

Sex Cells

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Sex Cells

by [h20cb](#)

Summary

Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov are thirty-five, still dominant on the ice, and absolutely, definitely not ready to become parents. But in a matter of weeks, Shane learns that he has a breeding kink, a few extra organs, and a medical condition that turns what he previously considered a medical impossibility into a tiny blip on a CT scan.

-OR-

The medically feasible mpreg nobody asked for but I wrote anyway. This piece is complete, beta read, and will be released in three-chapter increments. [UPDATE: All parts now available! Thanks for reading. <3]

Notes

First, a huge thank you to my beta readers, hollanovlvr13 and lil_gary, without whom this piece would probably never have seen the light of day. At the outset, I want to note that while I am not personally a doctor, I have access to an OB/GYN in my home who very kindly engaged with my questions throughout writing this piece even though I blushed uncontrollably the entire time while asking them. Call me Wyatt Hayes bc I'm down bad for my hot doctor wife. Note the tags and take care of yourself. See the chapter end notes for some additional broad notes about the piece. I hope you enjoy!

Chapter 1: The Stroller Section

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shane Hollander discovers he *might* have a breeding kink while shopping in a Nordstrom somewhere in Nashville, Tennessee. That somewhere is an upscale shopping mall, miles away from the music venues, Dolly Parton wall murals, celebrity-owned honky tonks, and garish neon signs that act as a siren song for American bachelorette weekends and country music fans alike.

No, the Mall at Green Hills is tucked away from the heart of the city, surrounded by lush greenery and the conspicuous McMansions that house record executives and professional athletes. Normally, Shane would not agree to visit a shopping mall—the clashing smells of food court offerings, the awkward interactions with sales clerks, the incandescent lighting, the crowded walkways, all promising sensory overload—but he made an exception.

The Ottawa Centaurs are on a winning streak and nearing the end of a road trip, having taken down Tampa, Carolina, and St. Louis in the previous week. The team landed in Nashville early that morning, and Ilya needed to replace a pair of sneakers he had blown out in a Charlotte hotel gym. Shane suspected Ilya's plan also included sniffing out a frozen Coca-Cola and a soft pretzel that Shane would have to pretend not to covet, but a quick Google search of the mall instilled confidence that he would be able to find lunch and a new pair of designer sunglasses, so he relented to Ilya's request for company. This wasn't something he would agree to so readily at home, but Shane has always appreciated the relative anonymity he has in the states. Besides, he figured it would be nice to spend a few hours alone with his husband outside the confines of a hotel room.

Shane knows he's made a mistake the moment Ilya steps through the wide automatic doors and makes a beeline for the baby section immediately to their left.

"They have the new Nuna," Ilya informs him with a grin, as though he is supposed to know what that means. Ilya wraps his long fingers around a stroller's brown leatherette handle and effortlessly releases its brake with his foot. Shane blinks, interrupting his wide-eyed stare. How did Ilya know where the brake was? Ilya doesn't seem to notice, and pushes and pulls the stroller several times to test the wheels.

"I like this one because of the turn radius," Ilya continues, demonstrating the stroller's mobility to the extent possible given that the device is tethered to the floor, by hanging a hard right and then a hard left. "But, I am not sure about the quick-fold..." He brings the stroller to an abrupt stop, and, with little more effort than the brake, finds the release handles on either side of the bassinet and lifts it away.

In one fluid motion, Ilya relocks the wheels, clasps the handlebar with one hand, and suddenly the stroller collapses in on itself. Triumphant, Ilya stands up to his full 6'3" height and tests its weight with one arm, curling it like a dumbbell. His lips purse, flattening his perfect cupid's bow. "I'm not sold. The Uppababy folds up smaller, and the Joolz is lighter."

Shane rolls his eyes at his husband fondly. It's wildly cute to hear these nonsensical words in Ilya's accent, even if it sounds a little like he's having a stroke. "I'm sorry, why do you know so much about strollers? Did I miss the part where we're having a baby?"

Ilya winces almost imperceptibly. That was the wrong thing to say, Shane realizes a moment too late. He cringes internally and hopes it doesn't show; this is a regular if not frequent topic of discussion. They're thirty-five and married, and have enough money to offer their grandchildren's grandchildren generational wealth. Their friends are, for the most part, not only already parents, but done having children, their kids now too old to be friends with his and Ilya's kids.

Shane had excused himself from dinner at the Pikes' home one evening a few months prior when he realized Ruby and Jade were approaching their thirteenth birthday and would probably be able to drive, maybe even be in *college*, by the time he and Ilya have their own baby. He *wants* a baby, even yearns for one.

But he also wants to have the time to be the type of parents their child deserves, not ones who have competing priorities and rely on his own aging parents for several days of childcare at a time while he and Ilya are on road trips. Ilya, on the other hand, is becoming antsy, though he would never say so directly.

"Right now, I mean," Shane finishes more softly, the *I'm sorry* left implicit. Ilya steps towards Shane and catches his fingers with his free hand, offering a closed-lipped smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

"No, you didn't miss anything. Not right now," Ilya clarifies. "But it doesn't hurt to plan ahead. You might remember, I replaced most of my cars with a boring SUV for some boring Canadian several years ago, so I must resort to sexy, sleek black strollers to get my thrills." Ilya's smile shifts into something broader and more genuine and Shane returns it, squeezing Ilya's hand.

"Yeah? These really do it for you?" Shane teases.

"Oh yes," Ilya maintains, looking pleased with himself. "And besides, you never know. Accidents happen."

Shane's shoulders relax as he laughs, relieved that Ilya has recovered enough to make a sex joke. "That's not exactly how that works, Ilya."

"Hm, yes, I know this, Hollander," Ilya groans as he sets down the stroller and draws Shane closer. "You know, we did have biology class in Russia."

Shane's breath hitches as Ilya skims the knuckle of his index finger between the waistband of his pants and his bellybutton, his eyes dark and probing. "But would it hurt to humor me?"

The question hangs heavy between them, and Shane fights a confounding mixture of arousal and confusion as they shop for new athletic shoes. From the moment that they enter Nordstrom to the moment that they leave the mall, sneakers, sunglasses, and lunch in tow, Ilya brings Shane up to speed on the current stroller options on the market.

He learns that they would probably need at least three strollers—one for everyday use that could be bigger and easier to maneuver, one for travel, and a third for jogging—and of some of the considerations that never would have occurred to him organically. Wheel stability, turn radius, carseat and bassinet compatibility, collapsibility, availability of accessories like cupholders and rain covers. Empty carseat weight is another, which Shane initially writes off as unimportant for them; why would they need to worry about added weight? They're two professional hockey players.

“Yes, but Yuna and David are not,” Ilya replies casually as they wait for their Uber. Shane's heart threatens to leap from his chest like the titular alien from the 1970s classic, a movie Shane has seen and enjoyed several times on hotel televisions and in-flight entertainment systems over the years. Thinking about Sigourney Weaver's breakout performance is easier than contemplating becoming parents, but Shane reluctantly doesn't follow the mental digression.

Though their conversations about kids have become more serious recently, it had, up until now, still felt like they were discussing some vague future versions of themselves. His husband worrying about his mom struggling to lift their baby out of her too-tall Volvo SUV makes the want more concrete, more visceral for Shane. He pretends to inspect the Cava greens and grains bowl in his hands to prevent Ilya from noticing the tears welling in his eyes.

Images spring to mind unbidden: a memory of Ilya reading a bedtime story to Arthur Pike, a six-month old Amber asleep in his arms; Ilya helping a frustrated eight-year old girl with her backhand at camp; and, most alarmingly, Ilya's head in his lap with a baby on his chest, a hopeful vision of the future rather than a snapshot of the past.

He commits the image to memory and resolves to himself that, even if he can't give Ilya a baby right now, the baby they both want so desperately but aren't ready for, he can still indulge Ilya's fantasies once they're home in a few days. The twinge deep in his abdomen suggests he might enjoy it too. What could be the harm?

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the piece that broke my brain over the course of several months! I hope you like it. Some preliminary notes: (1) This is not an overly angsty piece, but this will become mpreg pretty quickly. This is set in our own universe, wherein it is not possible for people assigned male at birth to become pregnant unless they are intersex, and is written to be as medically plausible as it can be. Because it is set in our own universe, finding out that he is pregnant is deeply weird for Shane, and as is remaining pregnant. Additionally, the not-AU mpreg aspect necessitates a certain amount of medical terminology and discussion of medical conditions that would make the story possible. If the words “fistula” or “rectum” are going to take you out of it, I apologize, but I do not see any way around using them. (2) I am not an expert on being intersex and it would be incredibly unlikely for this to happen even if someone were intersex, which I think I do

a good job highlighting in the work. (3) Each chapter where it's applicable will contain a Medical Accuracy Corner in the end notes that will explain what's going on and why, as well as flag any places where details are left out or what is less medical accuracy than it is medical science fiction. (4) If you are anti-abortion, you will not like how Shane's ability to decide whether to continue his pregnancy is discussed (or how the pregnancy itself is discussed probably) and I don't care. Go be anti-abortion somewhere else.

Actual chapter notes: I just know Shane would love a Cava greens and grains bowl and Ilya would get really sucked into finding the best possible baby gear. Please don't actually use the above as advice on which stroller to buy because I did not actually check the turning radii or weight or whatever of each of them, I just know those are the considerations and those are some of the big brands, because my wife is as weirdly obsessed as Ilya is.

If you like this, please leave kudos and drop a comment! Even an emoji or two means the world to me. This was a tough piece to write, so if there's anything you appreciate about the story, please let me know. I live on praise. Thank you for reading!

Chapter 2: Indulging

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shane has a plan and about forty five minutes to execute it. He and Ilya landed in Ottawa an hour ago, and Shane made an excuse so that Ilya would drop him off at home before heading to pick up Anya from the kenn—the *dog hotel*, Shane corrects himself mentally. It's easier not to say the wrong thing out loud if he polices his thoughts, too.

The moment Ilya pulls out of the driveway, Shane starts his routine. Bottom prep isn't glamorous, but Shane tries to make it as pleasant as possible when he can, more self care than perfunctory and functional, when time permits. He fills their fancy electric kettle with water for green tea and starts a load of laundry while he waits for the water to boil and then for the tea to steep.

Steaming mug in hand, the rest of the routine unfolds: Bathroom, bidet, douche, balm, shower, moisturizing. By the end, he feels and smells amazing, clean both outside and in. His rim is supple and, he imagines, will taste vaguely like coconut oil.

Most of the time, that is all Shane would take upon himself to prepare; while he *can* open himself, why would he? He loves Ilya's fingers inside him, so much deeper than Shane can reach with his own, teasing and scissoring and stroking his prostate until he is begging to be fucked.

But this time is special. Shane has spent the past two days replaying that otherwise innocuous exchange in a department store every chance he could: "*And besides, you never know. Accidents happen,*" the fingers tracing his belly, those eyes, "*would it hurt to humor me?*"

Shane shudders. He has two fingers inside himself, deep enough to stretch but not deep enough to satisfy his need.

His cock aches against the solid planes of his lower abs; he grasps it by the base, hard enough to stop himself from an untimely orgasm as he works a third finger inside. He is saving all of his come for Ilya. Open and ready, Shane gingerly works more lube into his hole and slips in a plug.

With some effort, Shane forces himself upright and makes his way to the en suite. With a warm cloth, Shane wipes away the excess lube that has collected on his thighs and ass cheeks and washes his hands. He slips on his favorite house robe, a cotton poplin material with a small but not distinctly feminine floral pattern.

Settled back on the bed, Shane checks the time on his phone. Forty-two minutes. He starts opening Ilya's contact to check his location, but the familiar hum of the garage door renders doing so unnecessary.

"Sha-ane," Ilya calls in a sing-song voice. "Someone is excited to see you."

Shane rolls his eyes fondly and pulls himself to his feet as the clatter of enthusiastic dog feet fills the home. Ilya and Anya stand at the bottom of the stairs expectantly, Anya lifting up onto her back paws and falling back to the earth repeatedly. She whimpers and rolls over the moment Shane's hands make contact, and, with some discomfort from the plug inside him, Shane kneels to rub her impossibly soft, felty belly.

"Hi," Shane greets Ilya from his low vantage. Ilya's eyes assess him, full of curiosity and want.

"Hello to you too," Ilya smirks. "You look very pretty. I am beginning to think that maybe you did not have important emails to send."

"Not exactly," Shane admits, sheepish and coy. "What do we need to do for Anya?"

"She just came from group play, so she will want to eat dinner and go to sleep," Ilya replies knowingly, helping Shane to his feet, pulling him in close and teasing at the tie around his waist.

Shane presses in closer and whispers into the space just below Ilya's ear. "I will take care of her. I want you to go wash the airplane off yourself and meet me in our bedroom in five minutes."

With a kiss to the flesh there, Shane pulls away; Ilya clears the stairs two at a time, pleased to take his marching orders.

Anya looks up at Shane with desperation as he fills her bowl with kibble and then spoons on her expensive human-grade topper that shows up at the house frozen on dry ice every few months. Shane regrets ever letting Ilya give it to her, because now she will refuse dry kibble.

Shane crouches to scratch the fuzzy tufts behind her ears as he deposits the bowl on her dinner mat. Whether for lack of command over the English language or due to the distraction of food, Anya does not respond when Shane quietly asks her aloud whether she would like to be a big sister.

Shane flips the laundry en route to the bedroom to give Ilya an extra moment to get ready, which ends up being exactly the right amount of time to voyeuristically ogle his husband for a few brief moments. Ilya emerges from the en suite naked, still mostly wet, wicking beads of water from his sculpted torso with a towel while walking with purpose towards the bed. Shane silently observes, leaning against the doorframe.

Evidently satisfied, Ilya drops his towel into the hamper and turns to face his bedside table. Shane has a view of defined back muscles giving way to an impossibly strong, round ass as Ilya aggressively applies moisturizer to his face and neck. He has just grabbed his larger container of body lotion when Shane decides to announce his presence.

"Let me help with that," Shane teases, closing the distance between them. Ilya turns with a jolt.

"I am not sure if that was only five minutes," Ilya confesses apologetically as Shane plucks the bottle from his hands.

"I don't *care*, Ilya," Shane groans, and begins working the lotion over his body with purpose. While Shane never *needs* an excuse to touch Ilya, he loves the intimacy of this, of pressing into the places that are sometimes overlooked or under-appreciated. He often draws patterns over Ilya's chest and shoulders lying wrapped up in one another after sex, yes, or clings to Ilya's meaty glutes and thighs as he takes his cock in his mouth, but he isn't sure when he last stopped to appreciate the skin below Ilya's armpits, the backs of his knees. Once Ilya is thoroughly coated from the front, Shane rises to his feet and taps Ilya's bare hip.

"On your stomach," Shane directs. Ilya climbs onto the bed and follows orders, but tenses and turns his head to the side once prone.

"Are you going to—" Ilya begins after a moment, eyes wide and straining to see Shane in his periphery. "We can, I mean, if you want, I just haven't done anything to prepare..." Shane lets out a surprised laugh when he finally realizes the source of Ilya's concern.

"No, Ilya," Shane reassures him as he presses a kiss at the base of Ilya's spine. "Relax. I just want to touch you." Ilya melts into his touch as Shane works lotion into his taut, tired muscles. Shane starts low, fingers and knuckles finding the fascia low in Ilya's calves, and works his way up. Reaching his back, Shane settles himself across Ilya's thick thighs and begins kneading the muscles along his spinal column, behind his scapulae, and finally his shoulders and neck. Ilya lets out a low *ungh* as Shane works into his traps and Shane decides it's as good a time as any to broach the subject.

"So, I've been thinking about what you said the other day, and if you still want to..." Ilya groans beneath him.

"What are you talking about, Hollander?" Ilya asks, voice garbled by the pillow partially obstructing his mouth. "I say many things, you are going to need to be more specific."

Shane squirms and feels his face and ears go hot. Ilya sighs and rolls over, still trapped under Shane's strong thighs.

"*Moy pomidor*," Ilya prods gently, his hands coming to rest on Shane's hips. *My tomato. Damn, I guess I really am blushing*, Shane thinks. "Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"I, um—hm," Shane stammers inarticulately. "The other day, in that store. You said some things that made me think that you might like to try to... have a baby with me." The look on Ilya's face goes from playful to concerned.

"You are not sure if you want to have a baby with me?" Ilya's voice is raised, bordering on panicked. Shane realizes he has taken the wrong tack.

"No, no, oh my god, of *course* I want to have a baby with you," Shane consoles Ilya, hands rubbing circles on his chest in apology. Ilya's body unclenches and the look on his face returns to one that doesn't break Shane's heart. Something about the momentary horror of the

exchange makes Shane brave enough to say what he means as clearly as he is ever capable of articulating his own desires outside the heat of the moment. “I just got the idea that you might want to pretend that is something we can do together, just the two of us. And if you want that, I might like to try that, too.”

Realization dawns on Ilya’s face and then settles into a shit-eating grin.

“Shane Hollander, are you asking me to put a baby inside you?”

Shane’s skin feels hot all over with embarrassment, but the traitorous swoop low in his abdomen tells him there is no use pretending. Not with Ilya.

“Yes,” Shane chokes out as Ilya’s hands begin exploring his body in earnest, trailing from where his knees meet the bed to his waist before settling there. As though he knows Shane has been replaying the small contact for the past few days, Ilya’s knuckles find the space between Shane’s bellybutton and pelvis and skim there delicately.

“You want me to come deep inside you, so deep you can grow a baby right here?” Ilya’s voice is velvety and controlled, and the words cause precome to pool on the head of Shane’s thus far neglected cock. Shane tries to respond but no words come out.

“Oh, I think you *do* want this,” Ilya notes with a look of wonder as he collects the liquid on his thumb and brings it to his mouth.

“Yes, Ilya, I want that,” Shane finally manages. Ilya’s fingers trail between Shane’s legs and his mouth opens into a perfect “o” at what he finds there. Ilya grabs at the base of the plug and pushes it gently, just enough to elicit a yelp from Shane.

“Say it, Shane,” Ilya prods, twisting and maneuvering the plug.

“I want you to come inside me—*fuck*, Ilya—I want you to put a baby in me,” Shane pleads, voice breaking.

“Good. I want to put a baby inside you,” Ilya growls as he grasps Shane’s shoulders and rolls Shane onto his back, settling with his hips between his legs.

“That is more like it,” Ilya whispers, placing a kiss on Shane’s neck as he slowly removes the plug. Shane whines at the momentary loss, but is soon placated when Ilya replaces it with two fingers. Ilya’s breath catches as his fingers slip inside.

“*Moya dusha*, did you put an entire bottle of lube in your ass?” Ilya asks with playful incredulity as he pumps his fingers.

“I wanted to be wet for you,” Shane moans by way of explanation. With his free hand, Ilya collects the fresh precome from the head of Shane’s cock and slicks it against Shane’s own lips.

“I do not think that is normally a problem,” Ilya teases.

“Shut up,” Shane snaps, eyes squeezed tight in concentration. “You know what I mean.”

Ilya removes his fingers from Shane and looms over him until Shane opens his eyes. When he finally does, Ilya is looking at him with so much tenderness that the last of Shane's nerves evaporate.

"I do," Ilya states with finality. With one last kiss, Ilya pulls away to grab the bottle of lubricant from the nightstand.

"Wait," Shane falters, reaching for Ilya's arm. "It should be okay, I think, if you can kind of spread it out. I want to feel everything."

Ilya's eyes go dark as he presses just the head of his cock inside Shane. Without much lube on the outside of his rim, the stretch sits just on the line between pain and pleasure.

"You have to tell me if you want me to stop," Ilya commands, looking for signs of discomfort on Shane's face. Shane nods a response, brow furrowed, focusing on the sensation.

Shane watches as Ilya coats the head of his cock inside him and pulls back to diligently swirl it around his entrance, the shallow movements tantalizing. Tentatively, Ilya presses inside another inch, then another, then another, the sting present but lessening with each new inch as more of Ilya's cock becomes slick.

Finally fully seated, both men groan. Ilya presses his torso heavy against Shane's, foreheads touching, and slides his cock in and out of him so slowly it feels like torture.

"Fuck me, Ilya," Shane breathes, hips bucking up in frustration.

Ilya complies, peeling his torso away. He brings one of Shane's ankles to his shoulder, leaving the other free to wrap around his waist as he pounds into Shane at a punishing pace.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya moans as Shane tangles his fingers into the hair at the base of Ilya's skull.

"So good, Ilya," Shane whispers in response. Ilya leans down to kiss him, hard, which evolves into the clattering of teeth and biting and noses smashed into cheekbones. Ilya keens against Shane's mouth before pulling away and lavishing his ankle with open-mouthed kisses.

