me? Not today.”

Shane sobs harder at that. Because part of him thinks maybe he should already know how to survive this. Maybe he should be stronger. More grateful. Less devastated.

Maksim is alive.

Alive.

And Shane loves him so much it physically hurts.

So why does this grief still feel like it’s hollowing him out from the inside?

“I miss him,” he cries suddenly, the words spilling out before he can stop them. “I know he’s alive, I know he is, but I miss him—”

Yuna breaks completely at that. A sharp inhale catching in her chest as she holds him tighter. Because she understands exactly what he means. Knows all too well the feeling of carrying a child inside her body for months, feeling every movement, every kick, every hiccup only to wake up empty.

“Oh, baby,” Yuna whispers through tears, pressing desperate kisses into his hair. “Of course you do.”

Shane cries harder. Not neat tears. Not quiet grief. Full-body devastation that wracks through healing ribs and stitches and exhaustion until he can barely stay standing. And Yuna just holds him through all of it. Like she used to when he was small enough to fit entirely in her lap. Like she can somehow love him enough to make this hurt less. Even knowing she can’t.

Shane cries into her shoulder so hard he can barely breathe properly between sobs, his entire body trembling against hers. And all Yuna can think is that this is still her baby. Twenty-one years old, a parent himself now, but still her baby.

She remembers him at five years old stumbling into her and David’s bedroom after a nightmare, clutching the sleeve of his dinosaur pajamas while tears dripped down flushed cheeks. Eight years old with scraped knees after falling off his bike, trying so hard not to cry because he wanted to be brave. Sixteen and heartbroken for the first time, curled beside her

on the couch pretending he didn't need comfort while silently leaning into every touch she offered him anyway.

And now this. Now her son is shaking apart in her arms because someone hurt him so badly that he no longer recognizes his own reflection.

Yuna's throat burns viciously.

Shane looks impossibly young when he lifts his head enough to look at her. Red-eyed and devastated.

"I don't feel real anymore," he whispers.

The confession guts her.

"Oh honey..." Yuna presses her forehead against his immediately, crying openly now too. "You've been through something horrific. Of course you don't."

Shane's mouth trembles violently. "They took him out of me and I wasn't even awake," he says, voice small and horrified in a way that makes Yuna feel physically sick. "One minute he was there and then I woke up and he was just—gone—"

A broken sob tears out of him again and Yuna pulls him back against her chest immediately, holding him tighter despite the care she has to take with his injuries.

"You carried him for months," she whispers fiercely into his hair. "You loved him every second he was inside you. Your body kept him alive through all of this."

"But I couldn't protect him—"

"You did." Yuna says it so quickly, so sharply, that Shane actually startles slightly in her arms. "You did protect him," she repeats, voice shaking with emotion. "Shane, sweetheart, listen to me. Your body endured something catastrophic and still kept him safe enough to bring him into this world alive."

Shane breaks all over again at that, sobbing openly against her chest. Because part of him wants desperately to believe her, and another part still feels unbearably betrayed by the body reflected back at him in the mirror.

Yuna just keeps holding him through it. Rocking him gently despite the fact he's long outgrown being rocked. Pressing kisses into his hair. Whispering soft little reassurances between tears even when she's not entirely sure Shane can hear them through the grief consuming him.

Eventually his knees weaken enough that she carefully guides him down to sit on the closed toilet lid, crouching painfully in front of him so she can keep holding his face in her hands.

"You are still you," she whispers fiercely. "Do you understand me? Scarred, grieving, hurting—yes. But still you."

Shane cries harder at that, face crumpling completely. Because right now he doesn't know if he believes it. Not when everything feels so altered. Not when his own body feels unfamiliar beneath his skin.

Yuna wipes helplessly at his tears with her thumbs even as her own continue falling, and quietly, privately, she hates Grigori Rozanov with every piece of her soul for making her son look at himself this way.

And that is how Ilya finds them.

The nursery discharge takes longer than expected. Papers. Instructions. Tiny hospital bracelets being removed from impossibly small wrists. Nurses fussing over blankets and bottles while Maksim sleeps through most of it tucked securely in his carrier.

By the time Ilya gets back to the room with him, he's already mildly on edge from being separated from Shane for too long. His alpha has been restless the entire time, agitated. Pulling constantly toward the hospital room and the omega waiting there.

Then he hears it. The sound reaches him before he even fully crosses the doorway. A broken sob. Then another.

Ilya freezes instantly, every muscle in his body locks. "Shane?"

No answer. Just crying. Raw and devastated and wrong enough that panic detonates through Ilya's chest immediately.

He sets Maksim's car seat down beside the bed so quickly it nearly startles the sleeping baby awake, hands already shaking as he turns toward the bathroom. His heart is pounding hard enough to hurt by the time he reaches the partially open door.

And then he sees them—Yuna crouched on the bathroom floor holding Shane's face while Shane sobs so hard he can barely stay upright on the closed toilet lid. His hospital gown hangs loose around bruised shoulders. His cast rests awkwardly against his chest. Tears soak his face, chest heaving violently with panic and grief and something so broken Ilya feels it like physical pain the second he sees him.

"Shane." The word comes out wrecked.

Shane looks up instantly at the sound of his voice, and absolutely falls apart.

"Ilya—" The sob that tears out of him is horrifying.

He lurches up too fast despite the pain and nearly loses his footing entirely in the process, but Ilya catches him before he can fall. Then Shane is clinging to him. Not carefully. Not cautiously. But desperately.

His good arm wraps around Ilya's neck while his entire body shakes violently against him. He buries his face against Ilya's shoulder and sobs harder, huge broken sounds that claw straight through Ilya's chest.

“Hey—hey, solnishko, I’ve got you.” Ilya breathes immediately, arms tightening around him instinctively.

But the second the words leave his mouth, Shane makes another devastated sound. Because something is wrong. His omega instincts are screaming for comfort. For safety, for his alpha’s scent, but there’s nothing there.

The hospital scent blockers smother everything beneath sterile antiseptic air. No mint. No evergreen. No Ilya.

Shane can feel the shape of him holding him, can hear his heartbeat, can hear his voice—but he cannot scent him, and that absence feels catastrophic.

“I can’t smell you,” Shane sobs against his shoulder, panic surging violently back up again. “I can’t—I can’t…”

The words gut Ilya instantly because he understands immediately what’s happening. Shane’s omega is in distress, desperate for the grounding reassurance of his alpha’s scent after seeing the damage done to his body, and the hospital has stripped that comfort away too.

“Fuck,” Ilya whispers under his breath, voice breaking slightly as he pulls Shane impossibly closer.

Shane is trembling so hard his teeth chatter faintly between sobs now, overwhelmed and grieving and instinctively searching for comfort he physically cannot access.

“I don’t feel right,” he cries. “I don’t feel like me anymore—”

Ilya’s chest caves inward painfully at the words. His gaze flickers once toward the mirror. Toward the glimpse of bruising beneath Shane’s open gown. The bandages. The devastation written all over his face. And suddenly he understands.

Oh.

Oh, Shane.

“Don’t look at that right now,” Ilya says immediately, voice rough with panic and heartbreak as he carefully turns Shane away from the mirror entirely. “Look at me instead. Just me.”

But Shane clings tighter, nearly frantic now.

“I can’t smell you,” he says again, voice splintering apart. “I can’t—please…”

Yuna wipes quickly at her own tears before standing to give them space, though her face crumples all over again at the sight of Shane desperately trying to ground himself against comforts the hospital won’t let him fully have.

Ilya presses his forehead tightly against Shane’s immediately, one hand cradling the back of his head while the other spreads protectively across his lower back.

“I know,” he murmurs shakily. “I know, solnishko. I know.”

Shane shakes violently against him.

His omega is panicking now in earnest, instincts thrown completely off balance by pain and loss and the inability to scent the alpha he’s bonded to. So Ilya compensates however he can.

He presses closer. Begins to purr. Lets Shane feel his heartbeat. His warmth. The rumble of his voice directly against his skin.

“You’re ok,” he murmurs over and over, kissing Shane’s damp forehead, anywhere he can reach. “You’re okay. I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

But Shane just sobs harder. Because he doesn’t feel ok. He feels empty and altered and wrong inside his own skin. And the one instinctual comfort his body is desperately clawing for is trapped behind hospital scent suppression systems and sterile air.

“I hate this place,” Ilya says suddenly, the words rough with emotion and anger both as he holds Shane tighter. The hospital. The blockers. The machines. All of it.

His alpha is furious. Protective instincts slamming violently against walls they cannot fully act on yet. Because Shane should not be crying like this under fluorescent lights while strangers walk past outside the door. He should be home. Warm and safe inside a nest that smells like family instead of antiseptic. Holding Maksim without fear and grief tearing him apart every other hour.

Yuna lingers for only a moment longer before quietly stepping out of the bathroom and closing the door behind her. Not because Shane doesn’t need her anymore, but because right now, instinct is pulling him somewhere she cannot fully reach—toward his alpha.

The second she steps back into the hospital room her eyes land on Maksim’s car seat beside Shane’s bed where somehow, impossibly, he still sleeps.

She moves toward him automatically, exhaustion suddenly heavy in her bones as she lowers herself carefully into the chair beside the bed, bending over to unbuckle and scoop him out of the car seat. The straps come loose with soft little clicks that sound impossibly loud in the quiet room.

Maksim stirs faintly at the movement, tiny face scrunching beneath the blanket before relaxing again when Yuna carefully lifts him against her chest. So little. The weight of him barely feels real in her arms.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she whispers shakily as she settles back into the chair with him tucked securely against her.

His warmth seeps immediately through the thin fabric of her shirt. Tiny breaths puff softly against her collarbone.

Alive.

Healthy enough to go home.

The thought makes her chest ache so hard she has to close her eyes briefly. Because just days ago doctors weren't sure either of them would survive, and now here she is, holding her grandson while her son cries in the bathroom because he survived too.

Maksim squirms faintly in his sleep, mouth opening in a tiny reflexive pout before settling again. The movement is so painfully familiar that Yuna nearly laughs through the tears burning her eyes. Shane used to do that exact same thing as a baby.

She smooths one gentle hand over the back of Maksim's head, fingertips catching slightly in the dark wisps of hair already curling faintly at the ends.

Behind her, muffled through the bathroom door, Shane's crying rises briefly again before quieting beneath the low rumble of Ilya's voice.

Yuna's chest aches. Because she knows exactly what's happening in there. Shane has always felt things with his whole heart. As a child, scraped knees became devastation. Heartbreaks became catastrophes. Love became all-consuming. And now grief has nowhere to go except directly through him.

Her poor baby.

Yuna looks down at Maksim again, carefully adjusting the blanket around him. His tiny fingers flex once against her chest before curling inward again in sleep. So unaware of how close the world came to losing him before he even got the chance to open his eyes properly.

A fresh wave of emotion crashes through her unexpectedly hard. Because Shane carried him through all of it, protected this little life long enough to bring him safely into the world, and now Shane is staring at scars and emptiness and mourning everything that body lost in the process..

"Your daddy loves you so much," she whispers fiercely, voice thick with tears. "More than anything."

The bathroom grows quieter behind her. Shane's sobs fading into exhausted hiccuping breaths beneath the low murmur of Ilya's voice and the sound of the shower turning on.

Good.

Yuna exhales shakily through her nose, gently rocking Maksim against her chest. There are some hurts she can soothed and some only Ilya can reach now. Still, she aches with helplessness listening to it. Because no mother should ever have to hear her child cry like that. Not at five years old. Not at twenty-one. Not ever.

Maksim stirs again, blinking briefly before his dark eyes flutter half-open sleepily. Yuna immediately softens, brushing her knuckles gently along his cheek.

"Well hello there," she whispers, tears threatening again despite her smile.

Maksim stares up at her blearily for a few unfocused seconds before settling once more against her chest with a tiny sigh.

And just like that, something inside Yuna breaks and heals at the same time.

Because despite everything—the blood, the fear, the surgeries, the grief, there is still this.

Warmth.

Life.

Family.

Something precious enough to survive even the worst thing that ever happened to them.

She wishes David were here.

The thought arrives suddenly and completely without defense, hitting her so hard her breath catches in her chest.

God, he should be here for this.

He should be sitting in the chair beside her making terrible jokes about how something so tiny can already have Shane's dramatic personality. Should be hovering nervously over the car seat manual like it's more complicated than engineering. Should be crying openly while pretending he isn't.

David would have loved Maksim instantly, violently. The same way he loved Shane from the second he was born.

Yuna can picture it so clearly it almost hurts.

David pacing hospital floors with a coffee gone cold in his hands because he was too worried about Shane to drink it. David crying the first time he held his grandson while insisting there was "something in his eye." David kissing Shane's forehead over and over because their son survived.

A tear slips free before she can stop it.

She looks down quickly, pressing her lips gently against Maksim's soft hair as emotion climbs painfully into her throat.

"He would've adored you," she whispers shakily into the quiet room.

Maksim stirs faintly against her chest, tiny fingers flexing once in sleep, and suddenly Yuna is overwhelmed by memory.

David holding newborn Shane against his bare chest at three in the morning because "he sleeps better this way." David skating with toddler Shane tucked against the glass during early morning practices because he refused to leave him at home. David standing in the

kitchen with flour all over his shirt while Shane sat on the counter “helping” bake cookies by eating half the chocolate chips.

He had loved being a father. Like it was the greatest thing that had ever happened to him.

And now Shane is a father too.

Yuna’s chest aches almost unbearably as she rocks Maksim gently.

Because David should have been here to help him through this part. To tell Shane that scars heal slower emotionally than physically. That loving your child so much it terrifies you is normal. That grief and gratitude can exist together without canceling each other out.

Instead Shane is crying in a hospital bathroom because he looked in the mirror and saw survival before he saw himself.

“Oh, Dave,” she whispers brokenly, eyes squeezing shut briefly. “Our baby needs you.”

The bathroom remains quiet behind her now except for the low murmur of Ilya’s voice. Yuna clings to that sound a little too, because if David cannot be here for Shane, at least Shane is not alone.

Ilya loves him fiercely.

She sees it every time he looks at Shane now. In the way he hovers instinctively closer whenever Shane winces. In the panic that crossed his face hearing him cry. In the way he holds him like something precious and wounded and irreplaceable all at once.

Yuna looks down at Maksim again, tears slipping silently down her cheeks now.

“You’ve got your daddy’s heart,” she whispers softly. “Both of them.”

Maksim sighs faintly in his sleep, warm and impossibly alive against her chest, and Yuna holds him a little tighter, grieving the man who should have been here to see this while thanking God over and over that Shane still is.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

I genuinely am so terrible at posting on a regular schedule, so here's another chapter—I swear things will get happier from here.

It takes a long time for Shane to calm. Even then, he doesn't really let go of Ilya.

His fingers stay twisted tightly in the fabric of Ilya's shirt while his breathing slowly evens out from devastated sobs into exhausted, shaky inhales. His eyes remain red and swollen, lashes damp, cheeks flushed with grief and embarrassment and exhaustion all tangled painfully together.

"I'm sorry," he whispers at one point, voice shredded raw from crying.

The apology nearly breaks Ilya apart on the spot.

"For what, solnishko?" he asks quietly, genuinely unable to understand why Shane thinks he owes anyone an apology right now.

"For... this." Shane's mouth trembles as he makes a helpless gesture toward himself. Toward the mirror. Toward all of it.

"Hey." Ilya's voice turns firmer immediately, though still impossibly gentle. He crouches carefully in front of Shane where he's sitting on the closed toilet lid, one hand steady against his knee. "You never apologize to me for hurting."

Shane's face crumples all over again, and God, Ilya hates this. Hates that Shane looked in the mirror and saw damage before survival.

"Come on," Ilya murmurs softly after a moment, brushing back the dark sweaty strands stuck to Shane's forehead. "Let me take care of you. Please?"

Shane nods weakly, and Ilya moves quickly, turning the water on, adjusting it to the perfect temperature. He notes the shower bench has already been set up by the nurse, the stack of towels folded nearby.

Shane looks overwhelmed all over again the second he glances toward the shower. His body aching and trembling from exhaustion, from crying so hard his ribs still throb with every uneven breath he pulls in. The steam curling through the small bathroom suddenly feels too warm, too close, fogging the mirrors and softening the fluorescent lights into something hazy and unreal.

A shower used to mean comfort. Music playing softly from his phone balanced on the sink. Hot water after a long practice, muscles aching and sore for a very different reason. Now it feels impossible, because standing there half-undressed beneath hospital lighting, Shane feels painfully aware of every injury pulling at his body. The ache in his ribs. The weakness in his legs. The heaviness of the cast strapped to his arm. The deep, unfamiliar soreness low in his abdomen that reminds him with every movement exactly what his body survived. Exactly what it lost.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” he whispers suddenly, voice thin with panic again.

Ilya steps closer immediately. Not crowding him, just there. Warm and steady and solid despite the scent blockers muting everything Shane’s instincts are desperately searching for.

“Yes, you can,” Ilya says quietly. “And I’m going to help you.”

Shane’s eyes squeeze shut briefly at that, fresh tears slipping free before he can stop them. Because he hates this. Hates needing help. Hates how weak his body feels now. Hates that something as basic as taking a shower suddenly feels like climbing a mountain barefoot.

His good hand curls helplessly into the fabric of Ilya’s shirt. “I hate feeling broken.”

The confession comes out so small it nearly disappears beneath the sound of running water.

“Oh, solnishko...” Ilya’s hands reach up carefully, framing Shane’s face with impossible gentleness. His thumbs brush beneath damp lashes, catching tears before they can fall. “You are healing,” he says softly, firmly. “That is not the same thing.”

Shane shakes his head, bottom lip trembling again. It doesn’t feel different. Right now it feels exactly the same.

“We’ll go slow,” he murmurs against damp curls. “Ok? Nothing more than you can handle.”

Shane nods weakly after a long moment. Not because he’s ready, but because he knows that Ilya will never let him fall apart alone. The certainty of that sits deep inside him even through the panic and grief. Ilya will catch him. Ilya will keep him safe.

So Shane lets himself lean into him a little more heavily, exhausted beyond words as Ilya carefully steadies him against his chest.

“I feel stupid,” Shane whispers after a moment, voice muffled against his shoulder. “It’s just a shower.”

Ilya’s hands tighten slightly around him immediately. “No,” he says firmly. “It’s not.”

Shane swallows hard, because it really isn’t.

A shower means standing in a body he barely recognizes. It means seeing bruises and scars and emptiness every time he looks down. It means facing the reality of what happened instead of hiding beneath blankets and hospital gowns. It means feeling how weak he is now. How fragile.

“Look at me,” Ilya says quietly.

Shane does, reluctantly, eyes swollen from crying, cheeks flushed and damp, expression still fragile with grief.

“There is nothing pathetic about needing help, not after you’ve survived something that most people would not have.” One careful hand slides against Shane’s jaw, thumb brushing lightly beneath his eye as a tear falls.

“I just…” His voice catches painfully. “I don’t know how to be in this body anymore.”

The words hit Ilya like a knife straight through the ribs. For a second, grief flashes openly across his face before he smooths it away into something softer as he presses another kiss to Shane’s forehead. “You don’t have to figure that out tonight. Just let me take care of you.”

Slowly, carefully, Ilya begins undressing him the rest of the way. He slides the hospital gown from Shane’s shoulders inch by inch, careful not to jostle his cast or pull too hard against bruised ribs. Every touch is deliberate, almost reverent as his fingertips brush warm skin mottled with healing injuries.

Shane can’t quite look at him while it happens. His eyes stay fixed somewhere over Ilya’s shoulder, throat bobbing hard every few seconds as he tries unsuccessfully to stop fresh tears from slipping free, visibly tensing every time new damage is exposed to the air.

Ilya notices. “Hey,” he murmurs softly when Shane instinctively tries to curl inward again. “Don’t hide from me.”

The gentleness in his voice almost hurts worse than pity would have, because there is no hesitation in the way Ilya looks at him. No disgust. No regret. Only heartbreak that someone hurt him this badly.

Shane’s throat tightens painfully as Ilya carefully kneels in front of him, the position bringing him eye-level with the bruising stretching across Shane’s thighs and hips. His breath catching the second cool air brushes across his stomach again, hands instinctively moving toward the incision before stopping midway, fingers curling inward helplessly instead.

Ilya catches his hand gently, not stopping him, just holding it. Drawing his trembling hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss against the inside of his wrist. Ilya’s overwhelming tenderness almost makes Shane cry harder.

“You’re shaking,” Ilya murmurs quietly, releasing Shane’s hand.

“Sorry.” Shane hates how small his voice sounds.

“I got you, solnishko. There’s nothing to apologize for, ok?”

Shane nods, just a small jerk of his wobbling chin as Ilya’s words settle somewhere deep inside his chest.

Then without another word, Ilya stands, quickly tugging his shirt up over his head before his hands move down to unfasten his jeans.

“You don’t have to—” he starts weakly, embarrassed all over again as he watches Ilya undress.

Ilya cuts him off immediately with a soft shake of his head. “I want to.”

Like it’s simple. Like it’s easy.

Only it isn’t.

Shane’s eyes blink back tears, because right now nothing feels easy. He feels difficult, heavy. Broken in ways he doesn’t know how to explain, and yet Ilya looks at him like caring for him is the easiest thing in the world.

His eyes burn as he watches Ilya from where he’s propped carefully against the sink, exhausted and emotionally wrung raw, his swollen eyes following every movement automatically. Not because there’s anything inherently intimate about it, but because right now, every act of closeness feels enormous.

Ilya steps out of his jeans and kicks them aside before moving back toward him immediately, now dressed only in dark boxers clinging low against his hips. The sight of bare skin, warm and familiar and undeniably Ilya, hits Shane harder than expected. Even muted by the hospital’s

Shane’s breathing stutters softly as Ilya steps back into his space, one hand immediately finding Shane’s waist again like he can’t stand not touching him for more than a few seconds now.

