shane hollander, solo parent connoisseur

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by hollanov_1410

Summary

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>
> "Please don't strip in front of this bar."
>
> "'s too hot," he muttered. "Stupid humid Florida. Was nice in the morning. Now I miss my dreary Canada."
>
> "Well, don't worry. It's waiting for you. All 10 degrees of it."
>
> "With you there, you make it 10 degrees hotter." He tried for a wink. It didn't fully land.
>
> Shane really wanted to kiss him. "Okay, Romeo."

Ilya is out of town celebrating Svetlana's birthday, leaving Shane to parent the kids by himself for the weekend.

How hard can it be.

Notes

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

- takes place abt 14 years post-TLG
- their kids are niko (12), max (9), and mila (3)
- they're both retired, but shane works as a skill development coach for the centaurs

thank you for reading! xx

See the end of the work for more notes

Thursday

"Yes, just like that," Ilya said, his hand over Max's on the knife, guiding each slow, even stroke through the yellow onion. "Good job. Perfect."

Max's eyes were streaming within seconds. He blinked hard, which did nothing, then wiped at them with the back of his wrist, which also did nothing. "Why does it *hurt*."

Ilya smiled and reached over and thumbed the tears off his cheek. "We may not even need salt after all."

The kitchen smelled warm and fragrant, garlic and butter already going in the pan. A pot of peeled potatoes sat in water on the counter. Mountains of grocery bags across the kitchen table and island that hadn't been fully unpacked yet. Half the cabinet contents spread across every available surface.

Shane had known Ilya did a big grocery run that morning, but he hadn't seen the full extent of it yet. Too busy putting Mila down for her nap, which had proved a more difficult feat today than usual, so much so he barely registered the front door opening when Ilya got back from the grocery store. But once she was finally down, he came downstairs, turned the corner into the kitchen, and stopped in the doorway.

Ilya and Max were both in matching aprons, hunched over the cutting board.

"Why does Max have a weapon."

They both looked up at exactly the same time. Max flashed his big smile, which showed off the gap where a canine tooth used to be. He had just lost that baby tooth this week.

"I'm being a soup chef."

"Sous-chef," Ilya corrected, ruffling his curls.

"I'm being a sous-chef, but we're making soup," Max said. He raised his hands and wiggled his fingers. "But don't worry, Dad. I'm using the lame gloves."

The *lame gloves* were cut resistant gloves that lived in the back of the kitchen drawer. They did look a little dorky, Shane would give him that. But Shane was grateful Ilya had remembered to put them on him at all.

Shane looked at all the groceries. "Can I ask why you two have enough food to feed all of Ottawa."

"We are meal prepping," Ilya said. "For when I'm gone."

Ilya was leaving the next morning for Miami, a weekend trip to celebrate Svetlana's birthday with a big group of her friends. A trip that had been in the works for months, and the kids were arguably just as excited about it as he was. The past week had been nonstop—would he

bring them back a souvenir, could they FaceTime Aunt Sveta on her birthday, was it true there were alligators in Florida and if so could he please take a picture with one. The answers had all been yes, yes, and he would see what he could do (yes).

Shane raised his eyebrows, amused. "I can cook for three days, you know. You don't have to do all of this."

"You say that, but you are underestimating what these three are capable of," Ilya said. "Your only job this weekend will be keeping them and yourself alive," he gestured at the potatoes in the pot. "I will give you a head start by supplying the nutrients."

Shane knew Ilya was a dramatic man. He loved a big gesture, an elaborate plan, a surprise. And he had a particular talent for making all of it feel like the most obvious thing in the world—o*f course* he had prepped enough food to last four people three days. *Of course* each meal was, no doubt, tailored to the kids' ever-changing preferences. Why wouldn't he?

Shane came up behind them, kissed Ilya on the cheek, and ran a hand through Max's hair. He looked at the cutting board of onions. "Nice julienne."

Max frowned down at it. "They're supposed to be diced."

"Sorry, sorry. My bad. Nice dicing, soup chef."

Friday

They said their goodbyes to Ilya at the airport that morning. Ilya had nearly missed his window because he couldn't stop hugging all of them, kept repeating how much he loved them. He took a particularly long time handing Mila back to Shane. But eventually he did, and they watched him go through security, and all three kids waved until he was out of sight.

Shane still got nervous whenever Ilya flew. Even though he knew, logically, the odds of anything bad happening were astronomically low. But his brain didn't seem to care about the odds. It went straight back to that one time Ilya's plane almost went down, the way it always did, and stayed there until he got a text saying Ilya had landed.

So he always needed a distraction while Ilya was up in the air. The park was a good one. Room to run, space to spread out, something for everyone. Even Niko, who had recently and very formally declared himself too old for the playground, could take a soccer ball out onto the grass and rope Max into a game until one of them got frustrated enough to need a break from the other.

When they arrived, Mila made a beeline for the swings the second they got through the gate. Same as always. Shane followed close behind, hands in his pockets, watching her try to haul

herself up onto the seat. Her legs weren't quite long enough. He lifted her on without comment.

"Push me high, Daddy!" she said immediately, already pumping her little legs before he'd even gotten behind her.

He kissed the top of her head and got behind her. "You got it, boss."

She squealed as he pushed, legs kicking out, hair streaming back behind her.

For a blew blissful seconds, maybe even a full minute, all was peaceful. But he was mid-push when she let go of the chains.

Shane's stomach went straight to the ground. He immediately grabbed the swing and stopped it short.