Ilya plants his hands behind Shane's knees and pushes them to his chest, changing the angle of his thrusts and pounding into Shane's prostate.

"Yeah, yeah, Ilya, just like that," Shane pants, high and breathy, eyes rolling back.

"Look at me, Shane," Ilya demands, taking Shane's weeping cock in hand and pumping in time with his thrusts. "Eyes on me. Come for me, *moya lyubov*. Come on my cock."

"Yes, Ilya, I'm gonna—" Ropes of dense, nearly opaque come coat Shane's spasming torso as Ilya works him through his orgasm, his sobs loud and vaguely inhuman. Shane writhes and whimpers involuntarily, the urge to push Ilya away losing the battle to the much stronger urge to feel Ilya empty himself inside his body.

Any of the humor that had made this seem silly earlier had disappeared long before, only desire left in its place.

“So good for me, *dorogoy*,” Ilya coos, moving one hand to stroke Shane’s lower abs. “I want to put a baby inside you. Right here,” Shane’s spent cock twitches uselessly against his skin. “You will get so *big* and so *full* and everyone will know it’s because I fucked you like this. I fucked you so good that you get to carry around a piece of me. You want this?”

“Fuck, Ilya,” Shane moaned, voice spent. “Yes, I want that. Come inside me, please. Fill me.”

Shane feels the moment Ilya’s movements begin to falter, the fast rhythm of his hips halting and starting, his breath going thready and desperate as he finds his peak and plunges over it. Ilya howls, burying his head in Shane’s neck and his cock deep inside him.

Shane wraps his arms and legs around Ilya’s collapsing frame, closes his eyes, and focuses on the sensation of Ilya’s aftershocks twinging inside him.

Finally, Ilya extracts himself with an oversensitive wince, taking care to keep Shane’s pelvis tilted backwards so as not to lose a drop. Shane feels Ilya collapse beside him and pulls him into his arms, both of them sweaty and sated.

“That was good?” Ilya inquires, Shane assumes less out of genuine curiosity than compliment seeking. Shane huffs out a laugh.

“Yes, Ilya. That was good,” Shane agrees. Ilya tiptoes two fingers down Shane’s abdomen and palms at his still half-interested cock.

“Good. See, I couldn’t help but notice that you might not be completely satisfied,” Ilya teases with faux concern, wrapping his hand around the shaft.

“Ilya,” Shane groans, uncertain if it’s a warning or a plea. Ilya sinks and presses light kisses against Shane’s legs, hips, pubic bone.

“Tell me to stop and I will stop,” Ilya admonishes, and tenderly takes Shane’s cock into his mouth, not yet totally hard. If the relentless bob, root to tip, or the vision of Ilya’s cheeks hollowed around him don’t do it, two fingers gently sliding inside Shane quickly remedy that, and he is soon impossibly hard, refractory period be damned.

The wet squelch of Ilya’s fingers fucking hard into Shane’s lube- and come-filled hole is lewd, and combine with Shane’s bitten-off moans and the garbled, rhythmic noises coming from Ilya’s throat to make a sort of obscene chorus. Then, above it all, Shane’s moans turn thready and high pitched.

“Ilya, oh my god, yes—” Shane yelps, the rest choking off as Ilya crooks his fingers once, twice against Shane’s tortured prostate and spills hard into Ilya’s mouth. Wordlessly, leaving his fingers inside Shane for him to clench around, Ilya pulls himself over Shane and coaxes his mouth open with his thumb. Shane leans up to meet Ilya’s mouth and groans hungrily at

the realization that, rather than swallowing his come, Ilya had collected it for him on his tongue.

“You see how good you taste for me?” Ilya breathes into Shane’s lips before sliding his tongue between them again. It isn’t much, his second release thinner and lesser in volume than his first, but the mixture of his own taste with the far more familiar flavor of Ilya’s saliva is heady, and he moans appreciatively. Shane feels it as Ilya extracts his fingers from where they’d taken up residence inside his body and makes a small noise of displeasure at the sudden absence.

“I know, *kotik*,” Ilya soothes, pulling away to sit back on his heels. “But we have to make sure it will take.”

Shane watches with rapt attention as Ilya pumps his own cock with wet fingers, every tiny muscle in his chest and shoulder visible with the rapid movement as Ilya’s breathing becomes heavy and his cock flushes an angry red. Ilya kneels closer and Shane has only a moment’s realization before Ilya is coming inside him, feeding two, three inches in and out of Shane’s spent hole while guttural noises escape his throat. Then, if only for a few moments, Ilya plunges deep inside Shane, panting and riding out his aftershocks for a second time.

Somehow both finally and too soon, Ilya dislodges himself and comes to lie beside Shane, pressed tight against his side. Shane can feel his pulse everywhere and welcomes the suddenly cool air against him as Ilya’s fingers draw random, circuitous paths on the hot skin of his torso.

Tracing to that space below Shane’s bellybutton, Ilya catches his attention, “So, Shane?”

“Hm?” Shane replies, blissed out and eyes closed.

“Do you think it worked?” Shane opens one eye to catch Ilya’s coy, crooked smile directed at him and returns it with a single carefree laugh.

“I think,” Shane sighs, dreamy and fucked out. “If anything’s going to get me pregnant, it’s what we just did.”

Chapter End Notes

Shane Hollander’s Guide to Bottom Prep by bisexualbuckley and its sequel live in my head rent free and this bottom prep regimen is basically canon to me now.

In my head they got a Smeg kettle as a wedding gift and Shane was just like “the Hamilton Beach one I’ve had since 2009 was fine” bc how can a kettle cost that much money, but also they and their friends are rich so it doesn’t matter.

If you like this, please leave kudos and drop a comment! Even an emoji or two means the world to me. This was a tough piece to write, so if there’s anything you appreciate

about the story, please let me know. I live on praise. Thank you for reading!

Chapter 3: Working Theories

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shane can't put it off any longer. What started several weeks before as an occasional twinge during penetrative sex had turned into constant pain, before ultimately subsiding into something more manageable recently. Fortunately, the pain peaked and waned during the playoffs, which meant that Shane could avoid discussing it with Ilya until they were home for the summer, able to make it out like he had simply chosen to be more of stickler about the no-sex-during-playoffs rule than usual.

After the end of a disappointingly brief playoff run, Shane knows that he is only putting off the inevitable. Even if he's feeling better, he still can't tolerate anything more than a couple of fingers, which is definitively an issue. Finally facing the music, Shane makes a same-day appointment with his GP, who quickly determines that, whatever the problem is, it is outside his scope of practice, and refers him to colorectal for diagnosis and treatment.

Two days later, Shane finds himself in a chilly hospital-based clinic, experiencing the indignity of wearing a cloth gown open in the back while he waits for Dr. Meadows.

Shane had successfully convinced Ilya that there was no need for him to move the magazine interview and photoshoot that had been scheduled months ago for this particular appointment. He is somewhat embarrassed by this whole ordeal, despite Ilya's assurances that there is nothing to be embarrassed about.

Whatever happens to—or, Shane cringes, *inside*—his asshole is pretty critical to their sex life. No matter how much he would love to hold Ilya's hand while yet another physician examines him, he can't bear the thought of Ilya remembering that the next time he is inside him. If he ever *can* be inside him again, which feels like a distant dream at the moment, though the pain has lessened. No, Shane needs to do this appointment alone.

Fortunately, the digital exam is quick this time. Dr. Meadows is young in the same way Shane is still young; a few errant flecks of white weave through the mousy brown hair at his temples, and thin lines have begun to form at the corners of his kind but unremarkable brown eyes, which are adorned with a pair of tortoiseshell glasses that suit his face.

The thought that he and his physician are roughly the same age offers a faint distraction from the discomfort of the exam; Shane can hardly believe that if his life had gone very differently, he could also be a surgeon by now, assuming he could get through the many years of schooling and training. He is, however, self aware enough to know that is not a fair assumption. Shane is smart but single-minded, and he's unsure he could have redirected his passion towards something like medicine.

"Okay, Shane," Dr. Meadows exhales, removing and disposing of his exam gloves. "I have some idea of what may be going on, but you will need a CT scan to confirm, which is like a souped-up X-ray machine that uses a computer to give us better images of organs. Probably

nothing too major. You can get your clothes back on and staff will let you know where to go at checkout. I'll see you back here afterwards."

After waiting more than an hour in an uncomfortable chair, Shane is disappointed to learn that getting a CT scan means derobing and redressing only to end up back in the same gown later, but supposes he prefers that to waiting in the gown the entire time. The scan takes longer than Shane expects, though he isn't quite sure where his expectations came from in the first place. Shane's healthcare knowledge is cobbled together from occasionally half-watching dramatized medical shows on hotel televisions when HGTV fails him and from his and Ilya's injuries over the years.

He knows a good deal about concussion protocols and distinguishing between bruises and fractures by feel, but he is otherwise useless, functionally medically illiterate, unless Grey's Anatomy is a lot more accurate than he previously thought.

Once again in Dr. Meadows's exam room, Shane begins to spiral. Dr. Meadows told him beforehand that this likely wasn't a huge deal, medically speaking, but their definitions of a huge deal might differ substantially. Even with the timing aligning as well as possible for hockey, surgery could have an enormous impact on his team, to say nothing of his sex life. And why had a nurse taken a blood sample after he got back from his CT?

Shane paces the tiny room like a caged zoo animal but finds it does little to expend the growing tension in his body or to quell his racing thoughts. He is mid-lap when he hears three quick raps on the door. Without a response—*why do they even bother knocking if they aren't going to wait for a response?*—Dr. Meadows steps into the room, this time with another person on his heels.

"Hi Shane," Dr. Meadows begins tentatively, his voice level but laced with something that sounds like alarm. "Please sit. This is Dr. Singh, who is here to help go over your CT results."

Dr. Singh is a short, middle-aged Indian woman with kind eyes and as much white in her closely cropped hair as black. She looks at Shane with a mixture of curiosity and something else—sympathy?

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Singh," Shane greets her after a beat, Canadian politeness winning out over his impulse to pointedly ask why she is there.

The two physicians share a look, silently negotiating who would speak first. The apparent loser, Dr. Meadows sighs and takes a seat on a cushioned stool with casters before beginning, meeting Shane at eye level.

"Shane, your CT images confirm my earlier suspicion that you have a fistula. That is basically a hole between two organs that are not supposed to be connected." Shane nods in comprehension for him to continue. "Fistulas can have some nasty complications, like blood infections, but fortunately yours is not severe and should heal on its own. It looks like it's already been healing, actually. I am going to send you home with some antibiotics, and you should feel good as new in a few weeks. You just need to remember to go to the emergency

room if you spike a fever.” That sounds less serious than Shane had anticipated, but the question still lingers.

“I... Hm. I’m never sure how to ask this without sounding like a diva,” Shane prompts with a practiced, self-deprecating smile. “But do you know how long I’ll be out of commission, if it’s not that serious? I’m.. I’m a professional hockey player.”

The pair of doctors appear to play another game of mental rock-paper-scissors, and this time Dr. Singh loses. “Shane, your CT scan revealed something unexpected in addition to the fistula,” she begins, pausing almost imperceptibly before the word *unexpected* as though she were grappling for the right thing to say. “This will likely come as a shock to you, but you have some female reproductive organs internally. We were able to identify a uterus, a cervix, a fallopian tube, an ovary, and a vagina on imaging. Dr. Meadows asked me to be here because I am an obstetrician and gynecologist.”

The sound in the room dampens around Shane as blood rushes to his ears. “What? I don’t—I don’t have a *vagina*,” he begins to protest, the word catching in his throat.

Dr. Singh looks apologetic. “Usually, when everyday people talk about vaginas, they are talking about the external part, the genitalia that people assigned female at birth have, but really it is the entire tube that runs from the crotch to the cervix, which you can think of as the opening to the uterus. Yours is closed from the outside, but definitely present.” Shane must look as dizzy as he feels because Dr. Singh pauses before adding, “I understand that this must be a lot to process, so please tell me if you need me to stop or slow down. We can regroup if you need.”

Shane feels moments away from vomiting, but gestures for her to continue. *Better to get it all out now*, he thinks.

“We could also see on the CT and confirmed with a blood test that you are pregnant.” The last word comes out carefully, like she is attempting to verbally diffuse a bomb. The wave of nausea crests all at once. Dr. Meadows reacts with surprising speed and agility, catching Shane’s vomit in a small trash can that had been on the floor only seconds before. Shane flings his arms around the receptacle like a life preserver, grateful for something to hold onto, lest he be completely unmoored.

“Shane? Do you need to take a break?” Dr. Singh’s voice is softer now, with the same maternal note his mom’s takes when he is upset. It stems the second wave of nausea.

“How?” Shane croaks out, rather than answering the question.

“We don’t know exactly how this happened yet, and we may never know. We know that you are part of the 1.7% of the population that is intersex, and that everything had to line up exactly right for you to become pregnant.” Dr. Singh grimaces, seemingly at her choice of the words *exactly right*, but continues. “It seems like this may also have been the first time you ovulated, because there is no menstrual blood stuck in your body—if you had menstruated with no place for it to go, I anticipate that we would have seen you in our emergency department much sooner. You had developed a fistula but it had not yet become so painful that you couldn’t tolerate penetrative sex, and, well...” Dr. Singh shrugs apologetically, dark

eyes glossy and assessing. "I know you must have a million more questions, some of which I will be able to answer and some that I will only be able to give my best working theory about, but one of my partners or I will be available to you at all times. My partners and I are all maternal-fetal medicine specialists, and we care for the most complex, highest risk pregnant patients."

Shane's head is swimming. Faintly, it occurs to him that it would make international news if anyone leaked his test results to the public, maybe even if he *weren't* a public figure. He knows that trans men get pregnant, if not all the time, then often enough that it isn't a news story, but this... isn't that. "Can you make sure this is private?" Shane pleads, his voice barely above a whisper, unable to meet her eyes and peering at the bin of refuse in his lap.

Dr. Singh's response to that question, at least, is forceful and confident. "Of course. We are legally bound to regardless, but we will be even more cautious than we usually are given your profile." Closely watching his face for any sign of discomfort, she covers Shane's hands with her own and squeezes gingerly. "We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. No matter what you decide to do."

What you decide to do. The words echo in Shane's head. *Oh, right,* he thinks. *I have options.* The thought of it lets his muscles slacken ever so slightly. Shane hasn't dedicated much time or consideration to what he believes or feels about abortion; he is a gay man and a professional hockey player, so it's never seemed like his business to weigh in on in the first place. As such, he's always been pretty comfortable leaving that up to the individual pregnant person. He just never thought he'd be among them. But what would an abortion even look like in his case? He knows there are surgical procedures and medications, but he anticipates that those typically assume the patient has a vaginal opening.

"What I decide to do?" Shane inquires, finally meeting her gaze, his eyes red and brow furrowed.

"Well, yes. If you decide to continue this pregnancy, it will require very close monitoring, especially at the beginning until your fistula has healed, but the whole pregnancy. If you decide to terminate, we can remove all of the internal female reproductive organs soon. We could even save the ovary, if you wanted to use your eggs in the future with a gestational surrogate." *His* eggs. The thought is almost funny. "Either way, this will require abdominal surgery, Shane. It's a question of when and how many surgeries. You're approximately six weeks, based on the imaging."

Shane's stomach lurches as Dr. Meadows cuts in. "Regardless of your decision, which, to be clear, is entirely yours, we do need to take care of the fistula. You can let staff know where to send your antibiotic prescription at checkout. I understand this is not your top concern right now, but left untreated, it will be soon."

Shane feels himself nod without deciding to do so consciously. "Okay. Thanks, Dr. Meadows."

With only a tight lipped smile in response, Dr. Meadows moves to exit. "I'll, um, leave you to it. Good luck."

An hour later, Shane leaves the hospital with a bottle of antibiotics, a multivitamin with folic acid, and an omega-3 supplement from the hospital pharmacy, as well as a folder of literature on pregnancy and what the word *intersex* means, and a deep and unabating dread in the pit of his stomach.

Chapter End Notes

Medical Accuracy Corner: (1) If we take it as a given that Shane is intersex, and has just ovulated, the fistula is a medically plausible way for him to become pregnant. (2) In reality, Dr. Singh would probably want to do immediate karyotyping on Shane, but again, I am not an expert on the care of intersex people and I do not have such an expert available to me. I am doing my best. (3) I do not have a GI or colorectal doctor available to me, but it is my understanding that fistulas do sometimes heal on their own. My consulting OB indicated that they may not want to operate to repair a rectovaginal fistula during pregnancy, which is why this is written in such a way that surgery is not implicated. (4) Some of the newer prenatal vitamins on the market contain methyltetrahydrofolate rather than folic acid, which are slightly different forms of the same thing. If the vitamin you choose contains folate rather than folic acid, however, you should add a separate folic acid supplement to prevent neural tube defects. There is not enough evidence right now to support methyltetrahydrofolate use in lieu of folic acid.

I am (sadly) American and don't know a lot about the Canadian healthcare system, though I did assume that seeing a specialist would require a referral from primary care. I did my best but I'm unwilling to send myself into the depression spiral that learning about a country with a normal healthcare system would cause. I also did not research Canadian medical training, so maternal-fetal medicine could be called something else, but IRL in the US, it's an additional fellowship that an OB/GYN does after residency (so, full educational trajectory is undergrad (4y) > med school (4y) > OB/GYN residency (4y) > MFM fellowship (3y)). For the purposes of this fic, you can assume that Dr. Singh trained in the U.S.

If you like this, please leave kudos and drop a comment! Even an emoji or two means the world to me. This was a tough piece to write, so if there's anything you appreciate about the story, please let me know. I live on praise. Thank you for reading!

Chapter 4: Smoothies Forgotten

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shane isn't exactly sure how he got home; he can faintly recall shielding his eyes from the too-bright sun upon exiting the hospital, annoyed that its position in the sky proved that the world was still spinning on its axis. In his foyer, Shane peers down at the keys in his hand and ascertains that he must have driven himself home in a fugue state, a briefly terrifying thought, and is grateful, he supposes, that mid-day traffic in Ottawa is relatively light.

Depositing his keys, he kneels to greet Anya, the strokes half-hearted at most, and slips off his shoes. Shane pads over to the backdoor and lets her out; blessedly, his body knows what to do even if he doesn't. Waiting for her to scratch at the glass, Shane takes the opportunity to fill a glass of water. His hands shake, sloshing water onto his shirt as he takes a sip, but he doesn't care; unusually out of touch with his body, Shane finds that he was parched, and drains the first glass. He promptly refills it and begins taking a long pull, only for the cold shock to his esophagus to cause his chest to seize up and his head to sear. One fist to the chest while squeezing his eyes closed and baring his teeth in pain, Shane blindly lets a whimpering and scratching Anya back in, abandons the offending glass on the counter, and staggers into the living room.

How is this possible? The question echoes through Shane's mind, mostly rhetorical; Dr. Singh has working theories that would sound plausible if Shane were reading about this in the news, if it were happening to anyone else. But Shane is a *man*. He is *male*. He had learned a lot about other queer people and trans and nonbinary people in the years since accepting his sexuality; hell, he had made a trans friend in Max. He knows there are men and other people who aren't women who can get pregnant. But Shane has never had his conception of his own gender shaken until this morning.

He's been voted the hottest player in the league multiple times; even if he can't understand why, he is regarded as very attractive, masculine, and he figures he can't be too bad to look at if he could land his undeniably, painfully hot husband. He isn't the biggest guy in the league but he is sturdy and strong; apart from the weeks at the end of playoffs when he can't eat enough to maintain his bodyweight and the end of the summer when he begrudgingly puts on a few extra pounds of adiposity in advance of a new season, his body could be used for an anatomy class learning muscle groups. Yes, his husband calls him pretty, but he calls Ilya pretty too, and Ilya isn't the one having an existential crisis. How can part of him be *female*?

Almost off-handed, Dr. Singh had told him that it's possible or even likely that he hasn't been producing sperm all this time, that the only sex cells he has or can make are eggs and that he'd been born with those. But learning for certain would require a different doctor's visit, and Shane isn't sure he wants to know anyway.

Shane is gay, and whatever residual shame he had still harbored when he and Ilya were outed was long gone. He had felt secure in his masculinity, the occasional profoundly stupid homophobic hockey player who still dared chirp him be damned—seriously, had Ilya not

knocked out enough teeth for them to learn their lesson? But Shane isn't sure his masculinity is secure enough to survive all of *this*.

Shane is still ruminating—or, more accurately, spiraling—splayed out on the living room area rug, staring at the ceiling fan, when he hears the front door unlock.

“Shane?” Ilya calls from the entry, a note of panic in his voice.