“Up we go,” Ilya murmurs quietly, as he stands, carefully helping Shane onto the shower bench. One arm securely around his waist, the other supporting the cast while making sure the waterproof covering stays sealed properly.

Ilya tests the water temperature against his wrist first before slowly bringing the detachable showerhead toward Shane. “You tell me if anything hurts too much ok?”

Shane nods faintly, letting out a wet laugh. “Everything kind of hurts.”

“I know, solnishko.” A sad little smile flickers across Ilya’s face as he guides the spray carefully over Shane’s shoulders and chest.

Shane inhales sharply when the heat hits bruised skin, nearly starts crying again immediately. Because it feels good. Because it hurts. Because there is no hesitation in Ilya’s gaze as it moves over his body now. No discomfort. No pity. Only careful attention and love. Love so obvious it almost hurts to look at directly.

Ilya moves the spray away, concern flashing across his face instantly. “Ok?”

Shane nods again, though his mouth trembles immediately afterward. “Yeah,” he whispers unevenly. “Just surprised me.”

Ilya studies him for another second anyway, making sure he means it before bringing the warm water back carefully, gentler this time, slower. The spray runs down over bruised shoulders and across his chest in soft rivulets, Ilya’s hand following behind, washing away the sticky feeling of sweat and hospital antiseptic.

Tears slip silently down Shane’s face again, just quiet grief leaking out of him faster than he can stop it.

“Hey,” Ilya murmurs softly, turning to set the showerhead back into mount above them before coming to cup Shane’s face carefully in both hands. Warm water continues spilling softly around them. “Talk to me.”

Shane shakes his head weakly at first, unable to fully explain the crushing mix of emotions sitting inside his chest. Humiliation, grief, relief, love, all tangled together so tightly he can barely separate one from another anymore.

“You’re being so nice to me,” he whispers finally, voice cracking apart around the words.

The confusion that crosses Ilya’s face is immediate and heartbreaking. “Shane...”

Fresh tears spill down Shane’s cheeks.

“I look—” His breath catches painfully. “I look awful and you’re still—”

Still touching him carefully. Still kissing his forehead. Still looking at him like he’s precious instead of ruined.

Ilya’s expression breaks completely, words coming out wrecked. “Dorogoy...” He steps closer instantly, one hand sliding behind Shane’s neck, the other pressing Shane’s cheek against his waist. “Do not do that to yourself. Do not look at what survived and call it awful.”

Shane’s shoulders shake as he presses his face harder against Ilya’s slick skin. There are no words to explain that his does not feel like survival yet.

“I don’t feel whole anymore,” he admits in a whisper so quiet it almost disappears beneath the sound of the water.

The grief in those words nearly knocks the breath from Ilya’s lungs. Without hesitation, he pulls back, bending at the waist to press his forehead carefully against Shane’s.

“You are beautiful,” he says fiercely and immediately. “And whole, and alive, and—” His thumb brushes gently beneath Shane’s eye, catching another tear. “And every scar on your body is proof that you fought your way back to me... To Maks... To your mother.”

Shane breaks again at that, a wounded little sound leaves him, small and devastated and helpless all at once as fresh tears spill down his face faster than he can stop them.

Because he doesn't believe it yet. Thinks he may never. But Ilya says it like fact. Like something unquestionable.

You are beautiful.

Not hesitantly.

Not gently corrected out of obligation.

But certain.

Definite.

Like there is nothing Shane could survive that would ever make Ilya look at him differently. And that certainty? It wrecks him. Because Shane has spent the last hour terrified that this body, the scarred version of it, the altered version of it, would somehow become harder to love. Harder to want. Harder to recognize as himself. And Ilya is standing here looking at him like he's something sacred.

A sob catches painfully in Shane's throat as he lowers his head, shoulders trembling beneath the warm spray of water. "I don't know how you can still look at me like that."

"Shane." The hurt in his voice is immediate and raw. "How could I not?"

And then Ilya kisses him.

Not desperate, not hungry, just soft. Reverent.

One kiss pressed gently to the corner of Shane's eye, catching tears before they can fall. Another against his forehead. His freckled cheek. The trembling edge of his jaw.

"Ya tebya lyublyu," he whispers against damp skin, voice breaking.

I love you.

Another kiss.

"Ya tebya lyublyu."

A kiss against the bridge of Shane's nose. His temple. The corner of his mouth.

Shane blinks slowly, not understanding, tears still clinging thick to his lashes. "Wh—what?"

Ilya's expression softens immediately.

Right.

Shane's brain is still foggy from exhaustion and pain medication and emotional overload, and Russian has a way of slipping out of Ilya most naturally when he's emotional enough, especially now. A tiny, helpless smile pulls briefly at the corner of Ilya's mouth before he leans in to press another gentle kiss against Shane's damp forehead.

“It means I love you,” he murmurs softly.

Shane’s face crumples instantly all over again. “Oh,” he breathes shakily.

Ilya brushes his thumb beneath Shane’s eye again, catching another tear before it can fall.

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” he repeats quietly, slower this time, like he’s placing each word carefully into Shane’s hands. “More than anything.”

Shane lets out another small, wounded sound and folds forward immediately, burying his face against Ilya’s shoulder. Because he still doesn’t know how to exist inside this body right now. Still feels cracked open and grieving and terrified he’ll never fully recognize himself again, but Ilya keeps holding him like none of that changes what he is worth. Like none of it could ever make him harder to love.

“I love you too,” Shane whispers shakily against damp skin. “So much.”

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

By the eighth day after waking up, the hospital becomes a more comfortable prison. The terror of those first few days has dulled around the edges now, softened by routine and exhaustion and the overwhelming relief of simply still being alive, and has settled into patterns Shane can predict.

Nurses drift in and out at familiar hours to check vitals and bring medications in tiny paper cups. Someone is always asking him questions now—about pain levels, nausea, dizziness, bowel movements, whether the incision feels tender, whether he’s sleeping, whether he’s eating enough, hydrating enough, walking the halls enough. Always touching him too. Adjusting blankets, checking monitors, examining his fading bruises and bandages with gentle clinical hands that no longer feel invasive exactly, just exhausting.

Somehow, impossibly, and maybe worst of all, the hospital has started to become familiar.

Not exactly comfortable, Shane doesn’t think that’s possible, just...familiar. Familiar enough that Shane knows which nurses linger to chat when they realize he’s having a rough day and which ones work quickly and quietly when he’s too drained to speak much. Familiar enough that he knows which days the cafeteria serves decent soup and which nurse on evenings is willing to sneak him extra pudding cups and popsicles when his appetite disappears again.

He knows which doctor always knocks twice before entering. Knows the quietest hours to shuffle slowly through the halls during physical therapy walks so he can avoid crowded corridors and shift changes. Knows which vending machine on the second floor actually stocks decent tea instead of the burnt-tasting stuff the cafeteria sells. Knows which hall window catches the sunset best around six in the evening, washing everything gold for a few brief minutes before the world turns sterile and fluorescent again.

He’s learned the rhythm of the place now. The soft squeak of rubber soles against polished floors. The distant beeping of monitors through half-open doors. The way the hospital never truly sleeps no matter how late the hour gets. That even at three in the morning there are still overhead pages crackling faintly through the halls. Still nurses murmuring quietly at stations beneath dimmed lights.

Shane hates that some part of him has adapted to all of it.

Hates that he can now wake seconds before the nurses enter for overnight vitals because his body has memorized the schedule. Hates that hospital food no longer tastes entirely strange. Hates that he instinctively checks for his call button whenever he shifts positions in bed. Because every tiny adaptation feels like proof he’s been here too long, like roots sinking unwillingly into a place he never wanted to stay.

And despite the small kindnesses, despite the routines, despite the growing familiarity of it all, the place still feels like a prison. Not a cruel one, just an inescapable one. Because every morning brings another smiling doctor with another vague promises of soon, and maybe tomorrow, and we just need to monitor you a little longer.

Shane hates all of them for it a little. Not fairly, not rationally, but enough that disappointment settles heavier in his chest every single time someone says almost. Because soon never comes. Just another night spent stuck in his too-small room beneath fluorescent lights that never fully dim, listening to the distant chorus of monitors beeping through the halls. Another night of hospital blankets that never feel quite warm enough and air scrubbed clean of every scent that actually comforts him.

That part is becoming unbearable.

At first, after waking up, the scent blockers barely registered through the pain and confusion and exhaustion, but now he notices the absence. No comforting scent of mint and evergreen from Ilya grounding him beneath every breath. No soft traces of Maksim lingering in blankets and clothing. No home, no safety, and Shane's omega is miserable because of it, restless in ways he doesn't fully know how to explain aloud.

Every instinct inside him screams to nest, his omega riding him hard now that the immediate danger has passed. The need claws through him so badly it physically hurts. An aching agitation beneath his ribs that no amount of repositioning or pain medication fully fixes.

It crawls beneath his skin at odd hours, leaving him tense and overstimulated and dangerously close to tears over things that shouldn't matter this much. A nurse adjusting Maksim's bassinet too far from the bed. Someone opening the door without knocking first. The sharp sterile smell of fresh disinfectant after housekeeping comes through.

Tiny things, except they don't feel tiny to his omega anymore.

Every part of him wants to gather his family close and retreat somewhere hidden and warm and unmistakably theirs. Somewhere soft enough that he can finally stop bracing for interruption every few minutes. Instead he's trapped in a hospital room where even the air feels foreign. Shane's omega hates it.

The distress sits low and constant beneath his skin now, difficult to explain aloud without sounding irrational. He just knows he feels wrong here. Unsettled in ways deeper than physical discomfort. Like his body keeps waiting for permission to finally relax and never receives it. Some nights it gets so overwhelming Shane has to physically fight the urge to start nesting with anything he can reach—blankets, hoodies, towels, the stuffies Hayden brings for Maks every time he visits.

Once, Ilya came back from speaking with a doctor to find Shane quietly crying while trying to rearrange the hospital pillows around himself and Maks because nothing smelled right and nothing felt safe enough and he couldn't make the restless ache under his skin stop.

Ilya had climbed into the narrow hospital bed without a word despite barely fitting, pulled Shane carefully against his chest with Maks tucked between them, and stayed there for nearly

two hours while Shane shook quietly against him trying to calm down. Even then, it only helped temporarily, because the second a nurse knocked and stepped inside to check vitals, the fragile sense of safety shattered all over again.

That's the cruelest part of it, Shane can never fully settle here. The hospital simply won't allow it. Every comfort is temporary. Every quiet moment interrupted eventually by another reminder that this isn't home, isn't private, isn't theirs. So the agitation builds and builds and builds day by day beneath Shane's skin until sometimes he feels like he could crawl out of himself from sheer instinctual frustration alone.

And every time another doctor smiles sympathetically and says, "Hopefully soon," all Shane can do is nod politely while the doctor talks, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from crying out of pure exhaustion.

"I'm going to lose my mind in here," he mutters weakly the second the door closes behind him, his shoulders sagging heavily into the pillow

Across the room, Ilya immediately looks up from where he's rocking Maksim against his shoulder. "You're not losing your mind."

"I cried yesterday because I learned the cafeteria stopped serving muffins at eleven," Shane deadpans. "I'm hanging by a thread."

A surprised laugh escapes Ilya before he can stop it. Maksim startles faintly in his arms at the sound, and immediately Ilya starts murmuring something gentle in Russian while rubbing tiny circles against the baby's back. The sight makes something warm ache through Shane's chest despite himself.

God he misses home. Misses his nest.

Not just the physical space of it, but the feeling, the safety. Misses blankets that smell like him and Ilya instead of bleach and hospital detergent. Misses the soft weight of familiar pillows tucked around his body exactly the way he likes them. Misses dim lighting and quiet mornings and knowing no one will enter his space unless invited. Shane doesn't think he'll ever take for granted the ability to lock a door again.

"You'll be home soon," Ilya says quietly after a moment.

Shane wants to believe him, but after days of hearing the same thing from doctors and nurses and discharge coordinators with sympathetic smiles, the words scrape painfully against his nerves instead of soothing them.

Always soon, never now.

His expression crumples before he can hide it.

"I know everyone keeps saying that," he whispers, voice thin with exhaustion. "But what if something else goes wrong?" Shane keeps his eyes fixed downward on where his fingers

lightly trace over the edge of the blanket in his lap. “I just...” He swallows hard, throat tight. “Every time someone says I’m getting better, I think of all the things that can go wrong.”

His voice cracks softly on the last word, and suddenly Ilya understands that this isn’t really about discharge timelines anymore—it’s fear. Pure, exhausted fear carved deep into Shane’s nervous system after everything that happened. Because healing no longer feels safe to him.

The last time Shane thought everything was ok, he ended up unconscious in an operating room fighting for his life while their son was cut from his body too early. Now every hopeful moment feels dangerous somehow, fragile. Like if he lets himself trust it too much, the universe will punish him again.

Shane’s fingers tighten slightly in the blanket. “I think about infections and complications and what if my stitches open and what if Maks stops breathing and what if I wake up and something’s wrong and—” His breathing stutters. “I know it sounds crazy.”

“It doesn’t.” Ilya answers immediately, firm enough that Shane finally looks up.

Ilya crosses the room slowly, placing Maksim in his bassinet before sitting carefully on the edge of the hospital bed beside him, one hand immediately finding Shane’s thigh beneath the blanket. Warm. Steady.

“You almost died,” he says quietly. “Your brain is trying to prepare for every possible danger now because it thinks if it anticipates it first, maybe it can stop it from happening.” Ilya’s hand tightens slightly where it rests against Shane’s thigh, his gaze dropping for a moment before he speaks again. “You have no idea how sorry I am that my father did this to you. That he took this from you... from us.”

Shane’s chest tightens painfully at the grief in his voice, because it’s not just Shane who lost something. The hysterectomy happened to his body, but the grief surrounding it has settled around both of them in different ways. Quietly. Unevenly.

And beneath all of Ilya’s steadiness these last eight days, Shane has still caught glimpses of it sometimes—the guilt, deep and ugly and festering beneath the surface no matter how carefully Ilya tries to bury it.

Shane sees it in the way Ilya goes silent whenever doctors discuss follow-up care or long-term recovery. Sees it in the tightness that enters his jaw every time Shane winces reaching for something or instinctively touches his stomach before remembering.

Sees it most clearly late at night when Ilya thinks Shane is asleep. When Shane catches him staring, cataloguing every scar and bruise and bandage. How he watches the slow rise and fall of Maksim’s chest as he sleeps. Like he still can’t fully believe either of them survived, or maybe like part of him believes he doesn’t deserve that they did.

And Shane understands why, more than anyone. Because Grigori didn’t just hurt Shane, he hurt Ilya too.

Shane leans into him automatically, exhausted body curling instinctively toward warmth and safety. “It’s not your fault,” he whispers softly.

Ilya’s arms tighten around him instinctively, like even now some terrified part of him is afraid Shane might disappear if he loosens his grip too much. “You almost died because of him,” Ilya says quietly.

Shane reaches carefully for his hand, threading their fingers together slowly around healing bruises and IV marks and exhaustion.

“What your father did was monstrous,” he says quietly. “But you are not him. You will never be him.”

Ilya goes very still beside him as the words settle around them. For a moment, he just stares at Shane like he doesn’t quite know what to do with that kind of forgiveness. That kind of unwavering belief.

Shane’s fingers tighten weakly around his hand. “Do you know why?” he asks softly.

Ilya’s throat bobs as he swallows, unable to reply.

“Because you are kind.” The words come quiet but certain. “Despite everything your father did to mold you into being just like him...” Shane’s voice softens further, eyes stinging slightly. “You stayed kind anyway.”

Emotion flickers hard across Ilya’s face, because kindness is not something he was ever taught to value growing up. Strength. Control. Obedience. Power. Those were things that mattered to Grigori Rozanov. Kindness was weakness. Mercy was exploitable. Love was leverage someone else could eventually use against you. And still, Ilya learned tenderness anyway.

Shane sees it in a thousand tiny things now that he knows how to look. In the way Ilya automatically lowers his voice whenever Maksim falls asleep against someone’s chest. In how carefully he helps Shane stand even when Shane insists he can do it himself. In the way he memorized every medication schedule and every nurse’s name within forty-eight hours of Shane waking up because he refused to risk missing anything important.

Kindness lives in him naturally despite everything that tried to beat it out of him.

“You held Maks before I could and loved him enough for both of us until I woke up.” Ilya closes his eyes briefly. “You held me while I cried in the shower because I didn’t recognize my own body anymore.” Shane’s voice wobbles. “You held us together. You. Your father never would have done that

A quiet, wrecked breath leaves Ilya at hearing it said aloud like this feels unbearable somehow. Not because it’s untrue, but because Shane looks at those moments like they mean something extraordinary when to Ilya they were simply instinct. Necessity. Love.

“You love people,” Shane says softly, threading their fingers together. “Your father only ever loved what he could control.”

Maksim shifts faintly in the bassinet beside the bed, tiny sleepy noises filling the quiet space between them.

Ilya looks down finally, staring at their intertwined fingers for a long moment before speaking. “He hated that about me. He thought compassion made me weak,” Ilya continues quietly. “Like my mother. That I would end up just like her one day.” A bitter laugh escapes him. “Said that love with a useless emotion

Grigori was wrong, love didn’t make Ilya weak. It made him into someone capable of gentleness despite being raised in cruelty. Someone who sat awake for eight days beside a hospital bed because leaving Shane alone felt physically impossible. Someone who looked at their son like the entire universe had rearranged itself around his existence.

Shane shifts carefully closer despite the ache in his body until his forehead rests lightly against Ilya’s shoulder. “Well,” he whispers softly, exhaustion and affection tangled together in his voice, “I think love—”

Ilya’s phone rings, the sharp sound cuts through the quiet room, interrupting the moment entirely.

Ilya glances down automatically, grimacing faintly at the timing just as Maksim startles awake in the bassinet with a tiny offended cry.

“Sorry, malysh,” Ilya murmurs immediately, already reaching for him.

Maksim fusses harder as Ilya carefully scoops him up one-handed, the baby’s tiny face scrunching red with sleepy outrage.

“I’m sorry, solnishko, I need to take this,” Ilya says softly to Shane, crossing back toward the bed and carefully settling Maksim into Shane’s arms instead.

Instantly, the baby quiets slightly once pressed against Shane’s chest.

Shane adjusts him automatically despite the awkwardness of his cast and healing ribs, exhaustion still heavy in every movement. “Go,” he murmurs quietly. “It’s ok.”

Ilya hesitates for half a second anyway. His hand brushes briefly through Shane’s curls before he finally steps into the hallway, already answering the call in Russian the second the door swings shut behind him.

“Da?”

Sergei’s voice crackles through the line immediately. “The den and nursery are ready. Sveta purchased—”

Ilya smirks automatically despite himself as he leans against the hallway wall. “Sveta, is it?” he drawls dryly. “Interesting level of familiarity with my ex-wife, Sergei.”

Sergei continues speaking as though Ilya said absolutely nothing. “Svetlana purchased everything Shane could want for his nest,” he says, deliberately emphasizing her first name now with exaggerated professionalism.

Ilya’s smirk widens faintly.

“It’s currently washed and waiting for his discharge,” Sergei continues. “The nursery is painted and furnished to your specifications. Blackout curtains installed in the master bedroom. Additional locks are in place. Security system fully operational.”

As he speaks, something deep inside Ilya’s chest loosens for the first time in days. Not completely, probably never completely again, but enough. Enough that he can finally picture bringing Shane home without his alpha instincts screaming danger every five seconds.

His gaze drifts automatically through the small window in the hospital room door. Inside, Shane is curled carefully against the raised pillows with Maksim tucked against his chest, head bowed sleepily as he murmurs something soft to calm the baby.

The sight hits Ilya hard enough to ache. Home. They are so close to home now.

“The den is—“

“Reinforced entry. We stocked additional blankets as requested.” Sergei replies immediately.

Ilya exhales slowly through his nose. Good because Shane’s omega has been fraying harder every day in this hospital. The nesting instincts, the scent distress, the constant restlessness beneath his skin—it’s become almost painful to witness.

Ilya has spent the last week watching Shane try to soothe instincts the hospital environment physically will not allow him to satisfy.

Soon, though. Soon Shane will have soft blankets and dim lighting and a locked bedroom door. Soon he’ll have warmth and quiet and a nest that smells like his alpha and baby instead of antiseptic. Soon he’ll finally be allowed to rest.

“Svetlana also sent over more things for the baby,” Sergei adds after a moment. “And approximately twenty pounds of expensive tea for Shane.”

A startled laugh escapes Ilya before he can stop it. “That sounds like her.”

“She also threatened one of the contractors for handling the nursery furniture incorrectly.

Ilya closes his eyes briefly, deeply unsurprised. “Poor man.”

Sergei snorts softly on the other end before his voice lowers slightly. “It’s ready, Ilya.”

The words settle heavily in his chest.

Ready.

For the first time since the accident, something inside him finally begins to unclench around the future, because there is now a place waiting for them outside this hospital room. Somewhere safe. Somewhere private. Somewhere Shane can finally stop surviving long enough to simply heal.

Ilya looks through the window again. Shane has fallen half asleep sitting upright now, cheek resting lightly against Maksim's head while the baby dozes peacefully against his chest. The sight is so unbearably soft it nearly knocks the air from Ilya's lungs.

Home, he thinks fiercely. I'm taking them home.

Chapter End Notes

Whoopie poopsies, sorry for the chapter confusion guys. I forgot I had a note saved on a draft and just clicked add chapter instead of posting chapter 25 there, but it's all fixed and by the time you read this the chapter will say 25 and not 26 lol

Anyway, here's the note I forgot all about:

Sooooooo, I made the choice to turn off guest comments because I'm tired of deleting shitty comments about me using AI and having people ruin my vibe—I don't, btw. Because AI is fucking garbage.