"Hey." He came around to face her, crouching down. His voice came out a little sharper than he wanted. He took a breath and pulled it back. "We never take our hands off the swing. You know that."

Mila blinked at him, the adrenaline grin still spread across her face. Not a lot of remorse happening in those eyes.

Shane had always been kind of intrigued by the toddler years, in between the moments where it made him want to lie facedown on the floor. They were becoming actual people. Figuring out cause and effect, testing what was real, working out where the edges were. He liked watching the lightbulb go off. Liked being the one there when it did.

He just wished that when Mila's went off, it wasn't so consistently at his expense.

"Daddy won't let you use the swing anymore if you can't be safe," he said, holding her gaze. "I mean it."

She kept her eyes on him, squirming in the seat. "'Kay," she said simply, kicking her feet again.

Shane looked at her one second longer before getting back behind her and giving another push.

As he pushed, he looked out towards where Max and Niko were playing soccer. Darting across the grass and hollering.

Mila giggled every time the swing peaked. On the way back down she'd tip her head upside down to look at him, and he'd stick his tongue out or blow her a kiss, which set her off every time.

"Higher!" she exclaimed.

He indulged her, earning himself another eruption of laughter.

Then she let go again.

"*Mila*—" he yelped, moving forward to stop the swing short with one hand, hooking an arm around her.

She was still giggling, red in the face.

"Okay, guess we're done then," he declared, lifting her off with one arm.

She realized immediately and wailed, reaching back for the swing, fingers grabbing at nothing. "Wait, no—"

He set her down on the wood chips and crouched to her level. She was already scowling up at him, eyes filling fast.

"I warned you," he said evenly. "You made the choice to do it again. So swings are done for now."

She let out a cry that was mostly indignation, stomping one foot. Her scowl deepened. She looked, in that moment, exactly like Ilya when he would get pouty for not getting his way, which Shane was trying to not to find funny right now.

"You can play with something else," he continued. "But not the swings."

"Don' want something else," she whimpered.

"Then we can go home, if that's what you prefer."

Her eyes widened. She shook her head firmly.

"Do you want to go on the slide?" Shane asked after a moment, reaching out to tighten the pigtail that had gone loose. She tried to squirm away from his hands but he got it anyway.

She gave a stiff nod. Of course she did—the slide ran a close second in her park activity rankings, and she'd made her preferences on the matter very clear on many previous occasions. Particularly going headfirst, which was its own separate ongoing negotiation.

She fixed him with another glare. "I go by *myself*."

The clearest possible sign she was genuinely annoyed with him. Any other day she'd already have both hands wrapped around his fingers, dragging him over to stand at the bottom and watch from three feet away. Or insisting he come down with her, which Shane had long ago made peace with as just part of the job. Even when it meant folding himself into a tube slide that was not built with a six-foot adult in mind.

He raised his hands up in mercy. She turned on her heel and marched toward the play structure, not looking back once.

He watched her go. The defiance was visible in every step, each one landing a little harder than necessary. She hauled herself up the structure with businesslike focus, then, at the top of

the stairs, hip-checked a toddler who was in her way. Shane winced and made a mental note to talk to her about that later.

He glanced back over at the boys, who were still paying soccer on the field just as hard and seriously as when they started. Niko had the ball, Max was being goalie.

Niko scored. Max groaned and threw the ball deliberately far. Niko flipped him off, but went after it.

Shane filed that away to talk with Niko about later. The list was adding up fast, considering Ilya had only been gone a couple of hours.

A few minutes passed. Mila had made probably the seventh round on the slide, with no sign of stopping. She kept glancing over at Shane between each one, still remembering to scowl, but making sure he was watching.

Shane looked back over at the field just in time to watch Niko wind up and kick the ball straight into Max's face. The sound carried across the park, sharp and flat. Max doubled over immediately, both hands flying up to cover his nose. Even from this distance, Shane could see the blood.

His stomach dropped. He was on his feet before he'd finished the thought, already moving, and then he remembered—Ilya wasn't here. He couldn't just leave Mila alone, even for a second.

"Niko," he called out urgently. "Go watch your sister. Please."

"I'm sorry, it was an accident—"

"I know, I know. I saw. It's okay." Shane kept moving toward Max. "Just keep an eye on her for a minute while I handle this."

Niko nodded and jogged toward the playground.

"—just not the swings," Shane called back.

As he reached Max, he knelt down and ran his hand through his sweaty hair. Both hands were clamped over his nose and mouth, blood streaking down over his fingers and across his palm. Shane's blood pressure spiked.

"Hey, you're okay, honey," he murmured, watching Max's quick breathing. "It's going to be okay. But I have to take a look, okay?"

He shook his head immediately. "It's going to be bad."

"It's probably not as bad as it feels right now. But I need to see. Just for a second."

Max whined, his eyes welling up a bit. "I don't want to go to the doctor," his voice cracked on the last bit.

"If you don't let me look, I'll have to take you anyway." Not the gentlest way to put it, but the copper smell was getting stronger and blood was dripping down his fingers and Shane's panic was climbing steadily.

It got Max to reluctantly pry his fingers away.

Shane hoped he was able to keep his wince internal. Max's nose wasn't broken, but it was swelling, and bruises were already starting to bloom under both eyes.

"I knew it was bad!" Max cried out as he watched Shane's reaction.

"No, no, it's not that bad," Shane tried to reassure him. "It's just going to bruise. That's all." He pulled a tissue from his pocket, pinched the bridge of Max's nose, and guided his head gently forward. "Let's have you lean this way, okay? It'll help stop the bleeding."