“I'm in here,” Shane offers quietly. His voice is thin from hours of silence. He doesn't see Ilya approaching so much as he feels him fold his body onto the floor and settle in behind his head.

“*Moya lyubov*,” Ilya exhales, all deflated frustration and relief, burying his hands in Shane's hair.

“I am sorry for yelling. I was calling and calling and you were not responding.” After hours of shock, Shane finally feels tears sting the backs of his eyes and chokes back a sob.

“Oh baby,” Ilya coos, pulling Shane up by his armpits and into his lap where he kneels with his knees tucked to the side. “Are you out for next season?”

Surprising both of them, a maniacal laugh erupts from Shane's mouth but quickly devolves into breathless blubbering. Until that morning, being out for the following season was the worst outcome either of them could have imagined from a doctor's appointment. Ilya presses kisses into Shane's cheeks, forehead, nose, anywhere he can catch a flash of skin until Shane's breathing returns to a normal human pace.

“*Solnyshko*,” Ilya tries carefully, voice wobbly but resolute. “I do not want to make you cry again, but you are scaring me. Please tell me what's wrong. I can take it.”

Coming back to himself, Shane realizes what this must seem like to Ilya; normally, people only react like this to the diagnosis of a terminal illness. Pulling his face from Ilya's now snotty and tear-stained shirt, Shane really looks at Ilya for the first time and finds in his eyes the unmistakable heartbreak of someone who believes he might soon be widowed. For the first time since that morning, Shane realizes that circumstances could be much worse.

“Ilya, I'm so sorry,” Shane wails. “I'm okay, I promise I'm okay. I'm not dying. I'm... I'm intersex.”

Ilya is momentarily speechless. “You are... inter-what?”

“I am intersex. It's different for everyone, but for me, it means that I have some internal organs that usually only women have. I never knew. The pain, the bleeding, it's because there is a hole in my rectum, which will heal on its own in a few weeks. It's already started healing.” Shane recounts the facts quickly and pauses; normally, saying the words *my rectum* to Ilya would be mortifying, but he's surprised to find that they barely register. He closes his eyes tight before continuing. “And a lot of things had to line up in a certain way for it to happen, but Ilya... I'm pregnant.”

Shane peels his eyes open one at a time and finds Ilya looking back at him with a very specific mixture of fear, confusion, and a vulnerable hopefulness that hurts to look at too closely. Shane lets the silence hang heavy between them until Ilya is ready to respond.

“Shane, I need you to keep talking. I think I understand, but please keep explaining what is going on and what you need from me.” Ilya’s words are cautious, measured.

Shane exhales and starts from the beginning. Afterwards, avoiding the question neither of them wants to answer at the moment, Ilya asks another.

“Do they know why you never ovulated before now?” Ilya’s voice is soft, but Shane winces thinking about himself ovulating. It’s so foreign.

“Dr. Singh kept saying that there is a lot she doesn’t know and can’t ever know for sure, but her working theory is that my testosterone was high enough that it acted somewhat like a contraceptive and helped to prevent ovulation. It’s anybody’s guess why that changed, but it sounds like I was lucky it was caught before I had a period because it could have been really dangerous.” Shane tries and fails to feel lucky. Ilya nods.

“And,” Ilya continues, seeming to struggle to find the gentlest possible words in his second language. “Even if you don’t want to have this baby, we could still have one that’s biologically ours? Half of each of us?”

Shane can see the effort Ilya is making, but hearing him call what is ultimately little more than a clump of cells *this baby* makes Shane’s stomach lurch. He swallows back the bile that had risen in his throat and nods. As if finally granted permission, Ilya erupts into joyous sobs and pulls Shane hard against his chest.

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If Shane had any doubts as to the accuracy of the pregnancy test, they are dispelled when he wakes the next morning and can’t make it to the en suite in time for the contents of his stomach to forcibly exit his body. In his panic, Shane grabs the hem of his T-shirt and catches his vomit in it, which seems smart until Ilya has to gingerly remove it over his head. Ilya disposes of the T-shirt while Shane washes bile and last night’s dinner from his hair.

As he reaches the bottom of the stairs in a clean shirt and joggers, Shane is confronted by the smell of hot breakfast food. This time, at least, he can make it to the toilet. Dinner gone, Shane retches up only bile until his esophagus stops convulsing. Usually fastidious Shane is resting his cheek on the toilet seat when he feels a warm, strong hand grasp the back of his neck and squeeze.

“Go away,” Shane groans. “And throw away the food. Only cold, scent-free breakfast now.”

Ilya silently drops a kiss to Shane’s exposed cheek and leaves with his marching orders. Moments later, Shane hears the gentle *whirr* of the blender and silently prays that his stomach will accept Ilya’s second offering.

Shane joins Ilya in the kitchen, where he has opened the windows and is portioning out a strawberry smoothie into two glasses. Shane laces his arms around Ilya's waist from behind and presses his forehead between his husband's bare shoulder blades, still tacky and warm from his own morning shower. He smells like grapefruit and sage and *Ilya*, and Shane is grateful to find that none of the scents make him retch.

"I'm sorry," Shane starts, but Ilya cuts him off, turning in his arms.

"There is nothing to be sorry about. Do not apologize to me," Ilya admonishes, then grins playfully. "It's my fault anyway for getting you knocked up." Shane plants his hands on Ilya's chest and pushes away lightly, no real heat behind it.

"Don't say that kind of thing, Ilya," Shane chides, a smile threatening at the corners of his lips.

"What?" Ilya continues, undeterred. "Is not true? Some other big, strong man came inside your ass on exactly the right day to make medical anomaly baby? I am not the father?" Shane's face falls, and then crumbles entirely.

"That's just it, Ilya," he responds after a beat, voice quavering. "I am the father too. I have to be. I have lived my entire life believing I was a man, just a man, nothing *different* or *extra*. This is so fucking weird, Ilya. I can't be someone's *mother*."

Ilya must know Shane's knees are buckling before he does, and gently guides both of their bodies to the floor. Propped against the pantry door, Shane's head comes to rest on Ilya's chest, sobs coming hot and violent. Anya pads over to inspect and, concerned, settles between their knees with her chin on Shane's thigh.

"Shane, *moya lyubov*, that is not what I meant and that is not what this is," Ilya soothes, catching Shane's chin in his fingertips to meet his eyes. "Regardless of how we have a baby, you will be our baby's father. Having some extra organs that just decided to cause trouble doesn't make you any less of a man." Shane smiles and nods in a way that lets Ilya know the words landed, but he isn't ready to respond yet.

"I cannot pretend that I do not want this medical anomaly baby with you because I want to have a baby with you, as soon as possible," Ilya continues candidly, and Shane fights the urge to look away from his husband's beautiful, guarded hazel eyes. "But if it is going to make you feel mentally fucked, or physically awful, or even if you are just not willing to give up the season, then it is not worth it. Fuck, being able to use your eggs with a surrogate is enough. You are suffering and I am being greedy." Ilya looks away, mouth contorting into a frown.

"You aren't being greedy. We are having two different, normal, *human* reactions to a weird ass situation." Shane's response comes quickly but is incomplete.

The silence stretches comfortably between them for a few long minutes. Shane had already counted backwards; if Dr. Singh was right about gestational age, that night after Nashville was probably the date of conception. Told one way, the story is a twisted parable with the clear takeaway to be careful what you wish for. Told another, it's a story about wanting

something impossible so much that you can change reality. In truth, it's neither; it's the improbable result of many unlikely occurrences, each necessary but not individually sufficient to produce the outcome.

Shane has never quite understood why anyone would have a baby without planning for it; it might have been easy for him to say before the events of the past two days, but there are birth control methods that are so wildly effective now that no one with access to them should be getting pregnant if they don't want to be, with the exception of the few cases on the margin where those methods fail. Shane values control of his own life over almost all else, and the phrase he's heard thrown around a few times—*unplanned, but not unwanted*—has always seemed ludicrous to him when it can be so easy to avoid unplanned pregnancy.

Over the years, Shane has heard another phrase dozens of times in locker rooms and living rooms and over team dinners: *There is never a good time to have a baby*. He has heard the words delivered by Hayden, shrugging one shoulder when asked if he felt too young to have a baby, better yet two, when Jackie was pregnant with the twins; a Montreal defenseman, whose wife went into labor on the day of his father's funeral; Caitlin Dykstra, enormously pregnant and unable to fly during a run of playoff games that ultimately culminated in the Centaurs bringing home the Cup on away ice.

Shane is suddenly pretty sure he understands both sentiments. It occurs to him that, while the pregnancy is (perhaps uniquely) *unplanned*, and it's *not a good time* to have a baby, he can't say it is *unwanted*. Safe in his husband's arms, Shane thinks about Nashville and strollers, turning radii and carseat weight. He thinks about Ilya consoling Amber after she fell off the monkey bars at a park in Montreal, kissing her bandaged knee. He thinks about his vision of the future, Ilya's head in his lap with their baby on Ilya's chest. And yes, he thinks about Ilya's words that night after Nashville, words that had been stripped of some of their sweetness, rendered dirty by their impossibility. *I want to put a baby inside you*.

Finally, Shane speaks. "I want to do this. I want to have this baby with you. I am really fucking scared, and Dr. Singh says things could go really wrong because this is not normal, and we can't tell anyone, even my parents until the twenty-week anatomy scan, and—"

Ilya cuts through Shane's caveats by pressing his lips against Shane's, gentle and chaste. Shane reaches up to touch Ilya's face and is unsurprised to find his thumb is tracking tears over his cheeks.

It is Ilya who pulls away first, keeping his forehead firmly pressed to Shane's. "Okay. I understand, we take it day by day. And if it is ever dangerous, we stop." Shane nods against Ilya's face. "We will figure out the rest, okay?"

Shane pulls himself into Ilya's lap and finds his lips with his own. For a moment, Ilya's hands are everywhere, trailing from the backs of his ankles to the tops of his shoulders over and over, as if confirming this is real, before settling with one knotted in Shane's hair and one arm hard against Shane's spine to ground them both. Shane finds the hinge of Ilya's jaw and presses to open his mouth wider, tongue exploring. He runs the tip along the backs of Ilya's impossibly straight and almost entirely fake upper teeth, the real ones casualties of hard checks into the boards and punches returned in kind. Absently, Shane wonders if those teeth

are seeping calcium into landfills across North America or were incinerated as medical waste, some part of Ilya now reduced to ash.

A low groan from Ilya's throat and the pressure of their hardening cocks against one another bring Shane back into his body. He rolls his hips once, twice, seeking friction before Ilya's fingers gently tug his head back to meet his eyes.

"You are okay to do this, yes? You want this?" Ilya's gaze is concerned and beseeching as he paws at Shane's groin. Shane rolls his eyes fondly.

"Ilya, my ass is broken, but my dick isn't," Shane needles, rising to his feet and extending a hand to his husband. "Come on. I want you in the bedroom."

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Not one to deny him, Ilya follows Shane to their room, never dropping his husband's hand. A few paces in front of the bed, Shane turns and meets his gaze, stepping backwards until his knees meet the edge where he sits upright, eyes trailing over Ilya's exposed skin.

Ilya steps between Shane's open thighs and catches his jaw with his hand, fanning his thumb over Shane's cheekbone. Shane's fingers find Ilya's flesh, trail from the loon on his shoulder and the bear on his chest, over each defined abdominal muscle, and down, down, over the vee and the dark, dense hair that disappears into Ilya's low-slung pants.

Without warning, Shane's face crashes into the space between Ilya's bellybutton and where his hard cock strains against soft fabric. Shane presses wet, frenetic kisses to the hair there, and lets out a low, desperate noise. Ilya feels Shane's lips pull away infinitesimally, forehead still firm against him, as Shane deftly grabs the two waistbands between him and what he wants and frees Ilya's cock, aching and purple and taut.

Shane's mouth is soft and reverent; one hand firmly grasping his length, thumb pressing the fleshy ridge that runs the length of his cock, slowly massaging, Shane kisses the head chastely and licks away the precome that it left on his lips. Shane takes the head into his mouth and swirls his tongue, clockwise, then counter, several times before coming to a stop with his tongue stretched long against the bottom of Ilya's cock. There, the tip of Shane's tongue finds Ilya's frenulum, and flicks hard against the sensitive band of tissue, eyes fluttering but locked on Ilya's.

The combination of sensation and the way Shane is looking at him is too much for Ilya to bear and his hips thrust involuntarily, forcing himself deeper into his husband's mouth.

Rather than wait for Ilya to knot his fingers in his hair to control how deep, how fast he thrusts next, Shane's hands land on Ilya's hips, fingers pressing into the flesh of his ass; Ilya isn't surprised. Their usual dynamic works for both of them. Shane, who seeks to control every aspect of his life to the greatest degree possible generally cedes control in the bedroom—or the shower, or the kitchen, or the living room, or the occasional hockey equipment storage closet—to Ilya, relieved to have one domain in which he knows he can safely let someone else lead. Ilya, who spent the most formative years of his life under the thumb of his father, coaches, an authoritarian government, the cultural mores of a home country that he

knew would abandon him or worse if they learned what he was—yes, Ilya likes control. He likes the power and the privilege of giving Shane what he needs and taking what he needs in return, and he takes that responsibility seriously.

Occasionally, though, when Shane feels especially unmoored, when his tight grip on the rest of his world is tested, Ilya is happy to pass the reins, both parties with the understanding that it is temporary. So, Ilya watches, rapt, as Shane takes what he needs, Ilya's cock all but disappearing into his husband's mouth with the push and pull of his hips.

“Fuck,” Ilya growled, “*Ty tak prekrasna, kogda berosh' to, chto tebe nuzhno.*” *You are so beautiful when you take what you need.*

Shane preens and takes him deep, tears accumulating in the corners of his eyes, a wet, garbled sound dislodging from his throat. Shane pulls one hand away from Ilya's hip to work his cock as he sucks a taut ball into his mouth, then the other in turn. Shane's lips back around Ilya's cock, Ilya watches as Shane collects saliva from his wet balls and tentatively slips a finger behind them to press on his perineum. Freeing Ilya's hips and taking his cock in his newly available hand, Shane pulls away and meets Ilya's eyes.

“Can I eat you out?” Shane entreats, rubbing small, coaxing circles.

“*Da.* Yes,” Ilya replies, punctuating his answer with a kiss before begrudgingly extricating himself from Shane's grasp. Shane pouts at the loss. “But please take off your clothes. I am feeling very... *vulnerable.*” The last word comes out in four distinct syllables, the way long English words often do. He cringes internally; he knows Shane finds it cute, and Ilya doesn't want to be cute at the moment. Shane smiles to himself but says nothing, which Ilya appreciates, as he removes and folded his clothes into little rectangles.

Moments later, Ilya lies prone diagonally across the bed with his cock digging into a pillow, which is another pleasantly vulnerable feeling. Shane settles in between his legs and threads his strong arms underneath Ilya's thighs. Ilya yelps at Shane's first lick, a long, lazy stroke from the top of his perineum past his hole. For what could be moments or minutes, Shane laps at Ilya like this, the noises escaping Ilya's lips foreign in his own ears. Shane's hands grasp at Ilya's ass cheeks and pull gently, Ilya's first indication that Shane is planning to home in on the tight furl of his hole.

“*Blyat!*” Ilya cries as Shane's tongue starts working him in earnest. “*Da, moya dusha.*” Shane's face is buried in his ass, tongue swirling around and swiping across his rim.

“*Mmph,*” Shane moans against his opening, and Ilya observes fleetingly that the sound is not dissimilar to those he makes on the rare occasions that Ilya can convince him to eat junk food—gross Canadian Lay's potato chip flavors, a (preferably frozen) Snickers bar, ice cream. It suddenly registers with Ilya that this is a treat for him.

“I love you, I love your tongue, I love—*fuck,*” Ilya stutters, hips jutting forward involuntarily into the pillow underneath. Then, Shane's tongue presses inside him, and Ilya loses all language. Still, the room is loud; moans of pleasure and need mix together, distinct from the wet, obscene sounds of flesh on flesh. Ilya grasps onto the sheets with both hands like an anchor.

Having built for what felt like hours, Ilya's orgasm hits hard and fast, come soaking through the pillowcase and possibly ruining the pillow itself. Shane clings hard to Ilya's thighs, chasing his hole even as his hips buck and finally as Ilya comes to a stop. Shane slows then, but only relents when Ilya unfurls his fingers from the sheets and taps frantically against Shane's shoulder, reminding Ilya of when women would do the same thing to him coming down after he'd made them come with his mouth.

Shane's tongue stills but remains pressed flat against Ilya's rim for a few long moments before he pulls away. Kissing one ass cheek and then the other, Shane extricates himself and settles beside Ilya.

"That was..." Ilya begins, but trails off for a beat too long.

"Really fucking hot?" Shane fills in the blank, and Ilya lets out a single exhausted laugh.

"*Da*, yes, that too," Ilya tries again. "But I was going to say amazing. Thank you. I think I needed that." Shane pulls himself close to Ilya and kisses him deeply, Ilya unbothered by the taste of himself on his husband's tongue.

"I think I did, too," Shane whispers, eyes momentarily wet. Ilya watches him inhale—two, three, four, and exhale—two, three, four, five, six—and blink several times in rapid succession. He continues more confidently, grinning. "But if I don't come down your throat in the next ten minutes, I am going to die."

Ilya chuckles at but chooses to otherwise ignore the dissonance, sinks down between his husband's knees, and proves his love and devotion with the level of expertise and confidence that only comes from having spent nearly half your lifetime learning everything there is to know about how to please another person.

After, sated and spent, Shane tucks himself into Ilya's side, resting his head on Ilya's chest, and falls asleep. For once, Ilya is not inclined to join him, but enjoys his warm, reassuring pressure against his body nevertheless. He pulls the duvet up to cover them both and lies thinking about the future, about the pregnancy. Ilya is so frightened—for Shane, and more selfishly, for himself if anything were to happen to Shane. The previous night, when he couldn't sleep, he set out to learn as much as he could about what was happening inside Shane's body and why, hoping that understanding could help him support Shane better. Shane had tried to explain how unlikely this was, but what Ilya gleaned from reading more online was that this was not only unlikely, but that, even with the facts as they were, was so unlikely that it statistically approached impossibility. This was less like sinking a shot goal line to goal line than sinking a shot from the *moon*.

With Shane (blessedly) asleep beside him from his adrenaline crash, Ilya had read a sad case study. The story was so wild that Ilya had found himself translating words he'd known for years just to confirm their meanings. A fifteen year old girl in a small African country was born without a vagina, but all her internal organs were present and accounted for; just after performing oral sex on her new boyfriend, her ex-boyfriend caught them, and stabbed her in the stomach. She went to the hospital for the injury and recovered. Nine months later, she went to the hospital for abdominal pain, where everyone involved was shocked to find that

she was in labor. The girl had a C-section and both she and the baby went on to live normal lives, but the question remained: How the *fuck* did that happen?

The doctors' best guess, the most accepted working theory, is that the semen in her stomach didn't have time to get killed by stomach acid, the knife punctured her uterus, and sperm met egg. Other experts think there is no way the semen could have survived in the stomach acid for even a moment, that maybe she was too embarrassed to admit to anal sex and that she had become pregnant the same way Shane had through a temporary opening she hadn't known about.

Initially, Ilya was tempted to think, *at least she knew she had a uterus*, but the girl, a grown woman now, might just as easily think, *at least he's an adult with a husband who loves him and more money than he could spend in several lifetimes and didn't get stabbed in the fucking stomach as a fucking teenager*, should she ever learn about him. So instead, Ilya had resolved to support whatever decision Shane made about continuing the pregnancy. He didn't, couldn't know what it was like to have his sense of self shaken the way Shane had, and vowed to do his best to express his own feelings without coercion, not only because he respected Shane's autonomy, but because he couldn't live with himself if he were the reason Shane suffered.

Since their conversation that morning, Ilya had felt a mixture of relief and guilt that he *felt* relieved about Shane's decision. But in this moment, his husband's breaths slow and even as he sleeps on his chest, Ilya lets himself feel the overwhelming joy he hadn't yet acknowledged. They are, assuming all goes well, going to have a baby. *Their* baby. And sooner than he had ever let himself hope.

Finally, Ilya feels his eyelids become heavy. Before closing them, he carefully reaches over to check the time. 12:02 pm. He smiles softly to himself as he drifts off, feeling accomplished for successfully running out the clock on morning sickness, the strawberry smoothies on the counter long forgotten. But there is always tomorrow.