I write for fun after I get off work (and sometimes while on the clock 🙄). I do this because I love writing about Hollanov and I want to share my fun little stories about these adorable babies. & mostly I write the stories that I would want to read in the hopes that someone else enjoys them too.

So, sorry to the guests who have left nice comments, I still love and appreciate all of you who come by and read my silly little fic and love it (feel free to stalk me on threads or IG under @daniireads and say hi), but I can't let a few assholes tank my mental health because they don't like my writing style (or my usage of em dashes and commas).

Anyway, thank you for coming to my TED talk.

Chapter 26

On his tenth day after waking up, Shane finally looks less like someone dragged half-dead from a twisted heap of metal and more like himself again. Not fully, not yet, but enough that sometimes, when he catches his reflection quickly in darkened windows or the bathroom mirror, the sight doesn't hit him with immediate panic anymore.

The bruises covering his body have faded into soft yellow shadows now instead of violent purple-black stains. The swelling in his face is gone completely. His concussion has healed enough that only harsh fluorescent lights leave a dull ache behind his eyes and standing too quickly earns him nothing worse than a few seconds of dizziness.

His ribs are healing too, slower than he would like, but he can breathe deeply again without feeling like his chest is splitting apart. Though coughing still hurts and bending remains absolute torture.

The cast on his right arm has become strangely normal somehow. At first every ounce of weight around his arm felt foreign and frustrating and humiliating. Now he barely notices it until he reaches wrong or twists suddenly and pain shoots sharply through the fracture, reminding him all over again that his body is still healing beneath the surface.

And the scar... The scar is healing beautifully according to his doctors. Clean, minimal irritation, with zero signs of infection. The nurses seem thrilled every time they check it, but Shane still can't quite look at it for very long, but he's trying.

And the best news of all—he can finally go home. Home! The word alone sends something emotional and instinctive crashing through Shane hard enough to make his chest ache. Not soon. Not hopefully tomorrow. Now.

He's practically vibrating with restless anticipation beneath his skin. His omega has been clawing toward this moment for days now, increasingly distressed by the hospital environment no matter how hard Shane tried to manage it rationally. And now, now he gets to go back to his nest.

God, he misses it. Misses the soft chaotic comfort of the apartment he shares with Hayden. Misses blankets that smell like him and Ilya instead of bleach and antiseptic. Misses the creaky floors and the perpetually broken kitchen light Hayden keeps swearing he'll fix himself instead of calling maintenance. Misses familiarity, safety, privacy.

He can practically feel the living room nest he had built while pregnant already. Every soft blanket his mother and Ilya and Hayden had found for him, piled high with the pillows he'd pilfered. His and Ilya's and Maks's clothes woven throughout, their scents mixing into one warm cozy blend that makes Shane's omega ache with longing so intense it almost hurts.

God, he wants it so badly. Wants to bury himself in that softness until every frayed nerve beneath his skin finally settles quiet again. Wants to curl around Maksim skin-to-skin on an actual couch instead of a hospital bed while Ilya sprawls warm and solid beside them.

No nurses, no monitors, no fluorescent lights buzzing overhead. No strangers walking through the door every twenty minutes asking him to rate his pain or checking his incision or waking him up just as he finally falls asleep. Just home, just his family...And Hayden, who Shane strongly suspects has already decided the baby belongs partially to him now too.

The thought pulls the faintest smile onto Shane's face. Because Hayden has apparently spent the last week "helping prepare the apartment," which according to Yuna mostly involved aggressively reorganizing furniture and threatening food delivery drivers. And honestly, Shane misses him almost as much as he misses the apartment itself. Misses normalcy.

But beneath all the restless excitement humming beneath Shane's skin about returning home, to normalcy or whatever semblance of that he can find, anxiety twists tight through his chest too. Because while the hospital may feel suffocating and exhausting and deeply wrong to every instinct inside him, it's also safe in its own clinical way. Predictable.

There are doctors here. Nurses. Emergency buttons and monitors and people constantly checking to make sure he's healing correctly. At home in the apartment, there won't be any of that. It'll just be him and Ilya and Maks. Alone. And that? That has Shane's brain snagging on terrible possibilities he can't seem to shut off.

Because what if something happens and they don't know what to do?

What if Maksim stops breathing in the middle of the night? What if Shane sleeps through it somehow? What if the baby starts crying and Shane can't get to him fast enough because his ribs hurt too badly to move quickly? What if he drops him?

The thought hits so suddenly and violently Shane physically flinches where he's sitting in bed. Because oh God, what if his arm gives out? What if pain shoots through it unexpectedly and he loses his grip? What if he falls asleep holding Maks and something terrible happens?

The room suddenly feels too small, too warm. His breathing sharpens unevenly in his chest as panic starts creeping up his spine faster than he can reason through it.

He's somebody's parent now.

Not just pregnant, not just preparing. Like actually responsible for a tiny human being who depends entirely on him surviving and functioning and knowing what to do.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. FUUUUCCCCCKKKKKKK.

Shane has no idea what he's doing. None.

At least here he has nurses teaching him how to hold Maks comfortably with his injuries. Doctors reassuring him every time he panics over normal newborn noises. Someone always nearby if something feels wrong. But at home there won't be a call button, just them.

"Oh my God," Shane whispers suddenly, voice thin and horrified.

Across the room, Ilya immediately looks up from where he's carefully reorganizing the discharge paperwork for the third time. "What?"

Shane stares at him wide-eyed, panic growing visibly by the second. “What if we’re bad at this?”

Ilya blinks once. “At... parenting?”

“Yes!” Shane hisses, words coming out sharper than he intends. Frantic around the edges now. “What if something happens and we don’t know what to do? What if Maks stops breathing? What if I hold him wrong? What if I miss something important because I’m tired?” His breathing catches painfully. “I can barely bend over without feeling like my ribs are going to crack open and we’re supposed to keep a whole person alive.” He’s spiraling now. “What if he gets sick? What if we don’t wake up when he cries? What if I fall carrying him? What if—”

“Shane.” Ilya’s voice cuts through the spiral, calm and firm, but Shane’s already shaking his head hard enough to make himself dizzy.

“No, because seriously, they’re just letting us leave with him.” His eyes are huge now. Slightly wild. “Like legally they’re just trusting us to take this baby home when I cried yesterday because I couldn’t open a juice bottle with one hand.”

For one stunned second, Ilya just stares at him, and to Shane’s absolute horror, he snorts.

“Ilya!” Shane’s voice rises.

“I’m sorry,” he says immediately, though he’s clearly fighting laughter now. “Solnishko, you are panicking because the hospital is allowing us to leave with our own child.”

“Yes!” Shane hisses. “That feels irresponsible!”

And somehow that finally breaks the tension hard enough that Ilya actually laughs. Not cruelly, not dismissively, just startled and exhausted and deeply fond all at once.

Shane shoots him a betrayed look. “Seriously Ilya... They can’t just give us a child!”

That only makes Ilya laugh harder for about half a second before the sound abruptly cuts off. Because Shane is visibly spiraling now. His breathing’s gone too fast. His pupils blown wide beneath fluorescent lights. One shaky hand pressed hard against his ribs like he’s trying to physically hold himself together.

Ilya’s expression shifts, concern replacing amusement so quickly it almost hurts to look at. “Shane,” he says gently, moving toward him at once. “I think you are having panic attack, solnishko.”

“I’m not—” Shane sucks in a sharp breath that immediately proves otherwise.

“Mm.” Ilya kneels carefully beside the bed despite Shane’s continued frantic gesturing. “You are speaking very fast.”

“Because there’s suddenly a whole human depending on us!” Shane whisper-hisses. “What if we accidentally kill him?”

Ilya blinks slowly before replying calmly, “We are not going to accidentally kill the baby.”

“But how do you know?” Shane demands immediately. “They barely checked if we know anything!”

“Shane, we have spent ten days in parenting classes disguised as hospital care.”

“That’s not enough!”

Ilya reaches forward carefully, taking Shane’s trembling hand between both of his before he can continue spiraling himself into orbit. “It’s going to be ok, solnishko. Just breathe for me.”

Shane tries, sort of. It comes out shaky and uneven, eyes stinging. God, he’s tired, so fucking tired.

“I’m sorry... I’m just scared,” he admits quietly.

“I know, dorogoy.” He brushes Shane’s hair gently back from his forehead. “But you know what bad parents don’t do?” Ilya asks quietly.

Shane blinks. “What?”

“They don’t panic this much about keeping their baby safe.” Ilya’s thumbs rub slowly over his knuckles. “You are terrified because you love him,” he says softly. “Because you understand how precious he is because you almost lost him.”

Shane’s eyes burn, because yes, that’s exactly it. The fear never fully left after waking up and realizing how close everything came to disappearing. Now Shane’s brain keeps trying to prepare for every possible catastrophe before it can happen again.

“I just...” His voice shakes. “What if I’m not enough for him?”

The question comes out so small it nearly caves Ilya’s chest inward. Because beneath all the panic and spiraling and fear about monitors and breathing and hospital safety nets, that’s the real terror sitting underneath all of it. Not that Shane will fail, that somehow he already is failing.

Without hesitation, Ilya leans forward and presses his forehead carefully against Shane’s.

“Shane,” he says quietly. “Our son already knows your heartbeat better than anything else in the world. He spent months growing safe beneath it,” Ilya continues, voice low and steady and full of aching certainty. “To Maks, you are the safest place in the world.” His thumb brushes gently beneath Shane’s eye. “He hears your voice and calms down. He sleeps best against your chest.” Ilya’s eyes sting slightly now too. “Our baby loves you so much already, Shane.”

A shaky breath catches painfully in Shane’s chest, because sometimes he still forgets that part. In all the fear and grief and panic, he forgets that maybe love matters more than getting everything perfect immediately. He forgets the way Maksim settles the second he holds him close. The way those tiny dark eyes search for him instinctively now whenever he speaks.

The way the baby quiets fastest against his chest, listening to his heartbeat like some part of him still recognizes home there.

Shane's throat tightens suddenly, because he's spent so much time terrified of what he lost that sometimes he forgets what still remains. That this tiny impossible person who already knows him, already trusts him completely. Maksim doesn't look at Shane and see scars or weakness or trauma stitched across healing skin. He doesn't know anything about blood loss or surgeries or fear or the nights Shane woke up sobbing because he thought he'd lost everything.

To Maks, Shane is simply his.

And God, that realization hits Shane hard enough to ache. Because maybe he's been measuring himself against impossible things these past ten days. Against the body he used to have. Against the parent he imagined becoming under different circumstances. Against a version of himself untouched by grief and terror and trauma. But Maksim doesn't need that version of him, he just needs Shane.

Fresh tears spill silently down Shane's face as the realization settles somewhere deep and fragile inside his chest.

"I love him so much already," he whispers brokenly. "It actually scares me."

"I know." Ilya says it softly, because loving Maksim feels enormous and vulnerable and terrifying in a way neither of them was prepared for. Like suddenly there's this tiny living thing existing outside their bodies carrying every softest part of them with him.

For a long moment neither of them speaks, the room hums quietly around them while Maksim sleeps peacefully nearby, completely unaware he's currently the center of both their entire worlds.

Shane wipes shakily at his face with his good hand and lets out a weak breathless laugh. "I still think it's insane they're letting us leave with him."

Ilya snorts softly against his temple. "Probably, but I think we're going to love him enough that we figure the rest out eventually."

Shane and Ilya pull apart as the discharge nurse bustles in, breaking apart the quiet little bubble they had settled into.

She's an older beta named Marjorie who smells faintly like lavender lotion and peppermint candies and has spent the last week aggressively mothering Shane whether he wanted her to or not. Today is no different.

"Alright, gentlemen," she says briskly as she sweeps into the room carrying a thick clipboard beneath one arm. "Let's get this circus on the road."

The moment she steps inside, the entire room seems to shift gears automatically. Suddenly there are papers being shuffled and discharge packets appearing and nurses moving in and out

with practiced efficiency while Shane sits there feeling slightly shell-shocked by the fact that this is actually happening. He's leaving.

Marjorie immediately clocks the overwhelmed look on his face, her expression softens for half a second before she points the clipboard at him accusingly. "And don't you start crying again before I finish my paperwork."

Shane lets out a startled wet laugh. "No promises."

"Hm. Terrible patient." she murmurs fondly.

Ilya shifts slightly beside the bed while Marjorie launches into discharge instructions with the terrifying efficiency of someone who's repeated them eight hundred times before breakfast.

"Continue rotating pain medications as prescribed. No lifting anything heavier than the baby. Monitor the incision daily. Call immediately if you develop fever, redness, drainage, worsening pain—"

The words begin blurring together. Shane tries to listen, really, he does, but his brain feels like static right now, too many emotions crammed together at once—relief, excitement, fear, and the overwhelming instinctual need to get out of this hospital immediately.

Beside him, Maksim sleeps peacefully in the bassinet, completely unaware that his daddy is having an emotional crisis over leaving the hospital and taking him home.

"Shane." Marjorie's voice cuts gently through the spiral, eyes narrowing just slightly as she holds the paperwork and a pen out to him. "Tell me one thing I just said."

He blinks abruptly, taking the pen from her to sign with his good hand. "Uh...Don't drop the baby?"

Ilya makes a strangled noise suspiciously close to laughter.

Marjorie sighs heavily toward the ceiling like Shane alone has aged her twenty years. "Close enough."

Despite himself, Shane smiles weakly.

The older beta softens visibly at the sight of his expression. "You nervous, sweetheart?" she asks more gently now.

His fingers twist tightly in the blanket pooled across his lap. "A little," he admits quietly.

"Well, of course you are." She sets the clipboard down for a moment before moving closer to the bed. "You survived something awful here," she says gently. "And now you're taking home a brand new baby while still recovering yourself." Her expression turns knowingly warm. "That would scare anybody."

Shane swallows hard, because part of him keeps feeling like he should be handling this better somehow. Less emotional, less frightened, less... fragile.

As though sensing the spiral immediately, Marjorie pats his knee lightly. “Honey, nobody feels ready to leave with their first baby.” She snorts softly. “Honestly, I still think it’s a little insane that hospitals just let people walk out with infants.”

A startled laugh escapes Shane before he can stop it. “Thank you!” he says immediately, pointing vindictively toward her. “That’s what I’ve been saying!”

“Ignore him,” Ilya says dryly. “He’s been having an existential crisis about our legally assigned infant ownership for the last twenty minutes.”

Marjorie cackles, actually cackles. “Oh sweetheart, everybody does.” Then her expression softens again as she looks toward Maksim sleeping nearby. “But you know what?” she says quietly. “The fact that you’re this scared means that baby is already very loved.”

Marjorie reaches for the clipboard again with a brisk little clap of her hands before either of them can spiral emotionally a second time. “Alright. Sign here, here, and here saying we explained everything and you promise not to wrestle bears while recovering.”

“I wasn’t planning to,” Shane mutters while signing shakily with his good hand.

“Excellent. We’re making progress.”

She reviews the paperwork one final time before nodding decisively. “Ok, here’s the plan.” She points toward Ilya. “You take the baby and pull the car around.” Then toward Shane. “We’ll wheel you downstairs shortly.”

Ilya immediately frowns. “I can wheel him down.”

“You can also go get the car while trained professionals do our jobs,” Marjorie replies dryly.

Shane snorts softly while Ilya looks deeply unconvinced by this arrangement. Eventually, though, he relents with visible reluctance.

Before leaving, he steps close again, one hand sliding gently into Shane’s curls before pressing a lingering kiss against his forehead. “I’ll meet you downstairs, solnishko,” Ilya says softly.

Shane nods faintly, “Ok.”

Ilya lifts Maksim’s car seat carefully, Maksim barely stirs inside it, tiny face tucked sleepily against the side padding. His gaze lingers on Shane for another second before finally heading toward the door, and the second he disappears into the hallway, Shane’s throat tightens, the room suddenly feels strangely empty.

They’re going home.

Marjorie notices immediately. “Oh no,” she says gently. “None of that sad face now.”

Shane huffs out a weak breath. “I know. I just...” His voice catches slightly. “This all feels very big.”

“Sweetheart,” she says quietly, “that’s because it is.” She squeezes his shoulder gently, smiling fondly. “But you don’t have to have everything figured out today. You just have to go home. Now,” she says briskly, returning to business mode. “Double check the room before you go.”

“My mother took home everything yesterday,” Shane says automatically, eyes darting around the hospital room anyway like his brain suddenly no longer trusts itself to remember basic facts.

The room looks strangely bare now. No overnight bags overflowing from chairs, no stacks of baby blankets, and not nearly as many flowers cluttering every available surface the way they had a few days ago. Just the essentials left behind.

“She thought it might be nice to leave you—the nurses—the flowers,” Shane adds quietly, then points weakly toward the counter near the sink. “And there’s a gift basket.”

Marjorie blinks. “A what?”

Shane shifts slightly against the pillows, suddenly looking shy about it. “It’s mostly tea and snacks and stuff,” he mumbles. “And gift cards. My mom put it together because everyone’s been really kind to us.”

For a moment, Marjorie just stares at him, her face visibly crumples into something dangerously emotional. “Oh, sweetheart.”

Shane immediately looks alarmed. “Please don’t—” He panics. “If you cry, then I’ll start crying again.”

“I am a professional,” Marjorie grumbles, looking suspiciously misty-eyed.

Shane snorts softly as the older beta walks slowly over toward the basket, peering inside with growing disbelief.

“This is enough coffee to revive the dead,” she mutters. Then louder— “Linda! Get in here right now before I steal this basket for myself.”

Another nurse pokes her head through the doorway almost immediately. “What?” Then she spots the flowers and gift basket. “Oh my God.”

Shane feels his face heat slightly beneath the attention. “You all took care of us,” he says quietly, shrugging one shoulder awkwardly. “It just felt wrong leaving without saying thank you.”

The second nurse’s expression softens instantly. “Oh honey.”

Within approximately thirty seconds, three more nurses have appeared seemingly out of thin air after hearing the words gift basket. The room suddenly fills with overlapping voices and soft exclamations over the flowers and snacks while Shane sits there looking both embarrassed and fond.

“You absolutely did not need to do this,” one nurse says while already inspecting the fancy tea assortment.

“I know,” Shane replies honestly. “But I—we— wanted to.”

That quiets the room slightly, because everyone here knows how close it came. Knows what Shane looked like when he first arrived. Knows how hard he fought to survive long enough to hold his son.

Marjorie clears her throat loudly before the room can become emotionally devastating again. “Well,” she announces briskly, dabbing suspiciously at one eye. “Clearly we are everyone’s favorite nurses.”

“Obviously,” Shane says immediately.

That earns him a chorus of offended noises from the hallway as more staff overhear. “Favoritism!” someone calls dramatically.

Shane laughs softly, the sound still fragile around the edges but genuine, and suddenly the room doesn’t feel quite as much like a prison anymore. Not because he wants to stay, god no, but because for the first time since the accident, this place feels less like somewhere terrible things happened to him and more like somewhere people helped put him back together afterward.

Marjorie watches the last of the nurses disappear down the hallway carrying flowers and pieces of the gift basket with fond exasperation written plainly across her face.

“Absolute vultures,” she mutters affectionately beneath her breath.

Marjorie turns back toward the room with a brisk clap of her hands, immediately slipping back into efficient discharge mode before anyone can get emotional again.

“Alright then.”

She gathers the last of Shane’s things with practiced movements. His medication packets. The folded discharge paperwork. The extra blankets Yuna insisted on bringing from home because “hospital blankets are depressing.” Even the giant insulated water bottle Hayden dropped off three days ago with HYDRATE OR DIE written across the side in obnoxiously large letters.

Marjorie eyes it briefly. “Your friend concerns me.”

“You and me both,” Shane smiles faintly.

The older beta stacks everything neatly onto a rolling cart before doing one final sweep of the room with sharp experienced eyes. The now-empty bassinet, the stripped counters, the hospital bed that has been Shane’s home for the last two weeks. Then over to him.

“You ready, sweetheart?” she asks more gently this time.

Shane looks around the room one last time taking in the fluorescent lights, the pale walls, the chair Ilya slept in nearly every night, and the bathroom where Shane cried in front of the mirror because he didn't recognize his own body anymore.

The room holds so much grief now. So much fear and pain, relief and love, and somehow, despite everything, gratitude too.

Slowly, Shane nods. "Yeah," he whispers, throat tightening slightly. "I think I am."

Marjorie smiles softly before reaching for the room phone. "Transport to postpartum discharge, please."

The reality hits harder hearing it said aloud—discharge. Shane's pulse jumps nervously beneath his skin all over again as Marjorie hangs up the phone and moves toward the wheelchair waiting folded near the wall.

Suddenly everything feels very real, very fast.

"What if I forgot something?" Shane blurts suddenly.

Marjorie doesn't even look up from locking the wheelchair into place. "You didn't."

"But what if—"

"Shane." She fixes him with a deeply unimpressed maternal look. "The room is empty."

He blinks, looks around and realizes she's right. "Sorry, I just—"

"It's ok, sweetie. You're going to be ok."

A tiny embarrassed smile flickers across Shane's face before immediately fading into nerves again. Because now there's nothing left to delay this, no more paperwork, no more discharge instructions, no more reasons to stay. Just the terrifying, wonderful reality of going home with his baby.

A soft knock sounds at the open doorway moments later before an orderly steps inside with an easy smile. "Ready to head out?" he asks gently.

Shane swallows hard, then nods. "Yeah."

The orderly wheels him slowly through the maternity ward halls while Marjorie follows beside them, pushing the cart piled with the last of Shane's things. The wheels squeak faintly against polished floors as they pass familiar hallways and nurses' stations Shane now knows almost by heart.

And somehow, word spreads almost immediately that he's finally leaving. Nurses who hadn't swarmed his room earlier begin appearing one by one as they move through the ward. Some lean out from behind desks. Others pause in doorways or step briefly into the hall just to wave him down before he disappears onto the elevator.