Max let him. Shane cupped the back of his head with his other hand, raking his hand through his hair.

"I'm going to need a nose job. And then everyone at school is going to know," Max sniffled after a beat.

Shane pressed his lips together. "You do not need a nose job. Maybe two black eyes. But no plastic surgery, I promise"

Max considered this. "That's kind of cool. Like when you and Papa used to get in fights on the ice."

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. "I need to stop letting you and Niko watch our old game footage."

"YouTube recommends me *Ilya Rozanov Fighting Compilations*," Max said. Which was a little concerning, Shane thought, but right now he was mostly just relieved Max was feeling okay enough to be talking at all.

"Well," Shane said, scratching Max's scalp. "Don't get any big ideas."

After a few minutes, once Max the blood stopped running as fast, Max said, his voice muffled, "Is Niko going to be in trouble?"

"No. It was an accident."

Max looked a little disappointed. "You could still, like, ground him or something."

Shane tilted Max's chin up carefully and pulled the tissue back. The bleeding had mostly stopped, but he still dabbed at it gently. "You must be feeling better," he murmured. "Already trying to throw your brother under the bus, huh?"

Max smiled, and that's when Shane realized there were some streaks of blood that made it across his teeth. God, Max *did* look exactly like Ilya after a fight on the ice.

He wiped it away carefully and tried not to sit with that thought for too long.

✦✦✦

By the time dinner came around, Shane could not have been more grateful for the prepped meals Ilya made. Cooking was the last thing on his mind. Pulling a tray of lasagna out of the fridge and sliding it straight into the oven felt like the greatest gift anyone had ever given him.

It was late now, definitely past Mila's bedtime, but Shane had agreed to let them finish their movie in the living room. He could not handle a meltdown tonight. He didn't have it in him. And besides, Mila would probably be asleep on the couch before it ended anyway.

Shane got a FaceTime call from Ilya while he was scrubbing the bottom of the sink. He turned off the tap, wiped his hands on a kitchen towel, and answered.

He was met with a flushed, close-up frame of Ilya, his eyes shiny and a little bloodshot, but a wide grin plastered on his face as soon as he registered Shane. "*Shane*," he breathed out immediately, in complete awe. As if he was seeing Shane for the first time.

Shane smiled. "You having a fun night, big guy?"

"*So* much fun," Ilya said, the words coming out slow and heavy.

Shane laughed, leaning against the sink. "I'm glad. The kids got a good kick out of the pictures you sent earlier. They all agreed Svetlana looks like a princess," he said. "A fairy princess, according to Mila."

Ilya grinned, though Shane wasn't entirely sure all of it was landing. He was staring at Shane with heavy lidded eyes. "Shane," he said hungrily. "You look so *good*."

Shane glanced down at himself. Stretched out t-shirt, slightly wrinkled from where Mila had grabbed a fistful of it earlier. There was a stain near the hem he was pretty sure was from dinner. Or maybe breakfast. He couldn't even remember what they ate for breakfast at this point.

"I think you might just be drunk," he said, smiling fondly.

"I'm not drunk," Ilya said, his voice only slightly betraying him. "I just have eyes. Eyes that know they have a husband who looks so good, and who I have been thinking about fucking all night—"

"Okay," Shane said, already moving, steering him firmly away from the living room doorway where the kids were still sprawled across the floor.

"If I had my hands on you right now, we would break the bed frame," he slurred. "And then I would feel very bad. Because you picked this one out. The fancy one. The walnut one from —" he waved a hand vaguely, "—wherever."

"It's white oak," Shane said. "From a mill in Quebec."

"Mm," he said, his eyes going a little heavy. "Love it when you talk dirty to me."

Shane smiled at his flushed face. Hair damp at the temples, cheeks rosy, mouth loose and curved in a grin that hadn't seemed to move since he popped up on the screen. The bass from the club thumped faintly behind him.

"I'll take it that you're having a good time," Shane said, leaning back against the kitchen island.

"Yes," he said. "Only thing better would be having your cock in my mouth—"

"Your children are four feet away," Shane interjected. Which was true. Also true was that hearing Ilya like this made him weak in the knees. He shifted his weight and adjusted the front of his pants.

Ilya groaned and dropped down to sit on the pavement, back against the wall of the club. Shane didn't want to think about what he was sitting in. He was definitely going to go to bed in those clothes, on top of the hotel covers, like an animal.

Shane wished he was there to take them off him when he got back to his room. Ilya would fight it even half-conscious, batting his hands away, mumbling in Russian, and they'd end up wrestling on the bed, and then Ilya would go down on him the way he only did when he was this drunk—sloppy and completely unfiltered, making sounds loud enough that the people next door would have no choice but to hear every second of it. Shane wouldn't even care.

Shane really did miss him. Was that codependency? Thinking longingly about getting your husband out of his disgusting outside clothes after less than a day apart? He'd stopped caring about the answer to that a long time ago.

"You reject my advancements," Ilya mumbled. "I should have let the very sexy man buy me a drink."

Shane felt his face go warm immediately. "What."

Ilya tipped his head back against the wall. "Very attractive man. Huge ass."

"Hm."

"Big thighs, big tits."

Shane narrowed his eyes at him. He genuinely could not tell, from that expression, whether Ilya was messing with him or not. Drunk or sober, that grin looked exactly the same either way. It was extremely annoying.

"And freckles."

"Seems just your type."

Ilya's smile widened. He started fumbling with the buttons on his shirt with one hand, squinting down at them.

"Please don't strip in front of this bar."

