we've only just begun

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we've only just begun

by imbihesgay

Summary

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“Oh.” Shane’s cheeks are a perpetual state of flushed red. “Before I came, I made a list of, um, things I am looking for in a car? Practical things, I guess. I didn’t want to forget.”

Ilya’s lips quiver, and he resists the urge to let an incredibly fond smile overtake his face. This tall, muscular omega could not be more precious if he was made of teddy bears and heart stickers.

“May I see it?” Ilya inquires, extending his hand again.

With visible reluctance, Shane passes over the piece of notebook paper.

Ilya glances up at Shane, arching an eyebrow. The omega smiles shyly at him, his warm brown eyes glimmering.

“Am I completely out of my mind to try and find all of these things in one car?” he asks.

“I never let a customer leave unhappy.” He winks at Shane, who lets out a small, startled laugh. It’s an utterly breathtaking sound, even as brief as it is.

-ilya is a single, playboy alpha car salesman. shane is a pregnant, unmated omega, trying to start his life over. they meet, and starting over gets a bit more complicated-

Notes

PLS SEE DISCLAIMERS AND NOTES-

this was literally written as a fever dream of what if ilya was an alpha car salesman and shane was a sweet pregnant omega who needed a good family car for his pup? thus this nonsense was born.

i have little to no academic knowledge of omegaverse, so im gonna make up rules as i see fit, if it's not lore accurate i do not care <3 im having fun playing barbies with words!

THAT BEING SAID i already have three more chapters of it written after this, am currently working on the fourth- subject to change. dear god, pray for us all.

pls mind the tags and i hope you enjoy thank you for reading !!

BE NICE IF YOU COMMENT THIS ONE IS WEIRD AND IM SENSITIVE AND IF IT'S NOT YOUR CUP OF TEA JUST GO DRINK SOMEWHERE ELSE THANK YOU!!!

Chapter 1

Ilya taps his fingers atop the cherry red roof of a brand new Porsche. It's a slow day today at Dallas Automotive, only three walk-ins, two of whom didn't even end up buying anything after getting a test drive around the neighborhood out of Ilya.

The rhythmic beating of the worst top 40 radio hits thrums through his ears, and he wrinkles his nose at the overwhelming stink of alpha body mist. Cliff Marleau, his fellow salesman, strolls by, grinning cockily.

"What is it, Marly?" Ilya arches an eyebrow dubiously. "You look like you just found gold in your fucking underpants."

He cackles. "More like in my fuckin' bank account. Just sold a year-old Fastback. 45k, with 80-month financing."

Ilya arches an eyebrow. "What kind of sucker just agreed to that?"

"You know these little omegas." Cliff shrugs, picking at something in his teeth. "They bag an alpha with a fat bank account, decide to go on a spending spree. He'd just gotten married. Already pupped up, too. Guess he thought he deserved a treat."

Ilya hums quietly. "You sold him a Mustang? Not the best choice for a carseat."

"He didn't seem that worried about it, once I told him how good he looked driving it."

"You are classy." Ilya rolls his eyes.

"Like you don't do the same shit to make your sales." Cliff laughs. "What was the name of that MILF you hooked up with last month, the one who bought that ridiculous ass SUV with the DVD players?"

"That SUV is going to fucking retire me early," Ilya replies with a smirk.

"And that chick is gonna expect you to fuck her again. She invested enough."

Before Ilya can retort, he's distracted by something at the front door. The bell dings, like it always does when a prospective buyer walks in. But it's not the sound that makes Ilya's head snap to the side.

It's the *smell.*

Pregnant omega is the first thing his body recognizes. A biological response, a simple, inherent feeling of protectiveness. Someone vulnerable nearby, someone needing the strength and capability of a big strong alpha. Foolish as their genetics are at times, this base level biology always rings true when encountering a pregnant omega.

For most sane alphas, at least.

Then of course, there are the *less* than sane alphas, the reason some omegas might need protection in the first place.

The man who has just entered the dealership is tall, broad-shouldered and muscular. He's bigger than the average omega, even for a man, with thick thighs and a strong-looking physique. His dark hair is a bit ruffled from the wind outside, choppy bangs falling over on to his forehead. His skin is a warm beige tone, with a smattering of freckles over his arrow-straight nose. The cheeks underneath are flushed pink from the cold outside, and his upper lip has a fascinating little divot in it that Ilya would like to explore with his tongue.

He's dressed in a pair of dark washed jeans and a large Nike hoodie, shoulders slightly hunched. He's favoring his left leg slightly, as if recovering from some sort of injury. From the size of him, Ilya would guess sports-related. Some sort of contact sport, probably.

And, *his smell.*

Rich notes of caramelized cinnamon apples, hot and aromatic as the scent fills the air. Sweet as sugar. The scent immediately softens Ilya's bones, his jaw falling slack.

It smells just like the dessert his mother used to make, back home in Russia. Sharlotka with sweet apples. She used to make it when his father had company come by the house, or just to have some dessert after a nice dinner. When she'd make it, the kitchen would smell rich with sugar and apples, and for a short while his Mama would smile. She had gotten the recipe from her own mother, he thinks now, maybe it made her feel close to someone she'd lost.

Wanting to avoid that feeling is exactly why Ilya hasn't eaten it since he left home.

But now, at this moment, he's confronted with the exact smell of his childhood kitchen. The safety of his mother's smile. The knowledge that for at least one night, his father would be on his best behavior in front of company. And Ilya could enjoy a warm, delicious treat that his grandmother used to make for his mother.

"Hey there." Marly is speaking before Ilya can collect himself, walking toward the man.

Immediately, alarm bells ring in Ilya's brain. He cannot let Cliff or any of these other disgusting alphas near this beautiful omega who smells of apples and pregnancy. Whatever the source of this delicious aroma, it is pure and wonderful. He will not let Cliff take advantage of this man.

"I have it, Marly." His arm shoots out to grab Cliff's bicep before the man can take another step. He looks at Ilya with disbelief. Normally, Ilya's happy to pounce on the hot betas or alphas, and leave the omegas to Cliff or Troy, who are both capable of intimidating them into a purchase.

Not today.

"Alright." Cliff backs off with a curious quirk to his brow.

The man at the door clears his throat. "Is this a bad time?"

His voice is soft, deep and firm, but gentle around the edges, like he's unsure of his own words.

"Of course not." Ilya throws on his best attempt at a cool, collected smile as he walks toward the man. The closer he gets, the stronger the smell becomes, and he finds himself having to take a few slow, steadying breaths. His instincts are starting to throb. The urge to *protectprotectprotect* this handsome omega is throttling him.

There is no visible bump under the man's hoodie, but the smell of pregnancy is potent and so strong it sticks under Ilya's teeth. Cinnamon apples and just the faintest touch of vanilla bean, light and effervescent.

"How can I help you, today?" Ilya asks him, voice much more restrained than when he usually approaches a customer trying to make a sale. He usually flirts a lot more right out the gate.

The omega shifts on his feet, and Ilya notices he has a crumpled piece of notebook paper in his hand. "I think I might be in the wrong place," he admits unsurely.

"Are you looking to buy a car?" Ilya inquires.

"Yes." He nods. "Um, this looks like a nice dealership, though. I'm not looking for anything too flashy." His dark eyes fall on the cherry red Porsche displayed in the center of the showroom.

Ilya waves a hand. "We have a lot of different styles. I assume you are looking for something with lots of room? Growing family?"

The man's face flushes an even brighter shade of red. It's fucking unbearably cute.

"I- didn't realize it was noticeable." He spares a brief glance at his midsection.

Ilya shakes his head. "It is not. But, um, well, your scent."

"I didn't even think about that, I'm sorry." The man's hand immediately comes up to press down on the scent gland on his neck. His eyes go a little wide, glancing around the dealership with sudden anxiety filling his gaze. "I have scent patches at home, but-"

"It is alright," Ilya assures him. "Do not worry about that. You are here to find a car, I will help you. My name is Ilya Rozanov."

He extends his hand. After a brief hesitation, the other man reaches out and grasps Ilya's hand with his left one. Ilya notes, with only polite interest, he has no wedding ring or visible mating mark.

Unusual, for a pregnant omega. Perhaps he and his partner are not traditional. Ilya thinks this beautiful specimen deserves better than a non-committal alpha, but maybe he's happy with being unmated. Or, they're not flashy and their mating marks are in hidden spots.

“Shane Hollander.” The man smiles briefly, the curve in his upper lip accentuated by the action. God, it’s a beautiful face.

“It is nice to meet you, Shane Hollander.” Ilya nods his head at the crumpled paper in Shane’s hand. “What is that you have there?”

“Oh.” Shane’s cheeks are a perpetual state of flushed red. “Before I came, I made a list of, um, things I am looking for in a car? Practical things, I guess. I didn’t want to forget.”

Ilya’s lips quiver, and he resists the urge to let an incredibly fond smile overtake his face. This tall, muscular omega could not be more precious if he was made of teddy bears and heart stickers.

“May I see it?” Ilya inquires, extending his hand again.

With visible reluctance, Shane passes over the piece of notebook paper.

1. *Room for a carseat*
2. *Gas efficient*
3. *Reliable brand*
4. *Under five thousand dollars*

Oof. That last one is *definitely* going to be a sticking point.

Ilya glances up at Shane, arching an eyebrow. The omega smiles shyly at him, his warm brown eyes glimmering.

“Am I completely out of my mind to try and find all of these things in one car?” he asks.

Maybe not at some used piece of shit dealership, Ilya thinks mildly.

“I never let a customer leave unhappy.” He winks at Shane, who lets out a small, startled laugh. It’s an utterly breathtaking sound, even as brief as it is.

“Follow me.” He begins walking, acutely aware of Shane’s steps behind him, and the accompanying smell of cinnamon apples.

The more affordable cars are out in the back lot, a bit of a walk, which he feels bad about putting Shane through in the cold weather. As they walk, he falls into step with the omega, trying to make casual conversation.

“So, is it a boy or a girl?” He gestures vaguely to Shane’s middle, which looks unassuming.

“What?” Shane asks.

“The pup?” Ilya frowns curiously.

“Oh!” Red-faced, and laughing with a bit of embarrassment, Shane brings one hand to rest over his stomach. “It’s too early to know, still.”

Ilya wants to admit he is surprised to hear that, considering Shane's smell is extremely strong, and that usually only happens much later in an omega pregnancy, but he doesn't. Everyone is different, he supposes. He's only really spent any time with his sister in law before she had his niece, and she was miserable for lots of reasons unrelated to the pregnancy. He mostly only remembers smelling her distress, and hating himself for not being able to fix it.

"What are you hoping for?" Ilya asks.

Shane lifts a shoulder in a shrug. "Just want them to be healthy. I…recently spent some time in the hospital, and right now just focusing on putting things back together, you know. Just want to keep them safe."

Tension coils up in Ilya's neck. The urge to *protect* flares up again, unexplainably.

"Hospital?" he asks, trying to keep his tone neutral.

Shane turns red again. "Yes, but we're okay now. Now, we need a safe car to get us around. I am tired of taking the bus to work."

Ilya studies his face for a beat. "What do you do for work?"

At this question, Shane smiles brightly. "I coach hockey."

Ah, a contact sport, as Ilya had suspected. "Wow, that is exciting."

Shane nods, looking more animated than he has so far. "It's amazing. I have kids five through twelve, so I get a lot of newer starters who just need to learn the basics. But, I used to play professionally, and I think they love learning some of the fancy tricks I learned in the NHL."

Ilya pauses them beside a hideous green sedan. "You used to play hockey in the NHL?"

Shane nods. "Yeah! I was a center for the Montreal Metros. Not sure if you're a hockey fan."

Apologetically, he shakes his head. "I am sorry, since moving to the states I am more of a football fan myself. Montreal, you said? What are you doing in Boston?"

Shane glances behind him at the green car, exhaling. "Starting over."

Ilya isn't quite sure what to say to that.

"Is this one you wanted to show me?" Shane gestures to the sedan.

Just as Ilya is about to say: "*this hideous thing? Of course not! I'd never do that to you!"* Shane speaks again.

"I like it." He walks around to the driver's side door, pursing his lips at the aged cloth interior.

"Shane," Ilya says flatly, "this car is a dump."

“Green is my favorite color,” Shane replies, unflapped. “Is it good on gas? The backseat looks roomy.”

Ilya falters. “You like this?”

“Sure.” Shane glances up at him. “Can we test drive it?”

“If you…want to.” Ilya hesitates, glancing at the tag on the front windshield. Jesus even for this soda can on wheels, it’s lightyears out of Shane’s price range.

“Oh.” Shane’s gaze follows his. “How much?”

Ilya huffs a quiet laugh. “You are supposed to try and negotiate, Shane, you don’t just ask me what you should pay.”

“I’ve never done this before,” Shane admits.

“You should also *not* say that.”

Shane exhales, hands going to his hips. He hesitates, grimacing. “Look, I’ll be honest, I don’t really have much money. I just need something to get us to and from. I’m desperate here, Ilya. Is there anything at all you can show me that’s in my price range? At this point, I don’t need it to do anything but run.”

Ilya is curious how a former NHL player could possibly not have any money, especially one who appears to still be pretty young, but he doesn’t say that.

Instead, he says, “we can do better than this big green trash can. Let me show you something.”

They walk a bit of the way back, until they come across a sleek black SUV. This one is newer, only five years old, with beige leather seats, a bluetooth radio, a backup camera, four-wheel drive, and carseat hooks in the back.

“Wow,” Shane says with big eyes. “This is way too nice, Ilya. I just told you-”

“It’s two grand,” Ilya says easily.

Shane’s head snaps toward him. “Excuse me?”

“Let’s give it a test drive, and see if you like it, hm?” Ilya points into the back windows. “It has DVD players in the seats. For the pup.”

The mention of the pup seems to soften Shane’s suspicion. “Alright, I guess. Can’t hurt to test it.”

Ilya trots off and returns with the keys, stopping in front of Shane, who is standing huddled in his hoodie against the cold wind. “Do you have your driver’s license?”

“Yes, here you go.” Shane passes it over.

Ilya glances down at the ID, and resists the urge to let out an extremely fond giggle. Shane's ID photo is, predictably, every bit as awkward and adorable as his in person presence. Standing before a blue backdrop, a shy smile splitting his lips, freckles visible over his nose, eyes unsure and reluctant.

"Nice photo," Ilya says absentmindedly.

Shane scoffs. "It's not nice to make fun of people."

With that, he climbs into the car. Ilya frowns and joins him, sitting in the passenger seat. Quietly, Shane begins adjusting his mirrors and seat, methodical and well-practiced. Ilya doesn't speak, letting him get comfortable before he breaks the silence.

"Comfortable?" he asks.

Shane nods, tilting his lips sideways. "Ten times more comfortable than a bus seat."

Ilya glances down at the address on the license. He isn't familiar with the street name, but the zip code isn't far. "I did not know bus routes went this way."

"They don't," Shane shakes his head as he puts the car into reverse, "I walked here today. But the bus is better for work and groceries."

Ilya frowns. It is way too cold to have walked here today, especially for a pregnant omega. *Protectprotectprotect.*

"I have to ask," Ilya murmurs, "your…alpha is okay with this? You are walking places alone and taking the bus? When you are carrying his pup?"

What Ilya *doesn't* say is that any alpha who would let that happen is not worthy of the beautiful man behind the wheel. He thinks insulting Shane's baby daddy might blow his sale.

"There's no alpha," Shane replies without taking his eyes off the road. He's taking them down a side street on the east end of the dealership.

Ilya frowns. "What do you mean? You are not mated to him, yet?"

Shane's lips tilt up again, this time the smile is less sweet, and tinged with a bitterness. "There just isn't an alpha."