One of the NICU nurses appears suddenly from around the corner, still half wearing gloves from whatever she'd been doing before spotting him. "Oh good, I caught you."

Shane's expression softens immediately when he recognizes her. She's the one who first placed Maksim against his chest. The one who quietly reassured him through tears the first time he held his son.

Without hesitation, she leans down and hugs him carefully around his shoulders. "I'm really glad you're both ok," she whispers softly enough only Shane hears it.

Emotion clogs painfully in Shane's throat. "Me too," he whispers back.

When she pulls away, her eyes are suspiciously bright. "Now go home and rest," she orders gently. "And remember that babies are weird little noises factories. Don't panic every time he snorts."

"No promises," Shane admits honestly, and that earns him another soft laugh.

As they continue down the hall, more voices call out goodbyes.

"Bye, Shane!"

"Don't come back unless it's socially!"

"Good luck with the sleep deprivation!"

One of the younger nurses cups her hands around her mouth dramatically. "Trust no diaper after midnight!"

Shane laughs hard enough to immediately regret it when his ribs protest sharply. "Ow,fuck."

Marjorie sighs deeply. "See? This is why we can't have nice things."

Shane snorts, as he presses a hand into his side.

By the time they reach the elevators, Shane is emotionally exhausted all over again. His ribs ache from laughing. His eyes burn from crying. His body feels heavy with exhaustion and healing and too many emotions stacked on top of one another for ten straight days, but for the first time since waking up in the ICU, the ache inside his chest no longer feels entirely rooted in grief.

There's hope tangled into it now too. Fragile, terrifying, but real. Because ten days ago Shane woke up believing he lost everything, and now he's going home. Not healed completely, not magically ok, but alive.

Alive enough to hold his son. Alive enough to laugh in hospital hallways and panic over newborn parenting and cry because nurses were kind to him. Alive enough to ache for home and softness and the future again. That realization settles strangely through him as the elevator doors slide open with a soft chime.

For days, survival was the only thing Shane could focus on. One breath. One hour. One pain medication schedule at a time, but somewhere along the way, without him fully realizing it, the future quietly started existing again around the edges.

A future with Maksim. With Ilya. With sleepy mornings tangled together on the couch and Hayden complaining dramatically while secretly rocking the baby at three in the morning. A future where Shane eventually learns how to look at his scar without wanting to cry. Where maybe one day the hospital stops appearing in nightmares quite so often. Where surviving slowly becomes living again.

The possibility feels almost too delicate to touch directly, like if Shane hopes for it too hard, something terrible might notice and take it away. It's there anyway, small and flickering and stubbornly alive beneath all the fear.

As the orderly wheels him into the elevator, Shane glances down at his hands resting in his lap. At the healing bruises and the IV marks and his cast, evidence of everything his body endured to get here, and suddenly, for the first time since the accident, he doesn't feel weak looking at them. Just... human. Human and hurt and healing.

Marjorie catches his expression from beside him and nudges his shoulder lightly. "You alright there, sweetheart?"

Shane blinks up at her before nodding softly. "Yeah," he says quietly. "I think I finally believe I'm going to be ok someday."

The older beta's face softens. "Oh honey," she says gently. "You already are."

That nearly makes Shane cry all over again, but this time the emotion swelling in his chest doesn't feel sharp or devastating. It feels warm, tender, like something inside him is finally beginning to uncurl after days spent braced for catastrophe.

But when the elevator doors open, reality crashes into him all over again.

The lobby is brighter than the maternity ward upstairs, louder too. Phones ringing at the reception desk. Visitors crossing polished floors carrying flowers and coffees and overnight bags. The steady hum of a hospital continuing on around them completely unaware that Shane's entire life has changed inside it.

The orderly guides the wheelchair carefully out into the lobby while Marjorie trails beside them with the cart, and Shane feels strangely exposed. No longer tucked safely upstairs behind locked maternity doors and security checkpoints. Now he's here, visible, leaving.

His pulse jumps nervously beneath his skin. Instinctively, his gaze flicks around searching for cameras or reporters or strangers staring too long, but there's nothing. Just ordinary life moving around him in soft blurred motion. Relief loosens something tight in his chest.

He'd expected chaos.

Cameras flashing the second the elevator doors opened into the lobby. Reporters crowding the entrance. Paparazzi shouting questions the moment they spotted him being wheeled toward the doors.

After everything—the accident and the rumors that exploded online while he was unconscious—Shane had braced himself for spectacle, for strangers turning the worst thing that ever happened to him into headlines.

Instead there is nothing.

No crowd gathered outside the hospital entrance. No cameras waiting behind barricades. No shouting voices or flashes of light. Just ordinary winter afternoon traffic moving steadily beyond the glass doors. Visitors coming and going. Nurses ending shifts. A man carrying balloons toward the pediatric wing. Normal.

Shane blinks slowly, confused enough that he actually cranes his neck slightly toward the entrance like maybe the paparazzi are simply hiding poorly somewhere.

Marjorie notices. “What’s with that face?” she asks as the orderly guides the wheelchair across the lobby.

Shane hesitates, then quietly murmurs. “I thought there’d be reporters.”

The older beta’s expression softens with immediate understanding. “Oh.” She glances toward the doors herself before huffing softly. “Mr. Rozanov took care of that.”

Shane blinks up at her. “What?”

Marjorie gives him a look like this should be obvious. “Honey, there were reporters camped outside this hospital for days after the accident.” She lowers her voice slightly as they continue across the lobby. “Then suddenly yesterday? Gone.”

Shane’s brow furrows. “How?”

The older beta snorts softly. “I didn’t ask questions. I’m a nurse, not a federal investigator, but from what I heard, your alpha’s security team made it very clear that anyone attempting to photograph you during discharge would regret the experience.”

A startled laugh escapes Shane before he can stop it, because yes, that absolutely sounds like Ilya. He can picture it perfectly too. Ilya standing outside a hospital full of reporters looking six-foot-three and deeply unimpressed while Sergei lurked nearby like the physical embodiment of a threat assessment.

The image is so absurdly specific Shane almost laughs again.

Marjorie notices immediately, her mouth twitching faintly. “There’s the smile I’ve been trying to get out of you all week.”

Shane ducks his head slightly, cheeks warming faintly beneath the compliment. “It’s just...” He shakes his head weakly. “That’s such an Ilya thing to do.”

“Mm.” Marjorie hums knowingly as the orderly guides the wheelchair toward the sliding doors. “That man has looked about three seconds away from committing felony assault every time someone’s bothered you since you woke up.”

Shane’s chest warms unexpectedly at the thought anyway, because even through all the fear and grief and trauma, one thing has remained terrifyingly constant these last ten days: Ilya’s presence. Always there. Always protecting him. Even now. The realization settles softly through Shane’s chest as the automatic doors slide open ahead of them.

Cold winter air brushes immediately against his face, crisp and startling after ten straight days of stale hospital warmth, and waiting beside the black SUV, is Ilya. Maksim’s car seat already secured inside.

The second his gaze lands on Shane, something in his posture visibly eases, relief flickering openly across his face before he moves toward them immediately, like he’s been holding tension in his body this entire time waiting for Shane to finally reappear through those hospital doors.

Ilya reaches them a second later, crouching immediately beside the wheelchair like he physically cannot stop himself from checking Shane over every thirty seconds. “You ok?” he asks softly, eyes flicking quickly over Shane’s face, searching automatically for signs of pain or panic or exhaustion.

Something about being looked at like that still catches Shane off guard sometimes, not because it’s unfamiliar anymore but because it’s become so constant. There hasn’t been a single moment since Shane woke up where Ilya hasn’t watched him like he matters more than anything else in the room.

Shane’s throat tightens faintly around the emotion rising there again. “Yeah,” he says quietly. “I think so.”

Ilya’s expression softens at the uncertainty in his voice.

Without hesitation, he reaches up and brushes his knuckles gently against Shane’s cheek, thumb catching briefly beneath one tired eye. “You don’t have to be fully ok yet,” he murmurs softly. “You just have to get through today.”

Behind them, Marjorie makes a suspiciously emotional noise that sounds like a sniffle.

“Oh no,” she mutters immediately. “I’m not crying in hospital parking lot, absolutely not.”

Shane laughs softly despite himself while Ilya glances upward with visible amusement. “You’ve been threatening to cry since breakfast,” he points out.

“I am a professional,” Marjorie says firmly while already dabbing at one eye.

The orderly snorts loudly.

Ilya rises smoothly to his feet before turning his attention fully back toward Shane again. “Ready to go home, solnishko?” he asks quietly.

The question hits hard enough to ache. Because yes, god, yes. Even with the fear still clawing beneath his ribs. Even with the panic and uncertainty and grief he's still carrying around like fresh bruises beneath his skin, he wants home more than he's ever wanted anything.

Shane glances toward the SUV automatically, toward the faint shape of Maksim sleeping peacefully inside his car seat, then back toward Ilya, a shaky breath leaves him.

"Yeah," Shane whispers softly. "Take me home."

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Getting into the SUV is far more exhausting than Shane expects it to be.

Not because the vehicle is especially difficult to climb into, or because every movement still feels like his body is healing around sharp edges beneath the surface, but because Shane refuses outright to sit anywhere except the backseat beside Maksim.

“Nope.” Shane immediately shakes his head, the second the orderly starts angling the wheelchair toward the front passenger door.

The orderly blinks, looking between him and Ilya. “Sir?”

“I’m sitting with my son.” The answer comes automatic, firm in a way Shane’s voice rarely is these days.

From beside the SUV, Ilya’s mouth twitches as he closes the passenger door and moves to open the back one instead. The orderly shrugs good-naturedly and redirects immediately while Marjorie mutters something under her breath about “possessive new parents” with obvious affection.

The closer Shane gets to the open back door, the more real everything starts feeling all over again. The car seat already secured inside, the soft bundled shape of Maksim sleeping peacefully within it, the fact that this tiny person is actually theirs to take home now. Emotion swells thickly in Shane’s throat as the orderly locks the wheelchair beside the SUV, but all Shane can really focus on is the baby sleeping inside the car. His baby.

Marjorie and Ilya flank him automatically as Shane carefully pushes himself upright from the wheelchair, the movement is slow and awkward and far harder than it should be. Every movement pulls unpleasantly at healing muscles and stitches beneath the surface. His scar burns faintly when he twists wrong trying to maneuver himself into the vehicle and Shane’s face tightens involuntarily before he can stop it, a quiet sharp inhale slipping through his teeth before he can stop it.

Ilya steadies him with both hands like he’s made of glass.

“Easy, solnishko.” Ilya murmurs softly the second Shane winces, Marjorie hovering at his side with the sharp-eyed focus of someone fully prepared to shove Shane right back into the wheelchair if necessary.

“I’m ok,” Shane insists automatically, even as he grips the door frame for balance longer than he means to as the world tilts faintly around the edges for one brief dizzy second.

Neither Ilya or Marjorie comment on the blatant lie, just keep hovering as Shane finally settles against the soft leather seats, breathing shallowly with exertion alone.

God, it's ridiculous how exhausting everything feels now.

"I'm ok," Shane says again, his gaze snagging on Maksim sleeping peacefully only inches away. Tiny face tucked beneath the soft blue knit hat. One miniature fist escaped stubbornly from the blanket wrapped around him, and none of the discomfort matters nearly as much.

Without thinking, Shane reaches over immediately with his good hand and rests two fingers lightly against the baby's tiny sock-covered foot. Maks shifts faintly beneath the touch but doesn't wake, little mouth falling open sleepily as the car door shuts softly behind them.

Outside the SUV, Ilya quietly turns back toward Marjorie and the orderly to gather the last of Shane's things from the cart. The giant emotional-support water bottle Hayden dropped off days ago with HYDRATE OR DIE still written aggressively across the side in permanent marker. The thick folder of discharge paperwork Shane absolutely will not remember half of later. The extra blanket Shane slept with every night because it smelled enough like home—and enough like Ilya—to calm his omega when the hospital blockers became too overwhelming.

Cold winter air bites softly at Ilya's cheeks as he lowers the trunk carefully after placing the final bag inside, and for a brief moment, he just stands there beside the SUV breathing.

Ten days ago he arrived at this hospital convinced he was about to lose everything he loved before it had even really begun. One minute he'd been standing inside an empty house interrogating the realtor about safety measures, the next he and Yuna were being ushered into one of the private family waiting rooms while doctors worked to save the one person both their worlds revolved around.

It was the longest wait of Ilya's life, because there was nothing to do except sit there imagining the worst thing possible over and over again—Shane dying before Ilya got to say goodbye, Maksim never breathing at all, both of them gone because Grigori decided their lives were expendable collateral damage.

And then a nurse appeared, taking him away from Yuna and his thoughts about losing Shane to the NICU. Because their son had arrived early enough that they wanted him monitored closely for a while. Ilya remembers following the nurse through fluorescent hallways feeling almost dissociated from his own body, like nothing around him could possibly be real.

Then they brought him to the incubator, and there he was. Tiny, red-faced, wrapped impossibly small beneath hospital blankets with wires attached to skin far too delicate for any of it. Ilya had never felt fear like that before, not even with Shane still unconscious somewhere upstairs fighting through surgery.

Because suddenly there was this tiny living thing depending on him completely. A child, his child, and Shane wasn't there to see him yet.

That thought nearly broke something inside him because Shane should've been there. Should've been holding Maksim first. Crying and exhausted and alive beside him instead of unconscious on an operating table while strangers monitored their baby through incubator walls.

Ilya remembers standing there beside the NICU bed staring at Maksim's tiny chest rising and falling and thinking with horrifying clarity: If Shane dies, I won't know how to survive this.

And that terror never fully left after that. It followed him through every day Shane stayed unconscious. Every doctor entering the room with too-neutral expressions. Every moment Maksim fussed in the NICU and Shane still couldn't hold him yet.

So standing here now beside the SUV watching Shane sit beside their son alive and exhausted and touching tiny sock-covered feet like he still can't believe Maksim is real, it feels overwhelming in ways Ilya can barely put words to.

Because ten days ago he genuinely thought this future might never happen at all.

Now Shane is here, still healing, still frightened sometimes, still carrying trauma in the tightness around his eyes and the careful way he moves, but alive. Alive enough to bring their baby home.

And it finally hits him—he's taking them home.

Emotion swells suddenly and violently in Ilya's chest, so overwhelming it almost feels painful.

Because for days now his alpha has been screaming at him to build safety around them. To create walls and warmth and softness and security strong enough that nothing like this can ever touch them again. It was that instinct is what drove him to buy the house so quickly, not logic but need, and now they're finally leaving.

Shane alive beside Maksim, both of them breathing, both of them his.

The realization nearly knocks the breath from Ilya's lungs, because for the first time in ten straight days, he can finally imagine something beyond survival.

Not hospital corridors and waiting rooms and fear so constant it became background noise beneath his skin. Not doctors speaking in careful measured tones while Shane lay unconscious upstairs and Maksim slept in the NICU attached to monitors because he'd arrived too early into a world already trying to take things from them.

Something beyond merely keeping them alive hour by hour—a future, one that no longer feels dangerous to hope for. That realization settles through Ilya slowly, almost cautiously, like his mind still doesn't fully trust it yet.

For ten days, hope felt sharp-edged. Unsafe. Every time he allowed himself to imagine Shane waking up or Maksim coming home healthy, terror followed immediately behind it

whispering how easily both things could still be taken away. So he stopped looking further ahead than the next update from doctors. The next hour. The next breath.

But now? Now Shane is sitting inside the SUV alive and exhausted and touching their son with this soft reverent tenderness that still visibly catches him off guard sometimes. Now Maksim is healthy enough to leave the hospital tucked safely into his car seat instead of surrounded by NICU monitors. Now Ilya is loading bags into a trunk instead of signing emergency consent forms with shaking hands. And suddenly the future doesn't feel like something fragile enough to shatter if he thinks about it too directly.

It feels real.

Ilya finds himself imagining ordinary things with an almost painful kind of longing now.

Shane half-asleep in oversized sweaters wandering into the kitchen at two in the morning because Maks finally settled down and now he's starving. The sound of a baby monitor crackling softly through quiet rooms. Tiny socks abandoned everywhere because apparently newborns shed clothing like it's a competitive sport.

He imagines Shane healing slowly in a home that smells like candied ginger and laundry detergent and warm blankets instead of antiseptic. Imagines him laughing again without grief immediately following behind it. Imagines their son growing up surrounded by people who love him enough to soften the sharpest parts of the world wherever they can.

And for the first time since the accident, those thoughts don't immediately fill Ilya with dread. Because ten days ago, standing in that family waiting room while surgeons operated on Shane and nurses monitored Maksim floors away, Ilya genuinely believed he was about to spend the rest of his life mourning a future he never got to have.

Now suddenly that future is waiting quietly in the backseat of an SUV, and the enormity of it nearly cracks him open emotionally. Because he understands now with horrifying clarity that love is not actually the soft uncomplicated thing people pretend it is.

It's terrifying.

It's standing in hospital corridors realizing another person's heartbeat matters as much as your own. It's looking at a newborn and understanding instantly that fear will live in your chest forever now because there is suddenly something in the world precious enough to ruin you completely if lost.

And yet, Ilya would choose this. Every single time. Even knowing the terror attached to loving them this much.

He watches as Shane adjusts Maksim's blanket with clumsy exhausted gentleness, and the sight nearly destroys him all over again. Because there they are. His omega, his son, his entire fucking heart sitting quietly in the backseat...And he gets to bring them home.

Marjorie watches him quietly for a long moment before speaking. "You ok, kiddo?"

Ilya turns to look at her, the orderly long gone, but Marjarie has stayed, her question catching him off guard slightly, because he honestly doesn't know how to answer it.

No, some part of him thinks immediately. No, I don't think I will ever fully recover from seeing Shane unconscious beneath ICU lights. No, I still wake up some mornings convinced my phone is about to ring with bad news. No, I don't think terror leaves you untouched after realizing how quickly you can lose everything.

But also, yes, because everything he never thought he would be able to have is sitting in the backseat waiting for him.

His gaze drifts back toward the SUV windows again automatically. Toward Shane, who's now whispering something softly to the sleeping baby despite Maks clearly being unconscious enough not to hear a word of it.

A small helpless smile finally tugs at the corner of his mouth. "Yeah," he says quietly, voice rougher than intended. "I think I might be now."

Marjorie's expression softens as she glances toward the SUV too, watching Shane carefully tuck the blanket more securely around Maksim's tiny body. "There's your whole world right there, huh?" she murmurs knowingly.

Ilya exhales slowly through his nose. "Yes" he says again, softer this time.

The word feels too small for the enormity of what he means. Because before Shane, Ilya genuinely believed love was mostly obligation and loyalty. Necessary things. Useful things. Things measured through sacrifice and usefulness and what you were willing to endure for another person.

Love was protection, provision. Standing beside someone because they belonged to you and you belonged to them in return. Solid things, practical things.

Then Shane arrived in his life and quietly ruined every definition Ilya thought he understood. Because Shane made love feel softer than Ilya knew it could be without becoming weak.

Turned it into warm tangled blankets and sleepy laughter in the middle of the night. Into instinctively reaching for each other in crowded rooms. Into Shane absentmindedly stealing Ilya's clothing because they smelled comforting. Into quiet domestic moments that somehow settled something restless inside Ilya he hadn't even realized was there.

And possession too, not ugly or controlling the way Grigori always wielded it. Something instinctive instead, fierce and reverent and deeply protective.

Mine to care for. Mine to protect. Mine to come home to.

Shane made Ilya understand for the first time that love could feel like peace instead of performance. And now there's Maksim, tiny and vulnerable and impossibly real, and loved so fiercely already that it physically aches.

Ilya didn't expect that part.

Didn't expect to look at someone so small and immediately feel his entire nervous system rearrange itself around keeping them safe. Didn't expect fear to become so intertwined with love that the two now feel inseparable. Because suddenly there is this tiny breathing thing in the world carrying pieces of both him and Shane, and Ilya knows with horrifying certainty he would tear apart entire cities before letting harm reach him.

But beneath the terror of loving Maksim this much sits something softer too—wonder.

Watching Shane hold their son for the first time. Seeing Maks settle instantly against Shane's heartbeat like he already knew exactly where home was. Tiny fingers curling instinctively around Ilya's thumb in the NICU while Shane still slept unconscious floors away.

Those moments changed something fundamental inside him.

And now, standing outside the hospital with Shane and Maksim waiting quietly inside the SUV, Ilya realizes something almost overwhelming in its simplicity: For the first time in his life, love does not feel like a burden he carries alone. It feels like somewhere he belongs too.

Ilya looks back toward Marjorie after a long moment, emotion pressing heavily against his ribs.

The older beta is watching him quietly, her expression soft with the kind of understanding only someone who's spent years witnessing people survive terrible things can possess.

For a second, Ilya almost doesn't know what to say, because thank you feels absurdly insufficient for everything this hospital and its staff carried them through. For keeping Shane alive long enough to wake up again. For caring for Maksim while Shane couldn't hold him yet. For helping stitch together pieces of a future that very nearly shattered before it even began.

His throat tightens unexpectedly. "I didn't..." He exhales quietly, glancing once more toward the SUV windows where Shane is still bent protectively toward the baby. "I didn't know if I would get this."

Marjorie's smiles softly, knowingly. "I know," she says gently, reaching out and squeezing his arm gently. "You take that family home, and let yourselves be happy there."

The words land somewhere deep, because happiness still feels strangely dangerous after everything. Like something that could disappear if held too tightly, but maybe that's what healing is, learning to hold joy anyway.

Ilya nods once, swallowing hard around the emotion lodged thickly in his throat. Then he looks back toward the SUV one final time before moving toward it automatically, drawn there by instinct stronger than thought.

Toward Shane. Toward Maksim. Toward the first place in his entire life that has ever truly felt like home.