"'s too hot," he muttered. "Stupid humid Florida. Was nice in the morning. Now I miss my dreary Canada."

"Well, don't worry. It's waiting for you. All ten degrees of it."

"With you there, you make it 10 degrees hotter." He tried for a wink. It didn't fully land.

Shane really wanted to kiss him. "Okay, Romeo."

Ilya finally gave up on the buttons and just let the shirt hang open, head falling back against the wall again. He now looked like he was about thirty seconds from falling asleep on the pavement.

"Where's Svetlana? Why are you sitting out there alone?" Although he partly knew the answer. Ilya was known to rogue at some parts of the night, once a certain level of alcohol was in his system.

"There was a man who was eyeing me, actually," Ilya said wickedly, ignoring Shane's question completely. "Do you want to know what I did?"

"I have a feeling you're going to tell me no matter what my answer is."

"I shoved my ring in his face," he said dramatically, pushing his ring finger in front of the camera clumsily. "And said I have very hot, famous husband who I have to get home to and rail—"

"Is it Papa?" Mila's voice drifted in from the living room, followed by the soft slap of her feet against the floor as she made her way toward the kitchen.

Ilya's face lit up on the screen. "I hear my *baby*."

Mila came barreling in before Shane could stop her, crashing into his legs. He caught her with his free arm and lifted her onto his hip so she was in frame.

Ilya made a sound like he'd been wounded. "Oh, look at you," he breathed. "You have grown so much since Papa last saw you. You are killing me, *malyshka*."

She was grinning just as wide as he was. She lunged for the phone with both hands and nearly took it clean out of Shane's grip before he pulled it back. Which of course made her whine. At this point, Shane could breathe wrong in her direction and she'd find a way to have a meltdown about it.

"Papa, come home," she whimpered.

Ilya kissed the screen. Actually pressed his lips to it. "Papa will be home in just one more sleep."

"Two," Shane corrected.

"Papa will be home in just two more sleeps."

Mila whined a little more, leaning her full weight back against Shane. He grunted and readjusted her.

"No sleeps," she said. "Want you now." Mila leaned in closer to Shane's phone, whispering, "Папа злой.Daddy's mean"

Shane looked down at her, raising an eyebrow. "Я могу тебя понять.I can understand you"

Ilya burst out laughing. Mila immediately frowned and glared at Shane. "Non, vous ne pouvez pasNo you can't."

Shane smiled, amused. Mila had a habit of conveniently forgetting that although she spoke three languages, he *also* spoke three languages. "Je peux toujours te comprendre, Mila. I can still understand you, Mila."

Shane looked at Ilya in the camera and said flatly, "I'm mean because I didn't let her crack her skull open on the swing today."

Ilya grinned bigger. "Mila, do not call Daddy mean," he said, making another attempt to sit up straighter against the wall. "You would not even be here if it were not for him."

"Yes I would," Mila declared with complete certainty.

Shane pressed his lips together to stop from laughing.

"Nope, you would not," Ilya retorted, just as confidently. "Your daddy did not carry you in his tummy for nine months for you to call him names."

Mila pressed her chubby little hand flat against Shane's cheek, pushing his face to the side so she could get closer to the screen. "He *didn't* carry me."

A laugh did escape Shane this time. "Oh, I didn't?"

She shook her head, very seriously.

"Ilya, you're gone not even 24 hours and our daughter has already reduced me to just some guy who lives with her."

Mila made another defiant sound, long and aggrieved.

Ilya looked up from the camera suddenly. There was a rustling, the frame tilting and going blurry for a second as he fumbled with the phone. "Sveta!" he called out, slightly breathless. "Look who is on the phone!"

Svetlana appeared on screen a few seconds later, her face lighting up when she saw them. She was less drunk than Ilya—or at least considerably better at hiding it. Likely the latter. Shane didn't think he had ever seen her look anything other than striking and completely composed, now that he thought about it.

"AUNTIE SVETA!" Mila shrieked, loud enough that Shane winced.

Svetlana leaned in the frame and cooed. "Hello, pretty girl!"

"I have your buttafly clips," Mila said urgently, pointing at her own hair. She did—a few small butterfly clips tucking her dark hair away from her face. Svetlana had given them to her during her last visit a few months back.

Svetlana gasped. "Pretty little *printsessa!* Who did those for you?"

"Daddy!" she squealed, and Shane smiled. "He can't braid as good as you and Papa," she added, very matter-of-factly.

Shane sighed. "Brutal."

Ilya was already trying to elbow his way back into frame. "Is she not the most perfect girl you have ever seen," he said to Svetlana, not really a question.

"The *most* perfect. I want to eat her up." Okay, she probably *was* drunk, Shane realized.

"I hope Ilya has been composing himself for at least some of your birthday weekend," Shane said to her, readjusting Mila on his hip.

Svetlana grinned. "Oh, Shane. This is nothing. I've seen him much, much worse."

Shane was morbidly curious about the various states she had witnessed Ilya in over the decades. Probably best not to know.

"I'm sorry I couldn't make it out," Shane continued, gently grabbing Mila's hand before she could shove her fingers in his face. "Wish I could be there to celebrate you."

Svetlana waved him off before he could finish. "Ilya should be the one apologizing for leaving you stranded this weekend," she said. "Besides, you'll see me next month. We'll make up for it then."

There was a rustling behind Shane. Niko wandered in from the living room, heading for the pantry, already unwrapping a granola bar. He spotted the screen, clocked Svetlana, and leaned in over Shane's shoulder. "Hi Aunt Sveta! Happy birthday," he said, his mouth already full.