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It takes Shane more than a moment to get his bearings. He is warm and vaguely sticky with sweat where Ilya's leg is draped over him in sleep. The sleek analog clock on his bedside table reads 2:34, and the light streaming through the curtains tells him that is pm, not am. He is fairly confident that they don't have a game that night, that this isn't a pregame nap, but he can't imagine another reason he would be waking up at this hour. Slowly and then all at once, he remembers. *Oh*. Shane gently lifts Ilya's leg, heavy with sleep, and they both wince at the loss of contact and cool air on exposed skin. Ilya's breathing continues at its slow clip as Shane slips away quickly.

On tiptoe, Shane collects his clothes and exits, quietly closing the door on his way out. His stomach gurgles as he descends the stairs, and finally it's with hunger rather than nausea. While he waits for the microwave to announce that his pre-portioned meal of chicken curry with vegetables and quinoa is ready, Shane opens the folder on the kitchen island and removes the business card tucked into the designated slot inside.

Dr. Faiza Singh

University of Ottawa Healthcare

Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology

Division of Maternal-Fetal Medicine

Before he can overthink it, Shane dials the number below Dr. Singh's professional information. He feels silly when he reaches a line for her clinic rather than the woman herself or even a personal voicemail. *Of course*, Shane thinks. *This isn't a direct line. Boundaries.*

The woman on the other end isn't surprised to hear a man's voice, or, if she is, she does a good job pretending she isn't. Maybe patients' husbands call all the time. He leaves a message with his contact information but without context, and resigns himself to wait for Dr. Singh's response.

Shane settles in on the couch and tucks into his meal. The curry hits his stomach and burns pleasantly, less from heat or spice than the presence of calories for the first time in nearly eighteen hours. Despite his hunger, Shane paces himself, both to savor the meal and for fear that eating too quickly would make him sick again. He is collecting the last bit of verdant green sauce with a final bite of dark leafy kale and chicken when his phone rings. Shane winces as his fork clanks against glass in his haste to put down the meal prep container.

"H-hello?" Shane stutters, frazzled.

"Hi, Shane, this is Dr. Singh," comes the voice from the other line, pleasant and professional. "I heard you called. How are you?" *How are you?* From anyone else in this context, these words might have sounded flippant, and by reflex, Shane wants to respond with sarcasm or anger. But from Dr. Singh, they sound genuine, and Shane finds himself answering honestly.

"I am... not great. Better than yesterday," Shane begins with a mirthless chuckle. "Though I did throw up kind of a lot this morning. Seems like yesterday wasn't a one-off thing." Shane is silent for a moment, but it must be clear to Dr. Singh that he isn't done. "We want to continue this pregnancy," Shane resumes, taking on a tone of finality. "I want to continue this pregnancy. It's still really fucking weird and I'm scared and I don't know how this will work, but I want to do it."

"Okay," Dr. Singh acknowledges. After a beat, she continues, seemingly having sufficiently steeled herself. "Then we will figure this out together. I want to see you in two weeks. We can't do a thorough abdominal ultrasound until then, but I will work on the game plan in the meantime. Until then, call with questions. I will send you my direct line so you don't have to go through the office." Shane wonders if she is offering him her phone number because of who he is or because of the unusual circumstances, but chooses not to ask. Either way, he will accept the special treatment. "Oh, and pick up some Unisom SleepTabs, vitamin B6, and Pepcid for the nausea. They help. Do you have any questions right now?"

Shane pauses for a long moment, considering. “Yeah. Could you send me the CT images and the report?”

Chapter End Notes

Medical Accuracy Corner: (1) Pepcid (famotidine) by itself and Unisom SleepTabs (doxylamine succinate) in conjunction with B6 are often recommended for nausea in pregnancy. Lots of patients swear by them. (2) Dr. Singh's working theories are really just my conjecture. For this story to work at all, Shane needs to have never ovulated before (because ovulation leads to menstruation, which in his case would lead to at least cyclic pain that worsens over time, and possible sepsis from not being able to flush the menstrual tissue/blood) and needs to suddenly ovulate at the exact right time. His testosterone levels preventing ovulation is theoretically medically possible. All of this might function similarly to PCOS (recently renamed PMOS). But, again, this is a fictional story based on a good deal of medical knowledge and a vibrant imagination, not reality.

I want to make it clear that I do not endorse Shane's previous understanding of why anyone would have a baby without planning for one. He is coming at this as someone who has never had to think about this seriously and has a seriously lacking perspective that takes for granted access to birth control (as well as abortion).

Sadly, the case study Ilya describes in this chapter is real; it is often played up in media (even media I generally trust) as this zany story about how life finds a way, despite the girl's youth and the violence inflicted upon her. I'm disappointed that the most compassionate description of her case will live in an mpreg fanfic but proud to have hopefully done her justice.

If you like this, please leave kudos and drop a comment! Even an emoji or two means the world to me. This was a tough piece to write, so if there's anything you appreciate about the story, please let me know. I live on praise. Thank you for reading!

Chapter 5: The Blip

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ilya is ready to be a father. Ilya is *fairly* certain he is ready to be a father. If he's completely honest, Ilya isn't sure it's possible for someone to know if they themselves are ready to become a parent; it seems like the kind of thing that fundamentally changes who you are as a person in addition to your entire life trajectory. From what he's witnessed when his teammates and their spouses have had kids, the life of a parent can be sorted into two discrete time periods: Before and after. That kind of paradigm shift seems like the thing that it's impossible to meaningfully prepare for.

And it's not like he's had the best role models. He considers his own father, Grigori, verbally abusive and neglectful at best, and his brother, Andrei, seemingly committed to repeating the mistakes of their father with his own daughter; *no, worse*, Ilya corrects himself, Andrei's also a drug addict. Though Ilya has come to understand during his time in North America that substance use disorder is a disease and has a good deal of compassion for people struggling with it, he has also come to accept a level of cognitive dissonance about the topic when it comes to his own brother. He might be able to extend empathy to others, but not to his own brother. He considers that maybe he needs to talk to Galina about that and files it away for a future session.

The memories of his mother are either implausibly rose-tinted by their paucity or too painful to look at directly. There are David and Yuna, of course, kind and thoughtful and supportive, who devoted themselves so completely to parenthood and take so much pride in it, though Ilya isn't sure that the relatively few years that he has known the Hollanders can overcome his entire upbringing.

But maybe the difference *is* that devotion and pride. For as much as he has relentlessly mocked Hayden Pike over the years, he and Jackie are great parents to good kids. The Pike children are smart: the twins are in advanced math classes and Arthur is something of a piano prodigy. When Arthur told the Pikes he didn't want to play hockey anymore so he could focus on music, Hayden only cried about it to Shane over the phone once, and then got really into Chopin or whatever. And so what if Amber got sent home from school three times in second grade for cursing? It sounds like the *little bitch* Mia had it coming for hogging the swings. Jackie took away her iPad for a week over the incident but privately laughed until she cried. If that's what good parenting entails, Ilya thinks he can manage.

Ilya smiles to himself and hunches over Shane's shoulder to peer at his desktop. That afternoon, while Ilya slept, Shane received an email from Dr. Singh with three images attached. Each black and white scan has been helpfully cropped, and each newly-discovered organ labelled; unlike the grainy, nondescript ultrasound photos Ilya's teammates have posted and sent in group chats over the years, the CT images are fairly clear. He can plainly make out the solitary ovary and fallopian tube, as well as the uterus, cervix, and vagina, which is rounded off at the bottom of the image.

What is less clear is the embryo, a tiny blip lodged into the left side of the uterus. If it weren't labeled, Ilya might have missed it. Shane flips through the images several times, as if hoping one of them might be more visually impressive. Finally, he stops and zooms in until the blip becomes pixelated.

It is Ilya who finally breaks the silence. "That's it? That's the baby?"

Shane turns to glare at him, but his expression softens when he sees Ilya's.

"Ilya, it's really early. It's going to be hard to see for a while—if we even have a while," Shane sighs and wraps his arms around Ilya's thighs. "I know you're excited and I am too, really, but I think it would be good if we can try to think of it as an embryo for now, maybe a fetus later for at least a while. It's really common to lose pregnancies this early and Dr. Singh said we don't know how my body will react, if it's even possible to get close enough to term."

Ilya catches his husband's face between his fingers and strokes his jaw with his thumb, searching his velvety brown eyes for signs of regret or hesitation about his decision, finding only fear and worry. "We have to be prepared for this to end badly," Ilya summarizes, and Shane nods into his hand.

"Okay, *moya dusha*," Ilya assuages, tone serious. "Let's make a plan, set the rules."

Shane laughs out loud, crinkling his freckled cheeks and nose for the first time since before the appointment. Ilya's heart swells and he seizes the moment, bending to pepper his husband's face with tiny pecks.

"When did you become such a planner?" Shane chuckles between kisses.

Ilya rises and extends a hand to Shane. "Come now, let's get comfortable and talk about when we will call it what and who we will tell when and how and stuff. You are normally Mr. Type-A List Man, but as you are with embryo, I will take notes."

Shane takes Ilya's hand with a laugh. "Ilya, that was almost indecipherable. You have to write exactly what I say so I can understand it later. But yes, let's talk."

Ilya collects a legal pad and pen from the desk with his free hand and begins to follow his husband to their living room before abruptly pausing in the doorway. He lets Shane's hand go with a parting squeeze.

"I'll be right there, *solnyshko*."

As Shane's footsteps soften down the hallway, Ilya turns his attention back to the computer, selects the clearest CT image, and presses print.

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Perhaps predictably, the planning session proves contentious. Ilya readily accepts Shane's suggestions for what to call the pregnancy, and when to tell friends and family, but fights valiantly to be able to purchase baby gear earlier than twenty weeks. Shane's doe eyes easily

cut through his resolve, however, and Ilya begrudgingly concedes. The main source of friction, however, is about *who* they will tell. They agreed about the Hollanders, Svetlana, and Rose, but—

“He’s my best friend, Ilya,” Shane groans, not for the first time. “He should know. We can trust him.”

“Oh, like we could trust him knowing about our relationship?” Ilya quips petulantly, not looking like even he quite believes it’s a good argument.

“We both know that wasn’t his fault,” Shane maintains, taking on the tone of a parent speaking to a child. “And it was ultimately good for us. And it’s irrelevant right now. I just can’t imagine lying to him about this.”

“Okay, then I want to tell Marlow,” Ilya lobs back. “If you get to tell three friends, because you know Pike will tell Jackie, I can tell two.”

Shane’s attempted rebuttals repeatedly fall flat until they agree to tell neither Hayden nor Cliff. Shane is annoyed the rest of the evening, and, uncharacteristically, finds himself rotting on the couch; it is clear to him that Hayden is different from Cliff, but explaining how without insulting his husband and sounding like an asshole proves an impossible task. Ilya gives him a wide berth for hours, sulking in the gym first and then taking Anya on a long walk.

Ilya has already turned in for the night when Shane leaves the warmth of the sectional and makes his way to the kitchen for a glass of water to take to bed. The front of the fridge, previously barren, is now home to two crisp sheets of computer paper: The first, a CT image proudly displaying the little blip that had started all of this; the second, a typed and printed copy of the rules they had set earlier, which makes Shane smile despite himself. It isn’t written exactly like Shane would have, the structure and language a bit simplistic (except, and there was that phrase again, medical anomaly—where did Ilya learn that?), but that makes it all the more endearing. Shane feels the tell-tale sting of tears behind his eyes as he locates a pen to make a minor adjustment.

The Hollander-Rozanovs’ Guide to Medical Anomaly Pregnancy

- Don’t call it baby before twenty weeks. Before ten weeks, call it embryo. Between ten and twenty weeks, call it fetus. Or call it “the pregnancy” at any time.
- Don’t buy baby stuff until twenty weeks.
- Don’t tell friends and family until twenty weeks.
- Don’t tell anyone, ever, except Yuna Hollander, David Hollander, Svetlana Vetrova, Rose Landry, doctors, and medical staff. *Addendum: Hayden Pike; Jackie Pike; Cliff Marlow -SH*

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Two weeks later, Shane is doing better. He has largely come to grips with the unexpected turn of events, and is, most of the time, more excited than upset about the pregnancy. He hasn’t

had a single panic attack or near miss in three days, the longest he has gone so far. That is, until he and Ilya arrive at Dr. Singh's clinic.

It is really nobody's fault; the clinic staff let them know ahead of time to come in through the employee entrance. Ilya knows that Shane is uncomfortable with receiving the VIP treatment, but feels confident that he isn't thinking about that right now, only grateful to the medical assistant who accompanies them to their patient room, bypassing the trip to the waiting area. Nevertheless, Ilya watches in helpless alarm as his husband takes in his surroundings and visibly deteriorates.

The room is largely unremarkable; two dated plastic armchairs sit against one beige wall, perpendicular to a wall of beige cabinetry and a stainless steel sink. In the center of the room sits a beige exam table, reclined to a 45-degree angle and covered with a strip of protective paper. Ilya does not struggle, however, to identify the items that sent Shane reeling. All four walls are covered with posters; one, a female anatomy diagram, another, a shot of a headless body with a pregnant belly from a PSA campaign encouraging "expectant mothers" to stop smoking. Foot rests poke out from the end of the exam table conspicuously. Ilya sucks a deep breath in through his nose and guides Shane to sit in the chair beside him, clasping his hand tightly.

"Shane," Ilya tries, but is cut off by a knock at the door.

The medical assistant is kind and quick, pausing only to note that Shane's pulse and blood pressure are a little elevated, but nothing to worry about. Neither Shane nor Ilya deign to clarify that a normal person's slightly elevated pulse and blood pressure are Shane's professional athlete's body having a panic attack.

"Shane," Ilya tries once they are alone again, "*moy dorogoy*, you need to breathe. You want me to breathe with you?" Shane squeezes Ilya's hand in response. "Okay, let's do in for four, out for eight. Can you do that? In, two, three, four—out, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight."

Five cycles in, Ilya feels Shane's pulse return to normal under his fingers, and places a chaste kiss to his temple. "*Molodets, lyubimyy*. Well done."

Just then, another perfunctory knock on the door disturbs their relative calm, and Dr. Singh enters. Ilya considers that her presence might usually be disarming; she greets them with a warm smile that reaches her kind eyes, and her petite and soft-looking frame is definitionally unintimidating. Regardless, he feels his husband go completely rigid the moment she enters the room.

"Good morning, Shane. And you must be Ilya," Dr. Singh welcomes, reaching to shake Ilya's free hand.

"It is good to meet you," Ilya replies with a polite nod and obligatory smile. Dr. Singh rolls a small cushioned (beige) stool out from its hiding place underneath a cabinet and sits facing Ilya and Shane.

“Okay, game plan,” Dr. Singh begins, clapping her hands to her knees and looking to Shane alone. “You still want to continue this pregnancy, correct?”

“Yes,” Shane answers, squeezing Ilya’s hand and offering him a small smile. “I do. We do.”

“Then let’s talk about what that means.” Dr. Singh’s plan entails more frequent visits than most pregnancies, and, naturally, it also entails a C-section, which she recommends be scheduled for thirty-nine weeks gestation. She advises that it would be best for Maternal-Fetal Medicine, or MFM, to manage the pregnancy, which Shane seems to expect but is news to Ilya. She explains that MFM is a special additional training program on top of Obstetrics and Gynecology residency that focuses on high risk pregnancies. Though many people who require consultation with MFM are able to be primarily managed by a generalist obstetrician, Dr. Singh wants to take Shane on as her own patient given the number of unknowns in a case like his.

“I can’t promise to be here for every visit, or for the delivery if you go into labor on your own and we have to do the C-section early, but I will promise that only those who need to know about this will know, and that you will be in extremely good hands,” Dr. Singh offers. Shane nods, and Ilya wonders whether it represents true acceptance or mere resignation.

“Do you want to do an ultrasound today? Normally we wouldn’t try an abdominal ultrasound this early because it’s hard to see too much of anything, but our other methods are unavailable to you,” Dr. Singh asks, wheeling a machine to sit beside the exam table. Shane looks to Ilya.

“Whatever you want,” Ilya shrugs, trying and failing at nonchalance. “I wouldn’t mind it, if you don’t.” Shane nods and rises to his feet, looking uncertain what to do with his hands.

“Alrighty,” Dr. Singh chimes with a clap. “No gowns this time, or for a very long time. Just hop up on the table and lift your shirt up for me.”

Ilya hasn’t spent much time imagining what it would be like to stand beside a pregnant partner getting a sonogram, except when he was younger; he had been diligent about condom use before Shane and he were exclusive, but condoms broke, and emergency contraceptives weren’t 100% effective. It would be dishonest to suggest that he had never worried about it, some random hookup tethered to him for a lifetime, even if he were confident that he would love his child.

So no, Ilya isn’t sure what the protocol is for the husband of a husband who unexpectedly found himself in an obstetrician’s office waiting to see what will (hopefully) become their baby in real time on a tiny computer screen; he has, however, seen enough television to join Shane, standing off to the side as Dr. Singh slathers his abdomen in a viscous blue goop and presses a probe to it.

“Here we go,” Dr. Singh announces, the black and white pixels on the screen morphing into something less fuzzy. “Like I said, there isn’t much to see here yet, but, ope—” Dr. Singh pauses and smiles. “There it is. It can be hit or miss this early with an abdominal ultrasound, so I didn’t want to worry you about it too much, but I’m picking up cardiac activity.”

“Cardiac activity?” Shane prods, tone curious but guarded.

“We don’t call it a heartbeat this early because the heart isn’t really formed yet, but you can think of it that way if you like,” Dr. Singh continues, “If everything continues normally we’ll be able to see it better in a few weeks, but do you see that?”

Dr. Singh points to the blip on screen, tiny but larger than in the CT images, and Ilya and Shane lean in as much as they can and squint. Sure enough, the blip is flashing, or maybe fluttering, expanding and contracting in size by a pixel or two. Ilya hears a buoyant, disbelieving laugh bubble up his throat and looks at Shane in wonder. For an eighth of a second, Ilya tries to school his face into something more neutral, but, meeting Shane's eyes, finds it unnecessary. Shane laughs back freely.

“This is so fucking weird,” Shane giggles. “But I guess this is really happening.”

Chapter End Notes

Medical Accuracy Corner: (1) Ultrasounds earlier in pregnancy are generally most useful when done transvaginally, which is obviously a problem for Shane given the lack of vaginal opening. (2) It is true that before a certain number of weeks, what anti-abortion people call a heartbeat is more properly cardiac activity. The term heartbeat is used to create an inaccurate idea of how developed a pregnancy is. It is also true that cardiac activity is a good sign that an early pregnancy will continue, and many pregnant people and their partners get excited about it. I do not endorse conflating cardiac activity with a heartbeat but respect why it's an important milestone for some patients.

If you like this, please leave kudos and drop a comment! Even an emoji or two means the world to me. This was a tough piece to write, so if there's anything you appreciate about the story, please let me know. I live on praise. Thank you for reading!

Chapter 6: One of the Greats

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The rest of the first trimester—up to 14 weeks—is long and difficult but uneventful. Dr. Singh’s advice to take Unisom SleepTabs with B6 and Pepcid for nausea is hugely helpful, especially when coupled with some hot ginger tea, though Shane still can’t tolerate solid food until the afternoon. All in all, Shane feels mostly, shockingly, normal. Sure, his hormones are “weird,” per Dr. Singh, whose veneer of doctorly professionalism sometimes slips to reveal her intellectual fascination with the whole ordeal. The embryo turns into a fetus, the plan not to call the fetus a baby until twenty weeks goes out the window by the time the first trimester ends, and the pregnancy, by all accounts, is going well.

Though he can’t train seriously and full contact hockey is out of the question, Shane can continue his exercise regimen, running and weightlifting almost as much as he usually did in the early postseason. Once cleared for sex, Shane is able to get out of his head via his favorite pastime, and retreating to the cottage means lap swimming, a welcome reprieve for newly-aching joints. Being pregnant means he can’t use the hot tub, which is unfortunate, but Ilya surprises Shane with the installation of a soaker tub for two, which more than makes up for the loss.

It is in that tub, July turning into August and seventeen weeks turning to eighteen weeks, that Ilya broaches the subject that neither of them really wants to touch—or, at least, one of those subjects.

“*Moya dusha*,” Ilya purrs against the shell of Shane’s ear, working strong, callused fingers into his traps.

“Hm?” Shane hums, pleasantly floating in post-coital, mid-shoulder-rub bliss, all but his chest up submerged in water that smells like their rose petal epsom salt.

“We have to talk about how we are going to tell people.” Ilya feels Shane’s muscles tense as he pulls away and rolls over in Ilya’s arms.

“I know,” Shane acquiesces quietly. “I hate that I’m so scared about the anatomy scan and telling people that I’m not any fun right now.”

“You are never too much fun, *moy sladkiy*,” Ilya teases. “although being a man who gets pregnant is not very boring of you.”

“I’m being *serious*, you asshole,” Shane snipes, scandalized, and splashes Ilya. Ilya does his best to look playfully offended, but the attempt is short-lived.