Ilya takes a beat to process Shane's words. He can't possibly be understanding this correctly. Someone, some lucky son of a bitch, was given the gift of this gorgeous omega growing a pup for them and…didn't want it?

Impossible.

"You did not want to be with him?" Ilya asks. It is the only explanation that makes any logical sense- the decision being Shane's.

At that, Shane laughs. A dry, short sound, more like a bark. Not cute and sweet like his other laugh had been.

“I just spent three weeks in the hospital trying to recover from omega rejection sickness. Wasn’t really my choice.”

Ilya is dumbstruck. Speechless. He cannot fathom what kind of insane lunatic could have done something so terrible to this lovely omega.

“He is lower than scum,” is all Ilya can manage to bite out. His alpha instincts are teasing at the edges of his self control, the protective urge in him begging to do *something* to defend Shane’s honor.

Shane’s smile softens around the edges. “I think you’re right about that. But, it’s fine. Pup and I are doing okay, physically. I’m figuring it out. Step one was get a job, step two was my own place, step three is a car. I’m already blowing through the list. Don’t need some lower than scum alpha to do it.”

Ilya swallows back the slew of insults that he wants to hurl at whoever this useless dogshit alpha is. Instead, he forces his words to come out gentle, supportive.

“You are doing great.”

“You’re like, really nice and genuine for a car salesman.” Shane arches an eyebrow. “I was expecting, you know, some typical cocky alphas who reek of cologne and treat me like some kind of child.”

Shame builds up in the corners of Ilya’s mind. Shane is not wrong, about what to have expected. Ilya *usually* is one of those guys. He’s not sure why he suddenly feels so different around Shane.

“Is not untrue,” Ilya tells him, “we are all knotheads. Should not trust us within an inch of your life. If you leave today and go to another shop, please do not tell them you have never bought a car before.”

Shane chuckles. “I won’t. Thanks for the tip.”

“I am surprised by that, though.” Ilya taps his fingertips on the dashboard. “How old are you, to have never done this?”

Shane rolls his eyes. “That’s a rude question, isn’t it?”

“Only if you are old.”

A small laugh, sweeter this time. “I’m twenty-eight. And when I was a pro hockey player I kind of had…*people* to do this kind of thing.”

Ilya guffaws. *“People!* I did not realize you are a snob, Shane Hollander.”

“I’m not, I swear! I just didn't care about cars, so you know, I said whatever was fine and they made it happen.”

“I am starting to think you are scamming *me,”* Ilya muses. “Pro hockey player money, but you wanted to buy the big green trash can?”

The humor leaves Shane’s expression as quickly as it had dawned there. “There’s no money, trust me. I used what I had to start over.”

Ilya glances out the window as Shane reroutes the car back into the dealership parking lot. He is a very good driver- textbook.

“Starting over is very brave,” Ilya tells him as he parks. “I started over once too.”

Shane glances at him, and Ilya can see the palpable fear in his big brown eyes. “Yeah?”

“Yes. I moved from a different country too. It was very scary.” Ilya grins at him. “But it makes you…better. Stronger, if that makes sense. You will be okay.”

“Thank you.” Shane’s voice sounds genuinely touched, and he offers Ilya a blindingly beautiful smile. “The car is amazing, by the way. Super comfortable.”

“Excellent.” Ilya nods and turns his attention back to the vehicle. “Do you want to go in there and sign some paperwork?”

“Sure.” Shane turns the car off and hands Ilya the keys in exchange for his license.

They head inside, and Ilya gets Shane seated in one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs in the back office. He holds up a finger, as if asking for some time, and tells him he’ll be right back.

The paperwork is going to be a fucking headache.

Cliff finds him just as he’s managed to get it all worked out, about twenty minutes later. He’s just finished up a painful conversation with Tanner from finance, who seemed extremely dubious about his intentions, but went with him anyway.

“You’re selling something to that guy?” Cliff asks, as he steps into stride with Ilya.

“Mhm. The SUV out front.”

Cliff scoffs. “What? Rozanov, you don’t even get out of *bed* for a car that cheap. Why didn’t you upsell him on those new ones with the sunroof?”

Ilya shrugs. “He is a very shrewd negotiator.”

“Wha- hey, what the fuck?” Before Ilya can react, Cliff reaches over and snatches the paperwork from his hands. “Why is *your* information on this?”

“Marly, give it the fuck back!” Ilya reaches for the papers, cursing the fact that his colleague is a whopping six foot four, and he falls a few inches short.

“Are you buying the car?” Cliff asks, disbelief pouring into each word.

“No!” Ilya snatches the papers and tucks them against his chest. “He is making a down payment. I am just covering the rest.”

Cliff stares at him in disbelief. “*You* are loaning him the money? Why the fuck don’t you just let the bank do that? Why are you-” He pauses, studying Ilya’s face. “You’re not loaning it to him. You’re *giving* it to him.”

“Mind your fucking business, Marleau.” Ilya turns on his heel and heads for the office before Cliff can get another reply off. He shuts the door firmly behind him, a little guilty when the sound startles Shane, who’d begun to droop in his chair.

“I am sorry that took so long,” Ilya says apologetically, crossing around to sit behind the desk.

“Oh, it’s okay.” Shane rubs a hand across his eyes and clears his throat. “I’m always tired lately. The pup, and all. Not your fault.”

The urge flares up in Ilya’s chest again. *Protectprotectprotect.*

He slides the paperwork across to Shane, folded over except the few lines he needs to sign. “Just need your signature on these, and the card you will be paying with, unless you are using check.”

Shane glances at Ilya, then the stack of paperwork. “I should…probably read it, right?”

Ilya’s chest aches. He wants to tell Shane that if he were suspicious of someone, he certainly shouldn't *ask* their permission to double check the work.

“Is just standard things,” Ilya tells him, gesturing with the pen. “Up to you.”

Shane blinks. “Two grand? That’s all?”

“Yes, we are having a sale on SUVs.”

The omega hesitates. “No catch? I mean, the car isn’t going to like, explode when I drive out of here?”

“Shane. I would not sell you an exploding car. They do not actually make those, I don’t think.”

The omega looks dubious, his brows furrowed, nose scrunched up in a way that makes his freckles wrinkle cutely. But he also looks *exhausted.* Tired, worn out, and just ready to have step three of his plans done with.

“Okay,” he says reluctantly. He reaches into his pocket and produces a wallet. He passes Ilya a debit card, and Ilya begins processing the payment while Shane signs his name. There will be no monthly financing cost, as Ilya is covering the remainder of the balance in full today.

The title will be in Shane's name. Unless he decides to actually read through the paperwork and see the total cost, and Ilya's bank account information, he will never have to know.

He has been through so much. He deserves a good, safe car for him and his pup. It is the least Ilya can do. He can't *protect* him, but he can do this.

Shane signs the paperwork, pays his two-thousand dollars, and Ilya hands him the keys. There's a visible relief on his face that makes the tension in Ilya's chest settle, if only slightly.

"Step three is done," Ilya says with a small smile.

"I don't know what to say," Shane admits, "thank you. I wasn't expecting this to go so well for me."

"Pup will like the SUV," Ilya assures him. "It will last you, it is a good car. Not a big green trash can."

Shane smiles, his teeth grazing his lower lip in a way Ilya is sure he doesn't *intend* to be as tantalizing as it is. "That wasn't a trash can."

"Shane, it would have turned into scrap metal if you ever hit a curb. Not good for you and the pup."

"I don't hit curbs." Shane scoffs.

There's a pause, a brief beat of quiet between them. Neither of them is sure exactly what happens next.

"Well." Shane pushes himself into a standing position, keys tucked against his chest, his copy of the paperwork under his arm. "I should go, I have to get ready for work. Thank you for everything, Ilya."

"Of course. My number, in case you need anything." Ilya passes him a business card quickly. "In case the car explodes, I guess."

Shane laughs. "Let's hope it doesn't."

"Be safe, Shane. Take care of yourself, okay?"

"Yeah, for sure. Thank you again."

Ilya watches him head for the door, wringing his fists anxiously, until Shane turns his head at the last moment.

"Ilya?" he asks softly.

"Yes, Shane?"

"When you started over…how long did it take you to feel like…you had it all figured out?"

Ilya does not want to upset him by giving him the honest answer.

I still haven't figured anything out.

"You seem much smarter than me," he replies, smiling. "You will figure it out in no time."

Shane smiles back, tender and sweet. The smell of cinnamon apples is intoxicating. Ilya has to grip the edge of his desk to keep himself from moving toward it.

"See you around," Shane says, and he disappears behind the closing door.

Ilya only exhales once the scent of apples has finally receded.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

(.) (.) << its boobs

"Rozanov!"

Ilya glances up, surprised to see his boss, Dallas Kent, making his way over to his desk.

Kent is, for lack of a better word, a complete and total piece of shit. He's your typical cocky alpha- reeks of cologne, hair gelled back so slick it looks greasy, strides into a room with an unearned confidence that's nauseating.

He'd inherited the dealership from his late father upon his passing, and while Ilya has never once thought he's half as capable as Mr. Kent was, he does have to admit he's a bit jealous of the familial bond they must have had. The only thing Ilya inherited after his own father's death was an old junk car, a mountain of medical bills and his annoying brother's frantic phone calls.

"What can I help you with, Dallas?" Ilya turns his head to face the other man with an immediate tension in his shoulders. Everyone refuses to call him *Mr. Kent,* out of respect for his well-liked, late father. It drives him crazy, makes him feel deeply disrespected.

That *is* the goal, though.

"Explain yourself." Kent drops a stack of papers on Ilya's desk, and it takes a moment for him to realize it's the financial proceedings for the car he'd purchased three days ago. The car he'd *secretly* purchased for an omega man he'd known for all of five minutes.

That had been insane, he knows. He doesn't regret it at all, knowing that Shane and the pup are safely commuting around town without having to take the bus or walk in the cold. But, he definitely wishes he didn't have to explain himself to his douchebag boss.

"I bought a car," he replies simply.

"First of all, you can't *sell yourself* a car, Rozanov." Kent rubs a hand across his forehead. "Second of all, the title is in some random guy's name. What the hell is going on here?"

"Does it matter?" Ilya demands. "I paid for it, full asking price too. Just, no commission for me. Even better for the shop. What is the big deal?"

"Why did you pay for it?"

Ilya shrugs. “Just doing something nice, Kent. You have never heard of this?”

Kent stares at him with disbelief. “I’ve heard of doing nice things. I’ve never heard of *you* doing nice things. You’re a complete knothead.”

True, for the record.

“So?” Ilya demands. “The car is paid for, it is all above board. What is the problem?”

“The problem is, you can’t just do whatever you want!” Kent’s face flushes an annoyed shade of red, and Ilya is grateful they are both wearing scent blockers, or he’s sure it would smell like testosterone and alpha-fueled rage right about now.

Ilya crosses his arms over his chest, meeting Kent’s eyes with a firm stare. “So what? You are going to fire me? For buying a car?”

Kent’s eyes narrow. “Maybe I will.”

With a laugh, Ilya replies, “good luck with that. I have the highest numbers of anyone here.”

“You’re on thin fucking ice, Rozanov. No more weird shit, do you hear me?”

“Scout’s honor.” Ilya raises his hand like he’s reciting the pledge, a smirk tilting his lips sideways.

Kent curses under his breath and huffs away, papers abandoned on Ilya’s desk.

Curiously, Ilya picks the papers up and runs his fingertips over the small print. SHANE HOLLANDER. He wonders how the omega is doing. Is he enjoying his new car? Is getting to work much easier for him now? Does he feel safer, getting around? Is it easier on his body, to not have to walk or navigate the bus system?

“Dude.”

Ilya startles a bit, seeing his two colleagues Troy and Cliff, standing beside his desk.

“Do I have a sign on my face that says *bother me* today?” he demands.

“Did Kent just come over here and rip into you about buying a car for that omega?” Cliff asks.

“You bought a car for an omega?” Troy interjects, big blue eyes shocked. “That’s a new one, Roz, you don’t usually have to work so hard, do you?”

“It is not like that.” Ilya waves a hand dismissively. “He just needed a car. It was for him and his pup.”

Troy’s eyes bulge. “You bought a car for a *mated* omega?”

“No. Now mind your business, both of you. Vultures.”

“He’s lost his fuckin’ mind,” Cliff says, shaking his head. “We need to take him out. He needs to get laid.”

“Yeah, what's it been like twenty four hours?” Troy snorts. “Quite the dry spell, Rozanov.”

“I am going nowhere with you two,” Ilya says without much conviction in his voice.

“Tonight, *Luke’s,* eight o’clock.” Cliff points at both of them, then himself. “Need my wingmen.”

Troy rolls his eyes. “Even *that’s* not gonna save you, you ugly bastard.”

Cliff playfully flips him off as he walks toward the floor. Once the two of them are alone, Troy leans against Ilya’s desk, expression expectant.

“Don’t you have cars to sell?” Ilya asks, pointedly keeping his eyes on his computer screen.

“Why did you buy a car for some random omega?” Troy asks.

“Troy.” Ilya pinches his nose between two fingers, exhaling with as much patience as he can muster. “Please leave me alone.”

Troy sighs loudly, but he walks away.

The club is loud, music thumping as Ilya takes another sip from the dark liquor in his glass. On nights like these, he’s usually absorbed in the music, and on the prowl for an eligible beta to go home with.

Betas are safer for casual, one-off hookups. The biology is so much less intense, it makes things easier when he slips out unannounced the next morning.

Tonight, though, he can’t get something very specific off his mind. The smell of cinnamon apples, with the faintest whiff of vanilla. An awkward, shy smile. Choppy dark bangs, big doe eyes. A constellation of freckles over a pinstraight nose.

A gentle voice, bravely speaking of starting over.

Pull yourself together, he thinks, *you met this omega for five fucking minutes.*

And bought him a goddamn car.

He must really be losing it, like Cliff said. He doesn't get attached like this, not to anyone, but especially not to some pupped-up omega he just met. He likes things clean, uncomplicated, not messy with baggage. Shane is definitely carrying around a lot of baggage.

So is Ilya. Not that he’d ever acknowledge it.

Beside him, Cliff and Troy are each making their way across the dance floor, chatting up some innocent omegas. Troy has always leaned more toward the men, while Cliff usually

only goes for women. Ilya likes both, but with women somehow it feels…safer? He doesn't know why. He's never been in a serious relationship with a man before, only casual flings, and more fleeting than with women.

He never calls afterward, even when he promises he will. Easier that way, safer. He's not the kind of man most people would *want* calling anyway. He hasn't been for a long time.

Something catches his attention, a woman approaching. She's a beta, neutral smelling. She has curly blonde hair and big blue eyes, stark in contrast to the dark eyeliner smudged around them. She's smiling at him lasciviously. Her shirt is cut so low he can nearly see her belly button.

"Hi," she says over the music, extending a perfectly manicured hand in his direction, "I'm Emma."

Ilya appraises her with a wry grin. "I'm Ilya."

He fucks Emma a few hours later, in her apartment. She's beautiful, and very sweet. She offers him a few more drinks once they're inside, and he accepts because that's always made things like this easier. They drink more, and make out sloppily, his fingers tangling in her hairsprayed curls. Her apartment is as neutral smelling as she is, and he relishes in the autonomy he gets to have over his body when he's not suffocating under an omega's powerful scent.

He is in control, not his biology. It's better this way.

When they part, Ilya in the doorway, making sure he has everything he needs, Emma asks, "will I see you again?"

Ilya purses his lips. "Probably not. Is that okay?"

She nods. "Sure. Bye-bye."

She closes the door on him without so much as a second glance. Ilya cannot say he blames her.