"Thank you, Niko!"

Niko raised his brow and leaned in. "Papa's trashed."

Shane shot him a look. "How do you know what that means."

"I'm twelve, Dad. Not five."

"I'm *three*," Mila piped up, twisting in Shane's arms to be part of the conversation. Niko grinned and kissed her cheek, depositing a few granola crumbs on her in the process. She didn't seem to notice or care.

"I am not trashed," Ilya said, with some dignity. "Niko. Get a plate. I told you not to make your father's life more difficult while I'm gone."

Niko rolled his eyes. "Nearly 2,500 kilometers away and you still find a way to nag."

"Hey," Shane warned.

Svetlana laughed hard at that, pressing her hand to her mouth. "More and more like a mini Ilya every day," she said, looking at Shane. "I'm so sorry. Best of luck."

"Don't encourage him," Ilya said. He leaned more into the screen. "Niko…what happened to my sweet boy. You used to be so *small*," Ilya slurred. "Could hold you in my hands—"

Niko looked at Shane. "Yeah, Papa's definitely trashed."

"No I'm not," Ilya insisted. "I just still remember your baby smell—"

"—Okay, I'm leaving now." Niko straightened up. "Papa's getting weird."

"He smelled so good," Ilya said longingly, to no one in particular, even as Niko disappeared out of the kitchen. "I wish I could bottle that smell. Wear it like a cologne. Niko's little baby smell—"

"Okay, Rozanov," Shane interrupted. "Get up off the ground, get some water in you, and do not ruin Svetlana's birthday night with this talk."

He pressed his nose into the top of Mila's hair as he said it, the clean, faintly sweet smell of her shampoo hitting him immediately. God. Ilya had a point, actually. He did kind of want to bottle it up. What happened to them.

"Papa call before I sleep?" Mila asked, looking up at Shane.

"Of course, *malyshka*," Ilya said, putting a hand to his chest. "I will sing to you. Read you bedtime story. Whatever you want."

"I think you're going to be incoherent by then," Shane said. "But I would love to watch you try."

Mila lit up anyway. "Yay!" She waved her hand at the screen, fingers spreading wide. "Bye bye, Auntie Sveta. Bye bye, Papa."

Both of them dissolved into goodbyes immediately, Svetlana blowing kiss after kiss, Ilya pressing his to the camera again. Shane said his own, and then hung up. The kitchen immediately went quiet.

He pocketed his phone and looked down at Mila. "Still hate me? Or will you let me help you get into your pajamas?"

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Fine."

✦✦✦

Sleeping without Ilya was not something Shane had gotten used to, even after all this time. And he forgot how much he fucking hated it.

He kept reaching over in that half-asleep way, his hand moving across the mattress before his brain had caught up, expecting the solid weight of an arm across his waist or the sound of snoring close to his ear. The sheets on Ilya's side were cold.

He tried for an hour. Laying in the dark, staring at the ceiling, listening to the house settle. But it wasn't happening.

Eventually he gave up, got out of bed, and went downstairs to get some water. He stood in the kitchen for a while, listening to the wind outside, the hum of the fridge. Then he did a loop of the kids' rooms the way he always did when he couldn't sleep.

Niko was flat on his back, completely limp, one arm hanging off the edge of the mattress, mouth slightly open. Max was curled into a tight ball facing the wall, knees pulled to his chest, buried under his comforter so only the top of his curly head was visible.

Shane stood in Mila's doorway a moment longer than he needed to. She had her stuffed dog, Scoops, tucked under one arm, blankets twisted around her in a way that made no structural sense, one foot of her footie pajamas sticking out from the bottom. Her hair had half-escaped the braid he'd put in—and alright, she had a point, maybe Ilya *was* better at braids.

He watched her chest rise and fall a few times. Then he crossed the room, smoothed her hair back from her face, and carefully scooped her up. She stirred, made a small sound low in her throat, and went completely boneless against him, her cheek dropping to his shoulder. He pressed a kiss to the side of her head and carried her back down the hall.

He tucked her in beside him and pulled the blanket over both of them. And finally, he was able to sleep.

Saturday

He must have slept hard, because the next thing he registered was small fingers prying his eyelid open in the morning.

He surfaced slowly, blinking, and found himself being examined at extremely close range by a pair of wide blue eyes.

"Good morning, sweetheart," he said groggily, pulling her down against his chest before she could get to his other eye.

She burrowed in against him. After a moment she lifted her chin, looking up at him from his chest.

"Daddy," she said, still a little drowsy.

"Hm?"

"I went to sleep in my big girl bed," she whispered. "And I woked up in *your* big girl bed."

He grinned, brushing her dark hair back from her face. "Huh. How'd that happen? Magic?"

She grinned back. "I think Papa did it."

Shane laughed. "Ah. Yeah, that makes sense. Papa flew all the way home just to move you into our bed, then left again."

"Yeah," she mumbled, her head dropping back against his chest.

He closed his eyes again. Her heartbeat was steady and small against his ribs. He would never get tired of that feeling. Whoever had said that having a child was like watching your heart walk around outside your body had known exactly what they were talking about.

"I love you, Daddy."

He kissed the top of her head and squeezed her a little tighter. "I love you more."

They were all at Max's hockey game later that morning. Which was a journey to get there, but they made it.

Max had gathered a small crowd of teammates around him on the bench, holding court over his bruised nose and black eyes. The other kids were wide-eyed, a few of them reaching out to touch his face. Max batted every hand away. Shane was at least glad he remembered that much.