The cold winter air follows him as he circles around the front of the SUV, exhaustion suddenly settling heavily into his own bones now that the adrenaline keeping him upright for ten straight days is finally beginning to loosen its grip.

By the time he opens the driver's side door and slips into the seat, the interior of the SUV is quiet. Warm. Soft with the faint sounds of the heater humming low beneath the tiny sleepy noises Maksim occasionally makes from the backseat.

And Shane is already half asleep, head tilted back carefully against the seat, dark hair messy from the wind and exhaustion, mouth parted slightly with the kind of deep involuntary fatigue that comes only after surviving too much for too long. The bruising lingering along his throat has faded enough now that it no longer shocks Ilya every time he sees it, but the sight still pulls painfully at something deep inside his chest anyway.

His cast rests awkwardly across his lap, a blanket tucked loosely over his legs, and his left hand is still curled gently around Maksim's tiny foot, even asleep. Like some instinct inside him refuses to let go completely.

The sight hits Ilya so hard he physically stills, because it's such a small thing. So ordinary, and somehow it feels more intimate than almost anything else he's ever witnessed.

Shane doesn't even realize he's doing it. There's no performance in it. No conscious tenderness meant for anyone else to see. Just pure exhausted instinct pulling him toward their son even in sleep. Protecting, checking, holding close.

Maksim squirms faintly in response, tiny fingers twitching beneath his blanket before settling again almost immediately.

Safe.

Comforted.

Home beside them already.

Ilya has to look away for a second just to steady himself, hands tightening briefly against the steering wheel while emotion presses hot and overwhelming behind his ribs.

God, he loves them so much.

Carefully, quietly, he reaches back over the center console and brushes his fingers over Shane's knee. The touch is feather-soft, but still, Shane stirs almost immediately, eyes blinking open slowly with sleepy disorientation before settling on Ilya.

For one brief moment, he looks confused, then his expression softens instantly when recognition settles in.

"Oh," he mumbles sleepily, voice rough with exhaustion. "Hi."

The sleepy greeting nearly kills Ilya outright, a helpless smile pulls briefly at his mouth despite everything. "Hi," he murmurs back softly. "Ready to go home?"

Shane's eyes drift half-shut again as he nods faintly against the seat. "Mmhm." His thumb rubs absently over Maksim's tiny sock through the blanket. "I can't wait to go back to the apartment," he murmurs sleepily. "God, I miss my nest."

The words hit Ilya directly in the chest, because yes, he knows. Knows how hard Shane's omega has been clawing toward safety and privacy these last ten days. Knows he's been picturing that apartment constantly—his blankets, his couch, Hayden inevitably hovering nearby pretending not to.

Ilya's hand stills slightly against Shane's knee. "About that..."

Shane blinks slowly, still sleepy enough not to immediately process the hesitation in Ilya's voice. "What?"

For one brief second, Ilya genuinely considers saying nothing. Just driving to the house first and explaining later once Shane is already inside somewhere warm and safe and quiet, but the thought lasts less than a heartbeat because Shane has had enough surprises for a lifetime already.

So instead, Ilya exhales softly and shifts slightly in the driver's seat to face him more fully. "I bought house," he says carefully.

Shane blinks, then blinks again. "You bought a what?!"

"A house." Ilya watches the confusion slowly begin clearing from Shane's face in real time. "I viewed a couple before the accident...."

That wakes Shane up considerably faster, his brows pull together immediately. "You bought a house?" he repeats slowly, like maybe the words rearranged themselves incorrectly on the way to his ears.

Ilya nods once. "For us."

Shane just stares at him for a long moment, "You..." Shane swallows once. "Ilya, What... When?"

"The night after you told me about your father." The confession comes quieter now. "When you fell asleep."

Understanding flickers slowly across Shane's exhausted face, followed almost immediately by concern. "You bought a whole house while I was unconscious-adjacent?"

A startled laugh escapes Ilya despite himself. "You were not unconscious-adjacent."

"I was on enough pain medication to legally hallucinate."

"Probably true."

Shane stares at him another long second before his gaze flicks automatically toward Maksim sleeping beside him, then back to Ilya, something emotional and uncertain flickers briefly

through his expression.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he says softly. “The apartment would have been fine.”

Ilya’s entire face changes slightly at the words. “Yes,” he says quietly. “I did.” He exhales softly, searching for words. “I’d been planning to surprise you, before the baby was born, but after the accident my alpha... after seeing you there like that...” His jaw tightens faintly around the memory. “I needed somewhere safe for you. For both of you.”

Emotion flickers visibly across Shane’s face now, raw and startled and exhausted enough not to hide any of it properly.

“The apartment is safe,” Shane says quietly, almost instinctively defensive of the place that carried him through so much already.

“I know.” And Ilya means it. “That place became home because you were there.” His thumb brushes lightly against Shane’s knee again. “But this...” He glances briefly out toward the streets beyond the windshield. “This is ours.”

Shane’s throat bobs visibly as he swallows, still stunned. Still processing.

“Wait,” he says suddenly, eyes widening slightly. “Hayden’s going to think you kidnapped me.”

That startles a real laugh out of Ilya, warm and helpless and exhausted all at once, the sound filling the SUV softer than Shane’s heard in days.

“Oh, no,” Ilya says immediately, still visibly amused as he settles back into the driver’s seat. “Hayden was very aware of what was happening.”

Shane narrows his eyes suspiciously. “That somehow does not reassure me.”

Ilya’s mouth twitches again. “He was not especially happy about me moving you out of the apartment.”

“Oh my God,” Shane breathes, already able to picture exactly how that conversation went.

“When I told him I bought a house for you and Maks, he stared at me for a full minute without blinking.”

Shane snorts softly. “Yeah, that tracks.”

“Then he asked if I had ‘completely lost my fucking mind.’”

A laugh escapes Shane immediately. “He did not!”

“He also informed me,” Ilya continues solemnly, “that if I was removing you from apartment while you were hospitalized and emotionally vulnerable, he would ‘beat my ass so severely even Russian mob money couldn’t fix it.’”

Shane makes a strangled noise halfway between horror and laughter. “You’re not even in the mob...”

“I tried explaining this,” Ilya says dryly. “Hayden remained unconvinced.”

“That’s because you look like you absolutely should be.”

“I look professional.”

“You look like you threaten billionaires for fun.”

“I do not threaten billionaires.” A brief pause. “Well, not anymore.”

That nearly starts Shane laughing all over again. He presses carefully against his ribs with his good hand, shoulders shaking faintly while Maksim continues sleeping peacefully beside him through the entire conversation

“See?” Shane wheezes. “This is why Hayden thinks you’re suspicious.”

“No,” Ilya says dryly as he starts the SUV. “That is because I was married.”

Shane immediately chokes on another laugh. “Oh my God.”

“I am serious, solnishko.” Ilya pulls carefully away from the hospital curb, one hand steady against the wheel while the other rests loosely near the center console. “The first time Hayden met me, he looked at wedding ring, looked back at me, and visibly decided I was a villain in one of his reality shows.”

“That is not what happened.”

“It is exactly what happened.”

Honestly? It kind of was. Hayden had spent the first several weeks of Shane and Ilya’s situation deeply convinced Shane was about to become the emotional collateral damage of some rich-people arrangement gone catastrophically wrong—a powerful older alpha, still legally married, connected to a terrifying family. To Hayden, it sounded less like romance and more like the beginning of a true crime documentary.

“He thought you were going to use me and take the baby,” Shane admits quietly.

Ilya’s expression shifts slightly at that. “Yes,” he says honestly. “I know.”

Because Hayden never actually cared that Ilya and Svetlana were close. The friendship between them made sense almost immediately once Shane explained it—two people raised inside the same brutal world choosing loyalty and partnership over romance. What Hayden cared about was Shane, specifically whether Shane was about to get his heart shattered by someone too powerful to survive loving safely.

“Then he thought you were gonna keep me hidden somewhere as your secret omega while staying married for business reasons.”

Ilya looks genuinely appalled.

“Never.” The word comes immediate and firm enough that Shane actually blinks slightly. “Not even when Svetlana and I were still married,” Ilya continues, brow furrowing faintly like the very idea unsettles him. “The thought never crossed my mind.” His grip shifts slightly against the steering wheel. “To take the baby away from you if you kept him...” There’s something almost incredulous in his voice now. “As if Maksim would not belong with you... It wasn’t your fault you ended up pregnant,” Ilya says quietly. “And I would never have...” He exhales slowly, exhaustion and old grief threading faintly through his voice now. “Even if things had been different with my father... with Svetlana and me...” A slight shake of his head. “I never would have taken him away from you.”

The sincerity in his voice hits Shane hard enough to ache, because Ilya sounds almost horrified by the idea. Not defensive, not performative, just deeply disturbed that Hayden would think that taking Shane’s baby away would be something that Ilya would willingly do.

And suddenly Shane remembers those first few terrified weeks after finding out he was pregnant—the panic, the uncertainty, the endless horror stories online about wealthy alphas fighting omegas for custody. Then layering Grigori onto all of it... His threats, the way he abused his power, and the terrifying understanding that Grigori could and would make entire lives disappear if he wanted to badly enough.

At the time, fear made everything feel possible, even things Ilya himself never actually gave Shane reason to believe.

“I know that now,” Shane says softly after a moment. “And so does Hayden.”

Ilya hums noncommittally, a low skeptical sound deep in his chest that immediately makes Shane snort softly.

“He does,” Shane insists tiredly. “He’s just dramatic.”

A sleepy laugh slips out of Shane before he settles deeper against the seat again, exhaustion pulling visibly at him now that adrenaline is finally fading. Still, his fingers remain curled lightly around Maksim’s tiny foot like he physically cannot stop touching him for reassurance.

“He likes you,” Shane murmurs after a moment.

“No.” The answer comes immediately. “He tolerates me because he loves you.”

Shane opens his mouth to argue automatically, then pauses. Because honestly? That’s probably at least partially true.

Hayden’s protectiveness toward Shane has never been subtle. It’s loud and ridiculous and occasionally deeply embarrassing, but underneath all the himbo nonsense is something frighteningly unwavering. If Shane hurts, Hayden hurts too. And after the accident, Shane knows there was probably a part of Hayden that looked at Ilya and saw every terrifying thing tied to the Rozanov name all at once.

“He helped you,” Shane says quietly.

Ilya’s expression softens faintly around the edges at that. “Eventually.”

Because despite the distrust and the fear and the complicated grief tangled through all of this, Hayden still showed up. Still helped build Shane a safe place to land afterward. Still spent days arguing over furniture placement and washing blankets and threatening delivery drivers on Shane’s behalf apparently.

That matters to Ilya more than he fully knows how to explain. Not because Hayden approved of him, but because Hayden trusted Shane enough to help anyway.

For a moment, neither of them speaks.

Outside the windows while the city slides past in muted gray blurs beyond the windshield. The heater hums low around them and Maksim lets out a tiny sleepy snuffle from his car seat before settling again.

“So how did you convince him?”

That pulls another faint laugh from Ilya. “I didn’t.”

Shane blinks. “What?”

“He came around himself after I took him to see house two days ago.”

Shane’s brows lift slightly. “And?”

“And he walked through the entire place in silence looking deeply judgmental.”

“That’s his normal face.”

“Yes, I know that now.”

Another sleepy laugh slips out of Shane.

“Then he saw basement.” Ilya’s mouth twitches faintly again. “The den space.”

Shane stills slightly.

Because even through exhaustion and emotion and lingering anxiety, his omega instinctively perks toward the word den.

“It’s good?” he asks quietly before he can stop himself.

Ilya’s entire expression softens immediately at the subtle shift in Shane’s scent and posture. “Yes,” he says gently. “Very good.”

Warm, quiet, private. The kind of space Shane’s omega has been desperately craving ever since waking up in a hospital full of strangers and fluorescent lights and scent blockers that left him feeling constantly restless beneath his own skin.

“And he liked it?” Shane asks softly after a moment.

A faint smile tugs at the corner of Ilya’s mouth. “Yes. He walked downstairs, stopped talking entirely, and just stood there looking around for a full minute.”

Shane snorts softly. “That’s how you know he’s having a thought.”

“It was deeply concerning.”

Another sleepy laugh escapes Shane.

“Then,” Ilya continues, “he looked at me and said...” His voice shifts slightly, doing a startlingly decent imitation of Hayden’s dramatic disbelief. ““Oh, his anxious little omega ass is gonna thrive down here.””

Shane immediately dissolves into helpless laughter, the sound comes out rusty from disuse and exhaustion, but real enough that it startles something warm loose inside Ilya’s chest anyway.

“Easy,” Ilya murmurs automatically when Shane winces and curls slightly around his ribs afterward, still smiling faintly.

“Oh my God,” Shane wheezes. “I can’t believe he said that.”

“He did.”

“And then?”

“And then he started reorganizing furniture with terrifying confidence.”

Shane groans softly. “Oh no.”

“He informed me your omega would hate ‘aggressive spatial energy.’”

“That is not a real thing.”

“I gathered.”

Emotion swells thickly in Shane’s chest. “He really helped?” he asks quietly.

Ilya glances back at him through the mirror, the humor fades gently into something softer. “Yes, he was worried about you.”

The words land heavily because Shane knows that already. Knows Hayden probably spent the last ten days terrified right alongside them all, but hearing that he had poured that fear into building something comforting instead of just panicking somehow hits differently.

“He washed every blanket twice,” Ilya says quietly. “Said the hospital smell would upset your omega.”

Shane’s throat tightens immediately.

“He also argued with Svetlana for forty minutes about throw pillows.”

A startled laugh escapes Shane through the sudden sting of tears.

“He accused one of them of being ‘emotionally hostile,’” Ilya adds solemnly.

“Oh my God.”

“I left after that.”

“That was wise.”

Warmth settles slowly through Shane’s chest now beneath all the exhaustion and lingering anxiety, because maybe this new place won’t actually feel unfamiliar after all, not if the people he loves filled it with pieces of home before he ever arrived.

Because suddenly he can picture it so clearly. Hayden helping build a nest because Shane couldn’t. Svetlana fussing over furniture and blankets despite pretending not to care too much. Ilya trying desperately to create somewhere soft enough for Shane to finally feel safe again.

All these people gathering quietly around the wreckage of something terrible trying to build warmth back into their lives afterward. Trying to make coming home feel safe instead of frightening. Trying to soften something brutal with blankets and paint colors and washed sheets and quiet basement rooms built carefully around Shane’s instincts before he even stepped foot inside.

The realization hits Shane all at once, sharp enough to ache. A soft broken sound catches in his throat before he can stop it, and suddenly tears sting hot behind his eyes again.

“Hey,” Ilya says immediately, concern softening his voice as he glances back through the mirror. “What’s wrong, solnishko?”

Shane shakes his head quickly, embarrassed by the sudden emotion even as another tear slips loose down his cheek. “Everyone...” His voice wobbles badly. “They did all this for me... for us...” He swallows hard. “And I’m scared I’ll hate it.” The confession comes out small and guilty and exhausted. “That I won’t be able to settle there.”

Ilya’s entire expression gentles instantly. “Oh, dorogoy.” His voice drops lower, softer. “They’ll understand if you decide you want to go back to the apartment.”

Shane wipes clumsily at his face with the sleeve of his hoodie, looking miserable now. “I know, but—” He exhales shakily. “What if my omega just... freaks out?” The words spill faster now that he’s started. “What if it doesn’t smell right? Or it’s too quiet or not quiet enough or I can’t relax there and everyone spent all this time trying to make it perfect and—” His breathing catches slightly. “What if I can’t make myself feel safe anywhere anymore?”

The raw fear in his voice twists painfully through Ilya’s chest because that’s what this really is underneath everything else. Not the house itself, but trauma. The terrifying realization that the place Shane felt safest in before the accident didn’t actually keep him safe at all.

Ilya slows at a red light before turning slightly in his seat to look back at him more fully. “It’s overwhelming,” he says gently. “Of course it is.”

Shane’s eyes stay fixed downward toward Maksim’s blanket. “I just don’t want everyone disappointed in me.”

The words hit harder than they should, because even now, even after surviving all this, Shane is still worried about failing people somehow.

“Solnishko,” Ilya says softly. “Hayden did not wash blankets because he expects performance from you.” A faint warmth touches his voice despite the seriousness of it. “He did it because he loves you and wanted somewhere soft waiting for you afterward.”

Another tear slips down Shane’s face.

“And Svetlana argued about furniture because she was worried about you,” Ilya continues quietly. “Not because she expects gratitude.” His gaze softens deeply. “And me?”

Shane finally looks up slightly.

“I bought house because my omega and son almost died and my alpha became slightly insane about safety afterward.”

That startles the faintest wet laugh out of Shane. “Slightly?” he snuffles weakly.

“Maybe very.”

The tiny shaky smile that appears on Shane’s face makes something unclench in Ilya’s chest immediately.

“You do not have to love it immediately,” Ilya says gently. “You do not have to settle perfectly on the first day. Or second.” A pause. “You are allowed to be scared.”

Shane’s throat tightens painfully again. Because God, he is scared. Scared of change. Scared of leaving the strange safety net of the hospital behind. Scared that trauma rewired something fundamental inside him and he’ll never fully feel safe again no matter where he goes.

But then he looks down at Maksim sleeping peacefully beside him, tiny and warm and safe enough to sleep through all of this, and beyond him sits Ilya, steady and patient and looking at Shane like there’s nowhere else in the world he’d rather be than right here helping him through this moment.

Maybe home isn’t actually the apartment, maybe it’s this. These people. This love gathering itself around him over and over again no matter how frightened or broken he feels.

Shane exhales shakily. “I want to try,” he whispers.

Ilya’s expression softens so completely it nearly hurts to look at. “That’s all anyone expects from you, solnishko, and if it does not feel right, we leave. No disappointment. No pressure.”

The certainty in his voice settles warm and grounding through Shane's chest. Not trapped, not obligated, but safe enough to choose, and somehow, for the first time since the accident, that makes the unknown ahead feel a little less frightening.

"Ok," Shane whispers the word comes small and fragile, but real.

"Ok," Ilya echoes gently.

The light changes, the SUV begins moving again, tires humming softly against wet pavement while the city drifts past outside in muted gray blurs. Inside, everything feels strangely warm. Quiet in a way the hospital never was.

Shane leans his head more fully against the seat, exhaustion pulling heavily at every inch of him now that the adrenaline of discharge and change and emotion is finally beginning to fade.

His body aches, his ribs hurt, his scar still pulls unpleasantly every time he shifts wrong, and beneath all of it, fear still lingers stubbornly in the corners of his chest but it no longer feels quite so suffocating. Because whatever waits for him at the end of this drive—whether he settles there immediately or not—he won't be facing it alone.

His fingers tighten faintly around Maksim's tiny foot again. The baby squirms sleepily beneath the blanket before settling with a soft little sigh that nearly cracks Shane open emotionally all over again. So small, so trusting.

A home.

God, the word still feels almost too big to process.

Shane closes his eyes briefly, trying to picture it.

Warm blankets washed in familiar detergent. Hayden stomping around complaining loudly while secretly fussing over him. Svetlana and his mother both pretending not to hover while absolutely hovering. A quiet den space waiting somewhere underground where Shane can curl up with Maksim and finally let his omega breathe again. And Ilya, always Ilya.

The fear is still there, but now something softer exists beside it too: tentative hope.

After a long quiet stretch of road, Shane speaks again without opening his eyes. "If Hayden picked ugly furniture..."

A startled laugh escapes Ilya immediately. "There is at least one chair that may genuinely offend you."

"Mm." Shane's mouth twitches faintly against exhaustion. "Good, that feels more manageable somehow."

Warmth spreads through the SUV again, light and familiar and aching precious after everything, and as Shane slowly drifts toward sleep beside their son while Ilya drives them

home through the falling dusk, the future ahead no longer feels like something circling hungrily above them waiting to collapse.

For the first time in a very long while, it feels like something they might actually get to live inside.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, I lied. I thought I could end their story at 30 chapters but the more I keep writing it didn't feel finished yet soooooo who knows where we end up 🤔🤔🤔

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

At some point during the drive, exhaustion finally drags Shane fully under. Not deep sleep exactly. More the heavy drifting haze of someone whose body is still healing from catastrophic trauma and has simply run out of energy to stay awake anymore. His head tips sideways against the seat. One hand still loosely curled around Maksim's tiny foot like even unconsciousness can't fully break the instinct to keep touching him.

So when Ilya finally reaches back and brushes gentle fingers against Shane's knee again, Shane wakes slowly, painfully slowly.

"Solnishko," Ilya murmurs softly. "We're here."

Shane makes a sleepy unhappy noise immediately, blinking blearily without actually opening his eyes all the way yet. "M'awake," he mumbles.

He very clearly is not.

A faint smile tugs briefly at Ilya's mouth. "Mhmm."

For a second Shane just sits there floating somewhere between dreaming and consciousness while the heater hums softly around them. His body feels heavy, warm, aching in places he doesn't even have names for yet.

Maksim lets out a tiny sleepy snuffle beside him, that finally drags Shane a little farther awake.

His eyes blink open slowly. Everything outside the windows is dark except for soft pools of golden exterior lighting reflecting against snow-dusted stone and massive windows. For one long confused second, Shane just stares blankly ahead trying to orient himself, this is not his apartment complex.

Shane straightens slightly too fast before wincing hard at the pull through his ribs. "What..." His voice comes out rough with sleep. "Where are we?"

Then his brain catches up as Shane finally looks properly out the windshield, and completely stops functioning for a moment.

"Oh my God—"

Because house had implied something entirely different in Shane's mind. Not...Not this.

The massive estate rises from the property ahead of them all warm stone and enormous black-framed windows glowing amber against the winter dusk.

The driveway curves elegantly through beautifully landscaped grounds dusted lightly with snow, winding past carefully sculpted evergreens and low stone garden walls half-buried beneath winter frost. Tall black iron fencing surrounds the property beyond the tree line, discreet but unmistakable, disappearing into the dark woods wrapping protectively around the estate like a barrier between this place and the rest of the world.