The Uber ride home is brief, and he finds himself standing at the kitchen island. His place is large and flashy, adorned with expensive furniture and wall hangings. There are no personal photos or effects, and everything is unscented. He uses scent neutralizing soaps, never wanting to reek of *alpha* the way his father used to. There are scent patches stacked up in his bedside drawer, enough for the next year. Enough to make sure no one is ever unfairly intimidated by his biology, the way his father used to do.

It's easy. Clean. Neat. Straight lines and scentless edges. Quiet, unfulfilling, empty.

It's for the best, anyway.

He smokes a few cigarettes in the kitchen, not bothering to crack a window, and watches a hockey game on the TV. He's been catching them a lot the past day or two, when he can. He isn't sure where the urge came from. He's never been much of a fan before.

After nearly drifting off with a lit cigarette in his hand, he quickly stamps it out and shuffles over to the couch. Plopping down, cheek smushed into the armrest, his eyes drift shut to the sounds of hockey sticks and buzzers.

He wonders, vaguely, if any of *these* players smell like cinnamon apples.

It's a distant, bleary noise that awakens him.

Sunlight is streaming through the windows of his house, and he blinks himself into awareness as he realizes his phone is ringing. It's a Saturday morning, and he usually doesn't work weekends unless he is covering for someone. Maybe it is Kent calling to say they need him.

Ilya's fingers fumble across the coffee table until they wrap around his cellphone, and he brings it to his ear with a muttered, "I'll be right there."

"Excuse me?"

The voice on the other line gives him pause. His eyes shoot open, now painfully aware of the brightness of day.

"Shane?" he asks with disbelief.

"Is this Ilya Rozanov?" Asks the man on the other line. He sounds…quite angry.

"Yes," Ilya replies, "is this Shane?"

"Yeah, it's fucking Shane."

Oh.

"Is something wrong with the car?" Ilya rubs sleep from his eyes, trying to clear the grogginess and the beginnings of what is surely to be a killer hangover.

"Wrong with the- are you fucking kidding me?"

Ilya sits up straighter at that. He's a little shocked, to be honest, at the vitriol coming from the mouth of the timid omega he'd met the other day.

"Shane, what is the matter?"

"You fucking *lied* to me!"

"I- what-"

"You paid for this fucking car! And you let me think I was getting some kind of deal or something? You paid twenty fucking grand for this? And just gave it to me?"

Ilya exhales. "You went through the paperwork."

“Yeah, asshole, I went through the paperwork. I know to you I’m just a silly little pupped up omega, but I’m not stupid. I can fucking read.” Shane’s voice is heavy with thick, burning anger.

“Shane, of *course* I do not think that. I just- I was just trying to do something nice. You needed a car. The money is…not really much to me.”

“What is wrong with you?” Shane demands. “I’m not some pathetic omega charity case. I’m not going to, like, *owe* you something now. Is that what you wanted? Big strong alpha had to come in and save me, and now I’m in debt to you somehow?”

“Shane, no, no, please that is not-”

“Where do you live? I’m dropping this fucking car off today. And I want my two grand back.”

“Will you please slow down? You do not have to do that. I don’t want *anything* from you, Shane. I just wanted-”

“What’s your address Ilya? I’m not fucking playing around. I will leave this thing at your work and tell your boss what you did. I’m sure they wouldn’t be too happy about it.”

Well, he isn’t wrong.

Dejectedly, Ilya relays his address to Shane.

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.” The line disconnects before he can reply.

Fuck.

Ilya scrambles to his feet, catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror above the fireplace. He looks like a fucking disaster. His curls are disheveled, dark circles under his eyes, and his clothing is rumpled. He reeks of cigarettes and booze and BO.

Fifteen minutes.

The house is pretty clean, save for last night's cigarette butts, so he opts to take a shower instead. He scrambles up the stairs toward his en suite bathroom.

He’s just made it back into a pair of cotton sweats and a white t-shirt when a loud, thunderous fist slams on his front door. With a shaking exhale, he heads down stairs toward the source of that unpleasant sound.

The scent of apples hits him before he even gets the door open, and it takes everything in his power not to inhale deeply. He turns the knob and opens it, expecting to find Shane red-faced and furious.

Instead, he’s standing on the front doorstep, looking dumbstruck. His eyes are wide, one hand clutching the keys to the car, the other hovering protectively over his stomach. He’s dressed

for the weather in a pair of jeans and an oversized hoodie. He looks tired, but radiant in the morning glow.

Their eyes meet, and Ilya ventures his words quietly. “Hi.”

Shane’s head snaps back stiffly, and his big brown eyes search Ilya’s face for a moment, before he lets out a strangled, “you’re not wearing a scent patch.”

Ilya’s own gaze goes wide with realization, one hand coming up to clutch at his bare neck. Shit, he’d been in such a hurry he’d forgotten. He never wears them alone in the comfort of his own home.

What does he smell like, to Shane? Frightening? Intimidating? The reek of testosterone and douchey, full-of-themselves alpha? He’s sure it must be nauseating, considering how stiff and uneasy Shane looks.

“One second.” Ilya shuts the door and races for the stairs, heart thumping in his chest. He gets the scent patch affixed to his neck, and rushes back down to open the door again, half expecting to see the keys abandoned on the stoop.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “I am usually very good about that.”

Shane eyes him. “You’re apologizing?”

“Yes, for forgetting to put on a scent patch. I hope it did not disturb you too much.”

There’s a brief pause, where the other man seems to be debating his reply. His shoulders sag a little. “I don’t understand you.”

“What do you mean?”

Shane gestures behind him at the parked SUV, waving the keys around. “What is the fucking meaning of this, Ilya?”

Ilya glances between Shane and the car, throat dry. He isn’t sure what to say because there isn’t a rational explanation for why he’d do something like this. He doesn’t know Shane, and it’s not exactly a habit of his to be philanthropic anyway. He’s an asshole, plain and simple.

“You needed a car,” he replies, voice weak, “I was able to help. I do not know what else to say, Shane.”

Shane’s jaw clenches. He tosses the keys at Ilya’s feet. “I’m so fucking *tired* of you alphas. Always thinking you know what’s best, like we can’t think for ourselves or take care of ourselves. I went there to find a car in my price range that *I* could get. I wanted to accomplish step three of *my* plan! And you took that away from me! You made me feel like a moron. Do you understand how *stupid* and naive I felt when I read through the paperwork today?”

Ilya wilts immediately. “Shane, this was not my intention. I am so sorry. I just wanted to help, that’s all. It is not about-”

“It’s *always* about that.” Shane’s eyes look watery around the edges, but he blinks the tears back without letting them fall. The sweet smell of apples sours a bit, the air between them growing acrid and tinged with distress.

Protectprotectprotect, Ilya’s instincts scream at him.

Be quiet, he tells them.

“I’ve had enough of alphas making decisions for me,” Shane says, brows furrowing, like he’s trying not to let the emotions surface. “How dare you, Ilya?”

“You are right.” Ilya raises his hands in a complacent gesture. “I am sorry, I- I wasn’t thinking of it that way, Shane. I’m a fucking knothead. I was trying to do something nice, but as you can see, that is not something I am good at. I never meant it to offend you, or make you feel stupid. I would not want that.”

It looks like Shane has more to say, none of it pleasant, but he stops short, one hand coming down to press against his lower abdomen. His nose wrinkles, eyes tightening, like he’s in pain.

“Shane?” Ilya asks urgently, resisting the instinct to reach out.

Shane huffs out a strained breath. “It’s-I’m alright. I get these cramps sometimes- *ah*- it’s lingering stuff, from the rejection sickness.” He closes his eyes and grits his teeth. “It’s normal, *ah.”*

The smell of omega in distress is damn near suffocating. Ilya clears his throat to try and keep his composure, gently gesturing to the couch in his living room.

“Please, sit,” he says softly.

Shane cuts him a very dubious look, but must be uncomfortable enough to ignore his suspicions. He nods once, and limps inside, favoring his left leg. He lowers himself on Ilya’s couch with a slight grunt of pain.

Quickly, Ilya grabs him a glass of water and shuffles back, handing it to him. Shane looks at him gratefully and takes a few slow sips.

“Do you need me to call someone?” Ilya asks, his chest throbbing with the urge to *protectprotectprotect.*

“I’m fine.” Shane shakes his head, then his face flushes. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. Are you still in pain? Do you need a doctor? Is the pup okay?”

Shane is already nodding. “Yes, everything’s fine. It’s just lingering stuff, they said it would probably happen for a while. I’m taking all kinds of meds, but there's still symptoms and pain.”

Ilya's throat feels tight. The rejection sickness must have almost killed him, if he was truly in the hospital for so long. A pregnant omega being rejected so harshly by their alpha has taken lives before. Shane is lucky, all things considered.

And, justifiably wary of alphas.

Ilya sits across from him on the couch, wringing his hands together. "Can I apologize again?"

The omega studies him for a beat, then exhales softly. "No. I accept your apology."

"I really am sorry. I was not trying to…*do* anything but help you get a car. I swear."

"I believe you. I'm sorry I got so…heated." Shane furrows his brow. "I'm just wary of being treated like I don't have any agency. I don't like that, Ilya. It's the whole reason I'm starting over."

"Of course." Ilya nods firmly. "This was not my intention. I just wanted to help. But I am, eh, stupid." He grins, pointing to his head with a shrug.

Shane's lips twitch. "You aren't stupid."

"You are kind." Ilya arches an eyebrow. "Please tell me you will keep the car."

The omega's shoulders stiffen at that.

"Please," Ilya says before he can argue, "it was a gift. You need a car. It is not charity or something you owe me back, I promise. Just, please, for the pup. You should not have to take the bus with a car seat, Shane."

After another sip of water, Shane sighs loudly. His eyes dart up to meet Ilya's -deep and wary sheathed behind thick eyelashes- and he nods his assent.

"Alright," he murmurs, "I guess it would be stupid to give it back. I do need it."

"It is still your plan," Ilya insists, "I just contributed. So very little. Only a tiny bit. That is what friends do, ah?"

"We're friends now?" Shane asks, arching an eyebrow.

"Mm, I think, yes. I bought you a car and you yelled at me. We have done it all, right?"

Shane snorts out a brisk laugh. "Is that what friends do?"

"Do not tell me I'm your first one."

Another laugh, softer this time, more at ease. "You really have a way with words, is that why you became a salesman?"

Ilya smirks. "No, *that* is because of how sexy I am. Helps me sell lots of cars."

“I bet.” Shane sets his glass down on the coffee table, glancing around the living room curiously. “Do you live alone?”

“Yes. Do you?”

“Yeah. Well, I guess, no. The pup and me.”

“Ah, the pup takes up a lot of room, do they?”

Shane snorts again. “Not just yet.”

There’s a brief pause. Ilya isn’t sure what to say next. Normally he’s the one who always has some sort of comment to make, some way to break the tension, but this is uncharted territory, and his living room smells intoxicatingly of apples. His defenses are low.

“Thank you for putting on the scent patch,” Shane says, gesturing obliquely in the direction of Ilya’s neck.

“Oh of course.” Ilya’s fingers brush over the material. “I hope I was not too stinky.”

“You smell like orange syrup and sandalwood,” Shane says plainly.

Ilya stares at him. He was not aware of that.

“Um, I guess that could be worse,” Ilya replies with an unsure laugh.

Shane nods. “Mhm.”

“Do you ever wear patches?” he asks, nodding at Shane’s neck.

“I spent twenty eight years *obsessively* wearing them,” Shane says. “Starting over. I don’t hide anymore.”

Ilya smiles at that. “You have some fire in you, Shane Hollander.”

“Oh I’m full of it.” Shane shakes his head slightly, and starts to stand. “I should leave you alone.”

Please, stay, Ilya wants to say. He doesn’t want the smell of apples to go anywhere.

Instead, he gets to his feet as well, and nods. “Right. Let me grab the keys, so you do not have to bend over.”

Ilya shuffles to the front door and opens it, relieved to see the keys Shane had tossed at his feet are still sitting there patiently on the stoop. Shane joins him in the doorway, expression contrite, his cheeks that adorable pink color under his freckles.

“I’m sorry,” Shane says as Ilya hands him the keys, “I lost my head. I do that sometimes.”

“Shane,” Ilya tilts his head gently, “you are dealing with a lot, on *top* of carrying a pup. Some strange alpha misleading you is definitely something you are allowed to react to.”

Shane huffs out a heavy breath.

“Besides,” Ilya adds before he can reply, “I lose my head plenty, trust me.”

Understatement of the century.

“Doesn’t seem that way to me. Seems like you’re cool as a cucumber.” Shane studies him briefly. “Must be a sales guy thing.”

“Must be,” Ilya supplies softly. He doesn’t add that years of both suppressing his emotions and hiding behind a thin veil of sex and booze will do the trick as well.

Shane passes him in the doorway, hesitating briefly. His eyes dart to the kitchen table, then back to Ilya.

“You know, smoking is really bad for your health,” he says.

Ilya blinks, dumbstruck for a moment. He glances behind him at the ashtray on the kitchen table, then back to Shane. If it were anyone else saying this to him unprompted, Ilya probably would have told them to go fuck themselves.

But, looking at the reddened cheeks of this sweet, feisty omega, he can’t find any annoyance in him at the chastising.

“That’s…true,” he manages.

“If we’re gonna be friends, you can’t do that.” Shane nods at the ashtray. “Second hand smoke kills.”

At that, Ilya grins. “So we *are* friends, are we Shane?”

“Not if you smoke around me.”

Ilya laughs, throwing his head back. “You are so bossy!”

Shane is not laughing when he looks at him, but he *is* smiling, the corners of his curved lips tilted up cutely.

“I promise I would never smoke near you or the pup,” Ilya assures him, still grinning. “Will you promise not to yell at me again?”

“No way, what if you deserve it?” Shane shakes his head, smile spreading.

“I probably will.”

For a beat, they both just stand there like idiots, smiling at one another. It’s a stark contrast to the way Shane had shown up here today, but not one Ilya is at all upset about.

“Drive safely, Shane,” he says. “We will…maybe talk soon?”

“Sure, Ilya.” Shane glances down at the keys in his hands, then up at the SUV. He looks back at Ilya. “Thank you. I kind of don’t have the words to say what a life saver this is.”

“Thank me by getting home safe.” Ilya nods at his midsection. “And try to relax. You know pups inherit their parent’s anger issues?”

“I don’t have anger issues you asshole!”

Ilya laughs again, and Shane’s face flushes brighter red.

“Whatever. We’ll see who is laughing when you kick it from lung cancer by age thirty.”

Ilya cackles fondly. “You are a very unusual man.”

“I know. Bye, Ilya.”

“Bye, Shane. See you.”

Ilya watches him make his way toward the SUV, still walking with a slightly awkward gait. He loads up behind the wheel, and waves sweetly to Ilya before backing out of the driveway. It’s equal parts endearing and confounding, Shane’s mood swings.

With a heavy breath, Ilya shuts the front door and pauses, realizing the room still smells enticingly of cinnamon apples. He follows the scent into the living room, running his fingertips over the edge of the chair where Shane had been seated. He breathes in, filling his lungs with the irresistible aroma.

In one breath, he’s surrounded by the safety of his childhood kitchen, the warmth and fullness of a delicious dessert. Thoughts of last night’s horrible one-night stand leave, replaced with only the kind of ease your favorite dessert can bring. Shane’s scent, even in simple lingering breaths, is as comforting to him as his fondest memories.

Jesus Christ, he’s in fucking trouble.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

you may notice the chapter count went up ... *sigh*

i hope you enjoy, there's some fun stuff in store :-)

thanks for reading !! please be nice!!!

Ilya wants to know more.