Shane was in the stands, watching Niko and Mila by the plexiglass. Niko had Mila up on his hip, her sippy cup of milk in one hand, the other pointing at the glass with her little gloved finger. She was narrating something Shane couldn't hear from here. Niko was nodding along, pointing at something on the ice that got her attention.

Normally, his parents would be here at the game with him. But of course they had a weekend getaway planned this same weekend. Had their trip been planned for nearly a year? Yeah. Did Shane still think the timing was part of some ongoing cosmic joke at his expense? Yeah.

They'd be back tomorrow, though, and they were coming to the airport with him in the morning to pick up Ilya. So not all hope was lost.

The whistle blew and the game started. Max was playing well, moving with the kind of focused energy he only had when he was locked in, and Shane made sure to get his phone out

and record it. Ilya would be furious if he didn't. He hated missing the kids' games under any circumstances.

Somewhere around the halfway point of the first period, Shane caught it in his peripheral vision. A kid, maybe fifteen or sixteen, off to his left, phone up and angled directly at where Niko and Mila were standing by the plexiglass. He was smiling, thumb clicking away, not showing any signs of stopping.

Shane's vision narrowed in on him, waiting to see if he would put the phone down. But he didn't. Shane gave him another few seconds.

Then Shane was moving before he'd fully decided to.

"Hey." He was standing in front of the kid before he'd even registered crossing the distance. The kid looked up, startled. He actually had the audacity to act confused.

"Delete those pictures," Shane barked. "Right now."

The kid's face went pale. "What? I didn't—"

"I watched you take them."

The teen put both hands up. "I seriously don't know what you're talking about."

"You have a lot of nerve," Shane hissed. He wasn't really tracking what he was saying anymore. He just held his hand out. "If you're not going to delete them, I'll do it myself."

He blinked. "I'm...I'm not giving you my phone."

"So you're just planning on keeping pictures of my kids on your phone."

"No! I didn't—I wasn't—"

Shane didn't let him finish. He snatched the phone straight out of his hand and looked at the screen.

Oh. It was a selfie.

Shane was staring at a 15-year-old's selfie.

"Uh," he stammered, still looking at the picture, just to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. Then blinked hard and handed it back to the teenager, his hands fumbling slightly. "Sorry." His heart was beating hard, and he felt heat rising to his cheeks. "Never take pictures of people without their consent." What the fuck was he saying. Why was he still talking. He needed to stop talking.

He turned and walked away before he could see whatever expression the kid had on his face.

If Ilya were here, he might have stopped Shane from doing that. Probably. Or maybe not—llya had accused strangers of the same thing more than once, sometimes with considerably

more aggression. The difference was that Ilya could talk his way out of anything. He had a way of walking it back that left the other person somehow feeling like *they* owed him an apology. Shane had never quite figured out how he did that.

He grabbed his bag and made his way over to Niko and Mila by the plexiglass. "Let's switch seats," he said. "Better view on the other side."

Niko looked at his face and his expression dropped immediately. "Oh God. What did you do."

Shane was not going to let this become a thing. The last thing he needed was for the kid's parents to put the pieces together for what happened, and for him to get a reputation as that famous asshole who snatches phones from minors.

He took Mila from his arms and put a hand of Niko's back, steering them toward the other side of the rink. "No questions. Let's go."

✦✦✦

The rest of the day was a blur.

When nighttime came, Shane didn't bother putting Mila in her own bed. He knew exactly how it would go—he'd be up in the middle of the night going to get her anyway, same as the night before. So he just brought her into his bed from the start, read her a book, FaceTimed Ilya so she could say goodnight, and watched her go out like a light before he'd even gotten to the last page. She was buried under the covers now, one arm flung out to the side.

Hoping to get maybe ten minutes to do something just for himself, Shane headed to the bathroom to do his skincare. Well, routine was a generous word for it. It was a cleanser and a lotion, both of which his mom had bought him after he'd made one offhand comment about liking how her lotion smelled. The most involved he'd ever been with skincare was during his pregnancies, and even then it was just the stretch mark cream his mom swore by. It hadn't worked. But he had used it diligently anyway.

He was patting his face dry when he heard the door creak open behind him. He caught Max's dark eyes in the mirror and put a finger to his lips immediately.

"*Please* do not wake her," he whispered, nodding towards the door.

Max's eyes widened a bit and he closed the door behind him.

"Are you doing your fun face masks tonight?" he asked, doing a surprisingly good job at keeping quiet.

Shane smiled. The face masks were also something Shane had zero interest until Rose would keep sending him some from her brand sponsorships. And then Ilya had gotten interested, and then the kids had gotten interested, and at some point it had become a whole thing. Niko used to call it "spa time" when he was little—the three of them in robes, face masks on, while Ilya painted Niko's nails.

"I am," Shane said, reaching into the drawer. "Want to do one with me?"

Max's face lit up. "Yes!"

"Come here then."

Max squeezed in beside him at the vanity. Shane held the drawer of the vanity open so he could pick. He always chose the same one—the collagen mask, which made essentially zero sense for a nine-year-old who had no business worrying about his skin elasticity. But Max liked the packaging. It was holographic.

Shane grabbed a headband and settled it carefully onto Max's head. His curls were getting long in the front, and when they were pushed back like this they stuck straight up, defying gravity. Just like Ilya's.

Shane pressed his thumb lightly over Max's bruised, freckled nose as he put the headband on. "How's your nose feeling?"

Max scrunched his nose. "Good."