“I know, Shane,” Ilya says more sincerely. “I am scared too. I think maybe if we have a plan for telling our family and friends, we will be less scared, at least about that, and then we can

just be scared about the scan.” Shane’s face settles into something like acceptance. If there’s one thing Ilya’s husband takes comfort in, it’s a plan.

“Yeah, I think you might be right,” Shane concedes. “Any bright ideas?”

Ilya resists the urge to make a joke about lamps—are his jokes getting worse the closer he gets to fatherhood?—and takes a moment before answering.

“I think we tell Yuna and David first, of course,” Ilya muses. “Yuna would die if anyone knew before her and it will be good dry run. And then I think we have to tell them exactly what Dr. Singh told you, leaving out the fun details maybe.”

The pair share a grimace; though she is obviously aware that they have sex, neither of them is particularly excited to make Yuna Hollander think about Ilya coming inside of her only child. Cognitively, they know those are the basic mechanics for straight couples, too, but it isn’t lost on either of them that straight people generally don’t love thinking about gay sex and that there are specific societal hangups about bottoming.

“Yeah, I think that’s about right,” Shane tips his head side to side regretfully. “But what about everyone else?” Ilya hums for a long moment, then turns his head to face Shane directly.

“What if we had a party?” Ilya can immediately tell from the look on his face that whatever Shane thought he was going to suggest, it was not that.

“A *party*?” Shane asks tentatively.

“Yes, so we only have to do it twice, once for Yuna and David and once for everybody else,” Ilya explains, the words coming to him more quickly as a vision takes shape.

Shane looks skeptical but at least he doesn’t strike it down out of hand. “Draw this out for me, Ilya.”

“We do the scan on a Thursday, yes? So, we schedule dinner with Yuna and David for Friday and a dinner party on Saturday. We tell everyone that they cannot say no. Sveta gets back from Moscow this week and everyone else is already somewhere on the continent and we are very lovable.” Ilya can feel his smile growing more excited by the sentence, and Shane is looking at him encouragingly. “We fix our mistakes from the dry run, everybody is very excited, we all have champagne except for you, and we take votes on baby names.”

“Okay, *rude*, but fine, I guess, to have champagne without me, and *no* to taking votes on names, but yes to the rest of that,” Shane answers with an eye roll and a grin, planting a kiss to Ilya’s jaw. “Thank you.” Then, a flash of uncertainty crosses Shane’s face, settling into something like grief. “What do we do if... what if the scan *doesn’t* go well?”

Ilya forces a tight smile to his lips before responding. “We still have dinner and the party, but we *all* have champagne.”

Shane answers with his own small, sad smile, then settles under Ilya’s chin. Ilya allows himself to close his eyes for a few minutes, relishing the weight of his husband’s body over

his. He must have nodded off, because he wakes with a jolt when Shane abruptly pulls away from him and yelps out his name.

“*Ilya*.”

“Shane.”

“No, *Ilya*,” Shane sputters excitedly, sitting back with a splash and pressing Ilya’s hand to his abdomen. Ilya feels like his heart might spontaneously burst, his love for his husband too much to bear, as he feels their baby move for the first time, tiny, almost imperceptible flutters through Shane’s abs that must be much stronger for Shane. Torn between looking at his husband’s beautiful, perfect, joyous expression and where his hand rests, he splits the difference, glancing between them as his own grin threatens to split his face in two.

Then, Shane is on top of him again, chest to chest, face to face, kissing him in that way that is at least 30% clanking, smiling teeth, and Ilya isn’t sure he has ever been so happy in his life.

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Rozanov-Hollander Mandatory Dinner Party

Ilya: Hello. If you are in this group text, you are required to be at our house for a dinner party next Saturday at 6pm. Jackie and Jackie’s Worse Half, please send your children to their grandparents. Please do not bother Shane about this.

Cliff: First of all, hi

Cliff: Second of all, what the fuck

Cliff: You cant MAKE us come to fuckin Ottawa in the off season

Cliff: No offence

Ilya: Yes, offense*

Cliff: Offence is correct in Canadian English, jackass. You cant even defend Canada correctly

Ilya: Ok fine but Ottawa is still great

Sveta: Hi, Ilyusha

Sveta: Is everything ok? I have no problem going to Ottawa but the ten days notice might be an issue for some people

Jackie: Hello! We are always happy to come visit and to have a night away from the kids, but I agree with Sveta, this does sound kind of ominous

Ilya: What is ominous

Jackie's Worse Half: It means something bad is going to happen, asshole

Ilya: Ah yes, now you chime in, just in time to make fun of ESL person

Jackie: Ignore him, Ilya. We'll be there. But really, is everything okay?

Ilya: Yes, we just have surprise for you

Rose: Now that really does sound ominous, but I'm going to be shooting in Toronto and I don't think I can travel that far!

Jackie's Worse Half: Ouch, Jacks

Ilya: Rose, you are going to be 4h drive or train or 1h plane ride away and you cannot spare to come for big surprise?

Rose: Ok, wow! Aggressive tactic but I respect it. I will be there if I can physically get there and back between shooting.

Ilya: I knew you would not disappoint me Rose

Cliff: I REALLY dont want to go to Ottawa when I dont have to but I guess I have to now for reasons you wont tell me

Ilya: Ok that's everyone then! See you next Saturday at 6pm

Sveta

Sveta: Are you going to tell me what this is really about?

Ilya: Nope.

Sveta: Didn't think so.

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One benefit to being absolutely ripped before pregnancy is that it often takes a long time for the pregnancy to become visible. That is how, a few days after feeling the baby move for the first time, Shane is able to set off for the first of two Game Changers camps at eighteen weeks pregnant. If Ilya notices that Shane is quieter than usual that Monday morning in Montreal, that he stole Ilya's camp-logo-emblazoned sweatshirt from last year in lieu of wearing his own so that the fabric wouldn't skim his body, he is kind enough not to show it.

And if the other coaches—Hayden, J.J., Marlow, Hayes, Price, Scott, Max, and Leah—notice that Shane repeatedly leaves the ice for protection behind the boards after demonstrating

drills for the kids, they choose not to mention it either, even if there is no way they could guess the reason for his caution.

Being on the ice is bittersweet. With the preseason closing in, Shane will soon be forced to watch his husband leave for practice without him. Shane knows that they will have to tell Coach Wiebe *something*, sooner rather than later; it feels dishonest enough for the C and an A to withhold that their previous season's leading scorer will be out until at least close to playoffs, information that might lead Wiebe to make different decisions about trades and free agents or pulling up AHL players. But lying outright with falsified medical records is the best idea either of them has come up with to this point, which is worse than lying by omission.

That Friday afternoon, Shane settles in beside Ilya at the coaches' table with a boxed lunch; Shane is grateful that his reputation as a health nut precedes him so the clear clamshell of greens in front of him does not elicit any sidelong glances as he looks around the table at his friends' sandwiches piled high with cold cuts that Shane can't eat due to listeria risk. He is tucking into his Mediterranean salad full of chickpeas and pine nuts and leafy vegetables and balsamic and (pasteurized) goat cheese when Scott clears his throat.

"Kip and I are having a baby," Scott announces, to many *awws* and *congratulations*. He goes on to explain that they have a surrogate, a first cousin of Kip's who doesn't want to have children of her own but is beautiful ("a dead ringer for Kip," Scott says proudly), smart, and excited to help them start their family. The baby is due in February.

After a few minutes of discussion, Leah sighs wistfully and rests her jaw on her fist. "I want one, too," she admits simply. Max pries her hand away from her face and takes it in both of his, eyes scanning the table.

"We have been talking about it for a few years now but it never seems like there's time. We could get a surrogate too, I guess, but that feels wrong when we have the component parts available. Not mine, my uterus closed up shop a long time ago." He lets out a single wry chuckle. "It's just a long time to be out from hockey, so we have been planning to wait for retirement. Froze our eggs and everything," Max explains. "Even if you time it right, you miss at least half a season."

The other coaches express their sympathies while Shane attempts to dissociate. Ilya's hand finds the small of his back, however, causing Shane to abruptly stab his compostable fork into the remaining greens and stand.

"I'm just gonna—" Shane stammers, thumb cocked towards the doorway. "I have paperwork to catch up on. Congrats, Scott. See you guys in a bit." Shane moves away in long strides until he reaches the hall where is free to jog the rest of the way to their small, makeshift administrative office. No sooner had he reached the room, which is a large storage closet during the rest of the year, when a wave of nausea hits and crests, acidic vinaigrette and tomatoes and bile exiting his body and landing in a small waste basket, leaving his throat as hot as the tears pricking behind his eyes.

The panic attacks had become fewer and farther between over the course of the pregnancy, as anxiety about *being* pregnant had become anxiety about *staying* pregnant, but the prospect of only being about halfway to his scheduled C-section and the season drawing closer every day

were proving to be increasing sources of stress and dread. Eyes bleary with tears, Shane fires off a text to Ilya asking for a few minutes alone, which he knows will be respected, and opens his meditation app. Timing his breath to a dot turning into a line turning into a triangle turning into a square and so on then collapsing in on itself repeatedly lowers Shane's heart rate considerably, and he is able to return to the ice a few minutes later with no one the wiser—except, of course, his husband, whose eyes never stray from him for more than a moment for the rest of the afternoon.

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"I need ice time," Shane informs Ilya, tucked against his bare chest in their hotel bed that night. Ilya strains to look down at him. "I didn't realize how much I would miss it. It's been easy enough in the post-season, but I need it, as long as I can still skate. And I need it for the team too, not just for me. I won't be able to do basically anything for six weeks after the baby and won't be able to skate for at least ten weeks and I'm scared I won't be myself when I do come back if I'm off the ice that long."

Ilya's fingers comb through Shane's hair for a few long moments, consideringly. Shane feels Ilya stiffen slightly beneath him before speaking. "What if we told Wiebe the truth?"

Shane jerks his head up and presses away from Ilya to look at him directly.

"What the fuck, Ilya?" Shane scolds. The question was rhetorical, but Ilya answers anyway.

"No, I mean it," Ilya presses. "It would solve multiple problems. Two birds, one rock."

"One *stone*," Shane clarifies, as gently as ever. "But what do you mean?"

"We have to tell him something, right? You do not like to lie, I do not like to lie, but we cannot find a better solution, and you need ice time. So we tell the truth. He keeps the team off our backs and gives you private time to skate," Ilya reasons, then punctuates it with an index finger to Shane's sternum, "*And* we don't have to make fake medical records."

"I just don't want this to spiral." The anger is gone from Shane's voice when he eventually replies, replaced by guarded apprehension. "We already have what, seven people to tell? Who will know? What if one of them talks, even by accident? What if he sees me differently?"

And that is the crux of it, isn't it? Not that Shane is really concerned about Coach Wiebe going to some gossip rag, but that every additional person they tell is one more person who might add a mental asterisk to Shane Hollander, hockey legend—yet another, after *Asian, **Gay, and ***Married to his career-long rival.

"Shane, we trust them. All of them," Ilya reminds Shane, squeezing his face gently between his thumb and forefinger so he can't look away. "They will not tell, and they will not see you differently. I have only said this once before and if you tell anyone, I will deny it until the day I die in your arms at the age 120, but you are the best hockey player of our generation." Shane laughs despite himself, though it sounds more like a sob. "*That* is how history will remember you."

Wordlessly, Ilya reaches over Shane to retrieve his phone from where it lay charging on the bedside table. Shane's face immediately falls.

"What are you doing? We were having a conversation—" Shane complains as Ilya types something into his browser. Ilya scans the page for a moment, then grins as he turns the too-bright screen to face Shane. With squinted eyes, both from the cold blue glare and his lack of reading glasses, Shane registers that he is looking at his own Wikipedia page.

"Read," Ilya commands. So Shane reads.

Shane Hollander (born May 10, 1991) is a Canadian professional ice hockey player who is a centre and Alternate Captain for the Ottawa Centaurs of the National Hockey League. He was selected second overall in the 2009 NHL entry draft by the Montreal Voyageurs, a team with whom he won three Stanley Cups over the course of eleven seasons prior to signing with the Centaurs in free agency in 2021, subsequently helping the Ottawa franchise win its first Stanley Cup. Born and raised in Ottawa, he is widely regarded as one of the greatest ice hockey players of all time...

Tears that Shane was unaware had been welling start to fall freely with the recognition that he has to click on a subsection titled Personal Life to find details about his race, sexuality, and marriage. Shane silently presses the phone to his chest and falls willingly into the crush of his husband's arms.

"Okay," Shane says, voice muffled against Ilya's chest. "Send him the invitation."

Chapter End Notes

Medical Accuracy Corner: (1) Shane feeling baby move for the first time occurs within the window in which most people generally start to feel it. I learned in the editing process that, while that is true, it is very unlikely that Ilya would be able to feel it externally then, even lightly. It would require significant rewriting to move that scene and I like it too much to change it, so it is remaining where it is, but please be aware that it is slightly medically implausible. (2) Generally speaking, you should not eat deli cold cuts or soft cheeses during pregnancy due to listeria risk, but you can eat them if they are pasteurized. :)

Shane's Wikipedia entry is based off of Sidney Crosby's because of course it is.

If you like this, please leave kudos and drop a comment! Even an emoji or two means the world to me. This was a tough piece to write, so if there's anything you appreciate about the story, please let me know. I live on praise. Thank you for reading!

Chapter 7: Dinner Parties

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ilya has never been more grateful for a scheduling conflict. Normally, Game Changers camps in Montreal and Ottawa are back-to-back weeks, but a children's figure skating camp had booked the Montreal practice facility for the week before the Ottawa camp dates. It is pure happenstance, then, that he and Shane have the week off to emotionally prepare for the twenty week anatomy scan and both emotionally and practically prepare for two dinner parties.

Shane flits about the house dusting and re-dusting and mumbling about place settings while Ilya plans menus. He lands on making chicken marsala for the Hollanders, a dish that he concedes is Italian but he always thought *tasted* Russian. Unwilling to cook for eight, Ilya opts for catering for Saturday's dinner, lighter fare with an arugula salad with pears, grilled salmon and vegetables and farro, and a summery fruit tart for dessert. He picks up a bottle of a spendy pinot noir at his favorite wine shop, something that can stand up to and cut through the richness of the mushroom sauce for Friday night, along with two bottles of dry rosé for Saturday, two bottles of Veuve Clicquot for celebratory purposes, and restocks Shane's Canada Dry for the second time in two weeks without comment.

The house is spotless and fresh pasta is dehydrating on the kitchen island by the time he and Shane slip through the staff entrance of Dr. Singh's clinic on Thursday. They have gotten used to this; the handful of doctors and nurses and medical assistants they have met are kind and discreet, having been more than understanding about the need for non-disclosure agreements from every person who is or may in the future be involved in Shane's care. Though they are unable or unwilling to accept the larger gifts Ilya has tried to present them with, they are always pleased to receive a box of bagels with the whole works or a dozen donuts from Tim Horton's.

But being used to it can't make this particular appointment any less nerve-racking. This is when they'd learn if their baby has any major congenital conditions, problems with its heart, brain, or other major organs, if the placenta is growing normally. Though the pregnancy has been shockingly uneventful thus far, both Ilya and Shane continue to worry on some level that the other shoe will drop eventually. A nurse they didn't know well had taken a blood sample to test for genetic abnormalities, so Ilya is relieved when Dr. Singh walks into the room for the scan itself. While Shane has occasionally been scanned by the in-house sonographer, Dr. Singh has done so personally more often than not, something Ilya has an inkling she does not do for all of her patients.

The scan takes close to an hour, easily the longest ultrasound to date. The room is mostly silent, apart from Dr. Singh's occasional remarks and pleased hums. "The kidneys look good, and—" Dr. Singh looks away from the screen to find Shane's eyes. "Do you want to know the sex?"

Shane looks to Ilya. They'd had the option to learn the sex earlier, after their first trimester screenings, but at the time it seemed like too much information to have about a pregnancy that could go wrong at any time. Now, they still aren't sure. They have spoken about this at length, but not found themselves any closer to a decision. On the one hand, this entire experience has done a number on Shane's conception of sex and gender, so it seems weird to get hung up on it. On the other, gendered baby clothes are *cute*, and they could have a closet full of pink or blue onesies waiting the day they bring their baby home.

Sounding like he has only just decided himself, Shane speaks with conviction. "No, let's wait. Everything about this has been a surprise. What's one more?"

Leaving hand in hand with a clean bill of health and several strips of black and white ultrasound images, Shane and Ilya go home to enjoy the last day with this particular secret shared only between them.

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Shane barely has time to toe off his shoes in the foyer before his husband has him pinned against the wall, pressing forceful kisses against his jaw, his throat, his shoulder.

"*Ilya*," Shane yelps in surprise.

"Shane," Ilya purrs, hand climbing beneath his shirt.

"Anatomy scan made you horny, huh?" Shane teases, knotting his fingers in the hair at the nape of Ilya's neck.

"No, but it made me *happy*," Ilya replies, his unoccupied hand palming at the seam of Shane's jeans. "And being happy around *you* makes me horny."

Shane's laugh cuts off abruptly at the sensation, Ilya unfastening his pants and freeing his cock. It has barely had time to enter the chat when Ilya takes the entire half-hard length into his mouth unceremoniously. Shane gasps and his free hand scrambles for purchase, finding it nested against Ilya's scalp.

"*Oh* my god," Shane moans, head lolling back and hitting the wall with a soft *thunk*.

Ilya pulls away and looks up at Shane through hooded lids. "Just Ilya is fine." Shane rolls his eyes as Ilya resumes his task, and wonders to himself: *Are his jokes getting worse the closer he gets to fatherhood?*

The building pressure in his cock brings him back into the moment—Ilya's tongue laving over his balls, licking up his shaft, flicking the head of his cock to collect the precome there, taking him to the hilt and working unfazed through a gag, his nose nested in the closely cropped dark hair at the base. Shane's fingers tighten in Ilya's curls as he comes closer, closer, *closer* to his edge and finally careens off of it, keening as his husband works him through his orgasm.

“That was—thank you,” Shane stammers as Ilya wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and rises to meet Shane’s lips. “I’m not prepped,” Shane apologizes against Ilya’s mouth.

“That’s okay,” Ilya promises, leading Shane by hand away from the foyer towards their bedroom. “I wanted to fuck your face anyway.”

And if that doesn’t sound like a perfect way to spend the afternoon, Shane doesn’t know what does.

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Friday night arrives too soon. Shane had spent the rest of Thursday afternoon and the better part of the evening in bed or in the shower in various states of undress with his husband, and he wanted to stay in their little cocoon, their world reduced down to two, as long as possible. But the table is set and the house smells like cooked mushrooms and onions and his parents are knocking on the front door.

“Yuna, David,” Ilya’s voice calls out from the entry as Shane tosses a salad. “Come in, sit down at the table. We’re almost ready.”

They *were* almost ready, at least for the food part, Shane thinks. At least for this dinner, the dry run as they had come to think of it, Yuna and David have no reason to suspect big news. To them, this is the same as any other Friday night dinner, one of dozens of times they have invited Shane’s parents over to share a meal over the years. The downside to having no warning, however, is that, halfway through dessert when Shane and Ilya clasp hands on top of the table and share a loaded look, Yuna and David are immediately and visibly on alert with no opportunity to train their faces.

“We need to talk to you about something and it will probably come as a bit of a shock,” Shane begins reciting the speech he’d planned while meticulously cleaning every inch of their house over the past four days.

Yuna can’t help herself. “You’re retiring,” she wails with full misplaced confidence, immediately more histrionic than Shane might have hoped.

“No,” Shane replies firmly, just as Ilya replies “no, not quite yet.” Shane casts a sidelong glance at his husband and makes a mental note to ask about that later.

“Let them speak, Yuna,” David admonishes, squeezing her hand. Yuna nods to continue.

“I went to the doctor a few months ago,” Shane tries again, and watches as confusion and terror play across his parents’ faces and settle into something more like concern, then recalls Ilya’s grief-stricken expression back in May.

“I am okay, to be very clear,” Shane blurts, and some of the tension falls from his parents’ faces. “But I learned that I am intersex.” Thankfully, it seems they both know what that word means and he can skip the biology lesson.

“Okay,” Yuna begins tentatively. “So what does that mean for you? You can get...whatever it is you have removed, right?”

Shane sighs, opening and closing his mouth a few times as his script escapes his memory. “Not exactly, at least right now. I don’t want to get into the details of *how* it happened, and it was all extremely unlikely, but I am pregnant. Twenty weeks.”

Yuna and David look shellshocked, dessert long forgotten. Ilya tops off their glasses of wine and rises from the table.