His first instinct, in the days following Shane's departure from his living room, is to Google him. He's supposedly a former NHL star, right? So something should come up when Ilya searches his name. Maybe it will give him some insight into this strange, puzzling omega.

The thing is, Shane had told Ilya, pretty explicitly, how tired he is of having his autonomy stolen from him. How, the whole point of starting over was to make his own destiny. And if Ilya goes behind his back and fucking *researches* him, how is he any better than any alpha before who has violated Shane's sacred control over his life?

Ilya knows that this plight is not unique to Shane's experience as an omega. It is a common thing, in this world, for alphas to march in and take what they want, regardless of the omega's preferences or choices. It's happened to so many he knew.

It happened to his own mother.

She hadn't wanted to get married to some stuffy old military alpha, or bear his sons, or live her entire life under his strictly ruling thumb. It was expected of her, as the omega of the house, to bow to his will under any circumstances. She didn't have her own money, her own property, even her children belonged to *him.*

Things have gotten a bit better since the year Ilya was born, but not by a significant margin. He knows, even though *legally* omegas have all the same rights as alphas and betas, the stigma burned into each facet of each system of their world does not reflect that supposed equality.

It's partly why the instinct to Google Shane is so high. Ilya has never actually heard of any omegas playing professional sports. He doesn't know a lot about hockey, so he's not sure if it's much different than football or basketball, but he would be surprised to find out that was the case.

With Shane's size, being much bigger and broader than a typical omega man, and years of suppressants and scent patches, Ilya bets he could get away with passing as a beta. He

wonders, if maybe that's what Shane had meant when he said he was *done hiding.*

What *happened* to him to get him here? Pupped up and unmated after nearly dying from rejection sickness? Taken from a professional NHL player to a children's hockey coach? No money, seemingly no family, no support?

Whatever it was that led Shane to this, Ilya knows the sweet omega man did not deserve it. It *kills* a little, not being able to know, not being able to ask without feeling like he might be putting too much pressure on an already volatile new friendship, and not being able to bring the alpha who did this to some kind of justice.

It's all so unfair.

Still, there's a minor consolation in the fact that at least Shane is getting around town safely. Ilya couldn't do much, but he was able to do that. Thank god Shane had agreed to take the car. He is a sensible man. Beautiful, but smart too.

Ilya is at work today, his mind occupied with thoughts of anything besides selling cars. It's slow anyway, a Tuesday morning. Usually weekdays are taken up by bored house omegas who have nothing better to do than come spend money.

Today, that thought makes him cringe. It's an insensitive way to think, he knows this. But, there *are* a lot of omegas who come in on weekdays with nothing else to do but spend their alpha's money.

Maybe that's because they aren't allowed to have real lives of their own, he thinks.

Right. He might spend all day lounging around luxury car dealerships and shopping malls too, if all he was allowed to do was keep the house clean and look pretty.

His upsetting line of thought is interrupted by his cellphone buzzing. He opens it to see an unfamiliar number, frowning at the content of the message.

UNKNOWN: *You didn't tell me this thing had a hidden spare tire in a compartment in the trunk.*

Ilya's eyes go wide, and he quickly realizes this number is the one that had called him on Saturday. He adjusts the contact name immediately.

ILYA: *honestly I did not even know, fun bonus though!*

SHANE: *Super useful!*

ILYA: *wait, did you get a flat tire?*

SHANE: *Yep, go figure, fucking huge rusty nail in the parking lot of my apartment complex :|*

ILYA: *where? I will come change it for you.*

SHANE: *Ilya don't be ridiculous, I know how to change a tire. I already did it! That's how I found the spare.*

ILYA: *what about the pup?*

SHANE: *The pup didn't help at all.*

Ilya exhales a patient sigh. Shane is certainly good at pushing buttons, that is for damn sure.

ILYA: *are you supposed to be doing things like that? with the pup and the rejection sickness? is that safe for you?*

SHANE: *Do you think I picked up the car like the Hulk and changed the tire one handed???*

ILYA: *what is the point of having friends if you do not call them for help in an emergency?*

SHANE: *I'd hardly call a rusty nail an emergency, Ilya. What, now omegas can't change tires?*

ILYA: *will all kinds of respect for omegas being capable and strong, you are pregnant. shouldn't you take it easy?*

SHANE: *Eh, easy is not really in my vocab.*

ILYA: *no shit*

SHANE: *(-:*

Ilya exhales another loud sigh, shaking his head as he rereads the messages. He knows he shouldn't be so excited at the prospect of Shane texting him, but he's a little ashamed to admit that it makes him downright giddy. This beautiful, perplexing omega *wants* to talk to him? What could he have done to deserve such a fate?

ILYA: *where are you driving to anyway?*

SHANE: *Oh big day planned. Lunch, doctor's appointment, then work.*

ILYA: *doctor? Is everything alright?*

SHANE: *Do you always worry this much?*

Ilya almost informs Shane that he usually has no one worthy of worrying about, but he decides not to.

ILYA: *am not worried, just curious if your little tire changing adventure did any damage*

SHANE: *Ha-ha. Dick. Just a normal checkup. The pup is fourteen weeks along today.*

ILYA: *oh, this is a fun appointment then? You get to see the pup?*

SHANE: *It is kinda fun. Seeing the pup is fun. The bloodwork and tests and shit is not, but that's all part of it.*

ILYA: *does not sound much fun. you work in the evening?*

SHANE: *On weekdays, yes. The kids get out of school and come to me at the rink. Weekends I work early in the morning.*

ILYA: *you work every day?*

SHANE: *Yes, it's good money and there are a lot of teams so they always need the help.*

ILYA: *do you not need to rest?*

SHANE: *I will rest eventually.*

ILYA: *jesus you are ominous*

***SHANE**: ;p*

Ilya nearly bursts out laughing at the stupid reply. It seems so out of character for Shane, but he's let slip his wry, slightly silly sense of humor a few times, and it's utterly endearing.

"Ahem."

He startles, looking up to see Troy standing beside his desk, arms crossed over his chest expectantly.

"What, Barrett?" he demands in a sour voice, turning his phone facedown on the desk.

"Who are you texting?" he asks innocently.

"Mind your business, hm?"

"It's that omega from the other day," Cliff says as he pokes his head over from his own desk. "He's been thinking about him all day. I've tried to get his attention like five times."

Ilya pauses. He had *not* noticed that.

"Did you not just go home with someone on Friday?" Troy demands.

"Fuckin' insatiable," Cliff mutters with a laugh.

"Stop," Ilya says, "it isn't that way. He is just a friend. He is going through something. He needs friends."

Troy and Cliff exchange a glance.

"Right," Troy speaks first. "*You* are…being friends with him, with no ulterior motive?"

"Ulterior motive? Fuck's sake, Barrett, I'm not a Bond villain."

“You also don’t have any omega friends,” Cliff points out. “I got the impression you don’t like them very much.”

Ilya looks at them with disbelief. “What? You think I am prejudiced against them or something?”

“You never date them, either,” he retorts.

“I just haven’t happened to meet very many,” he says stiffly. His avoidance of omegas has always been out of personal restraint and a desire to never inflict any of his unpleasant alpha-ness on them, more than anything else. But he can see how it might look bad from the outside.

“So you made friends with this pregnant omega man, bought him a car, and now are texting him,” Troy recaps the information with his forehead wrinkled like he’s solving a complex math puzzle.

“We have a lot in common. We both like sports. He is a professional hockey player.” Ilya tips his nose up, tone defensive.

“What?” Cliff demands. “An *omega* playing pro hockey?”

“That’s unusual,” Troy agrees.

Ilya scowls at them. “You are accusing him of lying?”

“No one’s saying that,” Troy replies diplomatically.

“What was his name again?” Cliff pulls his phone out. “Shane something, right?”

“Stop that!” Ilya reaches for the phone, but Cliff is too quick.

“I got him! *Shane Hollander, former center for the Montreal Metros.”* Cliff reads aloud from his phone.

Ilya shakes his head. “I told you, see? Now enough!”

“Former?” Cliff wonders, then continues reading. “Wait there’s an article here- *disgraced NHL star exposed as an omega, contract terminated due to player’s deception of the entire league.”*

“Oh shit,” Troy says, eyes widening. “So he *was* a player and he was hiding his secondary gender?”

Ilya rubs a hand across his face, shaking his head. He should not be hearing this. If Shane wanted to tell him this, he would have.

“This was only a few months ago,” Cliff says, “I bet they found out he was pregnant. You should’ve *smelled* him the other day, Troy. It was impossible to miss.”

“Enough!” Ilya snarls, jumping to his feet and slamming the phone out of Cliff’s hand.

Troy and Marleau stare at him in disbelief.

“What the fuck, Roz?” Cliff demands, bending down to pick up his phone with a whine. “It’s cracked!”

Ilya exhales a shaking breath, trying to calm the anger coursing through his veins. He can feel the instinct flaring up in his chest again, *protectprotectprotect.* It makes no sense- Shane isn’t even *here,* but everything in Ilya’s body is desperate to shield him from this privacy violation, or from the knowledge of what he’s been through.

“Whoa,” Troy mutters quietly, “Ilya, dude, are you alright? You look…”

“He looks like he’s gonna pay for this!” Cliff interjects, waving his phone in Ilya’s face with frustration. “What the fuck?!”

Ilya’s chest heaves, and he tries to control his breathing. He’s acting out like some shitty knothead with no self control. He needs to calm down. Shane is not his mate, or the father of his pup, or anything more than a man he’s only just met. No one is actively harming him. Cliff just fucking Googled him, for god’s sake.

“I’m sorry,” Ilya chokes out, “of course, I will fix.”

“It’s fine, man.” Cliff shakes his head, stuffing the phone back in his pocket. “But you need to, like, see a doctor or something. You almost just alpha-ed out on me over this guy you barely know. You’d better hope you don’t get too attached. He’s having someone else’s pup.”

With that, Marly turns and heads back for his desk. Troy shoots Ilya one sympathetic, parting glance and follows suit.

Ilya sits back at his desk, and tries to steady his breathing. He knows it’s a bad idea, he knows Cliff is right that he shouldn’t get so attached, but he thinks about the smell of cinnamon apples to try and calm down.

SHANE: *my pup is the size of a lemon*

Ilya can’t help the fond smile that spreads his face as he looks down at the text from Shane. It’s seven in the evening, and Ilya is sitting in his garage with a cigarette in his hand. A half-empty glass of whiskey sits perched on the tool shelf, and he’s staring dejectedly at the engine in front of him.

Or, he was, until Shane texted.

ILYA: *wow, if I shake you hard enough can I get some lemonade?*

SHANE: *You are such an asshole.*

ILYA: *the pup is healthy, though? You are both healthy?*

Shane takes too long to answer this one. Ilya takes another slow drag from his cigarette, and does something that's probably insane. He presses the call button.

"Hi," Shane answers on the third ring.

"Hi. Is this okay?"

"Yeah, this is okay."

"Are *you* okay?"

Shane sighs heavily, clearing his throat. "I-it's complicated, I guess."

Ilya sits up straighter. "What does that mean, Shane?"

"The rejection sickness is- it's complicated, is all," Shane replies, his voice crinkly through the speaker. "Sorry, one sec, I'm walking to my car."

Ilya waits patiently, while Shane makes various ruffling sounds and then a door slams. "Okay, I'm back. Had to get my gear in the trunk."

"You are carrying hockey gear?"

"My caddy had the day off."

Ilya rubs his forehead. "Shane. You were saying, the rejection sickness?"

"Oh yeah. I'm, mentally you know, over him. Over it. All of it. But, my body kind of doesn't understand why there's no alpha around, if that makes sense. So, I have to take these pills, four in the morning and three at night. Hormones, and supplements and all kinds of shit to manage the symptoms and keep the pup healthy. But it's still…not…"

His voice falters on the word Ilya knows he's trying to say. *Not enough.*

"I'm so sorry," Ilya murmurs, brows furrowing.

"It's so fucking unfair," Shane says quietly. "I'm doing everything for them, for the pup. I'm eating right and exercising and trying to sleep, taking all these pills and it's still not good enough. *I'm* not good enough. My stupid fucking body thinks it needs an alpha to get through this."

"Bioligy is fucking shitty sometimes," Ilya agrees, taking another drag. Smoke billows out in front of him.

"Are you smoking?" Shane asks.

"Sorry," Ilya says, "long day. Do not worry, there is no second hand smoke through the phone."

Shane snorts. "Well, anyway, that was my day. Why was yours long?"

“Hold on. What did the doctor say? Is there anything that can be done to help you and the pup?”

“We’ll be fine. Just have to stick to the meds and try not to get overly stressed or overtired or overworked or…any of the things I’m doing. She said if it goes on like this I’ll be considered high risk for the rest of the pregnancy, and I might need to go on bed rest which would just… *really* fuck me over, so.”

Ilya is quiet for a few beats, breathing through his teeth, before he finally finds himself brave enough to ask, “where the fuck is this alpha, Shane? Does he know he is doing this to you?”

“He is long gone and it’s for the best, trust me.” Shane clears his throat. “When he left he took everything, all the money, literally everything. He didn’t care that I’d be penniless.”

“How?” Ilya demands. “It was your money, was it not?”

Shane pauses, exhaling a loud sigh. “I guess, um, to explain it to you, I’d need to tell you why I’m no longer in the NHL.”

Ilya winces. “Only if you want to.”

“It’s fine. I got pregnant, and the league found out I’m an omega. I’d been posing as a beta since I was a teenager. There’s no explicit rules *against* omegas playing, but as I’m sure you know, we don’t have a big presence in professional sports. So, they expelled me from the league for all the years of deception, saying I was playing under false pretenses. They said if I had just come out as an omega years ago, it would have been different, but the scandal… well.” He huffs a bitter laugh. “They were full of shit, anyway. I wouldn’t have won three cups as an omega.”

“You *did* win three cups as an omega, Shane.” Ilya’s voice softens ever so slightly.

“I just meant…the opportunities would have been really limited to me.” Shane clears his throat. “So, I lost my career, lost all my income. When I got home, he smelled that I was pregnant. We were keeping all of the money in his name because alphas tend to get better interest rates on savings accounts than omegas and betas, did you know that?”

“I… did not know that.”

“They don’t advertise it. But it’s true. Anyway, he…somehow convinced me, because of that, to keep most of the money in his name. Fucking stupid now, I know. He left and told me if I ever tried to track him down, he’d make sure I regretted it. He definitely meant it.”

Ilya’s teeth clench together so hard and abruptly it hurts. “Fuck, Shane.”

“I know. But, I really want to just put all of that awful shit behind me. Starting over, right? For the pup. I want it to be neat and clean and uncomplicated. I don’t even care about the money, or the hockey, I just want my pup to be okay.” Shane sighs again. “That probably makes me sound like such a cliche fucking baby crazy omega.”

“No, Shane,” Ilya says, his voice a little wrecked, “it makes you sound like an amazing, selfless parent. Your pup is very, very lucky.”

Shane sounds a bit taken with emotion himself, when he replies, “thanks, Ilya. You don’t know what that means to me.”

There’s a few moments where neither of them speak.

Then, Shane asks, “so, what are you doing anyway? What does suave car salesman Ilya Rozanov do in his spare time? Other than buy cars for broke omegas.”

Ilya manages a weak laugh. “That was only for you, *milyy.* I have other things I do for fun.”

“Did you just call me darling?”

Ilya goes utterly still. “You…understood that?”

“My friend’s girlfriend is from Russia. She has the same kind of accent as you. That’s what she calls all of us. Darling.” Shane’s voice softens. “Haven’t heard that in a while. That was nice.”

“Ah, yes we use it a lot, term of endearment,” Ilya lies, “I call my friends at work this too. Is, um, not very serious to us.”

“Of course.”