"Good," Shane repeated, handing him the mask while he dug for his own. He settled for some hyaluronic acid one tonight. Not that he suspected it would help at all with how tired he was feeling.

"How long?" Max asked, looking in the mirror and wrinkling his nose, then opening his mouth.

"20 minutes."

"That's *forever*."

Shane smiled. "Hey, you're the one who came in here." He brushed some of his hair. Then pulled out his phone. "C'mere, let's show Papa what we're up to when he's he's out living his best life."

Max grinned and crowded in close. Shane pulled him against his side and held the phone up to the mirror. Max leaned forward and spread both hands out around his face, grinning as wide as the mask would let him. Shane smiled beside him.

When Shane sent it, he got an almost immediate response from Ilya.

Ilya:

my heart

look at my two baby boys. getting the spa treatment they deserve

especially for maxie who got his shit rocked yesterday

Max tugged on Shane's sleeve. "Wait, send him some more." He stuck out his tongue. Shane stuck his tongue out too and took another picture.

"And take one of me close up," Max said, still keeping his voice quiet despite his growing excitement. "Like the silly ones Papa takes of us."

Ilya was a genuine menace with the 0.5x camera. Shane had seen hundreds of photos of himself taken from above, wide-angle, looking like he'd been captured by a nature documentary. He didn't even flinch anymore when Ilya took them.

He angled the phone above Max and took a few. He showed Max his spread. Max giggled and pointed at a few. "Send him those."

Not even a few seconds later, Ilya responded:

Ilya:

he looks like little alien

i miss my little alien

They kept this up for a while. Shane let Max take a few of him too, crouching down so Max could get a better angle. Sure, maybe Shane had wanted a few minutes of alone time. But hearing Max so happy as he waited for Ilya's reaction made that easy to let go of.

From behind the closed bathroom door, there was a shifting sound from the bedroom. Then a small whimper.

Max looked up at Shane with wide eyes. "I was trying to be quiet," he whispered.

"You were," Shane said, brushing a hand across his back as he moved toward the door. "I think your sister just has a sixth sense for when someone's not right beside her."

Shane pushed the door open slowly. Mila was sitting up in the middle of the bed, hair going in every direction, blinking hard against the light spilling in from the bathroom. She pressed her whole palm flat against the side of her head and dragged it back through her hair, doing a remarkably bad job at getting nay of the hair out of her face.

"Uh oh," Shane said softly. "Did someone wake up?"

She looked at him. Blinked a few more times, working out where she was. Then her arms came straight out. "Dada."

He crossed to the bed and sat beside her, pulling her up onto his lap. She was so warm, heavy with sleep still. She reached up and prodded at his face mask with two fingers. "Mask."

"It is a mask," he agreed, kissing her nose. Then again. "You're supposed to be sleeping, big girl."

She didn't acknowledge this. Her eyes drifted to the bathroom doorway, and when Max stepped out a moment later she lit up completely. "Mask!" she squealed, louder now, pointing at him.

Max grinned and sat down next to them, opening his arms. Shane deposited Mila into them.

"You want one too, Mils?" Max asked. She nodded with her whole body. He looked up at Shane.

Shane glanced at the time and decided against doing the math on it. "Sure. She's not going back to sleep anytime soon." He looked at Mila. "Which one do you want, honey?"

She didn't even hesitate. "The *pretty* one."

Right. The nearly $400 cream one, which he used sparingly and which Mila, every single time, pressed her nose directly into his cheek to inhale. Always that one. Why she'd developed a preference for the most expensive thing on the shelf, Shane would never know.

Shane went to get it from the bathroom and came back, settling onto the bed beside them. He dabbed a small amount onto Mila's face and rubbed it in carefully. She went very still, eyes closing, chin tipping up slightly.

She took a slow breath in. "Smells pretty," she said, eyes still shut.

He nuzzled her nose with his. "You smell and look pretty."

Shane took another picture—Max hugging Mila tight on his lap, both of them with those grins that took up half their faces—and sent it to Ilya. A few minutes passed. Then a voice memo came through, loud with the noise of a busy restaurant behind it:

> *Hello my tiniest babies. It's Papa. Shane, make sure you turn up the volume so they hear me...Okay there, I gave you three whole seconds. Papa just needs to let you both know that you both look so beautiful, and Papa misses you so much. Make sure you say a big thank you to your father for sharing with you. You are lucky to have such a good sharer of a father. Does not come easy for him, I am sure. He is an only child, after all…*

It went on for a while. Shane sat back and watched Mila and Max listen, both of them leaning toward the phone, grinning like idiots, completely absorbed.

Ilya had always loved sending voice notes when he was away and couldn't pull away for an actual call. Shane loved that he loved it.

It was almost like having him in the room.

Sunday

It had seemed like a cute idea at the time. Surprising Ilya at the airport when he landed, all of kids with hand-made signs to welcome him back. Shane had pictured it clearly two weeks ago, when he'd been well-rested and feeling optimistic about his own organizational abilities.

That was two weeks ago.

Now it was Sunday morning, they were leaving to pick up Ilya from the airport in twenty minutes, he was running on four hours of sleep, and the signs weren't done.

"If you guys are not done in next ten minutes, you're bringing whatever you have," Shane said. "I don't care if it's half-finished."

David, who was sitting at the kitchen table helping Max color in his block letters, looked up. "You run a tight ship."

Shane leaned over and capped one of the markers Niko had left uncovered. "I run a ship that's being overrun by three tiny dictators."

"Don't worry. They know who's in charge. You make that very clear."

"Because you're very bossy," Yuna added, from where she was tidying up the counter without being asked.