“I don’t know how to ask this, but is everything about it... normal?” David finally asks.

Ilya, returning from the kitchen, takes his cue to answer. “Yes, as normal as it can be. Doctor says baby is healthy, Shane is healthy.” The silence stretches eternal between each question.

“So, twenty weeks, you said?” It’s Yuna this time. She looks pale and vaguely ill.

“Yes,” Ilya replies, opening a manila envelope and sliding the stack of twenty-week ultrasound images to her. “These are from yesterday.”

For the first time in what felt like hours but was more like ten minutes, Yuna and David smile, trading strips of black and white photos. Yuna’s eyes are glossy when she meets Shane’s.

“Wow,” she chokes out, voice thick, and chuckles despite herself. “What does this mean for hockey?” Ilya laughs out loud and Shane rolls his eyes.

“Leave it to Yuna Hollander to ask about hockey, like, immediately after learning that her *son* is pregnant,” Shane deadpans.

“Well!” Yuna begins to defend herself, but then Shane is laughing too.

“It means I will miss the start of the season. Probably most of it. I will have a scheduled C-section mid-December and it will probably be ten weeks before I can get back on the ice, maybe more before I can play in a real game.”

“But you’ll be back for the playoffs?” Yuna presses, which is met with groans and more laughter.

“Yes, mom, I’ll be back for playoffs,” Shane replies more seriously.

David turns to Ilya. “And what about you? Will you take any time off?”

Ilya shifts in his seat. “I’m not sure,” he answers honestly. “We are going to tell Wiebe tomorrow, along with the other few people we trust to know about this, and I know he would want me to be able to do that. But we have to—what is that thing where you act like things are normal so other people don’t notice?”

“Keep up appearances?” Shane offers.

“*Da*, yes, keep up appearances,” Ilya concludes. Yuna and David share a forlorn glance.

“I guess that makes sense,” David concedes sorrowfully.

Eventually, Ilya expertly opens a bottle and fills three flutes with champagne, a fourth with ginger ale that looks so close to the real thing that Ilya samples it to double check before passing it to Shane. After toasting to their family growing in this improbable manner, they are able to turn conversation back to more ordinary topics of conversation, a brief moment of normalcy.

As they stand in the foyer saying their goodbyes, Yuna takes an inquisitive look at Shane’s abdomen.

“You know, you don’t really look pregnant,” she remarks.

Shane opens his mouth to respond, but stops when Ilya places a hand on his belly possessively.

“That is because my husband has rock solid abs,” Ilya preens, fingers curling into Shane’s muscles. “Baby has to squish his organs instead.” Shane’s ears and cheeks go hot, but he doesn’t hate the implicit praise, even if it is true that his stomach and bladder decidedly do *not* like the squish.

“Yeah, yeah, we get it,” David laughs sardonically, all but pulling Yuna out the door.

Finally showered and in bed with his back nestled against his husband, Shane feels the exhaustion of the day finally hit his body.

“I think that went well,” Ilya opines, hands finding Shane’s hips.

“I do too,” Shane agrees. “Let’s hope tomorrow goes just as well.”

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It does not go just as well. The evening starts normally enough; being the only local guest, Coach Wiebe arrives first, bearing a tentative smile and an expensive Malbec. Ilya dutifully decants the wine into a glass carafe while Shane entertains Wiebe and Svetlana, their second arrival. It is easy enough for Shane to slip into the background of the conversation with Sveta’s status as hockey royalty and impressive depth of knowledge, which Wiebe immediately catches onto and for which Shane couldn’t be more grateful.

The Pikes arrive next, looking desperate for an evening of adult company, and Cliff follows close behind. Rose fumbles through the door last, twenty minutes late, frazzled, apologizing for a delayed train from Toronto and for her appearance, which is perhaps a little less polished than usual but better than most women look on their wedding days.

The motley group settles in around the dining table more easily than Shane might have suspected possible. Conversation and wine flow freely, and the atmosphere is light. That is, right up until Cliff poses the question they have all been avoiding.

“So, can I ask why we’re here?” Cliff asks, half smiling and leaning back in his chair. “Not that I don’t like to see you, but, I’m sure you didn’t ask me to fly to fuckin’ Ottawa in the off season just to hang out with Brandon Wiebe. No offense, man,” he adds, clapping Wiebe on the shoulder.

“None taken. I was wondering the same thing. Not that I mind talking to players and families from other teams or meeting the daughter of *the* Sergei Vetrov,” Wiebe remarks, still starstruck by Svetlana, then abruptly adds sheepishly, “and a movie star, of course.” Rose smiles at him politely, amused.

“Are you getting divorced?” Hayden demands without warning. Jackie elbows him hard enough to make Shane wince across the table. Hayden looks affronted. “What? It’s all I can think.”

“I’m sure that’s not what’s going on, Hayden. But it *is* an interesting crew, Shane,” Rose probes gently.

Ilya’s eyes meet his and Shane responds with an almost imperceptible nod and a far more perceptible sigh.

“Yeah, that’s fair,” Shane begins, pressing the heels of his palms to his eye sockets for a long moment until he sees stars. He pulls his hands away and rests his elbows on the table. “You are here because you are some of the most important people in our lives. Let me start by saying I’m fine, we’re fine, we are not getting divorced,” Shane slots this third item—*not getting divorced*—into his script for the night, having added *I’m fine, we’re fine* after the previous night’s realization that there is no other way to broach this particular subject without making his loved ones at least briefly think he is terminally ill.

“I was having some medical problems during playoffs and waited to go to the doctor until after,” he tries again, wincing at the look of disapproval from Wiebe. “Really, coach, I was fine,” he lies. “But we found out afterwards that I am intersex.”

The room is silent for a long beat.

“You’re... becoming a woman?” Hayden asks, face drawn up and mouth agape. This time, it is Rose whose elbow lands firmly in Hayden’s ribs, while his wife’s open palm meets the back of his head with an audible *thwap*. He holds both his hands up defensively, and glares at each of them in turn.

“No, you dingus, that is transgender,” Ilya barks, then holds up his own hands in surrender when Shane shoots him a warning look.

“It means that I was born with some female reproductive organs in addition to male ones,” Shane explains gently, facing Hayden but directed towards everyone. “I really, *really* don’t want to get into the details, but the only reason you’re all here is that I’m pregnant.”

Slowly, then, all at once, a Renaissance painting unfurls before Shane: Cliff, aspirating on rosé; Svetlana, clapping Cliff on the back to help him get it out; Rose, knocking over her long-abandoned plate as she launches herself towards Shane with open arms; Anya, bounding

towards the falling salmon; Wiebe, eyes round and mouth agape; Hayden frozen, looking somehow more confused than before; and Jackie and Ilya, waiting with bated breath for Hayden to say something else shockingly stupid.

Rose squeaks, quickly kneeling to collect what remnants of her meal she can with her linen napkin while Anya races against her efforts.

“You know, I always assumed if you were going to knock someone up by accident it would have been me,” Sveta jokes lightly. Hayden furrows his brow at Ilya.

“You have had *sex* with her,” Hayden begins incredulously, whispering the word *sex* like an expletive around a child. “And she’s still here?”

Sveta whirls and points a perfectly manicured finger in Hayden’s face. “*You* got them outed to the world and *you’re* still here?”

“Hey, I apologize—” Hayden whines, but Ilya cuts him off.

“She is like a sister to me,” Ilya explains defensively.

“She’s like a *sister* to you, and you still fucked her?” Cliff asks Ilya, seemingly derailed.

The room devolves into chaos, everyone talking at once, and Shane can’t make out his own thoughts above the din, so he is grateful when someone else takes charge.

“OKAY,” Rose yells with a clap, having safely deposited her plate and napkin back on the table much to Anya’s dismay. “Can we get back to the matter at hand, which is that our *friend* is *pregnant*?”

The group comes to order, and Shane thinks, not for the first time, that, had she not been so beautiful and talented, Rose would have been a great teacher. For the first time in several minutes, Shane meets Ilya’s eyes and feels the world start to make sense again. He squeezes Ilya’s hand tightly to give him the go-ahead.

“We understand this is probably the last thing you expected, and we will try to answer any questions that are not *too* invasive,” Ilya acknowledges, eyes narrowing to drive home that they will have to contend with him if they make Shane uncomfortable. “But you are the only people who know or can *ever* know, apart from medical people and Shane’s parents.”

The two field questions like a press conference from a surreal dream. Some are easy to answer—how far along, whether they knew the sex, if they could see ultrasound photos. Some, Ilya shoots down while Shane uncomfortably shifts in his seat, having already judiciously explained that, *yes*, this had been an accident, *no*, it won’t happen again, but *yes*, they could use the remaining eggs with a surrogate in the future. Passing the stack of black and white images to Svetlana, Wiebe clears his throat.

“I imagine I’m the last person you wanted to share this news with,” he states plainly. “But I also get why you had to. Twenty weeks puts you out until, what, March? My wife had a C-

section with our second and it took her months to get back to normal, and she doesn't play a contact sport for a living.”

“I’d rather you know than about eight billion other people,” Shane smiles weakly. “But yeah, we weren’t excited about telling you. If I make it to the scheduled mid-December date, yes, that means I’ll be back just in time for playoffs. Assuming I’m in shape for it. I have been able to work out so far, but a couple months without being able to lift more than a baby in a carseat...” Shane shrugs one shoulder helplessly and Wiebe nods sympathetically, brows creased in the middle. “We wanted to tell you so you could be thinking about trades, free agency. Shifting lines.”

“We also wanted to tell you so you can help us,” Ilya speaks up, squeezing Shane’s hand, able to verbalize what Shane can’t. “He needs ice time, as long as he’s able. Extra pads, just us, no contact obviously.”

Wiebe sits quietly for a long moment. “Does it *have* to be just you? I mean, you want ice time, you got it, but. By my count, you have five current or former hockey players who know about this and would be willing to help if we could. Six if we count your dad, Shane, who was a goalie if memory serves.”

It is overwhelming to consider; the previous day, Shane and Ilya had been in this alone, but for Dr. Singh and her colleagues. Throughout the duration of their relationship, they had spent so much time keeping secrets—from themselves, from each other, from their loved ones, from the world. But as much was gained as was lost every time they were honest with someone new about who they were to each other. This particular secret was not one Shane would ever feel comfortable sharing with the world; it was too much of an aberration from the norm. But maybe he was wrong to worry about telling the people around the table, people who are now looking at him with as much love and concern and care as he could fathom.

“Yeah, I’d like that,” Shane croaks around the lump in his throat. “I’d like that a lot.”

Chapter End Notes

Medical Accuracy Corner: IRL, there would likely be a little more time required for the lab to run the blood test for genetic abnormalities.

If you like this, please leave kudos and drop a comment! Even an emoji or two means the world to me. This was a tough piece to write, so if there's anything you appreciate about the story, please let me know. I live on praise. Thank you for reading!

Chapter 8: Zen Lord

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next several weeks pass without incident. Suited up in extra padding and sporting a no-contact penny for good measure, Shane is able to spend some time on the ice in an approximation of scrimmaging with Ilya, Wiebe, Hayden, and David in the evenings during the Ottawa Game Changers camp. David looks awkward in spare Centaurs goalie gear and more like a hermit crab than a hockey player in the crease, but proves surprisingly formidable once muscle memory kicks in, and the group keeps meeting weekly after Hayden heads home. It is the most fun Shane has had in months.

Dr. Singh continues to be pleased with how the pregnancy is progressing. The standard recommendation is for no more ultrasounds after twenty weeks in normal pregnancies, which, against all odds, Shane's has more or less become, so appointments are limited to blood tests and monitoring vitals, though he is on the books for a thirty-two week ultrasound.

Ilya adjusts back to the life of a professional hockey player with only a little more difficulty than usual, a little less bulky than he would have been with Shane matching him at least almost pound for pound in the weight room and ounce for ounce on the kitchen scale, but his conditioning is better than ever. Wiebe explains away Shane's absence with team management and the press, and the team knows better than to pressure Ilya or Shane for more specific answers. *Abdominal condition, might require surgery but not sure yet* was the official line. It could explain the eventual scarring, and the long term nature of his absence; surgery takes time to recover from and if someone can heal without it, surgery should generally be avoided.

Luca proves a better stand-in for Shane at center than Bood or Troy, but requires a lot of hand holding to believe it. It helps that Shane is still not showing—at least, if you don't know what you're looking at—when training camp starts in September. Ilya calls in reinforcements when Luca has a minor mental breakdown at the suggestion that he center the second line. Though Shane isn't generally the best with encouragement, the message needs to come from him, and Luca is able to adjust after Shane's pep talk. He isn't Shane—no one is—but he partially makes up for it through youthful speed and the sheer willpower to make Shane proud.

Luca's breakdown is close on the heels of Shane's own minor breakdown over his changing body. Though he can still go out in public in an oversized sweatshirt or hoodie, Ilya knows that Shane is struggling with his appearance when shirtless or nude. His abs have not yet given up, each muscle still defined and discrete, but a visible bump has formed, gently sloping from his ribs to his pelvis. It might have been more noticeable but for the commensurate swelling of his pecs, something Ilya *loves* but suspects his husband does not. Clothed, Shane looks plump, muscular, ready to take on a season of hockey after bulking over the summer. Unclothed, Ilya has to admit that Shane looks at least a *little* pregnant. Unable to find the words to make it better, Ilya fucks him about it, which seems to at least fend off the worst of the breakdown.

One day, an enormous box of well-worn unisex onesies and used baby supplies arrives without preamble. It seems every onesie design is anthropomorphic in some way; Clouds with faces, chocolate chip cookies and bottles of milk with faces, cars, buses, boats with faces. The onesies had been used to insulate no fewer than two dozen glass bottles. Deeper in the box, Ilya finds a notecard that had clearly fallen to the bottom and now lay nestled in a mass of tiny velvet hangers:

Shane and Ilya—

This is, as you might imagine, only a small fraction of our baby supplies collection. Gender is a social construct, but we have too many pink and blue onesies to ship, so we thought we'd start with the gender neutral ones. They're freshly laundered. Please come raid our garage before you buy anything new. We love you. Congratulations.

—Jackie and Hayden

Ilya wipes his eyes, having previously been unaware that he'd gotten misty, and undertakes the task of meticulously sorting the impossibly tiny garments—newborn, 0-3, 3-6, and so on. He hangs them on the previously empty rod in the nursery closet, and washes, sanitizes, and puts away the bottles.

The next weekend, they take the Pikes up on their offer. Ilya loads the Jeep down with goodies—a sturdy walnut crib, tiny mattress, and crib sheets; a jogging stroller, a baby monitor, a black leather diaper bag, and more clothes—and join them for lunch. Jackie tells the kids that Shane and Ilya are having a baby; while Arthur and Amber are young enough to buy that the stork will drop the baby off when it's ready, Ruby and Jade are old enough to assume she means they have a surrogate or are adopting. Jackie doesn't correct them. In a move that makes Shane cry (as so many things do these days), Shane and Ilya also leave with a box full of the kids' favorite stuffies, blankets, and books that they collected of their own accord, as well as a stick figure drawing from Amber of the two of them holding a baby aloft between them. The baby is little more than a circle with a smiley face inside an oval and looks more like a vulva than a child, but that only makes Ilya love it more.

+++++

The preseason fades into the season and the second trimester into the third, each transition laden with the sense of shit getting real.

Shane and Anya spend the time Ilya is away on roadies at his parents' house, which is fine. It is mostly fine. Except Shane is no longer able to leave the home for normal errands because he is visibly pregnant—not that anyone would make that assumption seeing him, but the rumors that would circulate instead would be almost as damaging. Hockey rags questioning whether his distended belly was from alcoholism, kidney disease, or heart failure would hardly be better than the truth. So, Shane gives up his precious weekly ice time and confines himself to his home, his parents' home, or Dr. Singh's office. At least at home, there is a real gym and he can breathe without being doted on by his mother, though he has to admit he enjoys eating the meals his parents prepare for him.

It is at his parents' house, watching the Centaurs with a commanding lead over the Admirals while he pedals a stationary bike, that Shane starts to feel dizzy during exercise for the first time. He unclips his right shoe and swings his leg over, nearly tripping as he unclips the left, suddenly unsteady. Shane hears his pulse *whoosh* through his ears as he sits abruptly on the small weight bench, all but falling onto it to avoid actually collapsing.

"Mom," Shane calls out. As an elite athlete, Shane has never felt his blood pressure spike and doesn't know what it feels like, but Yuna quickly retrieves David's automatic blood pressure cuff after he explains what happened.

"151/98," Yuna reads grimly. "That's not good. Do you want to go to the hospital?"

No, not good. It's too early, Shane thinks, and then a beat later, *and he's not here.*

"No, no hospital yet. I'll call Dr. Singh's office first. They always have someone on call."

Dr. Singh's partner is kind and patient, answering Shane's questions and refusing his apologies for disturbing her dinner.

"It's good you called, Shane. Dr. Singh will be in tomorrow and will want to see you. In the meantime, try to relax. Call back if it gets worse and go to the hospital if you experience vision changes, serious headaches, or abdominal pain."

After the call ends, Shane tries desperately to follow the doctor's directions but truly relaxing is next to impossible for him at baseline, better yet when there is reason to be anxious. He takes a lukewarm shower and then attempts to meditate until bed, having asked his mom to fill in Ilya so he could turn off his phone. He can only sleep (not long enough and fitfully) once his blood pressure is back in the normal range—too high for Shane under normal circumstances, but acceptable to the Canadian medical establishment.

Yuna accompanies Shane to his appointment with Dr. Singh the next morning. He is unsurprised to learn that he is being watched for gestational hypertension and is given his very own automatic blood pressure cuff.

"Your readings last night might have been a bit off because you needed a larger cuff. Your biceps are impressive," Dr. Singh explains with a half smile that Shane weakly tries to return. "But you were still a bit over that 140/90 mark again this morning. I'm glad to see you below that now, and especially glad that the preeclampsia labs came back normal today. I want you to take your blood pressure twice a day, and call if it's over that threshold again. Then, I want to see you again next week, and if it's still high, we will start doing non-stress tests twice a week."

"Non-stress tests?" Shane asks.

"They're just a way we can make sure the baby's heart is reacting appropriately," Dr. Singh continues.

Shane pauses a long beat. "What happens if the baby's heart doesn't react appropriately?"

“Then, we deliver early,” Dr. Singh replies delicately.

Shane’s mind grapples for pieces of information he’s read about babies born prematurely. He’s just crossed the thirty-one week mark. He knows babies born at that gestational age often live, *generally* live, but he isn’t sure about the risk of complications.

His face must give away his concern, because Yuna is suddenly putting voice to them. “What’s the risk of complications?” Dr. Singh looks at Shane while she answers.

“Right now, there are still a lot of unknowns. It is no guarantee, but the prognosis is much better if you can make it to thirty-four weeks, and even better if you can make it to your scheduled date at thirty-nine, Shane. We will do everything we can to get there safely.”

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Ilya’s arrival that evening is unmissable even from Shane’s place on the balcony, the sound of car doors flung open and slammed shut, bags haphazardly landing on the floor, and bounding footsteps as he calls for Shane.

“Out here,” Shane calls back. A gray cashmere throw blanket protects Shane’s skin from the cool Canadian autumn air as he sits cocooned by the gas fire pit. Ilya hurries onto the balcony and is immediately on him, hands grasping and lips caressing, checking to make sure he is all in one piece.

“*Moya dusha*,” Ilya sighs, hand to his chest. He must sense their disparate moods as well, and Shane watches as Ilya trains his face. Shane wordlessly opens the blanket with one arm and welcomes the familiar pressure of his husband against his side.

“Mmm,” Shane hums, face tilted to the sky with closed eyes and a small smile, finally relaxed.

“How are you feeling?” Ilya asks, rubbing tiny circles on Shane’s inner thigh, just above the knee.

“Better,” Shane assures. “No more abnormal readings since this morning.” *At least abnormal for most people*, he adds mentally. Shane is of the opinion that he is anxious enough for everyone and that others being worried on his behalf would only make him more anxious in turn, a terrible reinforcing cycle that would cause his negative emotions to snowball into something more dangerous, more untenable. He will bear this for himself, for Ilya, for the baby.

“And mentally?” Leave it to Ilya to immediately find the heart of the matter, the words left unsaid. Shane sighs.

“Mentally,” Shane starts tentatively, then lands on half-truth. “I’m... It could be worse.” Shane feels Ilya take in a long breath beside him.

“Shane,” Ilya sighs then, cocking his head with knowing eyes as if to say, *come on, I know you too well for you to lie to me*.