“Anyway. I am in my garage. Yes, I am smoking a cigarette. I am working on rebuilding my dad’s old car. I had it shipped here after he died. It has not run since I was twelve.”

“Oh, wow! What kind of car is it?”

“It is a 1977 Lada Niva, have you heard of this?”

“Oh, I’m kind of shitty with car stuff. I haven’t.”

“It is hideous. Yellow paint. I will send a picture.” Ilya angles the phone to snap a photo and send it to Shane. “Did you get it?”

“Yep, just got it now. I don’t think it’s ugly. I like yellow.”

“I thought you liked green?”

“I can only like one color?”

“You like booger colors, Shane.”

“If you don’t like the car, or the color, why did you ship it all the way here to fix it up?”

Ilya pauses at that, considering Shane’s question. Honestly, he had no good answer for Shane, other than it was the car his mom raised them in. It’s the car she took Ilya to the market in on Saturday mornings, and the one he helped her wash when the sponge was too big for his

hands and soap got all over his shirt. The car he sneaked treats into the backseat of when they went off for one of their picnics, just the two of them.

“I have always liked cars,” he says into the receiver, leaning back against his toolbox. “I have rebuilt a few, for fun projects. My dad died and I got the car, and I figured…another project would not hurt.”

“I’m sorry about your dad,” Shane says.

I’m not, Ilya thinks dryly.

“Thank you,” he replies. “Anyway, hopefully I can get it running this year. I keep putting it off. It is a big job by myself.”

“Well, I’m not great with cars, but I can hold a flashlight and turn a wrench. If you ever need a hand, I do kind of owe you one.”

Ilya can’t help the small smile that spreads across his face. “You owe me nothing, Shane.”

“Then call it a favor.” Shane laughs quietly into the receiver. “What, you don’t want my help?”

“I’ll take your company,” Ilya says, “I am not letting a pregnant omega work on a car. Sorry, Shane, we have to have *some* compromise here.”

“So I’ll just sit there and watch while you do all the hard work?”

“That would be perfect, yes.”

Another soft, *beautiful* laugh. “I guess it wouldn’t kill me to take it easy once in a while. For the pup.”

“For the pup,” Ilya agrees.

“What about your mom?” Shane asks, a little abruptly.

Ilya is not prepared for the question. He goes still, fingers tightening around the phone. The smoke billowing in a halo around his head suddenly feels suffocating. The cross around his neck weighs a million pounds.

“She is dead too,” he responds, barely above a whisper.

“Oh, jeez, Ilya. I’m really sorry.”

He almost manages a smile at Shane’s bumpy, awkward reply. He’s really not very smooth, is he?

“Is okay,” Ilya says, “was a long time ago. How about you, anyway? Are your parents excited to have a grandbaby?”

Shane hesitates for a long while, before he says, “yeah I think, probably.”

“Probably?” Ilya arches an eyebrow, stamping out the butt of his cigarette under his sneaker.

“I haven’t seen them since everything went down,” Shane admits. “I left Canada as quickly as I could. My agent helped me get away, somewhere no one would find me. I have no ties out here, no one would expect it, so.”

“Would they not be good about it?” Ilya asks. He can’t imagine having a pup on the way and not talking to his mother about it, if she were still alive.

“I…” Shane sighs. “It’s complicated. All they ever wanted for me was to be successful, to be *more* than just some omega. Now that I’ve lost everything, and gotten myself pupped up with no mate…I’m kinda their worst fears realized.”

“Shane. I am sure that is not true.”

“You haven’t met my mom.” Shane laughs awkwardly. “Anyway, you know, family. Complicated sometimes.”

Doesn’t Ilya know it?

“You are right,” he agrees, “it can be complicated.”

“I hope it’s not like that with me and my pup. I hope we’re just…happy.”

Ilya’s expression softens. He glances over at the ugly yellow car taking up space in his garage. Broken, and if he’s being honest, probably unfixable. Not dissimilar to his relationship with the dead man who owned it.

“You will be,” he tells Shane, with complete certainty in his voice. “You will be happy. Both of you.”

“I’ll do my best.” Shane hums under his breath. “I’m home now. I should probably eat something and get some sleep.”

“Yes, you absolutely should. Thank you for…telling me all of that. I am sure it isn’t easy.”

“Thanks for listening. You’re the first alpha I’ve ever met who…” Shane hesitates. “You’re just, really nice. I wasn’t expecting that. I’m sorry if that’s super offensive.”

“No, it is right. Most of us are shit.” Ilya smiles dryly. “I am not excluded from that.”

“I disagree.”

“Well, you are probably very exhausted. Growing a pup, training future NHL players, lots of work.”

Shane laughs. It’s more tired this time, but still gentle and at ease. “Maybe. Goodnight, Ilya.”

“Goodnight, Shane.”

The line disconnects. Ilya sets his phone down beside him, resting his elbows on his knees and trying to make sense of the intense conversation he’d just had. The more they talk, the less and less Shane feels like some stranger. He’s beginning to really feel like…a *friend.*

A friend whose scent makes Ilya feel safe, and at home, and comforted in more ways than he has in years. A friend who is unspeakably beautiful, and kind, and funny and smart and complex and-

And, fuck, Ilya is in so much fucking *trouble.*

But, there is nothing he can do about this tonight. So, he lights another cigarette, and stares with distaste at the ugly yellow car.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

ok im getting way ahead of myself writing and posting these but work has been slow *knock on wood* so ive been abusing my company computah to write omegaverse yaoi fanfic yayyyy <3

i hope you enjoy and thank you for reading if you have so far :) im having so much fun with this stupid ass au i appreciate than anyone else is enjoying the journey!

Over the following weeks, Ilya learns some things about his new friend Shane.

1. *Shane likes routine. He starts every morning the same way. A light jog -turned walk, as of late due to the pregnancy- a small breakfast of a smoothie, and some stretching. He loves to exercise.*
2. *Shane does not eat junk food. He believes it is the devil. It is the strangest thing in the world.*
3. *Shane has a whip-smart sense of humor. He is clever, and sarcastic. He can keep up with Ilya going a mile a minute on banter. It's absolutely thrilling.*
4. *He is passionate. Whatever fueling love he had for the NHL has since been transferred to how much he cares about the kids he's coaching now. He ends each shift by telling Ilya about something new one of his students accomplished, and he does it with a big crinkly smile on his face.*
5. *He doesn't like to show when he's afraid. When his doctor's appointments make him nervous, or he thinks too much about the future, he puts on a very brave face and pretends he has it all under control. Sometimes it's very obvious that he does not.*
6. *He is a very difficult person to not want to be around.*

They have been hanging out and texting every single day. It was a bit weird at first, neither of them knowing exactly what to expect from spending extended time together. But gradually it's just begun to…make sense. They enjoy each other's company a lot. Ilya likes Shane, and not just because of his almost ethereal beauty, or his homey apple scent.

Shane is a good person. When Ilya is done spending time with him, he feels lighter somehow. Like the weight of the world isn't pushing down on his shoulders, slouching him into a miserable state.

It's really fucking nice.

He knows this is unusual. An alpha and a pregnant omega carrying someone else's pup spending so much time together. Most alphas cannot stomach the idea of being there to support another alpha's pup.

It is no big deal though, really. It is not like Shane is Ilya's boyfriend or anything. They are just friends. He can be friends with whoever he wants. It's really fine, it's not a big deal at all. Just friends is completely fine. Ilya has never needed anything more.

He's just finished the paperwork on a pricey sedan he'd sold earlier today, when his phone buzzes. He smiles in spite of himself, when he sees the name on the screen.

SHANE: *I was thinking something.*

ILYA: *and this is a first for you?*

SHANE: *Don't be an asshole rn*

ILYA: *what were you thinking, Shane?*

SHANE: *Do you have any experience building furniture?*

Ilya pauses, pursing his lips.

ILYA: *some yes, what are you building?*

SHANE: *Well, I was in the middle of building everything in my apartment, but my doctor told me zero heavy lifting, like at all. I asked her if I could keep putting everything together and she told me to ask for help.*

SHANE: *I don't really have anyone to ask…*

ILYA: *send me your address. I will come build furniture after work.*

SHANE: *Thanks, Ilya. I'll make it worth your while!*

Ilya swallows thickly at that, trying to temper his expectations. By "make it worth his while" he's sure Shane means just some takeout dinner and a night of good conversation. That is truly fine. That is enough. It *has* to be enough.

Ilya had made plans to go out for lunch with Troy and Marly, who are both starting to get concerned about all the time he's been spending with Shane. He hasn't been out to the club with them in weeks, and he's sure they're starting to think their once cool friend has gone straight edge.

They invite Zane Boodram, the head of mechanics, and his protege Luca Haas. Normally, the parts guys and the sales guys don't have much in common, but their mutual hatred for their boss Kent does wonders to bring the departments together.

Zane is an alpha, just like Troy, Marly and Ilya. He wears a scent patch like the other three, out of respect for others. His wife Cassie is an omega, who is currently eight months pregnant

with their first child. Ilya has never heard Zane say a bad word about her, and when she comes by the shop to have lunch with him, he's fiercely respectful and protective of her. It's nice, Ilya thinks. It works for them and it's not…unbalanced. Not unfair, like his own parent's relationship had been. He bets that it was hard to find for both of them.

Luca is younger, single and unmated. He also wears a scent patch, but Ilya assumes he's a beta because everything about him is neutral. He doesn't talk much, a bit of a shy kid, but whip smart from what Ilya has heard. He spends most of his time with his head down back in the shop, and doesn't go near the alphas in the salesroom much.

Ilya doesn't blame him. Most alphas are intolerable to *him* and he is one. He's sure it's twice as unpleasant if you're not. None of them would mess with the kid, though. He's a nice guy.

They crowd around a booth in a Mexican restaurant uptown, ordering margaritas they shouldn't be having halfway through a workday, and devouring free chips. Their server, an omega woman with a chipper voice and a low cut work branded shirt, looks apprehensive as she approaches. Ilya doesn't blame her. He too is a little nervous about how his alpha counterparts are going to treat her.

It's not like anyone advertises it, but omegas are the most disrespected secondary gender. The lowly breeders, the weak, impish, pathetic ones who need their alphas so badly they could actually die if they're rejected by them. To most of the world, they're considered weak and unserious.

Ilya can't help but think of Shane. Shane who is tall and strong, who is fierce and brave and smart. Who is none of the stereotypes that landed omegas with their lack of respect in the first place.

His mother wasn't like that either. She was strong too, brave. That didn't end up mattering, in the end.

He shakes his head slightly, trying to clear it. Everyone else is ordering. He looks down at the menu and tries to get his thoughts together.

One of the things he hadn't expected when he left home was how much he was going to miss the food he was used to. He loves pizza and cheeseburgers as much as the next guy, but he'd be lying if he said he didn't wish there was a quick, convenient place to get borscht whenever he wants.

Ilya orders fajitas, and turns his attention to the fishbowl margarita in front of him. It tastes like Tequila and salt and bad decisions.

"Glad to see you're still any fun, Roz," Cliff says, nodding toward his drink. "I was about to ask Troy if you'd checked into AA or something."

Bood arches an eyebrow, gesturing to his own margarita. "If Rozanov can quit, there's no excuse for the rest of us."

Ilya snorts. "No one is quitting anything. I have been busy, that's all."

“Busy with that omega he bought a car for,” Marly mutters.

“Whoa.” Bood glances between them with disbelief. “You *what?”*

“Oh my god.” Ilya pinches the bridge of his nose between two fingers. “Do we have to talk about this?”

“He’s in love with an unmated, pregnant omega,” Troy says to Bood.

Luca’s head snaps up in Ilya’s direction, surely with judgment.

“I have made a friend,” Ilya replies with, what he considers, immeasurable patience. “He happens to be an omega, and he is expecting. It is not national news, Jesus.”

When he looks back up, Bood is studying him intently.

“What?” Ilya demands.

“Nothing.” Bood shakes his head. “Just, you’d better be careful, Roz. Getting too attached, you could catch a phantom mating.”

“What’s that?” Luca asks, brows furrowing.

“It’s when an alpha and omega spend a lot of time together,” Bood explains, taking a large sip from his drink, “the alpha’s body gets accustomed to the omega and tricks the alpha into thinking they’re mates, even if they aren’t.”

Troy shudders. “What’s that do to you?”

Bood shrugs. “Being mated to Cassie is the best feeling in the world. If I felt that and she didn’t…man, I don’t even *know* what I’d do.”

“This is not going to happen.” Ilya waves his hands with annoyance. “You are all so dramatic and stupid. Alphas and omegas can be just friends, da?”

“Of course!” Bood agrees. “I have lots of friends who are omegas.”

“Rozanov bought this guy a *car,”* Cliff reminds them. “Friends don’t do that.”

“My friends definitely don’t,” Troy grumbles.

“Friends should help you out!” Ilya insists.

“Okay, well we’re your friends too,” Cliff says. “Why don’t you come out with us tonight?”

“I…cannot.”

“Why?” Troy asks.

He exhales. He’s gonna hear it for this. “I am helping Shane build furniture.”

The table goes quiet. The ribbing he was expecting doesn't come. Instead, the other alphas and Luca all look…sympathetic.

"What?" Ilya demands.

"You are helping him build furniture?" Bood asks. "Like, a crib?"

Ilya hesitates. Shane hadn't *said* he was building a crib, but…it would make sense, wouldn't it? He's going to need one.

"That's nice of you, Roz," Bood speaks again, voice careful, gentle. "I'm sure you know what you're doing."

Cliff and Troy share a glance that says they both disagree with that statement, but they're kind enough not to comment any further. Luca looks down at his plate and doesn't say much.

Ilya sighs into his margarita. He should not have agreed to lunch with anyone besides Shane.

It's after dark when Ilya pulls his car into the dingy apartment complex Shane had sent him the address to. He's wary as he parks and exits, double checking that the doors are locked. The place is…well, not as nice as Ilya's.

As he makes his way up the brick steps to Shane's second-floor apartment, he wrinkles his nose. The stairs are in a state of disrepair, crumbling brick and uneven footing. The railing is a rusted joke. The light outside the door flickers ominously. He does not like the idea of Shane navigating these stairs in the dark while pregnant.

Hesitantly, he knocks on the door.

It takes a few moments before it opens, and he's greeted by the lush scent of sugary apples. Shane's there, smiling at him, looking utterly *stunning* in the dim orange light of his porch. His skin is glowing under the smattering of freckles on his face, a blush of life tinting his cheeks rosy pink. The dark circles under his eyes don't detract from how beautiful he is, despite Ilya's concern that he looks pretty exhausted. His dark hair is disheveled, and he's wearing a pair of gray joggers with a t-shirt pulled over.

The most noticeable thing is, though, it's the first time Ilya has really noticed his bump. He swears it was not this big the last time he saw Shane, but usually they're both dressed for the cold weather. Here, in just a t-shirt, the slope of his round middle is obvious.

He supposes it makes sense. Shane should be about twenty-weeks along now. He *should* have a little bump. The pup should be making themselves known. That means they are healthy and growing, just as they should.

Still, the sight of it makes his heart flutter in his chest. That peculiar instinct, *protectprotectprotect,* flares up again, insistent on being felt. Ilya stuffs his hands into his pockets and tries not to breathe in Shane's intoxicating smell. His self control feels like it's perched on razor thin wire. All he wants to do is reach over and gather the omega up into his

arms, shield him from mean alphas and unsafe staircases and everything that might upset the gorgeous man standing in front of him.

But he can't do any of that. He shouldn't *want* to, with his friend. Shane, while beautiful and fantastic and everything any alpha should ever *hope* for in a partner, is not his. He is just a friend.

"Hey," Shane greets him, voice soft around the edges, sleepy and gentle. "Thanks for coming."