The house itself looks less like a home and more like something architectural magazines would describe as a private luxury retreat. Clean modern lines softened by warm lighting. Towering glass windows stretching across multiple floors. Pale stone and dark wood blending seamlessly into the winter landscape around it. Wide covered terraces glowing softly beneath recessed lighting while snow gathers quietly along railings and steps.

It's huge.

Not flashy in the gaudy way Shane half expected from someone with Ilya's money. It's worse somehow, elegant and beautiful in a quiet devastating sort of way.

And impossibly private.

The black fencing encloses acres of property. No neighboring apartments pressed close beside it. No streets crowded with strangers. No paparazzi lingering near entrances waiting for glimpses through windows. Just snow and trees and warm light.

Shane stares openly now, exhaustion momentarily forgotten beneath sheer disbelief. "...Ilya."

His voice sounds faint, and the alpha suddenly looks a little suspiciously careful beside him. "Yes, solnishko?"

"This is not a house." He turns to look at Ilya with wide eyes. "This is where Batman would hide emotionally."

The startled laugh that escapes Ilya is helpless and immediate. Warmth flashes briefly across his face before softening into something more uncertain when Shane turns back to continue staring silently out the windshield.

Because now that the initial shock passes, Shane's omega abruptly becomes devastatingly aware of everything all at once—the privacy, the quiet, the massive surrounding property.

Safe.

The word curls instinctively through his chest before he can stop it, and somehow that realization is almost overwhelming.

"Oh," Shane whispers before he can stop himself.

Ilya goes very still beside him, because that sound, that tiny involuntary softening in Shane's voice hits him directly beneath the ribs.

"What?" he asks quietly.

Shane shakes his head faintly, still staring out at the house. “I just...” Emotion swells unexpectedly in his throat all over again. “It’s so quiet.”

And God, after ten days of monitors and fluorescent lights and strangers touching him constantly, Shane didn’t realize until this exact moment how desperately his omega needed quiet, the property itself almost seems to exhale around him.

“You know this is way too much, right?” Shane says it softly, not ungrateful, just completely overwhelmed.

His eyes remain fixed on the sprawling estate beyond the windshield while snow drifts lazily through warm golden light outside.

This place is enormous.

The kind of home Shane only ever saw online while doomscrolling through celebrity real estate articles at three in the morning. Not somewhere he ever imagined stepping foot inside, much less living.

Ilya glances back at him through the mirror, expression gentling immediately. “Yes,” he says simply.

That startles Shane enough that he actually looks at him. “You agree?”

“I bought you a fortress in the middle of the woods because my alpha had broken down after almost losing you.”

A startled laugh bursts out of Shane before immediately dissolving into something softer and more emotional, but anxiety still twists faintly beneath his ribs again as he looks back toward the house.

“It’s just...” Shane exhales shakily. “A really big step up from a two bedroom apartment.” His voice goes quieter. “This place looks like it has opinions about wine.”

That startles another helpless laugh out of Ilya. “It probably does.”

Shane snorts softly, but emotion still lingers visibly around the edges of him because the house isn’t just beautiful. It’s expensive in a way Shane still doesn’t fully know how to emotionally process. Quiet generational-wealth expensive, the kind of place where people probably own cashmere blankets on purpose.

“I don’t even know how to exist in something like this,” Shane admits quietly.

Ilya’s expression softens immediately. “Solnishko.”

He turns slightly more fully in his seat now, voice warm and grounding.

“It is just house.”

Shane gives him a deeply unimpressed look. “It is absolutely not just a house.”

A faint smile tugs at the corner of Ilya's mouth. "Ok," he concedes. "It is an aggressively large house."

"That's not better."

"But it is still only walls and furniture." Ilya's gaze flicks briefly toward Maksim sleeping peacefully between them before returning to Shane again. "It becomes home because you are inside it."

The quiet certainty in his voice steals something straight from Shane's lungs.

Ilya exhales softly before continuing more carefully now. "I know this is overwhelming." His thumb brushes absently against the steering wheel. "But after hospital..." His jaw tightens faintly. "I needed somewhere no one could get to you."

Shane's chest aches immediately at the honesty in his voice, because beneath all the money and security systems and giant black fences, that's what this really is—fear. Love wrapped tightly around terror.

"I didn't buy this because I think you care about expensive things," Ilya says quietly. "I bought it because you deserve somewhere peaceful to heal."

Shane's eyes sting suddenly.

God.

"And," Ilya adds more softly, "because when I saw the basement, I thought..." A faint, almost embarrassed pause. "Shane's omega is going to feel safe here."

That almost completely undoes him because the worst part is, Ilya was right, his omega is calm for the first time in a very long time.

"I... I can't believe you bought me an emotionally supportive Batman mansion."

Ilya snorts. "I did."

"And Hayden helped decorate it."

"That part may have been a mistake."

A tired laugh slips out of Shane despite himself. "Thank you." Shane murmurs softly.

Ilya's expression softens so completely it nearly hurts to look at directly.

"You never have to thank me for taking care of you, dorogoy."

The words settle warm and heavy through the quiet SUV while snow drifts softly outside around the glowing estate.

For a moment, neither of them speaks.

Shane just sits there trying to absorb the enormity of everything pressing against his chest all at once—exhaustion, fear, relief, grief, hope.

Home, or at least the possibility of one.

Then Ilya exhales softly and glances toward the house. “There is something I should probably warn you about before we go inside.”

Shane immediately narrows his eyes suspiciously. “What did Hayden do?”

Ilya huffs out a laugh. “Shockingly, this is not a Hayden-related emergency.”

“That’s honestly more concerning.”

Warmth flickers briefly across Ilya’s face before softening again into something gentler, more careful. “Your mother is inside.”

Shane’s expression immediately softens. “Ok.”

“And Svetlana.”

Another blink. “...Ok.”

“And Hayden.”

“I assumed.”

“And Sergei.”

That finally startles a tired snort out of Shane. “Why is Sergei there?”

Ilya’s mouth twitches faintly. “He claims it is to supervise Hayden.”

Shane immediately snorts. “Fair.”

Still smiling, Ilya shifts slightly in his seat. “But mostly,” he says dryly, “I think Sergei is there because he and Svetlana suddenly need many excuses to be in the same room together.”

Shane blinks, then slowly sits up as straight as possible. “...what?”

A very suspiciously innocent expression settles across Ilya’s face. “I said what I said.”

“No.” Shane points weakly with his good hand. “Back up immediately.”

Ilya laughs, warm and low and deeply entertained by Shane’s growing horror.

“They have been...” He searches briefly for wording. “Spending time together.”

“Shut up!”

“Svetlana suddenly has many opinions about security arrangements.”

“And Sergei?”

“Sergei, meanwhile, appears willing to listen to those opinions for alarming amounts of time.”

Shane stares at him in complete disbelief. “Your ex-wife is dating your terrifying bodyguard?”

“They are not dating.” Ilya pauses. “Yet.”

“Shit,” Shane slumps back against the seat, looking genuinely overwhelmed now. “I leave civilization for ten days and everyone starts having weird emotional side quests.”

That startles another laugh out of Ilya. “You should have seen Hayden when he realized.”

Shane narrows his eyes immediately. “Oh no...”

“He walked into the kitchen, looked at Svetlana making tea while Sergei stood approximately three inches too close beside her, and then physically backed out of the room without speaking.”

A horrified wheeze escapes Shane.

“Later,” Ilya continues solemnly, “he informed me the sexual tension in house was becoming ‘psychologically hostile.’”

Shane presses his face briefly into his shoulder with a groan-laugh. “I cannot deal with this today.”

“Fortunately,” Ilya says dryly, “you do not need to. They are both pretending nothing is happening.”

“That’s somehow worse.”

“Agreed.”

Warmth spreads softly through the SUV again, easing some of the lingering tension from Shane’s chest, because this ridiculous messy absurdity feels strangely normal, and somehow that realization makes going inside feel a little less frightening.

Still Shane doesn’t move to get out of the car.

Neither does Ilya.

Shane stares out at the house again, emotions moving heavily and unpredictably through his chest.

Home.

The word still feels enormous, too enormous maybe.

In the driver's seat, Ilya remains quietly still with both hands resting loosely against the steering wheel, gaze fixed somewhere ahead through the windshield, and Shane realizes something—Ilya's nervous too.

The thought startles him slightly, because Ilya has spent the last ten days being everyone else's steady point. Calm through every panic attack and surgery update and grief spiral. Constantly moving. Constantly fixing things. Protecting. Handling.

But now? Now they've arrived and the crisis is over enough that there's finally space left for emotion to catch up.

Shane watches the tension sitting quietly beneath Ilya's shoulders for a long moment before speaking softly. "You ok?"

Ilya's mouth twitches faintly like he got caught doing something embarrassing. "Yes." then a moment later. "No."

That pulls the faintest tired smile from Shane immediately as Ilya exhales slowly through his nose, gaze still fixed ahead.

"I think..." He pauses briefly, searching for words. "I spent so long trying to get you here that I did not think much beyond that."

The honesty in his voice settles warmly through Shane's chest. "And now?" Shane asks quietly.

Ilya glances back at him finally, the emotion in his eyes almost steals the breath from Shane's lungs. "Now you are here."

Something in Shane's chest cracks softly open at the words. Because God, ten days ago, Ilya didn't know if Shane would survive long enough to leave the hospital at all, and now they're sitting together in the driveway of a home Ilya bought because his alpha desperately needed somewhere safe to bring them afterward.

Neither of them seems to fully know how to process the enormity of that yet.

Maksim squirms softly in his sleep, making a tiny unhappy noise before settling again almost immediately.

Shane looks down at their son for a long moment before speaking softly without lifting his head again. "I'm scared."

The admission hangs quietly in the warm SUV. Not dramatic, not panicked, just honest.

"I know," Ilya says gently.

Shane swallows hard. "What if everything feels different now?"

"Everything is different now, dorogoy."

The words should hurt, strangely, they don't.

"We could have lost you... Both of you," Ilya continues quietly. "Of course that changes things." His thumb brushes absentmindedly against the edge of the steering wheel. "But different does not automatically mean bad."

Shane's eyes sting again, because maybe that's what he's been afraid of most, not just pain or trauma or healing but the possibility that surviving this somehow ruined everything they used to be.

Then Ilya turns and reaches slowly back across the center console and takes Shane's hand carefully in his own, warm and steady.

"You do not have to figure everything out tonight," he murmurs softly. "You just have to come inside."

The simplicity of it settles through Shane's chest like something grounding. Not forever, not every future fear all at once, just inside. Just tonight.

Shane exhales shakily and nods.

"But," Ilya says giving Shane's hand a squeeze, "If you are not ready, we can tell them to leave."

Shane's eyes flick back toward him immediately.

"No one will be upset with you," Ilya continues quietly. "You just got out of the hospital, everyone will understand if you are exhausted and overstimulated." His gaze stays steady on Shane's face. "If seeing people feels too overwhelming right now, that is ok."

Emotion swells unexpectedly in Shane's throat again because there's no pressure in Ilya's voice. No expectation or no disappointment hidden beneath the offer, just genuine permission.

"And if this"—Ilya gestures lightly toward the massive glowing estate beyond the windshield—"is too much tonight..." "We leave. We go back to the apartment, or hotel, or anywhere you want..." A brief pause. "Unless it's the hospital, and then I will say no."

Shane snorts, the sound coming out rough with exhaustion but genuine enough to make warmth flicker across Ilya's face in relief.

"You're vetoing my choices now?" he murmurs sleepily.

"When it comes to you wanting to return to that fluorescent prison voluntarily, yes."

A tired laugh slips out of Shane despite himself. "Well maybe Marjorie misses me."

"I am sure she does," Ilya says solemnly. "But we cannot keep checking you back into the hospital every time you want attention."

Shane gasps softly in immediate offense. “I could have died!”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees calmly. “Which is why people kept giving you pudding and warm blankets.”

Shane opens his mouth with another sleepy retort already forming when he abruptly stills as movement flashes outside the windshield. Both of them glancing up just as the massive front doors of the mansion burst open hard enough that one of them bounces slightly against the stone exterior.

“Oh no,” Shane whispers immediately.

A moment later Hayden comes barreling out of the mansion like he’s been personally launched from inside it.

He bounds down the wide stone steps in flannel pajama pants, unlaced boots, and while aggressively trying to shove himself into a puffer jacket at least two sizes too small for him that Shane can only assume belongs to either Yuna or Svetlana.

“Oh my God is that...”

Beside him, Ilya watches Hayden pinwheel slightly on an icy patch halfway down the steps without slowing even a little. “Sveta’s coat? Yes.”

Shane wheezes out a laugh as he takes him in—the tiny puffer jacket is stretched to absolute limit across Hayden’s chest and shoulders, the sleeves ending somewhere around mid-forearm. The hood bounces uselessly behind him while he barrels towards the SUV.

“Jesus Christ,” Ilya mutters as Hayden nearly wipes out again on another icy patch, catching himself dramatically against the side of the car with a loud thump.

“I’m fine,” Hayden says loud enough to be heard through the closed SUV windows, still half-sprawled against the side of the vehicle where he caught himself.

Then he spots Shane properly through the windshield and shouts, “OH MY GOD YOU’RE HERE!”

Hayden slaps both hands against the hood of the SUV like he physically cannot contain the emotion ricocheting through him. The too-small puffer jacket strains dangerously across his shoulders.

“You’re ACTUALLY HERE.”

“He does know this is our home, right?” Ilya asks quietly as Hayden scrambles around the SUV to fling open the back passenger door where Shane sits.

“If you don’t think he’s already claimed a room for himself, you’re lying to yourself.” Shane murmurs to Ilya as cold air rushes into the warm car before turning to give Hayden a tired smile “Hey Hayd.”

Hayden just stands there for a moment, one hand gripping the door frame, the other coming up to cover his mouth as his face crumples.

“You’re home.” he whispers brokenly, throwing himself halfway into the SUV

Strong arms wrap carefully, but not carefully enough, around Shane while Hayden immediately starts scenting him instinctively. Face pressed into Shane’s hair and neck while loud relieved purrs vibrate straight through his chest.

“Careful!” Ilya hisses, but Hayden only squeezes Shane tighter in his overwhelming relief, pulling a low pained groan from Shane’s throat as pressure jolts through his healing ribs.

Hayden jerks back instantly like he’s been electrocuted. “Sorry—sorry!” His purring cuts off abruptly while tears continue spilling openly down his face. “Oh my God, I’m sorry.”

Shane is already laughing softly through the ache despite himself because of course Hayden’s first instinct upon seeing him home from the hospital was full-body emotional assault.

“I’m ok,” Shane wheezes gently.

Hayden scrubs aggressively at his face with the sleeve of Svetlana’s tiny coat, sniffing hard. “I’m just...” His voice cracks completely. “I’m just really happy you’re home.”

The raw sincerity in his voice hits Shane hard enough to ache somewhere deeper than his injuries, and without thinking, he reaches up with his good hand and grabs the front of Hayden’s stupid tiny jacket, tugging him closer again.

“I missed you too,” Shane whispers.

That absolutely destroys Hayden all over again, a wounded little sound leaves him before he carefully presses his forehead against Shane’s for a second, purring softly again beneath shaky breaths.

Behind them, Ilya watches quietly from the driver’s seat, exhaustion and something dangerously fond, softening his entire expression, because for all Hayden drives him absolutely insane, this is love too—loud and messy and overwhelmingly sincere love.

The kind that cries openly in driveways and steals other people's jackets and immediately forgets every social cue the second someone they love comes home alive, and after everything that happened, seeing Shane surrounded by that instead of hospital monitors and IV lines feels almost unreal.

Unfortunately, Hayden's emotional ambush apparently triggers a chain reaction.

The front door flies open again.

“Hayden Alexander Pike!” Yuna marches out onto the front steps already looking scandalized, doesn't even make it halfway down before spotting the scene at the SUV and throwing both hands into the air. “I told you to wait!”

“I did wait!” Hayden yells back.

“Ow, my ear.” Shane grumbles.

Hayden winces and pulls back with a snuffle. “Sorry, bud.”

Ilya watches as a second figure appears behind Yuna, tall and lithe, a mass of curls piled on top of her head, wearing an expensive wool coat and the expression of someone who has already reached the end of her patience for the evening.

Svetlana stops at the top of the steps and narrows her eyes. “Is that my jacket?”

Hayden freezes. “No...” Slowly, very slowly, he attempts to zip the coat higher.

“You can’t even close it,” Svetlana says flatly..

“I was cold.”

“If you tear it, I am going to stab you.”

Behind Svetlana, Sergei finally emerges onto the porch carrying the exhausted resignation of a man who has spent entirely too much time around this family.

He takes in the scene—Hayden wearing Svetlana's jacket, Yuna scolding everyone, Shane laughing, and Ilya looking one minor inconvenience away from losing patience, then he slowly shakes his head.

“Five minutes,” Sergei mutters. “I left you people alone for five minutes.”

“Eight, actually,” Hayden says helpfully.

“No one asked you.”

The chatter grows louder as everyone converges toward the SUV at once. Questions and concern and excitement that they're finally home lobbed in Shane and Ilya's direction from every angle.

“How was the drive?”

“Did they give you enough pain medication?”

“Did you eat lunch?”

“Why are you still wearing the hospital socks?”

Shane opens his mouth to answer one of them, when a tiny fussy sound emerges from the car seat beside him.

Six adults freeze simultaneously, silence falling over the driveway almost comically fast as another unhappy squawk follows.

Shane glances down, watching and waiting as Maksim squirms beneath his blanket, tiny face scrunching unhappily in his sleep, one little fist escapes the swaddle and waves angrily at absolutely nothing.

“Oh no,” Hayden whispers immediately, as though he's just witnessed a natural disaster beginning to form. “He's waking up.”

“Obviously he's waking up,” Svetlana mutters. “You do not need to narrate the baby.”

Another tiny grumble emerges from the car seat, and Hayden panics a little harder. “Oh God.”

“What?” Yuna asks immediately.

“He sounds upset.”

“He made one noise, Hayd.”

“It was an unhappy noise.”

Svetlana closes her eyes briefly. “He is a newborn, all of his noises are unhappy noises.”

“That is not true!

“Name one happy noise.”

Hayden opens his mouth, then pauses, pointing dramatically toward the car seat. “The little squeaky one.”

“They're all squeaky.”

Another offended little complaint emerges from beneath the blanket.

“Oh my God.” Hayden hisses, wide eyed. “He's escalating.”

“He's just waking up.” Sergei points out from somewhere behind him.

“That's what escalating means!”

Shane is already laughing hard enough his ribs are beginning to protest.

“Hayd,” he wheezes out. “He's just fussing, he's ok.”

Hayden immediately whirls toward him. “How do you know?”

Shane blinks. “Because he's my son?”

“That's not a qualification!”

“Um... It literally is.”

Another tiny grumble emerges from the car seat, Maksim's tiny lips purse together, his bottom lip wobbling.

"Oh God, there he goes again."

"Hayd—"

"What if he's hungry?"

"He ate before we left." Ilya supplies from the front seat.

"What if he's cold?"

Shae snorts, "He's wrapped in approximately six blankets."

"What if he's emotionally overwhelmed?"

"Emo—Emotionally overwhelmed?"

"He just got discharged from the hospital..."

"Days ago! I am the one who just got discharged..."

Hayden waves him off. "This is different, I can tell."

"Hayd, you have literally never had a child."

"So..."

"That's not how babies work."

"Are you sure?"

Shane pauses. "Actually, no. I have no idea how babies work."

That visibly alarms Hayden. "What do you mean you don't know?!"

"I've only been a parent for ten days."

"Oh my God, and they just let you leave with a baby!?"

"That's what I said!" Shane exclaims immediately, pointing at Hayden like he's finally found someone with common sense.

"Please, not this again," Ilya mutters from the front seat, sounding genuinely exhausted.

"No, because think about it," Hayden continues, looking increasingly distressed. "You guys have had this kid for, what? Ten days?"

"Twelve technically," Shane says.

“Twelve days!” Hayden throws his hands up. “We've had leftovers in my fridge longer than that.”

“That is disgusting.” Svetlana murmurs, wrinkling her nose.

Hayden ignores her, “I'm just saying, there's no test.”

“There are classes,” Yuna offers.

“Which we took.” Shane points out.

“But I didn't!” Hayden points dramatically at himself. “Oh my God, they let me hold him.”

“You do know he's not your son, right?” Ilya asks.

Hayden stares at him. “Biologically, yes.”

The silence that follows is immediate.

“I'm sorry,” Shane wheezes. “Biologically?”

Hayden shrugs. “Look, I'm just saying that kid has been listening to me talk since he was, like, the size of a blueberry.”

“A blueberry?” Svetlana repeats.

“Listen, I don't know baby sizes.”

“Uh-huh...”

“I don't.” Hayden points accusingly at Shane. “One week he was a blueberry, then a peach, then an eggplant, then suddenly an entire rotisserie chicken.”

“A rotisserie chicken!? What—”

“I don't think that's how that works, Hayd.”

“It absolutely is.”

“No,” Yuna says through obvious laughter. “It absolutely is not.”

Hayden looks around the group like he's being personally persecuted. “You people keep comparing babies to produce. How is—”

“Oh my God, enough.” The quiet bark from Ilya cuts cleanly through the conversation. Not harsh, just exhausted.

Everyone immediately stops talking.

Ilya closes his eyes briefly and pinches the bridge of his nose with one hand while the other rests protectively on Maksim's car seat.

“We have been standing in the driveway arguing about fruit for fifteen minutes.”

“It has not been fifteen minutes,” Hayden says grumpily.

Sergei barks out a laugh behind him.

“Whatever, long enough.”

A tiny sleepy grumble comes from Maksim as if to support the statement.