“What? It’s true,” Shane insists. “It *could* be worse. I *am* scared. Preeclampsia is *really* scary and I *really* don’t want to get it.” Shane pauses to catch his breath, and Ilya kisses his temple to encourage him to continue. “I want to meet our baby so desperately, but I’m so scared of something happening that could hurt them. And I’m scared that other people being worried too will make me more stressed and make it more likely that something bad will happen.”

Ilya presses Shane’s head to his chest, his breath warm against his scalp.

“You are not going to get us to stop worrying, *moya lyubov*,” Ilya gently admits, informing rather than inviting discussion. “We love you, and we love the baby,” he continues, hand skimming feather light over Shane’s belly. “But I hear you. I will hold your parents at bay, paint nursery walls, and you will be zen lord.”

Shane huffs out a wet laugh. “Zen lord?”

“*Da*. Yes, you will meditate eight hours a day like a monk, or read books about the invention of the modern hockey puck or whatever it is you do.” Shane sits upright and jabs his fingers into Ilya’s ribs hard, but he can feel a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Hey, I’ll have you know that I’m reading *exciting* books with *exciting* titles like ‘Your Pregnancy and Childbirth,’ and ‘Your Baby and Young Child.’”

Ilya’s eyes give an exaggerated roll. “And who could forget ‘The Healthy Baby Gut Guide’? Very exciting material.”

Shane nestles back into Ilya’s side and sighs contentedly. Zen lord, he can do. He has prepared himself with a decade of yoga and meditation. He just needs to mentally check out for a few weeks and this will be over.

A week later, he gets the formal diagnosis of mild gestational hypertension, his labs for preeclampsia having come back normal once again but his blood pressures still elevated. For the moment, he doesn’t need medication, but he isn’t sure if that makes him feel better or worse. On the one hand, it’s good that his readings are not high enough to require meds; on the other, it would be a great source of comfort to have a pill ready to go to lower his blood pressure if he needs it.

His thirty-two week ultrasound shows that growth and fluid are normal for mild gestational hypertension. Shane endures the non-stress test—which he learns means that the doctors don’t purposefully put the baby under physical strain, not that it doesn’t induce anxiety for him—and goes home reassured that, at least for the time being, he is okay and the baby is okay.

Chapter End Notes

Medical Accuracy Corner: (1) I tried to make this diagnosis as accurate as possible; regardless of most typical elevated BPs, NSTs don't start until 32 weeks, and you do

need two high readings at appointments at least two separate occurrences but preferably a week apart to get the diagnosis of gestational hypertension, in conjunction with negative tests for preeclampsia. (2) After a diagnosis of gestational hypertension, his scheduled C-section would be moved to 37 weeks, which doesn't come up directly in this chapter but would feel incomplete not to mention. (3) While it is accurate that ultrasounds are not recommended in normal pregnancies after 20 weeks, the threshold for a 32-week ultrasound is very low and Dr. Singh would probably have a good enough reason to justify one given the weird nature of this pregnancy. (4) Your blood pressure readings may be inaccurate if your cuff doesn't fit! If your readings are wonky and you know you have thicker arms (regardless of why), be sure to ask what the size range is on the cuff they're using. It would help to know your arm circumference at the time of your office visit to advocate for the right size being used.

All the books mentioned are actual, real life books in my home lol

If you like this, please leave kudos and drop a comment! Even an emoji or two means the world to me. This was a tough piece to write, so if there's anything you appreciate about the story, please let me know. I live on praise. Thank you for reading!

Chapter 9: Nesting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

And thus proceeds the next four weeks: Ilya paints the nursery walls, first a light green that turns out more pistachio than the intended sage, which Shane vetoes only after seeing how it looks with *two* coats; Ilya repaints the nursery in a shade of butter yellow, to which Shane is far more amenable.

Shane orders the remaining nursery furniture—a dresser, a changing table, an enormous, plush, cream glider decked out with USB ports and lighting for middle-of-the-night feeds—the latter of which becomes Shane’s throne to watch from as Ilya dutifully assembles the other pieces.

Shane and Ilya host a rotating cast of friends to help keep Shane's loneliness at bay. Marlow stays in their guest room when the Bears play the Centaurs at home and plies Shane with cannoli from Boston's North End; Shane would never normally eat something with so much fat and sugar but finds he can't make himself worry about that.

Svetlana visits for a week and helps David and Yuna stockpile diapers and wipes in the garage. Rose stays multiple long weekends when she has downtime from shooting and is all too happy to spend the bulk of her visits on the couch watching reality television with Shane and providing unsolicited baby name suggestions. All in all, it does a good job of keeping Shane in decent spirits.

Shane fills drawers and shelves with carefully labelled acrylic containers and wire baskets then rearranges them just so, then orders extras just in case. You can never have too many containers. He makes hospital go-bags and hangs them on hooks in the foyer. He organizes books, first in rainbow order like the American women with too-long eyelash extensions on Netflix, then, deciding that he hates that, by recommended age range.

He goes to his biweekly appointments and comes to almost enjoy them, the sole brief reprieve from his own home and his parents’ home. He walks on the treadmill, the pace frustratingly slow. He meditates, focusing on the vibrations of the universe or whatever, as best he can, which is to say not very well at all. He checks his blood pressure twice a day, and goes over his checklist to confirm that, *no*, he still doesn’t have preeclampsia.

Shane tries not to look at his own reflection as he passes windows or mirrors. His normally thin, straight nose has broadened at the base, and his ankles have become puffy, but these are the least of his concerns; even clothed, Shane looks truly, indisputably pregnant. His joggers—Ilya’s joggers, in actuality, as they were just a little bigger to begin with—have to sit either above or below his belly, no longer able to extend over its fullest point.

His abs are stretched painfully taut all the time. His pecs are huge and sensitive, brown nipples confused and on alert. His skin is mostly stretchmark-free, thanks to good luck and a careful regimen of moisturizers, oils, and creams, so Shane has at least a small flicker of hope

that maybe someday his body might look more or less how it used to look, but he isn't confident.

Shane, who has dedicated his life to optimizing his physical health through faultless diligence, has never felt more out of control in his own body. So, he makes to-do lists for Ilya and his parents, he organizes and reorganizes, he walks and walks and walks to nowhere, he meditates, he checks his blood pressure, he checks his blood pressure, he checks his blood pressure, and he *doesn't* look in the mirror.

+++++

"Shane?" Ilya groans, voice thick with sleep, stretching his arms overhead and assessing his surroundings. Without opening his eyes, Ilya fumbles blindly where Shane should be but finds only still-warm sheets. It is only then that Ilya registers that he is pinned to the bed at his hips and thighs, wet heat surrounding and spreading from his groin. Ilya flutters his eyes open to find Shane, his considerable breadth pressing Ilya's legs open, his mouth enclosing Ilya's half-hard cock.

It has been a while, at least relatively speaking; though Dr. Singh told them it was safe, Shane has been incredibly reluctant to have sex the previous few weeks, and only a few exhausted, desperate handies and shower blowjobs had been exchanged between the two of them. Ilya isn't sure of it, but has an inkling Shane isn't feeling great about his body, and that his medical concerns are either less of a factor than he is letting on or that they are a pretextual explanation for not wanting to have sex.

Either way, he isn't going to press Shane about it; Ilya can't imagine how strange and frightening this experience must be for Shane, and he is doing all he can to be the partner Shane needs. Still, it's a shame that he hasn't been able to get his hands on those pecs for weeks.

"Hi," Ilya says, suddenly too dumbfounded by the sight below him to be more articulate: Shane has draped one arm over Ilya's leg and is using the other to help prop himself up, one leg extended and the other hiked to lay his belly on the bed sideways. He looks up at Ilya through hooded eyes and Ilya is no longer only half hard.

"I see that you are busy," Ilya grunts out. "So no need to respond if this is your plan, but if you do not want me to come right now, you need to stop."

Shane pulls away and rests his cheek to Ilya's thigh, smirking up at him.

"Hi," Shane breathes.

"You woke up horny," Ilya observes unnecessarily.

"Yeah," Shane barks out a laugh, then awkwardly but determinedly pulls his body over Ilya's, hovering over his face. "Do you want to fuck me?"

Ilya groans involuntarily and drags his fingers over his own face before leaning up to kiss his husband, sweet and greedy and wanting and too brief.

“Yes, if that is what you want,” Ilya replies. It feels like an admission. He is content, if not happy, to limit themselves to mouths and hands as long as Shane wants, but of course he misses the closeness, the intimacy that he only fully experiences inside his husband. Shane nods and lands another kiss on Ilya’s mouth before shifting off Ilya and onto his side. Ilya gets the message and rolls to press his body against Shane’s.

Ilya lets his hands roam freely over Shane’s miles of exposed skin, his bulging pecs, the swell of his belly. Shane moans lightly as Ilya’s fingers trace the sore muscles at his hip, and more deeply as Ilya presses harder into the flesh there, kneading and soothing. Shane turns his head and catches Ilya’s mouth with his own, stealing Ilya’s attention from where he’s been lavishing wildly at the crook of his neck.

“Please fuck me, Ilya,” Shane begs, hand fumbling blindly under his own pillow and returning victorious with a small bottle of lube he must have stashed earlier.

Oh, Ilya thinks. Not only had Shane woken up horny, he woke up horny (and early) enough to sneak out of bed, prep himself, and hide lube in the bed. Ilya grins and plucks the bottle from Shane’s hand.

As Ilya works Shane open, his body taking one, two, three fingers quickly and greedily, Ilya wonders if maybe he had done this part as well, too desperate to wait. *Had he?*

“Ilya,” Shane groans, this time in frustration. *Ah*. So there’s confirmation.

“Okay, *zachik*,” Ilya relents, slicking his cock and notching it against Shane’s hole.

Ilya loves fucking him like this. It will never be as deep as it would be on all fours, and he misses the eye contact of having Shane spread out underneath him, looking up at him with desperation spelled all over his face, or Shane split open on top of him, his thick, powerful thighs taking on a secondary purpose.

But this, their bodies pressing hard against each other, torso to torso, leg to leg, Ilya’s hand free to touch anywhere and everywhere he can reach, Shane’s neck craned back just enough to pull Ilya’s mouth to his, less to kiss than to moan into each other’s mouths—it is *intimate*, and it is *tight*.

Ilya gets lost in it, the intensity, the sweetness, and can’t be sure how long he spends kissing and whispering Russian nonsense into the cool, damp skin at Shane’s shoulder.

“Harder, Ilya,” Shane whines. “You’re not gonna break me.”

The ring of muscle around Ilya’s cock contracts greedily, and Ilya can do nothing but abide and hope he lasts long enough for Shane to finish first.

“You feel—*ungh*—so good,” Ilya grunts. “Not gonna last.”

“Me neither,” Shane pants, voice breathy and high, relocating Ilya’s hand from where it rested on his abdomen to his cock. “Make me come, Ilya.”

And so he does, hot, thick release flooding Ilya's hand while Shane clenches hard around his cock and sends him over the edge with him. Ilya rides out his orgasm pressed deep inside his husband, dotting his back, neck, shoulders with open-mouthed kisses. He wipes his hand on the soiled bedsheets and, eventually, reluctantly removes his fully soft cock with a groan.

"Let's shower," Ilya says, extending his hand to his blissed out husband. He knows Shane is pretty much constantly exhausted, but being covered in sweat and come for more than a few minutes is not something he could ever normally stand. Shane groans and lumbers to his feet, taking Ilya's outstretched hand.

Once clean and clothed, the day progresses in much the same way that game days always did this season. It is mid-November, and Shane is thirty-five weeks and some change. The Centaurs would face Minnesota on home ice that evening before a brief break for American Thanksgiving; though the league doesn't recognize the days before and after the holiday, Ottawa was blessedly left off the Black Friday schedule, giving Ilya a five-day stretch at home, save an optional skate the following Sunday.

"You know, I could blow off the game," Ilya muses, arms looped around Shane's back as Shane prepares an afternoon snack of carrots and hummus. "Say there was an emergency. Wiebe wouldn't ask too many questions." Shane leans into it as Ilya presses an open-mouthed kiss to the junction of his neck and shoulder. For a moment, it almost seems like he's considering it, but Ilya knows better.

"Mmh, don't tempt me," Shane groans, turning in his arms and giving him a stern look. "You know you have to get us to the playoffs."

Ilya plucks a baby carrot from the bowl behind Shane's hip and breaks off a bite with his incisors.

"I'm pretty sure a team of sick, elderly goats on skates could beat Minnesota right now, but whatever you say," Ilya jokes, grinning through a mouthful of orange carrot flecks.

"Chew with your mouth closed, you freak," Shane glares and smacks Ilya's chest, but there is no heat behind it. "You're about to be somebody's dad."

Ilya swallows and preens, then pretends to look for his keys until Yuna arrives; he knows that Shane doesn't like to be babysat, but he would take the withering look that Shane shoots him when Ilya miraculously finds his keys in a jacket pocket he said he'd already checked over worrying about something happening to his husband with no one around to help. With a kiss to Yuna's cheek, Shane's lips, and Shane's abdomen, Ilya leaves for the game, maybe just a few minutes late.

Chapter End Notes

If you like this, please leave kudos and drop a comment! Even an emoji or two means the world to me. This was a tough piece to write, so if there's anything you appreciate

about the story, please let me know. I live on praise. Thank you for reading!

Chapter 10: Baby Hollander

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shane wakes from his evening nap expecting to feel at least partly refreshed and ready to watch the game from the comfort of his own couch. Energy had been difficult to come by for several weeks; Shane had never been a big caffeine drinker, but he relied on exercise as a means to ward off the siren song of his bed during the middle of the day.

He tried less reliable methods—cold water to the face, loud music he didn't enjoy—but without caffeine or meaningful exercise available to him, he found himself being lured in often by the promise of coziness, Ilya's smell, and blackout curtains.

Instead, Shane feels like dogshit. It feels like someone is holding the back of his head in a vice grip; over the steady *whoosh* of blood in his ears, he can hear Dr. Singh's voice warning him about severe headaches, especially ones that stemmed from where the back of the neck meets the skull.

Shane sits up and turns to place his feet on the floor one at a time at a glacial pace, but evidently not slowly enough. Shane's vision doubles, then focuses slightly but leaves a haze of gray specks and spiderwebs. He tries and fails to blink them away. Then, panic sets in.

"Mooom," he yells, reluctantly; it is hard not to think about the last time he called for his mother, and this will only make it more difficult for him to object to having someone with him at all times.

Yuna appears in the doorway, looking frazzled and concerned.

"I feel like dogshit," Shane tells her candidly; there is no better descriptor. "Can you get my blood pressure cuff?"

If she responds verbally, Shane doesn't hear it. He is too focused on keeping his eyes closed while shifting into an acceptable position for a blood pressure reading, his arm supported by his bedside table and his feet flat on the floor.

"Let me help," Yuna offers needlessly, as though he is in any position to reject assistance, slipping the cuff onto his upper arm. Shane waits with bated breath until he hears the now-familiar *psssst* and feels the cuff release. He shakes out his wrist.

"175/103," Yuna quavers, voice low. Shane's eyes snap open, which he immediately regrets. He closes them again and shifts to rest his other arm on the table.

"That can't be right," Shane protests. "Try the other side."

The next sixty seconds are fraught, Shane trying valiantly and failing to modulate his breathing.

“172/101,” Yuna reads grimly. “I’m calling Dr. Singh.”

Shane feels the bed shift slightly as Yuna stands and leaves the room. Under normal circumstances, Shane would object to his mother calling the doctor for him, but he can't bring himself to argue when his skull feels like it is being crushed by a trash compactor and he can't open his eyes. Moments or minutes pass before she returns.

“We are going to the hospital,” Yuna announces. “Dr. Singh will meet us at OB triage. They'll have a room ready for you.”

Shane inhales sharply through his nose and nods once, working himself up to stand. He isn't sure how he made it to the car, but he soon finds himself settled in Yuna's passenger seat, reclined nearly horizontal. Yuna is reversing her SUV down the driveway when Shane sits up with a start.

"What is it?" Yuna slams the brakes, then winces in apology when Shane grimaces.

“The go-bags,” Shane replies. “It might be time.”

+++++

As promised, an OB triage nurse whisks Shane to a private room upon arrival. It is small and windowless, but Shane is free from prying eyes and grateful for it.

He pees in a cup and changes into a hospital gown before settling in and being joined by Yuna, who, for her part, has spent the previous twenty minutes trying to reach Coach Wiebe to alert Ilya. She initially called at the end of the first intermission, which means it might be a while before he sees her messages and voicemails if his phone is not on him, a fact that Shane tries and fails not to think about.

A nurse comes into his room, seemingly unfazed; Shane figures that Dr. Singh briefed those working after his mom called. He chooses not to consider how many people know at this point, vowing to ruminate about it later instead.

“Hi, I’m Cara,” the young woman greets him. “I’m going to be helping Dr. Singh this evening with some vitals and tests.” Shane isn’t sure whether he wants her to acknowledge that he is not, for a myriad of reasons, a typical patient of hers, but finds himself put slightly at ease when he notices the inclusive pride flag badge reel clipped to her chest as she takes his blood pressure.

“184/112,” Cara relays, grimacing, as though she isn’t used to giving bad news, though Shane is sure she is. “I am going to get an IV started for you and push some labetalol, which should help get your pressure down some. Dr. Singh already put in an order for it since you had a blood pressure cuff at home. Just need confirmation here. Then I'm going to get baby on the monitor. I'll fill Dr. Singh in, and we'll check back in ten minutes or so.”

Cara helps Shane drape a blanket across his lap, has Shane lift his gown above his belly, and places the fetal heart rate monitor straps across his bare abdomen, one high across his belly and one closer to his hips. She feels around in the crook of Shane's elbow, cleanses the skin

with an alcohol swab, and finds his vein on the first try. He winces at the sting as she pulls the needle back and secures the thick cannula with clear medical tape.

“Thanks for getting that over with so quickly,” Yuna says, filling the tense silence. “They can never seem to get me on the first try. Sometimes it feels like they’re on an excavation mission.”

“No problem, but I can hardly take any credit. You could land a plane on these veins,” Cara chuckles warmly. Shane tries to feel flattered but fails; healthcare workers get excited about the weirdest things.

Shane watches with detached curiosity as Cara pushes the meds. Finished, she turns to the door.

“Cara?” Shane calls after her. She looks back and raises her eyebrows in question. “What comes next?”

Cara steps closer and offers Shane a small smile. “We repeat the blood pressure, and if it’s still high, Dr. Singh talks you through next steps.”

Shane nods to dismiss her, but still isn’t sure what that means. He has spent the better part of the past month waiting for something bad to happen and now that it has, he realizes he isn’t sure what the immediate ramifications are based on new pieces of information, the trajectories of the invisible flowchart someone else knows by heart but has withheld from him out of kindness or fear of overwhelming him.

Ten minutes feel like an hour, but when they elapse, Shane is relieved to see a familiar face.

“Hi, Dr. Singh,” Shane offers weakly. “Sorry to bring you in like this.”

“Hi Shane, hi Yuna,” Dr. Singh replies, pleasant as ever. “Don’t you apologize. This is why we have someone on call. How are you feeling?”

Shane restrains himself from responding with the colorful language he feels is most apt. “I have... felt better,” he lands on instead.

“I would imagine so, yeah,” Dr. Singh looks down at her iPad, eyes scanning, presumably reading his chart. Her lips turn down so briefly that Shane might have missed it if he had blinked at the wrong moment. Finally, her gaze meets his. “Let’s check that blood pressure one more time, Shane.”

The cuff, which Cara had not bothered removing after his last read, tightens on his arm and then releases with a familiar beep and *whoosh* of air.

“Okay,” Dr. Singh sighs, then puts on her most serious doctor face. “We have a BP of 172/109 and high protein content in your urine sufficient to diagnose preeclampsia with severe features. Baby looks good on the monitor. Your liver function is normal, so Cara is going to come back and give you some Tylenol for pain and another dose of IV blood pressure meds to get out of the acute range.”

Dr. Singh pulls out a rolling stool identical to those Shane has seen in her clinic and sits, eye level with Yuna and slightly below Shane. “This *does* mean we need to deliver, as soon as possible.” Shane's heart plummets. Despite how scared he is and has been, both for himself and for the baby, he trusts that they are safe with Dr. Singh. Rather, the thought that keeps blaring in his head like a five-alarm fire is *he isn't here yet, please god, not yet*.

As though she were reading his mind, Dr. Singh continues. “This is *urgent*, but not *emergent*, which means we have a little time. No one is going to come take you to the OR in the next thirty seconds. But we do need to get the baby out as soon as we can to help manage the risk to you and to the baby. Right now, you are at an elevated risk of seizure and stroke, especially with the headache and other neurologic symptoms you described.”

“How long until you need to operate?” Yuna asks, voice level in a way that Shane isn't sure his would be. Dr. Singh tilts her head from one side to the other consideringly.