Shane frowned. "I'm not bossy."

Yuna laughed. "Oh, please. You were bossy even as a baby. We were worked around *your* schedule," she said. "It was your world, we were just living in it."

Shane crouched down to pick up the markers Mila had dropped on the floor—deliberately, he was fairly certain. "Mom. I am very aware of every time you made us get to the airport three hours early for a domestic flight. So I really don't want to hear it from you about being fifteen minutes early to pick up Ilya."

"*You* make us show up three hours early when we fly, too!" Niko complained, pointing a pen at him.

"Well that's different when there's three of you," he grumbled. "Who all think its funny to just dart off without telling me. You're lucky I don't use leashes on all of you."

"Woof woof, woof," Mila chanted cheerfully, pressing another sticker down onto her very abstract sign.

"You'd be too embarrassed to actually use one of those backpack leashes," Yuna said, setting down her cloth and dropping into the chair beside Mila, rubbing her back while she worked. "Ilya, on the other hand…Maybe I'll get him one. He'd make good use of it."

"Please don't."

"Ruff ruff," Mila carried on. "Ruff ruff ruff—"

Max grinned. "Mila, how does a big dog sound like?"

She beamed, took a big inhale, and shouted, "*WOOF*."

"Yup! What about an even *bigger* dog—"

"Mila, let's draw a dog instead," Shane interjected, tapping her paper. "Draw the biggest dog you can in the next ten minutes."

Mila gasped at that. And she got a purple marker and started going.

✦✦✦

They made it to the airport with five minutes to spare before Ilya's flight landed. Not the fifteen Shane had wanted, but he'd take it.

They found a spot in the arrivals area with a clear sightline. All three kids held their signs up, jostling for position, craning to see past the people in front of them.

Mila was bouncing on her toes, Yuna's hand wrapped around hers to keep her from bouncing herself into someone. She twisted and looked up at Shane. "Daddy, I can't see."

Shane smiled and hoisted her onto his shoulders. "How about now?"

She immediately tried to kick her legs in excitement. Shane grabbed both ankles before she got him in the jaw. "I can see everyone," she announced, very pleased.

He hummed a little in response. Then flinched as he got hit in the face with her sign.

"Let's try not to give your dad a papercut on his eye, Millie," Yuna said, tugging on her sneakered foot. "The last thing he needs right now is a trip to urgent care."

"Don't jinx it," Shane sighed.

Mila, because she seemed to have no problem listening to anyone *but* Shane this entire weekend, stopped immediately and held onto her sign higher.

They waited, eyes scanning every person who came around the corner. Roller bags, people who looked half-asleep, other families rushing toward each other. Mila kept asking if that was him every thirty seconds. It was not.

And then it was.

Ilya came through in his sunglasses and Adidas trackpants, wheeling his carry-on, scanning the crowd. The most recognizably Slavic travel outfit imaginable, worn by a man who was probably convinced he looked completely inconspicuous.

All three kids gasped at the same time.

"PAPA!" Max bellowed.

Ilya heard Max before he saw them. He looked up, scanning, and then he found them. His face broke into a grin wide enough to see from across the hall.

He stopped dead in the middle of the walkway. Then he turned in a slow, deliberate circle, squinting around like he was genuinely checking whether there might be someone else this was all for. "Wait, wait! Is all of this for *me*?"

"Yes!" all three shouted.

"You're all sure? Not another Papa?"

"*Obviously* not," Niko said.

"Ah! Well, in that case—" he let go of his carry-on and sprinted toward them at full speed, weaving through people with no concern whatsoever for anyone in his path.

He hit Niko and Max at full force, wrapping both arms around them and pressing a kiss to each of their heads before they could even fully react. They hugged him back, and Shane watched Niko's shoulders drop about two inches. Ilya pulled back just enough to look at their signs properly, taking them from both of them, reading each one, and then kissing them both on the cheeks while they tolerated it.

Shane was trying to be present and not look at the luggage he had just left laying in the middle of the busy airport. That could easily get snatched up. But luckily his dad was thinking two steps ahead, and was already heading over to retrieve it.

Ilya turned and reached for Mila, lifting her straight off Shane's shoulders. She was practically vibrating. "Mila," he said, pressing kiss after kiss all over her face while she shrieked. "You are so big now. How did this happen? What has Daddy been feeding you?"

"The food *you* prepped," Shane teased.

Ilya smiled and pulled Shane into a kiss. Shane melted into it immediately, one hand finding the front of his jacket.

Then Ilya pulled back just enough to settle Mila more securely on his hip and take her poster from her, holding it up to examine it properly. "Did you make this all by yourself?"

She nodded, big and proud, her arms tight around his neck. "I used my favorite sticker."

"Your favorite?" He gasped, pulling the poster closer like he needed a better look. "Thank you, *malyshka*. Papa will buy you a whole new sticker sheet this week."

Ilya wrapped Yuna in a one-armed hug and kissed her cheek. Then David came back with the carry-on and Ilya pulled him in too, kissing his cheek loudly enough to make him laugh.

They made their way toward the exit, Ilya holding his collection of signs in one hand and Mila in the other. He leaned over and kissed Shane again as they walked.

"If this is the welcome-back treatment I get when I'm gone for three days," he said, glancing down at the signs, "maybe I should leave more often."

Shane stared at him.

"I will kill you."

End Notes

thank you so much for reading!!

and thank you so much for your support, especially on my last fic (i'm still going through the comments!!). i can't express how much i appreciate it 🩷🩷

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!