"Your stairs." Ilya gestures behind him with his brow furrowed. "You really need to be careful."

Shane follows his gaze, perplexed, as if he hadn't even thought about that. "Oh, yeah, they're a little wobbly."

"Wobbly?" Ilya demands. "You need to talk to maintenance. They have to fix for you. It is not safe, you are carrying a pup."

Shane arches an eyebrow at him. "You're really passionate about building codes all of a sudden, Ilya."

He narrows his eyes. "Just, be careful."

"Of course." Shane steps aside. "Come on in."

Ilya accepts the invitation and walks in, hearing Shane close the door behind him as he scans the apartment. It's less of an apartment and more of a *box.* It's a studio layout, with a small kitchenette, a two-seater sofa pressed up against the back wall, and a full sized mattress on the floor on the opposite wall.

Ilya turns to him with disbelief. "You are sleeping on the floor?"

Shane shakes his head. "No, that's my mattress. Bed frame is on the list tonight, actually."

A whine threatens to rise from Ilya's throat at the thought of Shane curled up on this mattress on the floor. He stamps it down, teeth clenching with resistance.

"I know," Shane says before Ilya can reply, "it's a dump. You should have seen where I was living before. Makes this place look like a closet."

Ilya turns to look at him, eyes burning. "Have you thought of contacting someone? Friends? Your parents? Or-"

"No." Shane cuts him off, jaw clenched, expression darkening. "I'd rather live in squalor than go back to my ex begging for money. I will figure this out. I don't need it to be perfect. I just need it to be mine."

"I can understand that," Ilya replies gently. "But don't you think your parents might be worried about you?"

Shane shrugs, arms crossing over the swell of his belly. “They didn’t come visit me in the hospital for three weeks when I was at death’s door. That got the message across how they feel about all of this.”

Ilya’s eyes soften. “You told them you were there and they did not come?”

At that, Shane shifts on his feet. “I mean, *I* couldn’t tell them about it because I was so fucked up.”

“But they are your emergency contacts?”

Shane hesitates. “No, um, my ex was. I know the hospital called him to see if he’d come help me but he refused.”

Ilya meets his eyes. “Shane, have you considered that maybe he did not *tell* your parents what was going on? Maybe they did not even know you were sick.”

Shane’s expression goes stormy. “They didn’t hear from me for three weeks, that wasn’t enough to at least *try* to find me?”

“How do you know they did not try? You came here right after, no? Without telling anyone?”

“What are you doing?” Shane demands. “Why are you- it’s none of your business, okay?”

Ilya nods quickly, contrite. Shane is right that it’s not his place to try and intervene with his family matters. All Ilya knows is that if he had one last chance to see his mother before losing her forever, he’d have taken it at any cost. He can’t imagine her still *being here* and choosing to shut her out.

But, Shane is not his mate. The pup is not his. None of this is his place.

“Of course, I am sorry.” Ilya holds his hands up placatingly. “Let’s build furniture, mm? What do you want to start with?”

Shane shows him to the living room, where there is a coffee table in pieces on the floor, surrounded by bubble wrap, freshly unpacked. Beside it is a box with a bed frame, and a dresser. No crib, thank fucking god. Ilya wasn’t sure how he’d contend with doing something *that* intimate for Shane’s pup.

He tells Shane to sit on the couch while he squats down to examine the coffee table pieces. Curiously, he asks, “is there a manual?”

“No, sorry, I got all this stuff at a garage sale. Some hoarder lady who had a bunch of stuff that still had the box, but opened. She was missing some things though. I got screws at the hardware store, there should be enough at least.” Shane scoots to the edge of the couch. “If you let me, I can-”

“No, please sit, relax.” Ilya waves a hand. “Have you had dinner?”

“Not yet.”

“I will order us something.”

“No! I’ll cook. Or I can order it. It’s the least I can do-”

“Okay.” Ilya interjects, knowing Shane needs to do *something* so it feels less like charity. “I like anything. What are you craving? Probably broccoli and dry chicken, da?”

Shane rolls his eyes. “You know, your body is a temple.”

Ilya snorts. “Do not tell that to my body, I like to eat.”

“That actually reminds me.” Shane pushes himself up off the couch and makes his way across the apartment. Ilya tries not to smile fondly at the faintest beginnings of a tiny waddle in his movements. “I got you something.”

“You got me something?” Ilya leans back on his heels. “It is not my birthday.”

“It’s not that kind of something.” Shane returns with a small white pack. He hands it over to Ilya, whose eyebrows arch as he reads the label.

“Nicotine gum,” he says dryly, “just what I wanted.”

“It’s supposed to help you stop smoking,” Shane explains, hovering by the couch with his hands cupped under his belly. “It’s still not *good* for you, but it's better than inhaling all that smoke.”

Ilya’s mouth twitches, and he looks up at Shane, smiling softly. “You got me gum to help me stop smoking?”

Shane nods. “I don’t want you to die of black lung or something.”

With a quiet huff of a laugh, Ilya shakes his head. “Shane, I have not smoked in two weeks.”

“You haven’t?” Shane’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“No, I ah, thought about what you said. Second hand smoke *is* very bad. My father always smoked around us, and my mother hated it.” He runs his thumb over the label on the gum pack. “I probably should have quit a long time ago, anyway.”

Shane’s eyes are all big and soft when Ilya looks back at him. “You just quit? Cold turkey?”

“It is killing me, but yes.” Ilya chuckles. “I will take the gum though, thank you.”

“No way!” Shane reaches forward and snatches the pack from him. “You’ve gone two weeks with *no* nicotine, I’m not reintroducing it to you! It’s not just the smoke that kills you, Ilya!”

Ilya laughs again, this time looser, more light. “You are so ridiculous!”

Shane tucks the gum away in his pocket. “Your will power is very impressive. Quitting smoking is hard and you are just doing it. Seriously, that’s kind of amazing.”

Ilya looks at Shane's beautiful face, glowing in the dim orange lamplight, having to strongly resist the urge to stand up and kiss him stupidly.

Here's to hoping his willpower is half as good as Shane thinks.

Shane falls asleep about an hour after the takeout salad bowls, and ten minutes into Ilya starting to build the dresser.

Ilya can't help himself but to stop and look, still grumpily picking lettuce bits out of his teeth because they had to order something *wholesome* for dinner instead of the pizza he'd suggested. Despite his annoyance at the *completely unsatisfying* dinner, he can't help the warmth fluttering in his chest at the sight of Shane, slouched over on the couch asleep.

He is truly the most beautiful person Ilya has ever met. And now, curled around his cute little belly, strong arms protectively folded over the pup, Ilya thinks he might be the most adorable thing to ever walk the earth.

What he cannot fathom is how some stupid alpha could have ever left his side. Even upon hearing it had made Shane sick, not showing up at his bedside, even to save his life? What kind of fucking monster is this guy? What was a guy like that ever even *doing* with Shane Hollander?

Ilya studies his sleeping face, sorrowful and frightened, even in a state of rest. Shane has been through so much. All Ilya wants to do is take the pain and fear, bottle it up and throw it out the window. Shane does not deserve to be burdened with it.

In his sleep, Shane makes a small noise, a huff of discomfort. His hips adjust slightly. Ilya goes stone-still, watching him with wide, concerned eyes. After another beat, Shane lets out a small, pained whine.

The sound is unbearable. Ilya's hands come up to instinctively cover his ears and shy back. The sound of Shane's unrestrained displeasure is painful, ringing in Ilya's ears sharply.

He has to do something to fix it, *now.*

Ilya moves in the direction of the sound, reaching a tentative hand out to touch Shane's arm. The skin is warm, *too* warm, and feverish. His brows furrow with concern, as he gently rubs Shane's arm a few times, until the omega's eyes flutter open.

"Alpha…" Shane whispers, clearly still muddled by sleep and discomfort.

"Shane," Ilya murmurs, "you are very warm, and you seem to be in pain. What is going on, are you alright?"

Shane's lashes flutter, and he blinks himself more into awareness. "Hm, *ah*." His hands tighten around his belly.

"Shane?" Ilya repeats, more urgently this time.

“Need…” Shane winces. *“Ah*, sorry, it’s the cramps. It hurts, and *m’hot.”*

Something clicks. “The rejection sickness? You are in pain? You feel like you have a fever.”

The omega nods, expression still wrinkled up with pain. “Always at night. I have pills. Need my pills.”

“This happens every night?” Ilya asks in a haunted voice.

“Mhm, yeah. Need the medicine. There’s a few pills. Green bottle, and the b-blue bottle *ah, fuck.”* Shane lets out another whine, this time louder and more high-pitched.

Ilya moves forward, instinct taking over. His brain is screaming at him *protectprotectprotect.* He has to *do something.*

“The pills, Ilya,” Shane rasps, “please.”

Right. The medicine. That will help. That will give Shane something Ilya can’t.

Ilya scrambles into the kitchen, his own skin feeling hot and prickly. He hunts for the bottles Shane described, and fills a glass with water. The hair on the back of his neck is standing straight up as Shane lets out another whine.

Unable to help it, a small noise of discontent churns out from Ilya’s chest as well. He quickly clears his throat to cover it up, he cannot have Shane know exactly how painful this is for him.

He brings the meds back to the couch, kneeling in front of Shane as he shakes them all out into his palm per the directions on each bottle. When he presses them into Shane’s palm, it’s burning hot.

“Take them, please, Shane,” he urges.

Shane nods and swallows the handful dry, accepting the glass of water afterward. He takes a few sips, then passes it back to Ilya in a shaking grip.

Ilya sets the glass on the freshly built coffee table, and turns back to Shane, who is still feverish and whining.

“Why isn’t it working?" he demands.

“Takes some time,” Shane replies in a haggard voice.

“What can I do?” Ilya asks desperately. He can not bear another second of this.

“Can’t do anything,” Shane whimpers, “no alpha. My body’s confused. It’s betraying me.”

“The pup?” Ilya asks frantically, hands hovering over Shane’s midsection, though he doesn't touch.

“She’s okay,” Shane murmurs, his hand splayed protectively over his round bump.

“She?”

Shane’s lashes flutter, and he manages another weak smile. “Oh yeah, forgot to tell you. Pup’s a girl. Just found out.”

A *girl*. A little baby girl. A tiny little version of Shane, with his freckles, and his big brown eyes, and choppy pigtails.

Ilya’s heart does something strange. For a moment, it feels like it’s being squeezed in a vice. It’s so painful he forgets how to breathe. He tries desperately to inhale, but his lungs are restricted.

He’s distracted from his own issue when Shane whines again, throwing his head back against the pillow. He looks downright miserable.

It is not a conscious thought, or choice. It is not a decision Ilya makes. His biology takes over, then, and he climbs on to the couch, pulling Shane into his arms.

Other than a slightly startled gasp, Shane does not object. Instead, his body goes completely limp against Ilya’s chest. His face burrows into the warm skin there, his pinstraight nose nudging against the scent patch on Ilya’s neck. Ilya quickly rips it off, letting Shane smell his calming pheromones. The omega’s breaths steady, going from frantic and pained to calm, slow, easy.

“There you go,” Ilya murmurs, smoothing his hand down between Shane’s shoulder blades. His skin feels cooler already. “There we go, yes, Shane, is that better?”

“Mm, alpha.” Shane noses his neck again, his voice breathy and content.

Protectprotectprotect Ilya’s instincts scream at him. He holds Shane tighter against him, shushing softly.

“You are okay,” he mumbles, “you are okay. You and her. I have you.”

“Thank you,” Shane whispers, eyes closing, “better than the pills. Thank you, alpha.”

Ilya swallows the lump in his throat, nodding as he presses his face into Shane’s hair and inhales *deeply.*

Sweet apples. A tiny whiff of vanilla. Saccharine gentility, safety, home.

Mate, he thinks, *mine.*

Oh, no.

Ilya holds Shane tightly, letting his body relax, letting his mind go quiet, and wondering what the *fuck* he is going to do.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

ahhh!! this guy is coming along nicely, im almost done writing the whole thing :-)

pls be warned this chapter has some intense memories for ilya, and more medical stuff with the rejection sickness. im taking liberties and making things up for this universe!

i hope you enjoy and thank you sm for reading <3 <3

Ilya does not intend to fall asleep on Shane's couch.

Obviously. He planned to comfort Shane, soothe him until the symptoms resolved, and then get back to work building furniture.

But Shane is so warm, and soft. He fits nestled into the crook of Ilya's neck and the shape of his chest damn near perfectly. He smells like warm, syrupy apples that have been baked over a slow heat. He makes these soft little content noises, tiny hums and purrs from deep in his throat that are absolutely intoxicating. Impossible to resist trying to stay as close as possible to hear more.

Somewhere, somehow, they both fell asleep tangled together on the small sofa.

The sun rises, brilliant light beaming through the broken shades of Shane's living room windows. Ilya blinks back into existence, realizing that a warm weight is still settled against his body. Shane, his nose pressed into Ilya's scent gland, his body languid and loose, soft breaths huffing from his parted lips as he sleeps soundly. He looks completely out, like he hasn't slept so hard in months.

Mate, his body thinks, as his arms tighten fractionally around Shane's back, *mine, pup, mate, mine, mine, mine.*

No, he thinks back, *stop that!*

Fuck.

He has to put a stop to this, right now. He has to wake Shane, apologize, and leave immediately. Then, he has to maybe never speak to him again. This is the very opposite of *uncomplicated.*

He's just about to do so, when Shane adjusts slightly, his thigh grazing Ilya's. His body tenses, heat rising through his veins at the subtle touch. *Fuck.*

Shane smells so fucking good.

“Mm,” Shane murmurs, pressing closer to Ilya, “alpha.”

Jesus Christ.

“Shane,” Ilya whispers, “it is um, just me. Not your alpha. Just me. Your friend, Ilya.”

“Smell so good,” Shane’s lips move gently against Ilya’s neck, and he shudders.

“Shane,” he repeats, a bit firmer, “it is me. Ilya Rozanov. I am not…I am not your-”

Mate, mine, pup, mate, mine, pup.

“Not your mate,” he chokes out, “just your friend.”

At that, Shane’s head tilts back, and it seems like he only now finally comes into awareness. His eyes flutter open, and for a beat, they just stare at each other.

“Oh!” Shane exclaims, pushing his body backward, then wincing at the sudden movement. He falls back on the other couch cushion, massaging his hip with one hand.

“Are you okay?” Ilya asks, trying to ignore the way his entire body suddenly feels like it’s been filled with ice cold water. He yearns to lean in, to wrap his arms around Shane, bring his body close again.

“Fine, fine,” Shane insists, “better than I’ve felt in weeks, actually.”

Ilya grimaces.

“I’m really sorry,” Shane adds, “I don’t know how that happened.”

“You were in pain,” Ilya explains weakly, “I just wanted to help.”

Mate, mine, pup, mine, mine.

Stop it!

“You look like you’re gonna be sick,” Shane says, worry evident in his voice. “Listen Ilya, I’m so sorry, you weren’t supposed to see me like that. I hate that you felt like you had to… do that. I didn’t mean for that to happen, I hope you know that. I am so sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

Ilya stares. Then blinks. Then stares some more.

“You made *me* uncomfortable?” he asks quizzically.

“God, I’m so sorry.” Shane scrubs a hand across his eyes. “When the rejection sickness flares up like that I am…I am not myself, you know? My body is a mess and it takes over. The pills do help but, it’s obviously not as good as…” He eyes Ilya with a wince. “Real alpha pheromones.”

Ilya tries desperately to find something to say. He fails entirely.