“Ideally, the next two hours, up to four,” she answers. “But two hours is the goal, and I'm going to do my best to get us in there by then. Our ORs are all occupied at the moment, so it will probably be closer to the two-hour mark. There are plenty of other things we will also do simultaneously in the meantime, like starting you on magnesium drip to decrease seizure risk, and giving you a dose of steroids to help baby's lungs before birth.”

Shane exhales audibly, and chances a glance at Yuna.

“I'll get him here, Shane,” Yuna promises, squeezing his hand. Shane is struck for the millionth time during his pregnancy how lucky he is to have Yuna Hollander for a parent and prays that he will be half as reliable and supportive as she is. He nods, not yet trusting his voice, and swallows down the lump in his throat.

“Thank you, Dr. Singh,” Shane croaks, tears stinging at the backs of his eyes. “I'm glad it's you here.”

Dr. Singh stands but pauses to squeeze his empty hand lightly, and Shane would be forgiven if he thinks he sees her eyes glistening too.

“Me, too, Shane. We're going to take care of you.”

+++++

Yuna Hollander is nothing if not persistent. By her count, she has called Brandon Wiebe more than thirty times in the past... however long it has been since Shane agreed to go to the hospital. She is incandescent. He is their *only* way to contact Ilya during a game, and he had promised to keep his phone on vibrate, on his person, in case of an emergency. Shane and Ilya had told him about the pregnancy in the first place, something they only shared with their closest friends and family, at least in part because it was *really important* that he let Ilya know immediately if there were an emergency.

If David weren't traveling for work, trying valiantly to get on the next flight to Ottawa, she would have sent him to the arena by this point. Hell, she has half a mind to go herself, if it wouldn't mean leaving Shane alone. After all of this is over, Yuna is going to kill Wiebe, or at

least find some alternative commensurate punishment that wouldn't include prison time for her. She is too excited to be a grandmother to be incarcerated.

Her finger is hovering over his contact when she receives an incoming call from one Brandon Wiebe.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Yuna snaps, ready to lay into him.

"Yuna, I am so sorry. My phone fell out of my pocket and I didn't notice—" He stammers.

"No, actually, I don't care," Yuna interrupts, shaking her head as though he can see her. "I'll deal with you later. Ilya needs to get here. We're at the hospital. He has a little time, so tell him to take a two minute shower *only* and to call me from the car."

"Is everything okay?" Wiebe tries, tone wary. Yuna is tempted to tell him to fuck off and to get Ilya here, but imagines how Ilya would react if he had to leave the ice not knowing if Shane and the baby were okay, even if her insistence on taking a shower was a good sign.

"Not exactly, but tell him everyone is stable," Yuna exhales, gathering all the serenity she can. "And he's going to be a dad very soon."

+++++

Shane is tortured in the few hours before his C-section. Or, at least, he is pretty sure it is a form of torture. He gets a painful shot in his ass, he is forced to drink a gross lemon-lime flavored medication to prevent aspiration during surgery, and given a massive infusion of drugs to prevent seizures (and put on a drip of the same) that makes him feel even worse than he did before the meds. But the most torturous part is the uncertainty that Ilya would make it.

Only with the assurance that Ilya is en route and will get to the hospital in time for the delivery does Shane agree to move to the operating room.

"Hi, I'm Maddie," greets a tiny red-headed woman from the foot of his bed. "I'm a nurse. We need to prep you for surgery, so we need to get your gown off your belly. The drape goes up later so you can't see what's happening on the other side. We usually tell patients that they can just pull up their gowns to maintain a bit of privacy, but..." Maddie trails off with a shrug, the *you do not have breasts to feel shy about* left implicit. The notion of being completely naked on an exam table would normally be horrific to Shane, but he can't bring himself to care at the moment.

"I'll just take it off, then," Shane decides, and carefully unsnaps the closures at his shoulder and removes the garment, folding it reflexively before handing it to the nurse.

The anesthesiologist, Dr. Castro, places his spinal next, but Shane doesn't have long to focus on the strangeness of not being able to feel anything below his chest, because after that comes the Foley catheter. "You know, it's been a while since I've placed one of these in a penis," Maddie teases, and Shane earnestly wishes he had kept the gown around his chest to more easily hide his flushing face. "But the basic mechanics are the same."

Meanwhile, someone clips the already minimal hair from his abdomen, while another person checks to make sure the anesthesia is working. A voice tells him to *put your arms on the arm boards, please, and don't move them*, while someone else wipes his belly with an antiseptic.

Once it is dry and the surgeons have scrubbed in, the drape finally goes up, and Shane is left alone with Dr. Castro, an older man with a serious expression that Shane isn't sure he likes. Being alone with a no-nonsense anesthesiologist was *not* part of his birth plan, and Shane is beginning to panic about Ilya's absence.

"Okay, Shane, we're almost ready," Shane hears Dr. Singh call from the other side. "We are going to check one more time to make sure you're numb and then Ilya can come in."

"Sounds good," Shane calls back, flooded with relief. *He made it.*

"We are going to pinch you with some instruments, and you are going to tell us if you feel any sharp pain," Dr. Singh explains. "Tell me if any of these feel sharp or stabby." Without more preamble, Shane feels a dull touch to his left hip, his right hip, then below his right ribs and left ribs.

"Feels weird, but just pressure," Shane confirms, then agrees to tell them if he feels sharp pain at any time.

Just then, the operating room door opens behind Shane's shoulder, and the room is temporarily filled with the dulcet sounds of frantic Russian. Shane has never heard anything more beautiful.

"Shane, *moya lyubov*, are you okay?" Ilya asks, quickly closing the distance between them and running his hands through Shane's hair.

"I am now," Shane replies, beaming. Ilya leans over him and kisses his lips upside down, Peter Parker in a paper gown and hat.

"Hi Ilya," Dr. Singh intones. "Glad you're here. Do whatever you need to keep Shane calm and happy, and do *not* look on this side of the drape. We'd have to call in the jocks in Ortho to get you off the floor if you fainted." Several people laugh out loud at the remark, but Shane doesn't get it, and from the look on his face, it appears neither does Ilya.

Ilya shrugs one shoulder at Shane, then responds. "No problem, Doc."

Shane is, blessedly, aware of very little after that. He feels unnatural pressure and tugging sensations, and tries to tune out the chatter on the other side of the room. *Now we're going to cut through the fascia...* None of it sounds like any of Shane's business. He tunes back in when Dr. Singh says *almost there*—he feels the pressure peak, and imagines hands reaching inside his abdomen—and then he hears it, the unmistakable wail of a newborn.

Ilya's grasp tightens around Shane's hand, letting out a laugh of wonder.

"Congratulations, dads," Dr. Singh crows. "Our pediatrics team is checking baby over, but in just a second... Yep, she's all yours."

She, Shane mouths up at Ilya, grinning. A moment later, a nurse comes around the drape holding a tiny, angry red infant and deposits her carefully on Shane's chest.

"Hello, *solnyshko*, so good to meet you," Ilya coos quietly, stroking her scalp soothingly.

"Hi, baby," Shane whispers, planting a kiss to her forehead.

Shane could have been on the table another ten minutes or two hours and he wouldn't have noticed, his world reduced to the sticky, 5lb 7oz, 19" long baby girl in his arms, copious black hair shellacked to her head. *She is here, and she is perfect.*

Chapter End Notes

Medical Accuracy Corner: (1) Shane's headache and other neurologic symptoms create a fairly realistic depiction of how a patient might experience preeclampsia. The fact that he's having these symptoms is why he would be given anti-seizure medications at the hospital, and those meds do really make people feel like crap. (2) I took great care to follow the diagnostic criteria for preeclampsia (e.g. two readings a certain length of time apart, the ranges those readings are in, the protein content in the urine, the Tylenol only after getting back liver tests). (3) The C-section prep is also basically accurate; there are slight details, like what type of nurse does what, abdomen prep, and the verbal communication between the people staffing the case that are kind of elided. (4) IRL, Shane would probably be on the table a while after baby is out for the tubal (mentioned later) and closing. (4) While I have not taken great pains to make this accurate from a Canadian health system perspective, I did look up whether babies are weighed in pounds or kilos in Canada and got the result that they are measured in kilos for official medical use but usually pounds for individual normal person use (which is actually in line with how it is done in the U.S. as well), so you can assume that the weight was taken in metric and then converted.

If you like this, please leave kudos and drop a comment! Even an emoji or two means the world to me. This was a tough piece to write, so if there's anything you appreciate about the story, please let me know. I live on praise. Thank you for reading!

Chapter 11: Lily

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ilya stands sentry by the front door with a bottle of hand sanitizer and a touchless thermometer, accosting their teammates one by one as they enter the Hollander-Rozanov house one Saturday morning in late January.

“You are sure you got TDAP, not some other vaccine?” Shane overhears Ilya interrogating Luca as he approaches the pair, a nest of black curls poking out from the mess of fabric that houses the sleeping infant close to his chest.

“Stop harassing our friends, Ilya,” Shane chides quietly, watching Luca’s attention turn to him. Luca is wide eyed as he spreads the gratuitous amount of sanitizer Ilya squirted into his palms.

“*Mein Gott*,” Luca coos, quiet and hesitant, stepping forward and tentatively reaching out to touch the soft locks, stopping short. “Can I?” Shane nods with a soft smile, grateful that Luca can’t see the hesitation spelled all over Ilya’s face behind his shoulder. Luca’s touch is light, uncertain. “Hi baby,” he effuses, grinning stupidly.

The warm mass stirs with a huff, but doesn’t wake—*fortunately for Luca*, Shane thinks, as Ilya would not have been kind about it—and Shane silently gestures for Luca and Ilya to join the rest of their teammates in the living room.

Shane enters the room quietly, observing for a moment with profound gratitude. It’s a full house; with the promise of a full breakfast spread (including apple turnovers) from Harris and Troy, and an exceptionally cute baby that none of them have met yet, there were only a few who didn’t take them up on the offer, even though Ilya enlisted Dr. Terry to administer a round of booster shots first. Shane is overcome at the sight of even their rookies and new trades spilling onto their floor, two armchairs left conspicuously empty.

“There they are,” Bood calls, his voice pitched low, only just loud enough to get heads to turn.

“Hey, guys,” Shane grins, stroking his daughter’s back through the folds of fabric, and makes his way to one of the free seats. “Sorry I couldn’t join you earlier, I didn’t want to wake her. I gave up and I guess it didn’t matter anyway. She fell back asleep immediately.”

“How are you feeling?” Dykstra asks.

“Yeah, it had to be hard to manage with the surgery on top of everything else,” Harris adds. A sea of sympathetic nodding heads look back at Shane.

Shane meets Ilya’s eyes in the armchair across from him and shares a private smile, secretly pleased that their word choice makes it possible not to lie so much as stretch the truth. As far

as the team knows, their daughter was born via surrogate, her birth unfortunately coinciding with Shane's abdominal surgery.

"Yeah, it's been tough, but she's great, and I'm recovering well."

She *is* great, and he *is* recovering well. Shane's blood pressures have returned to pre-pregnancy levels, so he is officially no longer at risk of suddenly dying from preeclampsia. He will be ten weeks post op in a few days, and has been cleared to return to practice on the ice on a strict no-contact basis at twelve weeks, assuming no complications until then, with the aim of being able to play again a couple weeks later.

Ilya returned from parental leave two weeks prior, at Shane's behest; though Luca is great, their other centers are too green, their more experienced linemates are unable to make up for it, and having Ilya off the ice hurts their chances of making it to the playoffs.

They answer the expected questions—yes, she's sleeping; no, *we're* not really sleeping; yes, she's eating; yes, we were surprised by how many diapers we go through; yes, she's really tall even though she was premature—and Shane relishes every second.

"I feel like we should know this by now, but I don't think you've said," Troy hedges apologetically. "What's her name?"

"Liliya Ilyanovna Hollander," Ilya announces proudly, voice thick. "Lily for short."

"Wow, that's a lotta vowels," Harris remarks. Shane catches Troy pinching his arm, but both he and Ilya laugh.

"It is," Shane agrees readily. Lily's eyes began to flutter open as if on cue.

"Liliya, huh?" Luca chuckles. "Doesn't that sound a lot like Ilya?"

"Sure does," Shane replies. He smiles to himself. For years, his now-husband was saved under a different name in his phone, a readymade diminutive and the literal translation of their daughter's name; he wonders for the thousandth time how they weren't caught sooner.

"She's waking up now," Shane informs the room as he gingerly extracts his daughter's tiny frame from the wrap and rests her more or less upright against his thighs and chest, carefully supporting her head. She is facing away from him, but Shane can imagine what his teammates are seeing as they coo and grin and offer silly little waves, Lily blinking against the too-bright light of mid-morning—her tiny, pointed nose, her perfect cupid's bow, her hazel eyes still heavy with sleep, the mess of black curls sticking out wildly.

"Whose sperm did you use?" Hayes asks, then continues after a beat. "If that's not too intrusive." It seems the team is committed to optimally phrasing questions.

Ilya meets Shane's eyes again, then glances down at their daughter, utterly besotted. "Mine."

The room is quiet for a long moment as their friends *ooh* and *ahh*.

“Well, call me crazy,” Dykstra chimes in with a curious half-smile. “But don’t you guys think she kind of looks like Hollander too?”

The team chuckles, none quite so sincerely as Shane and Ilya. The new parents share a long look and Shane shrugs one shoulder as if to say *you take this one*. Ilya smiles broadly, his eyes never leaving his husband's.

“Yeah, we think so too.”

+++++

In the end, Ilya chooses none of the strollers he'd test driven at Nordstrom for their primary stroller, instead opting for a wildly expensive, limited edition Silver Cross collab with Automobili Lamborghini. It is ostentatious, with flashy orange detailing and automobile-inspired design details. Shane kind of hates it, but finds it fitting, given that Ilya had sold his own actual Lamborghini in his move to Ottawa. It's a small concession in the grand scheme of things, though he does find himself reaching for the secondhand jogging stroller from the Pikes' for more than just his daily runs.

For the moment, Shane's internal reproductive organs are still inside his body. He was disappointed when Dr. Singh explained that it was too dangerous to remove them during delivery without a clinical reason to do so—though she did perform a tubal ligation at the time—less because it really bothered him that he would continue to have them and more because it means additional surgery in the future.

This entire experience has offered Shane a new appreciation for his body. He has long been grateful for the innate qualities that helped him become an exceptional hockey player—the hand-eye coordination, the agility, the lung capacity, the ability to clear lactic acid more quickly than most people—as well as the skills he's been able to hone to skate faster, longer, to find the exact right angle and force with which to meet the puck so it has nowhere to go except the back of the net.

His body has accomplished amazing physical feats that have already etched his name in ink in the book of hockey legends, given him wealth and fame and esteem.

But, Lily sleeping soundly in his arms, Shane is certain that no part of his body has given him more than some long-undiscovered organs that, had he learned about them in any other conceivable way, would have been medical waste within days. He discussed a post-season hysterectomy with Dr. Singh and got a referral to one of her colleagues in minimally invasive gynecologic surgery, but Shane decided to postpone it until retirement and takes a medication usually given to induce menopause in the meantime. What's a little while longer with a few extra organs?

Shortly after Shane returns to the ice, Ilya tells him that he is ready to retire. Initially, Shane protests; they are still young, or at least young enough for retirement to feel premature. They have several good years left between them. But Ilya confesses that he has begun to feel the toll that the sport is taking on his body—joints that ache when it is going to rain, shoulders that hurt when he sleeps on them funny, knees that creak when he gets up from tummy time with Lily.

And then there *is* Lily, this funny, beautiful, lively baby, who grows taller or gains weight or does something new every time they are away for roadtrips. Ilya already missed her first social smile—the first time her chubby cheeks stretched into a gummy grin because she was happy rather than gassy—while he was away on his first roadie, though Shane was there and on the receiving end of it, not having been cleared to play yet.

Eventually, Shane comes to understand why Ilya needs to be done. He considers retiring with Ilya, as he always assumed he would. He feels a great deal of guilt, first at the notion that he is abandoning Lily and then at the notion that he is abandoning Ilya, and takes a great deal of convincing that he would be doing neither by remaining on the team. He had missed the better portion of the previous season, missed the camaraderie that came with that, and had spent months effectively trapped inside his own home. Neither he nor Ilya would begrudge him a little more time.

In compromise, Shane resolves to play just one more season, which Ilya accepts only after adequate assurances that it's what Shane really wants, that Shane isn't cutting his career short for him. Privately, Shane also resolves to send Ilya off with one more Cup, and to put up the performance of his life to do it if necessary.

Chapter End Notes

Medical accuracy corner: (1) Everyone who is going to come into contact with a newborn should receive a TDAP booster because of how dangerous pertussis is in particular for small babies. (2) It is medically accurate that an OB would not perform a simultaneous C-section-hysterectomy without a life-threatening medical indication like severe hemorrhage. (3) Drugs that induce menopause also prevent menstruation, which would be medically dangerous for Shane to experience.

The Silver Cross x Lamborghini collab is, absurdly, a real thing and so Ilya Rozanov-coded that it had to make it into the fic. It is \$6000 USD and heinous.

<https://silvercrossus.com/product/silver-cross-reef-automobili-lamborghini-stroller/>

If you like this, please leave kudos and drop a comment! Even an emoji or two means the world to me. This was a tough piece to write, so if there's anything you appreciate about the story, please let me know. I live on praise. Thank you for reading!

Chapter 12: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The seconds count down in what will be the last game of the Stanley Cup finals, but the home crowd is already on its feet. The Centaurs are up 4-2 with more seconds left on the power play than remain in the third period, after a Los Angeles defenseman caught a minor for cross-checking Barrett in an attempt to gain possession.

Their victory imminent, Ilya is only faintly aware of the game going on around him, of their opponents scrambling helplessly for a goal, *one goal* to save a bit of dignity, of his husband bounding down the ice in search of an empty netter for good measure, when muscle memory kicks in. He catches Troy's pass on reflex, delivers the puck to where he has already calculated Shane will be, and looks up just in time to watch it sail into the back of the net, meters away from the nearest opposing player.

The final buzzer blares, helmets fly off, and the Centaurs pour over the boards, descending on Hayes. Despite their dominance that evening, the ultimate outcome hadn't been a foregone conclusion at the start of the series; LA took it to six games, and the score that night is the result of some of the best minutes Wyatt has ever spent on the ice, stopping shots a lesser goalie could have never. He would go on to win the Conn Smythe that evening, and neither Ilya nor Shane would be surprised or offended.

Still, Ilya is far more interested in finding his husband in the mass of sweaty bodies and does so easily, grasping and pulling his hand to yank him free of the horde. With less fanfare than Hunter's or their own first post-Cup win, Ilya pulls Shane close, sweeps the sweat-drenched hair away from his forehead, and kisses him, long, deep, and sweet. Afterwards, photos of that kiss *do* circulate on the internet, especially in hockey circles, but none of those images is the one that breaks containment—something that was a revelation a decade before is old hat now, not commonplace, but not groundbreaking either. *Progress*, Ilya thinks.

Instead, the image that makes its way from the hockey blogs to the morning talk shows to a place of honor in the Hollander-Rozanov trophy room is something new altogether. Ilya also sets the image his phone's lock screen, so he can look at it as frequently as possible, a perfect memory cased in glass: Lily, seven and a half months old, clad in Centaurs attire and a black toque with a red pompom, looking curious but unbothered as she sits inside the Stanley Cup. Ilya and Shane kneel on the ice beside her, mirror images as they hold her upright, beaming. It is the single best photo Ilya has ever seen.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Notes: And what of it if I wrote the hockey scene in such a way that there is no actual hockey? ;) I very much did not know anything about hockey before like seven months ago but as soon as I saw a picture of a baby in the Stanley Cup I knew how this story was ending. Thanks for sticking through it with me.

End Notes:

And that's a wrap! I hope you enjoyed. I had a (mostly) great time writing this. I don't read a lot of mpreg, but I am one half of a queer couple trying to have a baby, and I think on some subconscious level part of me was like "man, it'd be really nice if we could just surprise ourselves and everyone else and make one without someone else's genetic material and catheters and speculums involved, just rawdogging and a dream," which is something for me to work out in therapy.

I have a few other ideas for future works, so if you like this one, please subscribe; if you'd prefer some lighter fare, I might direct you to my other published fic, [RussianLover81](#), which is a cute little AU in which Shane is a Peloton instructor and Ilya is a potentially over-enthusiastic fan. It would seem that, no matter what I try to write, Shane Hollander will end up on a stationary bike at some point, and Yuna will contemplate committing felonies against those who wrong her son.

If you did like this, please leave kudos and drop a comment; even an emoji or two means the world to me.

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