“See?” Ilya gestures toward the baby. “Even he is tired of this conversation.”

“I think he was on my side,” Hayden mutters.

“No one is on your side.” Svetlana pats his shoulder sympathetically. “Not even the baby.”

Hayden looks wounded.

“Can we please take this inside now, solnishko?” he asks Shane, ignoring everyone else.

The endearment lands warm and familiar against Shane's chest.

For a second Shane just looks past him, past the ridiculous crowd gathered around the SUV, toward the glowing house waiting behind them at the warm windows and snow-covered stone.

Home.

A lump rises unexpectedly in Shane's throat, his eyes stinging suddenly.

“Yeah,” Shane whispers, voice catching slightly around the word. “Yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry I went MIA for a bit there! I knew where I wanted to go with the story but the words wouldn't come. So, if this chapter feels a bit wonky please know it's because it was like pulling teeth to get out 😭

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The second Shane crosses the threshold, something inside him goes still. Not the exhaustion or the ache in his ribs or the pull of healing skin across his abdomen, or the anxiety that's been following him like a shadow ever since he woke up in the ICU, but something deeper, older and more instinctive—his omega.

For ten days it has felt unsettled, restless. Unable to fully relax no matter how many times he reminded himself the hospital was safe, because it had been safe. Objectively speaking.

Doctors and nurses and emergency buttons and specialists and machines constantly monitoring both him and Maksim, but his omega had hated every second of it. The sterile air, the antiseptic, the constant parade of strangers, the too harsh fluorescent lights, and the feeling that nothing belonged to anyone and that everyone was only passing through, including him.

And now?

Now he steps inside this house and something deep in his chest simply... exhales.

Home.

The house smells like home.

Not a building, not expensive real estate, not luxury, but home.

Mint and evergreen drift through the air first, warm and steady and unmistakably Ilya. Not the sharp scent of cologne, not something artificial. Just Ilya. The scent Shane has fallen asleep beside, the scent woven through blankets and shirts and the crook of a neck he presses his face into when the world feels too sharp.

It's everywhere. In the furniture, in the air itself, as though Ilya has spent weeks moving through these rooms imagining them occupied. Imagining Shane and Maksim here, imagining them.

The realization sends a painful warmth straight through Shane's chest.

Then comes lemon, bright and clean and warm—his mother. The scent sits lighter throughout the house but no less present, wrapped around baskets and blankets and flowers, lingering near the kitchen, tucked into corners. The unmistakable evidence of a mother who has spent the last week fussing over every detail she could possibly reach.

He can practically see her moving through the rooms—straightening pillows, folding blankets, stocking cabinets. Making sure everything was ready, that he would be ready.

And then comes Hayden. Shane actually laughs softly when he notices it, because of course Hayden somehow managed to scent-mark the entire house too.

Not intentionally, probably.

Maybe.

His scent lingers beneath the others, woven through hallways and furniture and blankets with the stubborn persistence of someone who's apparently spent the last week living here. Icy and crisp, clean in a way that immediately makes Shane think of hockey rinks. Not the smell of the ice itself, but that first sharp breath when stepping through the rink doors, the sudden sting of cold air filling your lungs.

It's such a distinctly Hayden scent that Shane immediately pictures him barreling through the house carrying armfuls of pillows while arguing with furniture.

His scent clings strongest in unexpected places—the giant sectional, where a pair of throw pillows that absolutely weren't where Yuna originally put them, the hallway leading toward what Shane strongly suspects is Hayden's claimed bedroom.

It's familiar enough that something inside Shane immediately relaxes around it, because Hayden's scent has been part of home for years now. Long before Ilya, before Maksim, before any of this.

The scent brings all of it back in flashes. All-night study sessions fueled entirely by energy drinks and spite. Movie nights that inevitably devolved into everyone talking over the film until nobody remembered what they'd actually watched. The smell of greasy takeout containers stacked beside gaming consoles. Long drives with the windows down, Hayden singing loudly and incorrectly to songs he only half knew. Stopping at gas stations at two in the morning because somebody wanted snacks.

And hockey games, of course.

Hayden slamming into the boards after a particularly aggressive shift and immediately popping back up to grin through a split lip. Hayden celebrating goals like he'd personally solved world hunger. Hayden getting into fights. Hayden getting threatened with fights but somehow befriend everyone anyway.

Every major chapter of Shane's adult life somehow contains traces of Hayden, and now his scent is here too.

And beneath all of that, woven more subtly through the house, linger two newer scents. Not unfamiliar, just newer. Less deeply rooted in Shane's bones than the others, yet no less comforting.

Svetlana's lavender and honey, warm and elegant and deceptively soft, appearing in little pockets throughout the house. On blankets, near the kitchen, lingering faintly in the hallway, and the oversized armchair near the fireplace that Shane would bet money she's already claimed as her spot.

And wrapped around it, Sergei's smoke and leather. The scent is deeper than the others, grounding and solid. The sort of scent that settles into furniture and woodwork and somehow makes an entire room feel steadier.

Shane finds traces of it near the fireplace, near the entryway, near the study he hasn't even seen yet. It smells like cold winter nights and expensive jackets, like campfires and old books. Like the reassuring presence of someone who doesn't talk unless he has something worth saying.

Shane blinks his eyes open. At some point they'd drifted closed without him realizing it and he had just been standing there in the foyer, breathing, taking it all in. Letting his omega map the space the same way it used to map new apartments and hotel rooms and unfamiliar places.

His gaze lifts, and for the first time he truly sees the house.

The foyer opens around him in soaring expanses of light and space. Towering ceilings stretch upward two full stories overhead, crossed by massive dark timber beams that somehow keep the room feeling grounded despite its size. Floor-to-ceiling windows rise along the back of the house, transforming the snow-covered woods beyond into living artwork. The fading winter sunlight reflects off fresh snow and spills into the room in soft gold.

Everything glows. Not flashy or ostentatious, but warmly.

The floors beneath his feet are wide-plank white oak in rich honey tones that seem to absorb and reflect light simultaneously. Natural stone climbs portions of the walls, dark metal accents add contrast without making anything feel cold.

Everywhere he looks there are textures—wood and stone, wool and linen and velvet. Things meant to be touched, used. Less like the museum he imagined from the outside, and despite the obvious expense, it feels like home.

The great room opens ahead of him and Shane's breath catches. A massive stone fireplace stretches nearly two stories high, flames dancing behind glass, crackling softly. The sound immediately does something soothing to the frantic corners of his brain.

Oversized sofas gather around it in conversational clusters layered with blankets and pillows. Books rest on coffee tables, candles sit waiting to be lit, and plants soften corners.

His eyes catch on a framed photograph sitting on one shelf, then another and another.

Pictures already scattered throughout the room. College photos, family photos, pictures of his mother and father, Hayden and Jackie. Interspersed throughout are pictures of Ilya and Svetlana as teenagers, of him and his mother, her holding him in her lap and smiling down at him. Pictures of Maksim tucked among them. His ultrasound photo, his wrinkled red face in the NICU, Ilya teary eyed with Maksim on his bare chest, and the three of them in Shane's hospital bed.

Shane turns away, taking in the enormous kitchen with its white oak cabinetry and dark stone countertops gleaming beneath warm pendant lights, and the island large enough to host an entire holiday gathering. The space somehow manages to feel both impossibly grand and deeply lived-in at the same time

A warm presence settles at his side.

"Ready, solnishko?"

Shane glances up at him. "For what?"

A small smile pulls at the corner of Ilya's mouth, the sort of smile that only appears when he's genuinely pleased with himself, which is immediately suspicious.

"To see my favorite part."

Shane laughs softly. "That's concerning."

"It should be."

Before Shane can question him further, Ilya nudges him gently forward. Not toward the staircase or the great room, but toward a door tucked beyond the kitchen.

The closer they get, the more Shane notices it, the scent.

At first it's faint beneath everything else. Then stronger, and stronger still, until his omega is practically vibrating with attention.

His footsteps slow. "Ilya..."

The smile widens. "Open it."

Shane stares at him, then at the door, then back. "You are being weird."

"Open the door, solnishko." The fond exasperation in Ilya's voice makes warmth bloom inside Shane's chest.

Slowly, he reaches for the handle and twists. The door swings inward, and Shane's breath catches.

The scent hits him first. Not the room, not what he's looking at, but the scent.

Their scent.

Mint and evergreen and sugared ginger, blended together everywhere.

The force of it nearly physically stops him, because unlike the rest of the house, where their scents mingle naturally throughout shared spaces, this room is saturated with them and only them. Not overwhelmingly or aggressively, just undeniably them.

His omega immediately surges toward it, drawn forward before his brain even catches up.

"Oh." The word escapes him on a breath.

Because the room beyond is beautiful. Not in the extravagant way the foyer is beautiful, or in the architectural-showpiece way the great room is beautiful. Because it feels like someone reached directly into the deepest parts of his omega instincts and built a room around them.

The basement stretches beneath the house in warm pools of amber light. Every lamp deliberately chosen to cast a soft golden glow that leaves corners gentle and inviting instead of dark. The ceiling feels lower than the main floor above, intentionally cozy despite the sheer size of the space. It feels safe, enclosed, intimate. And at the center of it all sits the couch.

Shane actually stops walking.

It's enormous. Not a couch, really, but more like a giant upholstered island built entirely for comfort. Cream-colored and impossibly soft, the sectional sprawls across the room in a massive U-shape, deep enough that a person could practically disappear into it. The kind of furniture designed for sleeping on, with cushions thick enough to sink into.

The kind of furniture designed for nesting.

"Oh." Shane murmurs, taking in the blankets layered over blankets.

Soft knit throws, weighted fleece blankets, soft sherpa, and gossamer linen. Some folded neatly, others deliberately rumpled, like someone had been arranging them for weeks trying to determine the perfect configuration.

And pillows... Pillows everywhere.

Huge body pillows, firm support pillows, ridiculous oversized pillows and squishmallows. His favorite pregnancy pillow, and one made from one of his old hockey jerseys beside the weighted plush Hayden bought him during finals week in college.

The couch sits oriented toward a massive stone fireplace built into one wall, a fire crackles softly inside. Above it hangs a television large enough for movie marathons and hockey games, shelving lines either side of the fireplace.

Then Shane notices the corner nearest the couch.

Maksim, an entire space for Maksim integrated directly into the room.

A beautiful wooden bassinet sits within arm's reach of the sectional, close enough that Shane could lean over and touch it without ever leaving the nest. A soft rocking chair sits nearby with a basket full of blankets and burp clothes beside it.

A changing station hidden inside custom cabinetry, its shelves filled with diapers and creams, tiny books and little stuffed toys. Everything they might need, all right there. No stairs to climb, no running across the house.

Shane's eyes sting. Because he can picture it so clearly now.

Maksim sleeping in the bassinet while Shane naps curled beneath blankets. Ilya stretched out beside him with a book balanced on his chest. Movie nights and hockey games. Maksim eventually learning to crawl across the giant sectional. Blanket forts and bedtime stories.

An entire future sitting quietly inside one room.

The realization settles so heavily in Shane's chest that for a moment he can't speak, can't move. Can't do anything except stand there staring at the couch, at the bassinet and the blankets. At the life waiting for them here.

"What do you think, dorogoy?" Ilya's voice is soft, careful, and that more than anything else finally makes Shane turn.

The alpha is watching him with an expression Shane has almost never seen before. Not with his usual confidence and steady self-assurance Ilya carries into every room. He's nervous.

Because buying the house had been easy. Building the den and Shane's nest had been easy. Creating this entire space had been easy, but Shane liking it? That part matters.

His throat tightens painfully. "I..."

The word dies halfway out, his eyes suddenly burning.

Ten days ago he wasn't sure he'd ever wake up again, wasn't sure Maksim would be ok, wasn't sure any of this future would exist, and now it's here, built for him. Waiting for him.

His gaze finds the bassinet again, then the couch, then to Ilya and their sleeping son in his arms.

"You made me a nest." His voice comes out embarrassingly small.

Ilya's entire expression softens. "Yes."

Like it's the most obvious thing in the world. Like there was never any possibility he wouldn't.

A helpless laugh escapes Shane, wet around the edges. "It's ridiculous."

Ilya immediately looks alarmed.

Shane laughs harder. "No, no." He swipes quickly at his eyes. "I mean that in a good way."

"Then why are you crying?"

"I am emotional."

Ilya snorts. "That is not answer."

"It is absolutely an answer."

"It is explanation you give when you do not want to explain."

Shane points at him. "Correct."

Ilya's mouth twitches. "Try again, solnishko."

Shane lets out a long breath, his gaze drifts back toward the nest. Toward the bassinet sitting within arm's reach of the giant couch. Toward the shelves already stocked with books and blankets and little pieces of a life that hasn't happened yet.

"I just..." His voice catches slightly, and finally he says the only thing that feels honest enough. "It's perfect, and I don't feel like I deserve it."

The second the words leave his mouth, Shane wishes he could take them back.

He keeps his eyes fixed on the nest, because saying it out loud feels embarrassing somehow. Childish and ungrateful, but true.

The house, the den, their family and future... All of it feels impossibly beautiful, and some stubborn wounded part of him keeps waiting for someone to point out that it belongs to somebody else. Somebody better, somebody stronger. Somebody who didn't nearly die.

A soft sound leaves Ilya. Not quite a sigh, not quite a laugh.

When Shane finally glances over, the alpha is staring at him like he's said something utterly ridiculous.

"Deserve it?"

Shane shrugs helplessly. "I don't know." His throat tightens. "It just feels like..." He gestures vaguely toward the room. "All this feels too good to be true."

For a moment, Ilya simply looks at him, then slowly adjusts Maksim higher against his shoulder. "Shane."

The use of his name immediately makes him look up.

"Dorogoy." The endearment wraps around him like a blanket. "This is not too good to be true." His voice is quiet, steady. "It is just good."

The words hit harder than any grand speech could have. Because Ilya says them like they're obvious, like the distinction matters.

Not too good, just good.

"You almost died." Ilya says it plainly.

No dramatics, just fact.

"You are alive." His gaze drops briefly to Maksim. "He is alive, and now we are home."

"I know..." Shane snuffles, scrubbing at his face again. "It's just..." His voice catches. "We almost didn't have this."

The words fall into the quiet between them. Heavy and honest.

For a moment, neither of them speaks, because there isn't really anything to say that hasn't already been said.

"Come here." Ilya says, breaking the silence.

Shane goes without thinking, stepping forward until he's pressed against Ilya's side until he can feel the steady warmth of him. The steady warmth of Maksim too.

Ilya rests his cheek briefly against Shane's hair. "You are right."

The answer surprises him.

Shane blinks. "What?"

"We almost lost this." His arm tightens around Shane. "And it was terrifying, but this..." Ilya's hand slides up to cup the back of Shane's neck. "This doesn't exist because we got lucky." His thumb brushes gently against Shane's skin. "It exists because we survived."

Shane's breath catches on a sob.

"We survived, dorogoy."

The words settle somewhere deep, somewhere wounded.

"And now we get to have this." Ilya's gaze moves between Shane and Maksim, the two people who hold his entire heart. "We get early mornings and sleepless nights. We get first words and first steps." A smile tugs faintly at his mouth. "We get scraped knees and school projects and soccer games or hockey games or whatever terrifying sport he decides he likes."

Shane lets out a watery laugh.

"We get all of it." The simple certainty in his voice nearly breaks Shane all over again.

He doesn't trust himself to speak, doesn't trust his voice not to crack. So instead he presses closer, carefully, gently, placing one hand against Maksim's back.

Their son sighs softly in his sleep. The sound hits Shane right in the chest.

The fire crackles softly, the room glows around them while Maksim sleeps, and for the first time in what feels like forever, there isn't anything urgent demanding their attention. No doctors, no monitors. No decisions. No fear.

Just this, just them.

Shane closes his eyes briefly, breathing in Ilya's mint and evergreen, feeling Maksim's tiny heartbeat beneath his palm. Just letting himself exist inside this moment.

Ilya shifts slightly beside him. "You know what my favorite part of the room is?"

Shane opens his eyes. "The couch?"

"No."

"The fireplace?"

"No."

"The absurd amount of money you spent on blankets?"

"Those are investment."

That earns a real snort from Shane. "Then what?"

"You."

Shane blinks. "What?"

Ilya nods toward the nest. "It only works when you're in it."

The room suddenly feels very quiet, very warm.

"Ilya—"

"I'm serious." His gaze flicks briefly toward the couch. "Before you got here, it was just furniture. Just things." His hand brushes lightly against Shane's where it rests on Maksim. "Now it's home."

The words hit harder than any grand declaration ever could.

Because Ilya isn't talking about the room, not really. He's talking about belonging. About family. About the fact that every beautiful thing in this room only matters because Shane is standing here to see it.

Shane's eyes burn immediately. "Oh no."

"What?"

"You can't say things like that."

A small smile appears. "Why?"

"Because I was just starting to stop crying."

To Shane's horror, Ilya actually laughs, a warm, helpless sound that fills the room.

He leans down and presses a kiss into Shane's hair. "You can cry as much as you want, dorogoy." His arm tightens around both Shane and Maksim. "We're home."

Chapter End Notes

We made it to the den, friends!

I hope it was worth the wait.

Also thank you all for your love and kind words, it means so much to me 

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The first few days in the house feel strangely unreal. Not because of the size of it or because of the soaring ceilings or the floor-to-ceiling windows or the fact that Shane still occasionally gets lost trying to find the laundry room, but because they're home, actually home.

For the first week, Shane catches himself listening for monitors and looking for nurses, waiting for someone to come check on Maksim or for someone to tell them what happens next. Nobody ever does because now it's just them. Just parents.

The house slowly settles around them, or maybe they settle into it. It's hard to tell.

The den becomes the center of everything almost immediately. The beautiful kitchen goes largely unused except for coffee, reheated leftovers, and the occasional meal Yuna insists on dropping off despite living forty minutes away. As does the formal dining room, and the upstairs sitting room might as well not exist.

Instead, life condenses around the nest in Ilya's den, around the giant sectional and the bassinet tucked within arm's reach.

Days blur together there—feedings and diaper changes, naps and time spent folding laundry while watching movies with the volume turned down low. And more laundry, an astonishing amount of laundry for someone so small.

The house begins accumulating evidence of parenthood at alarming speed. Burp cloths appear on every surface, tiny socks migrate mysteriously throughout the property, and half-finished bottles materialize beside lamps. Blankets multiply and nobody knows where they're coming from.

At some point Shane realizes they've stopped referring to the den as Ilya's den, then eventually stop referring to it as the nest. It's just where they live now, the gorgeous master bedroom on the second floor untouched.

The first morning Shane wakes up and finds both Ilya and Maksim asleep beside him on the couch. It feels oddly significant. Not dramatic, just important. The baby tucked into the bassinet, Ilya asleep with one arm stretched protectively toward both of them with the fire reduced to glowing embers.

Home.

Not the apartment or the hospital or somewhere temporary.

Home.

Shane heals slowly. Much slower than he'd like, but somehow faster than Ilya thinks he should.

The first week, Ilya follows him everywhere. The kitchen, the den, the mudroom, and back. One afternoon Shane turns around to find the alpha standing in the doorway watching him carry his own water bottle.

"Ilya."

"What?"

"I am carrying water."

"I see that."

"Then why are you looking at me like I'm attempting mountain climbing?"

"Because last week you tried standing up and nearly passed out."

"I was tired."

"You had been awake for eleven minutes."

"I was still tired."

Ilya says nothing, just continues to shadow him.

Eventually though, Shane recovers enough to start moving comfortably through the house without Ilya hovering. No more stopping halfway up the stairs to catch his breath. No more wincing when he picks up Maksim because his incision pulls. The most important—his thoughts are no longer consumed by the accident.

Those moments matter more than he expects because healing isn't dramatic. It happens quietly, in tiny victories nobody else notices. Like when he realizes he isn't calculating the distance to the nearest hospital anymore, or when he laughs so hard at something Hayden says that his ribs hurt for normal reasons.

Recovery sneaks up on him. Much like Hayden, who has, to Ilya's endless frustration, effectively moved in. Not officially. Because officially speaking, Hayden still has an apartment, one he now shares with Jackie. An apartment he continues paying rent for, but apparently has forgotten exists.

By week three, the evidence is impossible to ignore.

Ilya finds a toothbrush in the upstairs bathroom that he promptly throws away, only for a second to appear later that day, followed by a mug that he knows belongs to Hayden from the many mornings he spent in a quiet standoffish with the annoying man in the cramped apartment kitchen.

Other little things like a hoodie and a pair of shoes in the mudroom, his scent lingering in one of the chairs in the den. Then bigger things like a gaming console that appears beneath the television that Ilya definitely did not purchase, followed by a mini fridge filled with Hayden's favorite beer and ginger ale's for Shane.

It's the mini fridge that is the last straw for Ilya.

"Why the fuck is there a miniature refrigerator inside my den?"

Hayden looks up from the couch where he and Shane are playing a video game while Maksim sleeps. "For beverages."

He says it like it's the most obvious thing in the world, which makes Ilya grind his teeth. "We have a kitchen."

Hayden rolls his eyes. "Well yeah, upstairs."

The situation only deteriorates from there.

One afternoon Ilya discovers Hayden has somehow acquired a key to their house.

The discovery happens entirely by accident. Hayden is digging through his pockets looking for his phone. Out comes a wallet, a crumpled receipt, three sticks of gum, a baby sock. Ilya does not ask questions, until a familiar black key fob drops onto the kitchen island.

Ilya stares at Hayden who stares back, eyes wide.

Slowly, Ilya reaches over and picks it up. "Where did you get this?"

Hayden looks down at the key. "Um..." He scratches his neck. "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"It just sort of appeared on my keychain."

"You cannot magically acquire a house key, Pike."

Hayden shrugs. "Well, I did."

Ilya pinches the bridge of his nose. "That—what? No."