“Christ, I’m humiliated.” Shane gets to his feet, wobbling slightly. “Ilya, please, you know that this is just a friendship to me, right? You know I don’t need or want anything from you, yeah? I promise. This is not…*like that.* I’m fine on my own. I didn’t- I wasn’t expecting-”

“I need the bathroom,” Ilya says abruptly. He gets to his feet and makes a beeline for the bathroom, where he promptly leans across the toilet and vomits noisily.

Mate, mine, friendship, don’t need-

“Ilya?” Shane’s voice is on the other side of the door. “Holy fuck, are you okay?”

Ilya wipes at his sweat-dampened face, breathing heavily. He feels fucked up. What is wrong with him?

Phantom mating, he hears Bood’s voice in his head. *Being mated to Cassie is the best feeling in the world. If I felt that and she didn’t…man, I don’t even know what I’d do.*

Fuck.

“One second,” he calls hoarsely.

Fuuuuuck.

Ilya splashes cold water on his face, trying to catch his breath. He catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror and flinches. He looks like absolute shit.

With trembling hands, he opens the bathroom door. Shane is standing there, wide-eyed, hands protectively splayed over his tummy. As tall and muscular as he is, right now, he looks more timid than Ilya’s ever seen him.

“This is why I do not eat salads,” Ilya tries for a weak joke. It falls completely flat.

“Is it me?” Shane asks quietly. “Is it…the pup? I know some alphas don’t…react well to a pup that isn’t theirs. Is that what’s happening to you?”

No, Ilya wants to say, *you are everything, you and your pup. It is too much. I want it too badly.*

“I promise, that is not it,” Ilya assures him. “We are fine, okay? That was just a friend helping another friend. I promise, I know that too, da?”

Warily, Shane studies him. “Are you sure…?”

“Positive.” Ilya nods and smiles at him, and even that feels phony. “I do have to go to work, but I will talk to you later, okay?”

He’s already moving toward the door. He doesn’t like this. It feels like the way he sneaks out after a one night stand. That is not what Shane is. Shane is not something quick and dirty.

He turns in the doorway, seeing Shane hasn't moved. He is still standing there, hands on his belly, expression terrified.

Watching, as another alpha abandons him.

"I *will* call you Shane," Ilya says, hoping the promise sounds as genuine as he intends it.

"Okay," Shane replies, with no ounce of faith in his voice.

Ilya closes the door, even though the action feels like wood splintering in his lungs.

Ilya marches into the parts department at Dallas Automotive, his eyes zeroing in on the man behind the desk. Zane Boodram is behind the counter, explaining to Luca the intricacies of replacing the spark plugs on a BMW.

Ilya lays his hand loudly on the desk, and both men turn to him. Bood's eyes go wide, and Luca immediately shuffles to stand behind him.

It occurs to Ilya, who came straight from Shane's apartment, that he'd ripped his scent patch off last night. He's sure the *frantic alpha* scent is suffocating, though he's surprised Luca picked up on it, as a beta.

"Whoa!" Bood puts his hands up, arching an eyebrow. "What's going on here, Roz? You look horrible! And you reek! Where's your patch?"

"I need you to tell me more about this *phantom mating* thing," Ilya insists, well aware he looks and sounds like a lunatic.

"Oh no." Bood sets down his clipboard, still keeping his body in front of Luca. "What's going on?"

Ilya's lip wobbles. "I-I don't know exactly, but I think…it might be happening to me."

Bood exhales. "Alright, we can talk. But you need to clean up, calm down, and put on a scent patch. We've got omegas here, and you're fucking scary like this Roz."

Ilya frowns. "We don't have any-"

He sees Luca's flash of bright blonde hair sticking out from behind Bood's shoulder.

Oh.

His heart wrenches.

"Luca?" he asks, barely audible.

"Yes." Bood stands firm in front of him.

"I am sorry, Luca," Ilya says, "I did not mean to…come in here like that."

Luca peers around Bood, clearly surprised by the apology, though he sticks close to Bood, who he must deem the safest right now. Survival instincts at work. “It’s okay.”

“No it isn’t.” Ilya shakes his head, running a hand through his hair. “I should have been more responsible. I hope I did not…frighten you too much.”

“I’m not frightened,” Luca assures him. Ilya can’t tell if he’s lying, but he hasn’t moved from behind Bood, which doesn’t look great.

“Go clean yourself up,” Bood says, “I’ll meet you at your place, okay?”

Ilya nods dejectedly, turning and heading for the door. He hears Bood quietly asking Luca if he’s alright, to which Luca assures him again that he’s fine.

Guilt tangles up his insides. *Bohze moy,* he’s a disaster. What is *wrong* with him? He is completely losing it. He never goes anywhere without his patch, how could he have- poor *Luca*- Jesus Christ.

His father *never* wore scent patches. He didn’t believe in them, the same way he didn’t believe in omegas taking heat suppressants, or alphas getting injections to stave off their ruts.

There was a natural order of things, in his eyes; alphas talk, everyone else listens.

Ilya has tried his whole life not to…*be* that. His biology does not control him, it cannot make decisions for him. He’s steered clear of omega partners, suppressed his own biology with scent patches and rut injections and neutral soaps. He’s done everything in his power not to turn into the primal, Neanderthal alpha ruled by his hormones that his father and brother were.

And now, here he is, phantom mated to an omega who sees him only as a friend, running into his place of business and frightening the staff, spiraling like some kind of maniac.

What the fuck is he *doing?*

Get it together, he tells himself, *get home, and clean yourself up.*

Right. He smells like alpha pheromones and the lingering scent of Shane’s apple aroma. The thought of Shane, back at his apartment alone after Ilya had stormed out, makes him whine low in his chest. His skin prickles, the hair on his arms standing up. The thought of Shane in any discomfort or displeasure makes him want to vomit.

The phantom mating, he’s sure.

He never should have done any of this- gotten close to Shane. How could he, or his body at that, have stood a chance against him? He’s utterly and completely beautiful. He’s smart and incredibly funny. He’s resilient, brave, strong, and impressive. He is a truly exceptional human being, who makes Ilya laugh- who makes Ilya feel at home.

Of course his body got fucking confused. He’s been spending so much time with an omega who, on paper, is fucking perfect for him. Just his type, if he were to ever admit he had one.

The kind of person he's always been terrified of meeting, because only this person could have the power to truly hurt him.

And hurt, it does.

When he finally makes it home, breathing in the familiar neutrality of his house, there are tears in his eyes. He lets them fall, even as he clamors up the stairs, stripping the clothing that smells of Shane. It lands in a pile by the bathroom door, and he steps into the shower, letting cold water blast against his flushed skin.

Under the spray, his eyes close, and he rests his palm flat against the shower wall, trying to find his breath. Memories threaten the surface of his mind, flashes of his mother's face- not smiling and warm like he should remember her. Frightened, wary, suspicious.

He remembers the week before she took her life; his father had found some of her books, hidden away under the mattress. Books about omega rights, self-help books for omegas who needed to get out of a bad situation, *knowledge* and *tools* he wanted to make sure she never had access to. A way to keep her subservient, unquestioning, completely at his mercy.

Ilya and Alexei listened to the fight from the kitchen table. Neither of them spoke. Alexei's hands were folded in his lap, and he wouldn't meet Ilya's eyes.

When the sound of a blow landing made Ilya jump out of his seat, desperate to go try and protect his mother, Alexei shoved him back and told him to sit on his hands.

"This is the way things are," he'd said in English, the way he always did when he didn't want their parents overhearing. "You can't protect her."

Looking back, Ilya figures he was right. He didn't protect her. He couldn't. His father would have just beaten him too, like he'd done many times before. And his mother would have told him not to get involved, like she did every other time. And everything would have stayed the same.

Only, it didn't. Because she killed herself the next week.

There was no note, no explanation. When Ilya found her, she was unconscious in the bedroom beside a bottle of pills. Her gold crucifix was dangling from her neck. He remembers wondering where she'd even gotten the pills, because he knew mated omegas at the time needed their husband's permission for prescriptions.

He found out later, she had taken all of the pain killers his father was prescribed after an accident at work a year earlier. He'd been injured after arresting an omega who fought back. His dad had been given the best of the best for relief after the slight injury that omega caused him, but his mother's relief came only in death.

Well, Ilya *hopes* it was relief. That's the only way he can make sense of the loss, is the fervent hope that at the very least, she was no longer suffering.

Suffering like Shane is now, with his rejection sickness, and being completely isolated from his family, and trying to grow a pup while working himself to the bone. He knows Shane prefers it this way, as hard as it all is, to being dependent on an alpha for anything. That's more than Ilya's mother could say. At least Shane has choices.

Ilya owes him an apology. He needs to see a doctor for this phantom mating, and get himself sorted, and make it right with Shane. Shane does not need to be worrying about this on top of everything he's already going through. Ilya can figure this out. He has to.

He does not want to lose Shane.

When Bood knocks on the door, Ilya is already dressed and waiting in the living room, a scent patch carefully affixed to his neck. His expression is sheepish when he answers the door, and Bood can clearly tell he's contrite, judging by the kindness in his voice when he speaks.

"You look better," he says gently.

Ilya steps aside to let him in. "I do not feel better. I am losing my mind, Bood."

"What happened?"

They sit across from each other in the living room, and Ilya lets it spill. He tells Bood about Shane's smell, how it makes him feel safe and at home. He tells Bood about Shane's beautiful laugh, and his sense of humor. He tells Bood about the rejection sickness, and everything that happened the night before. He tells him everything he can bring himself to speak aloud.

And, it feels fucking good to get off his chest, if he's being completely honest.

For a moment, after Ilya's finished, Bood doesn't respond. Ilya is afraid he's about to get the most intense judgemental lecture of his life, but instead Bood asks,

"And you're *sure* Shane doesn't feel the same way for you?"

Ilya blinks. "Of course not. He even made it a point to tell me this morning. Just friends."

"Well, you said he was apologizing to you and you were freaking out. Maybe he was just afraid of getting rejected again?" Bood arches an eyebrow at Ilya expectantly.

He considers this. He supposes Shane has never shown *objection* to Ilya in their time as friends. They've had lunch together and spent many late nights talking on the phone, they text each other most of the day. He invited Ilya over to build his bed frame.

But he also remembers how angry Shane had been about even the slight insinuation of Ilya *rescuing* him with the car. He remembers Shane telling him that he'd rather live in squalor than depend on an alpha for anything. He saw the physical effects of the rejection sickness, plain as day, in Shane's discomfort.

"He is rebuilding his life," Ilya says quietly. "He is trying to do it on his own, be independent and not need an alpha to get by. Me telling him about this, forcing my way in, it would not be

fair. It is not what he wants."

Bood's expression is sympathetic. "Why can't it be that he *wants* you, not *needs* you?"

How could he want me? Ilya thinks to himself. *I have nothing, I am nothing.*

"What will happen with the phantom mating?" He asks instead, choosing to ignore the question. "What do I do?"

"Well." Bood sits back in his chair, exhaling thoughtfully. "It happened to my cousin a few years back. It was rough. She completely rejected him, and it was a wreck."

Ilya stares at him in a pressing manner.

"My advice would be to see a doctor," Bood adds. "Don't try to handle it on your own and don't go cold turkey with Shane. Your body will freak out. But, this is only the beginning stages of a phantom mating, from what you described. It's gonna get worse, man."

"Unless?" Ilya prompts.

Bood shrugs. "Unless you guys mate for real."

He drops his head, groaning. "This is not an option, Bood."

"Why-"

"We barely know each other," Ilya says, "he is having someone else's pup."

"Well, Cassie and I only knew each other for three weeks before we mated. When you know, you know man. Besides, that other alpha isn't around, isn't that the whole reason for Shane's sickness?"

"I mean, yes but, that is not the point. He doesn't *want* this. That matters more than anything."

"Of course," Bood agrees. "You haven't actually *asked* him if he wants it, though."

"He is still mourning someone else," Ilya replies quietly.

"His *body* is struggling to cope with the pregnancy with no alpha," Bood corrects. "You of all people should know that our minds and our biology don't always get along, Roz."

Ilya exhales. He supposes Bood has a point.

"I think you should just talk to him," Bood says. "Just, tell him what's going on, see where he's at. Nothing good comes from hiding your feelings."

A dry smile cracks its way across Ilya's face. "That is kind of all I know how to do."

"Well." Bood reaches over and pats his knee affectionately. "Time to learn a new trick, eh?"

Ilya takes some time, before he decides to go back to Shane's.

After Bood leaves, he sits alone in the living room, drinking a large glass of whiskey. He does not smoke, because he'd been serious about quitting, but he needs something to calm his nerves. Bood is right, he knows, that it's better to just be honest. This thing with Shane is getting complicated, and if he doesn't clear the air now, it will only get worse. He can go to the doctor for his phantom mating, they can take things slow. He does not have to give up Shane altogether, but it wouldn't hurt him to be a little more open about how he feels.

He stops on his way to buy a bouquet of flowers and some chocolate. The flowers, lilies, because Shane had mentioned they were his favorites. The chocolates, because Shane is pregnant and deserves to treat himself. Both things because Ilya feels like a knothead for the way he left this morning, and he has to try and do something to ease the guilt.

When he knocks gently on Shane's apartment door, there is no answer. He waits patiently. He knows Shane is home because he doesn't work until later, and his car is parked in the same spot it was when Ilya left.

There's an unexplainable feeling in his chest, as he waits by the door, shifting on his feet. Anxiety curls up in his stomach, the feeling that something is just *wrong* in a way he can't comprehend.

"Shane?" he calls softly.

No answer.

Ilya clears his throat, and knocks again, louder this time. "Shane!"

He tries Shane's cell. His throat tightens as he hears it ringing through the door.

No answer.

The anxiety is choking now. He brings his foot up and smashes it against the space under the doorknob. The frame wobbles, and he tries again, desperate. The door flies open, slamming into the wall with an alarming *thud.*

"Shane!" he calls into the hall, hoping that finally he will appear, safe and sound.

Nothing happens.

Ilya's feet are moving before he can consciously decide to do it. He's in the apartment, frantically making his way around the small corner to the large living area.

His blood runs cold when he sees a body sprawled out on the floor.

"Shane!" he cries, the sound wrenched from his throat as if with a crowbar. He drops the flowers and the chocolates, collapsing to the floor beside the omega. He's facedown, cheek pressed into the wood, unconscious. His sweet apple scent is so dull Ilya can hardly smell it,

which makes panic course through his veins. His skin is pale with a green hue underneath, no pink blush blooming under his freckles.

“Shane?” he asks again, already dialing 911 with his phone. He cups Shane’s cheek, fingers desperately searching under his jaw for a pulse. It’s weak, but there. Closer now, he can see bruising beginning to bloom on the side of Shane’s face.

He fell. Ilya wasn’t here, and he *fell.* His eyes drop down to the swell of Shane’s belly, visible in his t-shirt. Oh god, the *pup*. Did he land on her? Is she okay? Is she even alive? *Protectprotectprotect- failure, mate, pup, mine, mate, mate, failed-*

“911, what’s your emergency?” comes the voice of the operator.

“I need help.” Ilya’s words come out wrecked. “He is dying, I can feel his pulse, it- he is *dying.”*

“Slow down sir, tell me your name and location please.”

Ilya rattles off the information, then explains Shane’s situation to the operator. “He is twenty weeks along, and he’s been dealing with rejection sickness. I left this morning and he was…a bit upset, but- please, you have to send help. His heart is getting too slow, I can barely smell him, please-”

“Who are you to him, Ilya?”

Ilya swallows and it feels like his spit is made of razor blades. “We are friends.”

“Our ambulance is on the way. Does Shane still have a pulse?”

“B-barely,” Ilya sobs, sounding so small even to his own ears. He reaches out to touch Shane’s hand. It’s cold, like Mama’s was.