Across the island, Shane is already starting to laugh.

"No, seriously," Hayden says, sounding genuinely confused. "I noticed it like three days ago."

"You noticed it three days ago."

"Yeah."

"And you did not think to ask why you had a key to my house?"

Hayden considers this. "No. I figured you wanted me to have it."

"Why would I want you to have a key to my house?"

Hayden blinks. "Because I'm Maks's godfather?"

Ilya stares at him and Hayden stares right back, completely serious. As though this is the most obvious thing he's ever said.

"...that is your defense?"

"I mean..."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

Hayden gestures toward the baby currently sleeping against Shane's chest. "Is he, or is he not my godson?"

"Yes, that is my son."

"Right, our son."

Ilya falls silent, mouth open as Shane wheezes.

Ilya slowly raises an eyebrow. "Our son?"

"You know what I meant!"

"Did I?"

Hayden turns desperately toward Shane. "Tell him what I meant."

Shane immediately shakes his head. "Nope."

"Traitor."

"You walked into that one by yourself."

Hayden sighs dramatically, then points at Maksim again. "Look, all I'm saying is that if something happened—"

"Nothing is happening."

"If something happened—"

"Nothing."

"—I would obviously be involved. So, needless to say, me having a house key makes sense..."

"No."

"I'm hearing maybe."

"You heard incorrectly."

"Definitely sounds like a yes to me."

Ilya lets out a long suffering sigh. "I'm changing security codes."

Hayden gasps. "You wouldn't."

The argument continues. Predictably and relentlessly, somehow ending with Hayden getting a garage door opener. Nobody is entirely sure how, least of all Ilya.

The truly alarming part is that nobody seems concerned. Not Yuna or Sergei or Shane. Especially not Shane, who is laughing too hard to respond when Ilya asks, "How did this happen?"

Eventually the argument dissolves into the comfortable background noise their lives have somehow become—coffee brewing, Maksim sleeping, Ilya questioning his life choices while Hayden talks animatedly with Shane.

Routine. Perhaps not the one they'd expected, but theirs all the same.

Meanwhile, Maksim grows. Tiny changes at first, almost impossible to notice day-to-day. A little heavier, a little longer, the newborn haze begins to fade. He's more alert, tracking movement with his eyes, following voices, and turning his head toward familiar sounds. Toward Shane and Ilya.

The first time Maksim calms immediately against Shane's chest, something catches painfully in his throat, because suddenly it hits him that he's not just keeping a baby alive, he's a dad.

Of course, nobody tells you how much of actually parenting is just guessing.

Hungry?

Tired?

Gas?

Cold?

Too warm?

Overstimulated?

Understimulated?

Existential crisis?

Sometimes he and Ilya spend twenty minutes troubleshooting only to discover Maksim was furious because one sock came off.

One memorable night he screams for nearly an hour. Nothing works. Not the bottle or his favorite pacifier, not rocking or walking him around the nest. Not even Ilya singing to him a Russian lullaby that he'd told Shane his mother had sung to him as a child.

Nothing.

Shane is nearing tears, and Ilya looks moments away from declaring war on an infant. Until he walks past Hayden's goddamn mini fridge, the compressor clicking on, and instantly Maksim quiets.

Neither of them speaks as Ilya rocks Maks while standing near the fridge. Not as his red scrunched face smooths out, and his wet brown eyes begin to droop. Not as he snuffles and drifts off to sleep.

The compressor hums again. Shane and Ilya hold their breaths, waiting, but Maks remains asleep,

Slowly, Ilya turns toward Shane. "If he requires industrial refrigeration sounds to survive, I'm leaving him there."

Shane looks down at their sleeping son. "I'm not going to complain if it works."

For the next three weeks they play appliance noises from YouTube.

Ah, parenthood.

The days blur together—feedings, diapers, bottles, laundry. Always with the laundry.

Shane realizes it while folding what has to be his second load of laundry that day, or maybe his third. Honestly, it's impossible to tell anymore.

Before Maksim, Shane had never really appreciated how much laundry one tiny human could generate, but now it feels like a personal attack. Tiny socks and onesies, blankets and burp cloth. So many burp cloths.

He stands in the laundry room staring suspiciously at a basket full of clean baby clothes.

"I don't understand."

No one answers, mostly because he's alone.

"I have watched him wear one outfit all day, and yet somehow there are fourteen outfits in here."

From somewhere down the hallway comes Hayden's voice. "He shits professionally."

"Thank you, Hayden."

"You're welcome."

Shane shakes his head, smiling despite himself as he resumes folding, the repetitive motion is strangely calming. And somewhere between matching impossibly small socks and wondering where half their burp cloths keep disappearing to, a realization sneaks up on him.

He stops, looking down at the laundry basket then around the room. The house is quiet, the dryer running, the tv playing Maks's new favorite sound—a box fan—while he naps in his bassinet, and it hits him.

Somewhere along the way, he's stopped measuring time by pain medication. Stopped counting hours between pain med doses. Stopped organizing entire days around doctor's appointments and follow-ups and physical restrictions. Stopped waking every morning cataloguing what hurt.

It completely catches him off guard, because for so long recovery had been everything—how far he could walk, how easily he could stand, whether walking up the stairs hurt or his scar pulled. Recovery had been its own full-time job, and now? Now he's standing in a laundry room folding baby clothes and complaining about the physics of infant outfit changes, not recovering but living.

His hand drifts unconsciously to his abdomen. The scar still exists, the memory of everything that happened still exists. The memory of everything they almost lost, that exists too. So does the fear, but only sometimes now. In quiet moments when a phone rings unexpectedly, or when Maksim sleeps longer than usual, or when Shane catches himself remembering the sound of metal twisting and sirens and blood. But they aren't the center of everything anymore. They aren't the first thing he thinks about when he wakes up, or the last thing he thinks about before falling asleep.

The center of everything is currently a baby who somehow generates three loads of laundry a day despite weighing less than a sack of potatoes. The center of everything is knowing that Ilya steals blankets when he sleeps. And Hayden refusing to leave even though Jackie has to be missing him. And deciding what to make for dinner. And whether Maksim's fussing means hungry, tired, bored, gassy, or simply offended by existence.

The grief and the fear and the scar are all still there, but they've been forced to make room. Room for the life that continued and still continues happening around them. Because the things that nearly destroyed them no longer get to be the foundation of his days. Now they're simply part of the story, his story. Their story. Just not the whole story.

No, the whole story is a future that keeps arriving whether they're ready for it or not.

And standing there in the laundry room, hand resting lightly over a scar that will always be part of him, Shane realizes something that feels almost miraculous—the worst thing that ever happened to him isn't what defines his life anymore.

And for the first time in a very long time, that feels like enough.

—

Spring arrives quietly. Not all at once or in some dramatic burst of sunshine and flowers, just gradually. The snow melts, the days grow longer and the trees begin turning green again.

Before either of them has realized, three months have passed.

The house feels different now, lived in. The hallways have acquired the familiar clutter of everyday life. A baby swing has now joined the corner for Maksim. More blankets appear, lighter and softer than the fleece and sherpa ones Shane likes to snuggle in when it's cold. Coffee mugs abandoned on end tables next to textbooks.

Maksim is no longer the sleepy newborn who spent most of his life eating and sleeping. Now he's awake, tracking Shane and Ilya's movement around the room, smiling when they talk to him.

The first time Maksim laughs, Shane nearly drops his phone. It's not a full laugh, not really, just a tiny burst of sound. A surprised little giggle that escapes while Shane is making faces at him in the den.

"Oh my God."

Maksim blinks then laughs again.

Shane immediately starts yelling. "ILYA!"

Heavy footsteps thunder somewhere upstairs, followed by Ilya rushing into the room. "What happened?"

Shane points. "He laughed."

"What?"

"He laughed!"

Shane pulls another face while Ilya watches. Maks does nothing but stare.

"I swear he laughed."

"I believe you."

"No, you don't."

"I do."

"You absolutely don't."

Ilya's mouth twitches. "I am standing here, aren't I?"

Shane narrows his eyes then turns back toward their baby, pretending to eat his toes.

Nothing.

"Cmon bub, laugh again for Daddy."

Maksim blinks up at him.

Shane blows a raspberry on his belly. Maksim's face scrunches and he lets out an adorable sneeze, but does not laugh.

Before Shane can continue his campaign for another laugh, a familiar voice drifts down the basement stairs. "What's happening?" Hayden appears, taking in the scene. "Oh, are we trying to get him to laugh?"

"We already got him to laugh."

He gasps. "Without me?"

"Yes."

Hayden looks personally offended, then crouches beside Maksim. "Hey buddy."

Maksim's eyes immediately lock onto him.

"Don't."

He glances over at Shane. "What?"

"Don't you dare!"

Hayden grins, then turns back to Maks, making a completely ridiculous noise. Half bark, half chirp, which instantly has Maksim's face lighting up. Hayden makes the noise again and Maks laughs. A real laugh this time, bright and delighted.

"NOOO!" Shane shouts.

"YESSSS!"

"I HATE YOU!"

Maksim laughs harder as Hayden throws both hands into the air in victory. "I told you he loved me!" He tosses over his shoulder at Ilya, who has been recording the entire time.

Shane debates whether friendship can be legally revoked, while Maksim, entirely unaware of the chaos he's caused, laughs again.

And somewhere between the first laugh and the second and the tenth, life quietly keeps moving forward around them.

Most mornings begin with Shane logging into class while drinking coffee that's already gone cold. His final semester somehow continues around parenthood. Assignments are completed during naps. Recorded lectures play quietly while he folds laundry. Discussion posts are

written one-handed while holding a bottle. More than once a professor pauses during office hours to ask about the baby occasionally visible in the background.

Meanwhile, Ilya thrives. Not as CEO, not as a Rozanov, but as Papa. The role seems to fit him with almost alarming ease.

Every morning after breakfast he disappears with Maksim, sometimes for an hour, other times longer. Just the two of them and Andre. Sergei's replacement has been with them for several weeks now, every bit as competent and professional as Sergei stated he would be.

Most importantly, he's patient, and willing to tolerate Ilya's increasingly absurd collection of baby photographs.

Andre has seen more pictures of Maksim than anyone should legally be required to.

"This one was yesterday."

"Very nice, sir."

"This one was two hours later."

"Remarkable."

"And this one—"

"Sir, he appears to be asleep in all three."

Ilya looks offended. "He is clearly sleeping differently."

Their morning walks become routine. Maksim strapped securely against Ilya's chest with Andre trailing several steps behind. The three of them winding through the property while spring slowly transforms the world around them.

Sometimes Shane watches them through the windows while working on coursework in the kitchen. Watching Ilya stop every few minutes because Maksim has discovered something fascinating—a bird, a tree, a cloud.

One afternoon Shane had glanced up from a discussion post to find Ilya standing completely still in the middle of the yard, Andre hovering a few steps behind. He wasn't talking or moving, just watching, Maksim strapped to his chest looking up at him and smiling. The expression that had crossed Ilya's face in return was so immediate, so helplessly soft, that Shane's chest aches.

Because for all the things Ilya Rozanov has been in his life—friend, partner, alpha, protector, Papa might be his favorite.

It always surprises Shane how much Ilya loves being a father, not because he ever doubted he would, but because Ilya doesn't approach fatherhood the way he approaches most things. There's no strategy, no carefully measured distance, no attempt to maintain control. He simply throws himself into it completely.

Every bottle, every diaper change, every middle-of-the-night feeding, every walk... None of it is beneath him. Nothing is inconvenient or boring. If anything, the ordinary parts seem to be his favorite.

The diaper bag is almost permanently attached to one shoulder now, and can change a diaper in record time. He's become frighteningly efficient at assembling bottles, and somehow always knows exactly where Maksim's pacifier disappeared to.

And Maks? He adores his Papa just as equally.

At three months old, love looks different. It isn't reaching for him yet, or calling for him, or running into his arms, but it's little things. The way his entire face lights up when he hears Ilya's voice. The way he turns his head immediately whenever Papa enters a room. The way he settles faster against Ilya's chest than anywhere else. The way his eyes follow him constantly, as though he can't quite understand why anyone would ever look at anything else.

More than once Shane has watched Maksim completely ignore everyone around him because Ilya happened to be nearby.

The funniest part is that Ilya pretends not to notice. As though he's somehow immune to it. As though he doesn't immediately soften every time Maksim's eyes find him. As though Shane hasn't caught him smiling about it when he thinks nobody is looking.

One afternoon, while Shane has taken a break from studying to grab a snack in the kitchen, he hears Ilya's voice drifting through the open patio door. The sound of Ilya talking softly to Maksim in Russian immediately drawing his attention toward the window.

Outside, Ilya is stretched out in one of the patio chairs beneath the spring sunshine, Maksim nestled securely against his chest. Andre sits several feet away pretending not to listen, even though he smiles occasionally at whatever Ilya is saying.

Maksim is staring up at Ilya with complete and utter fascination, like he's the most interesting thing he's ever seen.

Maybe he is.

Their son lets out a happy little coo, and Ilya pauses, looking down, listening with complete seriousness as though receiving important information.

"Da, moy malen'kiy prints, imenno eto ya i skazal."

Yes, my little prince, that's exactly what I said.

Maksim coos again, longer this time.

Ilya nods thoughtfully. "YA znayu, no papa zanimayetsya."

I know, but Daddy is studying.

Another coo.

A tiny frown appears on Ilya's face. "Nyet! Papa ne mozhet brosit' universitet."

Daddy cannot quit university.

Maksim responds with what sounds suspiciously like an argument. Andre coughs abruptly, his shoulders shaking as he pretends not to laugh.

Ilya ignores him. "You make a compelling point."

Maksim kicks his feet triumphantly, letting out another coo.

"But still no."

Maks looks deeply dissatisfied by this ruling.

Ilya shifts Maksim slightly higher against his chest. "What if," he says gravely, "we allow Papa to finish his degree so he can stop staring at the computer all day, hmm?"

Maksim considers this, or possibly discovers his own hand. It's difficult to tell. He coos again happily, slobbering on his fist.

"Yes, excellent compromise."

Maks smiles, a bright, gummy little grin that seems entirely too pleased with himself. Shane laughs, and two heads turn toward the window, one adult and one baby, both looking equally pleased to have caught him listening.

Outside, Maksim coos again, and Ilya responds. Whatever he says has their son kicking his feet happily, both of them still looking where Shane stands in the kitchen, and it nearly bowls Shane over at how much he loves the both of them at this moment.

—

In July, Ilya surprises Shane with a cottage on Lake Muskoka after Shane had mentioned how much he missed summers at the lake with his parents, swimming until sunset and fishing off the dock with his father. He tells Ilya about the bonfires and s'mores, which Ilya is very intrigued by, and how, when he got older, he and his father would wake up early to take out the canoes and watch the sun rise.

Ilya listens quietly, nodding occasionally, asking questions here and there.

Shane forgets about the conversation entirely. It was just a random conversation over dinner, something that sparked memories from his childhood. The sort of thing people talk about without thinking.

Except, three weeks later, Ilya informs him they're leaving Friday morning.

"For what?" Shane asks, looking up from where he'd been spoon-feeding Maksim banana puree, the spoon hovering just out of reach.

Immediately, Maksim lunges for it, and misses, letting out an offended squawk.

"Our vacation." Ilya says it casually, his attention fixed on the baby currently glaring at Shane for withholding bananas. "We're going to the lake."

Maksim squawks again, louder this time.

"I know," Ilya tells him sympathetically. "I was surprised too."

Shane blinks, still confused. "What are you talking about?"

"The lake."

"What lake, Ilya? We haven't talked about going to the lake?"

"Dorogoy..."

"Don't—" Shane points the spoon in Ilya's direction, puree plopping onto Maks's high chair tray. "What have you done?"

"I didn't do—"

Maks shrieks, drawing their attention back to him, where he's enthusiastically slapping both hands into the splattered banana puree.

"Ilya."

"Yes, moya lyubov"

"What lake?"

"The one you mentioned, with the cottage."

The spoon slips from Shane's fingers, "The one with the what?"

"The cottage."

Maksim slams both palms down again, banana puree flies. A blob lands directly on Ilya's sleeve.

Neither of the adults notice.

Shane stares. "The cottage."

"Yes."

"You own a cottage? Since when?"

"Technically..."

"Oh my God."

No longer interested in the bananas, Maks begins to babble

"Dadadada!"

Both men immediately look at him, and Maks beams at them as he brings his banana covered fingers to his mouth.

"Dada?" Shane repeats hopefully. "Maks, did you say 'Dada'?"

Maksim says nothing, just shoves his entire fist into his mouth, kicking his feet happily against the chair.

Shane sighs, then turns back to the much larger problem. "The cottage."

"Hmm?" Ilya feigns confusion.

"You own a cottage?"

"We own a cottage."

Shane actually laughs. "WHAT?! ILYA—"

Ilya shrugs. "You said you liked the lake, so I bought a cottage."

"Ilya—"

"You said every summer your parents took you to the lake."

Shane freezes, because he had said that, hadn't he.

Across the table, Maksim lets out another happy squeal before attempting to eat the high chair tray. Ilya reaches over automatically, rescuing a too large chunk of banana before it disappears into their baby's mouth.

"It's good for the family."

The words are simple. Matter-of-fact, but Shane knows him well enough to hear everything else hidden underneath them.

Good for Maksim.

Good for Shane.

Good for them.

His chest tightens and his eyes waters.

Across the table, Ilya glances up. "What? You are not happy?"

Shane shakes his head at this ridiculous man with his ridiculous habit of turning every cherished memory Shane mentions into a permanent fixture.

"I can't believe you bought us a cottage."

"Good investment."

"Oh, is it?"

"Yes, it has a private dock and a beach access."

"Of course it does."

"Boat house."

"Please tell me you didn't buy a boat."

Ilya says nothing.

"Ilya!

The cottage, if one could even call it that, sits at the end of a narrow road that winds through towering pines.

For a long moment, Shane just stares through the windshield.

It's not really a cottage, not by normal people's standards, but undeniably a cottage by the standards of ridiculous Russian men with more money than sense. Warm cedar and glass rise from the rocky landscape as though the house grew there naturally.

It's more modern than Shane envisions when someone says the word cottage. All clean lines and tall angles, and expanses of windows reflecting water and sky. Everything about it seems designed around the view—the lake glittering and endless blue between the trees, the northern summer sunlight dancing across the surface.

"Oh." The word escapes before Shane can stop it.

Beside him, Ilya looks pleased, dangerously so. "You like it?"

"Of course I do!"

The inside of the cottage is somehow even worse, or better, Shane hasn't decided yet. Floor-to-ceiling windows line the lakeside wall, every room flooded with sunlight. Warm wood wraps around everything, the walls, the ceilings, the floors, honey gold.

The scent hits him as he stops further inside. Sun-warmed timber filling and fresh lake air drifting through the open windows, layered with the hints of mint, and ginger, and Maks's freshness.

The great room opens around a massive stone fireplace, where oversized sofas face it and the lake, as though the architect couldn't decide which view was better. The kitchen sits just beyond, open and welcoming. Wide counters and a huge island, something Ilya seems fond

of in his homes. It's the kind of kitchen that practically demands pancakes on Sunday mornings.

Everywhere Shane looks there are windows, the lake follows him through the house. Appearing around corners, reflecting in glass. Waiting outside every room.

The master bedroom overlooks the water, the guest rooms sit tucked among the trees. Outside, a wide deck stretches toward the shoreline, a fire pit just beyond.

Shane steps onto the deck, the lake breeze catching his hair as he stares at the dock Ilya mentioned, suddenly feeling eight years old again. A vision of his younger self barefoot down a wooden dock just like this one. His father laughing behind him, pretending to tell him not to run but never actually stopping him.

The memories arrive so quickly they almost steal his breath, and for a moment all Shane can do is just stand there. Looking, remembering.

His mother's scent reaches him before the sound of her footsteps, bright and zesty lemon. A second later she steps beside him, and without a word, she slips an arm around his waist, leaning her head gently against his shoulder.

For a long moment neither of them says anything, just listening to the lake lap softly against the dock below, as a loon calls somewhere overhead.

His mother's arm tightens slightly as she murmurs, "He would've loved this."

Shane nods, eyes burning and the lump in his throat too large for him to speak around. Because she's right. Shane can see his father so clearly it almost hurts, standing at the end of the dock with a fishing rod. Can see him teaching Maksim how to skip stones, and falling asleep in a chair after dinner while insisting he wasn't tired. And laughing, always laughing.

Shane swallows hard. "Yeah, he would've."

Silence settles between them again, comfortable and familiar. The kind of silence shared by people carrying the same grief.

His mother turns away from the water, Her free hand rises to cup his cheek, thumb rubbing across his freckles. The gesture is so achingly familiar it almost hurts. The same hand that soothed scraped knees. The same hand that brushed hair from his forehead when he was sick. The same hand that held his after the funeral.

Yuna gives him a soft, sad smile, the kind that says she knows exactly where his thoughts have wandered, and Shane returns it.

For a moment neither of them speaks, neither of them needs to. Then his mother's gaze drifts past him, toward the cottage. Shane follows it automatically to where he can see Ilya holding Maks through the enormous lakeside windows, their son is perched on one hip, tiny hands clapping excitedly as Ilya dances him around the living room.

Maksim rewards the performance with a delighted squeal, the sound carries faintly through the open windows. Ilya dips him again, and Maks laughs harder.

And just like that, Shane finds himself smiling, brighter, easier.

"Come on," his mother softly, the warmth in her voice matches the summer sunlight. "Let's go join them."

Shane takes one last look at the lake, at the dock and the memories and turns toward the cottage.

Toward the future.

Toward home.

Chapter End Notes

Well, it ended up being 30 chapters anyway so I guess I lied about lying 🤔🤔🤔

Anyway, thank you so much to all of you who have read and commented and left kudos. It has meant the world to me that yall have loved these babies as much as I do!

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