“I am going to be honest with you, Ilya, cases like Shane’s are difficult. He may need life saving measures before we arrive to intervene. Are you prepared to help your friend?”

“What does that mean?” Ilya wipes at his eyes. “Anything, yes, what can I do please? He cannot die.”

“Are you mated to anyone, Ilya?”

Ilya goes still. “I- no? What does that have to do with-”

“Shane’s body is shutting down, because it needs a mate to handle the strain of pregnancy. Do you understand?” The operator’s voice is solemn.

“Of course I understand, I know what omega rejection sickness is.” Ilya’s voice gets harsher. “This is not helping him! Where is the ambulance?”

“Eight minutes out,” she replies calmly.

“He does not have that much time!” Ilya cries. Shane’s body is cold, his pulse thready, his smell…Christ, he can’t even smell apples anymore.

“Ilya, if you bite him, it may save his life.” Her words come quick, and blunt.

Ilya’s body feels like it’s frozen. *Protectprotectprotect,* his body screams at him, *mate, pup, mate, protect!*

Without thinking, Ilya rolls Shane gently on his side. His beautiful face is bruised purple along his temple and the upper curve of his cheekbone. His eyes are shut. He’s cold, unmoving.

“It will save him?” Ilya asks wetly, his vision blurry from tears.

“It’s his best chance,” the operator replies, her voice low and grim. “His body needs a mate.”

“I-“ Ilya lets out another harsh, shuddering sob. “I cannot do this without his permission, can’t I-can’t we-“

His fingers brush against the scent gland on Shane’s neck. Alarm fills his body, when he can’t locate the pulse that was just there moments ago.

No.

In an instant, Ilya scoops him up into his arms. He brushes one hand along the fine, black hair on Shane’s head- a tender apology for what he’s about to do.

“I am sorry,” he sobs quietly, “I have no choice, *milyy.”*

With one swift motion, he brings his teeth to Shane’s neck, and bites down as hard as he can.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

WARNING for medical stuff and blood etc. nothing really crazy but ya just in case!!!! again i am fucking with the rules of omegaverse and the fake medical stuff so just suspend your disbelief and have some fun!

this au is so frankly ridiculous but im so glad anyone besides me is enjoying thank you so much for reading and commenting it seriously means so much to me. i have officially begun writing ch10 the final chapter of this so im very excited to share what's next and i hope you enjoy !!

please friendly reminder that i am not a professional and this is all just silly fun times so pls dont expect anything miraculous here im just doin a fun romance story <3 <3 <3

thank you for reading <3 <3

Everything tastes like pennies.

Ilya's eyes are closed, but blood is spilling between his parted lips. It drips down his jaw, dribbling on to his neck, staining the collar of his shirt. Shane's blood, warm and coppery. It pulses from his mating gland, which has been bitten into so deeply Ilya is momentarily afraid he hit a vein.

"Mine," he whispers against Shane's neck, pressing bloodstained kiss marks all over his face. His cheeks, his chin, his jaw. "Mine, mine. Come back to me, *moy lyubimyy."*

He mouths at Shane's bloody neck, tongue lapping up the remnants of spilled red liquid, gently soothing the angry bite mark now stark against his skin. He doesn't know how he even knows to do it, it just comes to him instinctively.

"Come back to me, Shane," he weeps in between smears of red kisses.

As if on command, the flutter of Shane's eyelashes gets Ilya's attention. His chest moves in a rigid, slow sucking motion, like he's trying to vacuum as much air into his lungs as he can get.

His eyes shoot open, big and brown and glazed over with an emotion Ilya can't read.

Before either of them can speak, Shane grabs Ilya by the neck, rips off his scent patch, and bites down with his own canines.

It *hurts*, Ilya notices right away. Shane bites down hard, teeth locking into the flesh like he's trying to anchor himself. Their bodies press together, and Ilya feels more blood drip on his clothes, this time from his own neck.

The next moment, though, the pain disappears. Replacing it, is an intrinsic peace, a *bliss* he's never known in his life. The slowly warming body beneath him, the press of thighs against each other, the blood-smeared teeth and lips, now almost frantically lapping at one another.

Their mouths collide, and it's slippery, messy, disgusting. It's *intoxicating.*

"*Ilya*," Shane moans against him.

"I am here," Ilya whispers, "I am here, you are okay. Oh god, Shane, you are *okay."*

Before anyone can speak again, the sound of loud footsteps thuds up the apartment stairs, and three EMTs crowd the small living room. Two men and a woman, all neutral smelling. Betas are usually best fit for emergency jobs like this, so Ilya makes the assumption.

"Whoa," one of them says, "he's big for an omega."

Ilya growls, pressing Shane close to his chest. His instincts are fiercely screeching *protectprotectprotect.*

"Easy now," the woman says placatingly, extending her palm to Ilya like he's a wild animal. "We don't want to hurt him, we want to help him."

"He's too tall for the stretcher we brought," the first man speaks again. "I thought this was an omega in distress?"

"It *obviously* is," the woman replies, gesturing toward Ilya and Shane. "They just mated, look. We have to tread carefully around the alpha."

Ilya looks down at Shane, cheek pressed into his chest, eyes closed again. He can feel his body moving, lashes fluttering, breathing. But he looks wrecked. Almost dying probably takes a lot of energy.

"I will carry him," Ilya says roughly. Shane is not too big for *him.*

He carefully gathers Shane's tall, broad body in his arms bridal style. It's a tad awkward, considering Shane *is* tall and currently sporting a round belly, but Ilya gets the job done.

"Well," he snaps at the waiting EMTs, "show us to the ambulance."

They scurry out the door, Ilya and Shane following behind. He can't imagine what he must smell like right now. Protective alpha, intense mating pheromones, a whole slew of things that would be hard to brace against for anyone else witnessing this.

The ride to the hospital is sort of a blur. It takes a few intense growls from Ilya before he allows the female EMT to take Shane's vitals and check the pup's heart rate. His vitals are shaky, but she says steadily improving. The pup's heartbeat is strong, thank fucking *god.*

“You saved his life,” she tells Ilya, voice solemn. “Was this always the plan, at least? To be mated?”

Ilya doesn’t meet her eyes.

“Oh,” she replies softly, understanding in her tone. “I’m sorry.”

“I am not. He is alive.”

Shane is mostly out of it on the drive, and as they’re transferring him in the ER. They get him on a bed fit for an alpha, considering their standard omega gurneys are too small. This alone has Ilya’s teeth gritting with irritation. How much of the world is not built for Shane to even *exist?*

They let him accompany Shane through the ER bay, one hand protectively covering the fresh bite mark on his neck. Shane still has not come to, which is terrifying, but they say he’s stable. The bite saved him, the *alpha* saved him.

Shane is set up on an alpha cot with an IV in his arm and a fetal heart rate monitor wrapped around his belly. They clean the blood off of his skin, and put an ice pack on his head to help the bruising from his fall. They do scans and draw blood and run tests, all while Shane is drifting in and out of consciousness.

So much out of his control. Ilya knows he must hate this.

“Is there anyone we can call?” a sweet nurse asks Ilya, as he’s waiting outside the room while they change Shane into his hospital gown. Someone gave him wet wipes to clean himself up, thankfully, but his skin still feels sticky with remnants of blood.

Ilya hesitates. Shane’s family should know about this, shouldn’t they? He suspects they hadn’t been informed the last time he was hospitalized. Someone should tell them. If they choose not to come, at least he can know he tried, and their neglect isn’t his doing.

He has done enough.

“His parents are in Canada,” Ilya tells her, “I don’t have their phone number. But they should know.”

“The EMTs recovered his phone, it fell out of his pocket in the ambulance,” she answers. “I can’t go through it, but a loved one could. Do you want to get their number from his phone?” She digs around in a plastic bag and hands him Shane’s phone.

Ilya exhales heavily. *A loved one.* He should not be doing this.

“I will call,” he says, forcing a smile, “thank you.”

“And you?” She reaches out and touches his arm gently. “How are you doing? Should we call anyone for you?”

“Me?” he demands, eyebrows furrowing.

“I am sure today was very traumatic for you,” she says softly, “seeing your friend nearly die, and then a forced mating. Anyone would understand if you need some support.”

Ilya looks at her, unblinking. *A forced mating.* He supposes, in a way, she’s not wrong. He made the decision to bite, but it wasn’t a *real* choice, was it? Between saving Shane’s life, his pup’s life, or doing nothing?

“I am fine,” he replies briskly.

“We have counseling services, as well as some specialists we can recommend, for when you two break the mating,” she adds.

Ilya startles a little at that. “Wh-what?”

“Well, it’s the assumption this was not what either of you wanted,” she says softly, “or it would have been done already, right?”

He grimaces. “I mean, I guess, yeah.”

“So you will eventually want to break the mating bond, once Shane is stable?” she infers.

“I did not know that could be done,” he admits.

“It isn’t recommended. It’s a painful, sometimes dangerous process. It would definitely need to wait until Shane has delivered his pup. His body has been through too much now, to risk that.”

Ilya rubs a hand across his forehead. “Okay. I…this is a lot, I am sorry.”

“Of course. We will take it slow.” She pats his arm again. “We are here if you need anything.”

She hustles away, and Ilya glances down at the phone in his hand. It feels wrong to violate Shane’s privacy like this, but he feels like he has no choice. Shane needs his family here, right now. Ilya cannot be the only person Shane can turn to, it isn’t fair. He’s already trapped him in this mating bond without consent. Shane should have options.

Predictably, Shane’s phone passcode is *2-22-80.* Ilya huffs a laugh at that when he finally guesses it after three attempts. Fucking miracle on ice. If there is one thing Shane will always be consistent about, it’s his love of hockey.

Once he’s in the phone, he quickly goes to the contacts, not interested in snooping through photos or messages. He does note that Shane’s homescreen photo is an ultrasound picture, probably from his latest appointment. It makes his eyes prickle, but he ignores that.

He finds a contact named *MOM* in the phone, exhales shakily, and presses the call button.

It does not even get through a full ring, he’s pretty sure, before a frantic voice is answering the phone.

“Shane!” A woman exclaims. “Honey, you finally called. Are you safe? Where are you? David, come here, Shane is on the phone!”

Ilya’s throat tightens at the desperation in her voice. It has been so long since he’s heard a worried mother’s voice.

“I am sorry,” he speaks, clearing his throat, “I am not Shane.”

There’s a heavy pause on the other line.

“Who is this? Is Shane in danger? What do you want? We have money, we-”

“No, no. I am a friend of Shane’s.” Ilya elects *not* to mention that technically, he is Shane’s mate. “Are you his mother?”

“Yes, I’m Yuna. Please, who is this? Where is my son? We have been looking for him for months, no one can tell us anything, he won’t answer our calls, none of his friends have seen him.” Another pause. “No, don’t tell me- oh my god. He’s dead, isn’t he? Oh my god.”

“No, no!” Ilya quickly interjects, his own chest aching at the sudden agony in her voice. “He is alive, I promise. I am with him now, he is at Mercy General hospital in Boston.”

Another pause. “You don’t…sound like you’re from Boston.”

“I am from Russia, yes, but I have lived here many years. My name is Ilya. I am a friend of Shane’s. Shane is here. He has been living here for the past few months.”

“He’s in Boston?” This time, Yuna sounds completely perplexed.

“He’s in the hospital?” Another voice, a man this time, joins hers. Must be the *David* she’d called to.

Ilya exhales. “How much do you know? What happened before he left Canada?”

Another lengthy pause.

“The NHL terminated his contract,” Yuna replies, “because they found out he’s an omega. I am not sure how…there was a rumor that…oh my god. The hospital. Ilya, is he really pregnant?”

“You did not know?”

“Oh my god.” David this time, sounding distraught.

“No one will tell us anything, it’s all privileged and without Shane-” Yuna’s voice breaks. “Why hasn’t he called us? Why would he leave?”

Ilya’s eyes close, a pained expression on his face. Christ, how wrong Shane had been. This entire time, thinking they had rejected him, when in fact they were completely in the dark.

“He is pregnant, about twenty weeks along,” Ilya replies. “Someone in the NHL found out. He was terminated. He told the pup’s father, and…he was rejected. It made him very sick, um, you have heard of rejection sickness? I assume, around the time you first stopped hearing from him, is when this happened. He was in the hospital and he said no one came to see him. As soon as he got out, his agent helped him leave.”

“Who is the pup’s father?” Yuna demands.

At that, Ilya pauses. “You…did not know him?”

He had assumed, all this time, that this was a long-term, serious boyfriend of Shane’s. Someone he loved, until the rejection at least.

“He had a lot of secrets,” Yuna replies, voice thick with emotion. “We suspected he might have been with someone who was…abusing him. He wouldn’t talk about it, but there were signs.”

Ilya’s fist tightens. “Signs?”

“He wasn’t *physically* hurt or anything like that, outside of hockey injuries at least. But he was different, more subdued. He’d always been shy and reserved but this was different. And he started having to… I don't know, it almost seemed like he would ask for permission before doing things. Spending money, or taking trips, or what have you. But he never would *explain.”*

Ilya’s teeth grind together. So this alpha was controlling Shane, manipulating and abusing him, taking all of his money, ruining his career, and discarding him like trash after putting a pup in his belly.

A growl, low and ominous, rises from Ilya’s throat. He balks, surprised by what he’d just done.

“Ilya,” Yuna says, and he’s grateful she can’t see how red his face must be. “Who *are* you?”

“Will you come?” he asks, instead of answering that question. “Will you come to Boston? I think he needs his family. He has been so alone. He thinks you do not want him.”

“Oh, my baby.” Yuna sniffles. “Yes, of course. We’ll book a flight now, we should be there in a few hours. Can you text me all the information?”

“Yes. Will send from my phone. Keep me posted, okay? I…I am not going to tell him you are coming. I think it will scare him. He should speak to you.”

“Is he okay, Ilya?”

Ilya sighs again, glancing through the glass window at Shane’s unconscious form. “Hopefully, he will be soon.”

Shane comes to a few hours later.

It's slow, his rising from the twilight state he'd been in. His heart monitor and the pups are both beating rhythmically- a steady, reassuring pattern. His vitals have been gradually improving, but the doctors have already warned Ilya that modified bed rest is a likely outcome for the remaining duration of the pregnancy. He's dreading having to tell Shane that.

"Hey there," Ilya says gently, hoping to ease him into awareness.

Shane's eyelashes flutter, revealing his clear brown eyes. They are not glossy and glazed over like they'd been earlier. His skin is flushed warm, pink under his freckles. He looks more alert, more himself. The smell of apples is still muted, drowned out by sterile bedsheets and scent neutralizing sprays.

Ilya can't help but examine the bite mark on his neck, the lines and ridges of where his own teeth had penetrated skin, desperate and hungry. He winces a bit- it's uneven, messy. Shane will probably hate that. He would've liked cleaner lines, more presentable. Ilya would have liked to give him that.

"What do you remember?" Ilya asks him, resisting the instinctive urge to reach out and touch. *Mate,* his mind thinks, *mine.*

Not untrue, this time.

Shane's mouth falls open, and he stares at Ilya for a few seconds, until he finds his raspy voice. "Is the pup okay?"

"Yes," Ilya affirms quickly. "They have been checking her, and they did an ultrasound. That is her heart rate, there." He shows Shane on the machine. "Very strong girl."

Shane looks down at his belly, exposed in the gown. His fingers trail over the skin there, tendrils of silvery stretch marks dancing up his sides. His lip wobbles, eyes filling with liquid.

"Oh, Shane." Ilya moves toward him, unable to help it. His omega is crying, scared. Ilya leans over the side of the bed and scents him softly, pleased when Shane returns the action. He buries his nose in Ilya's neck, breathing in deeply.

Then, he goes utterly still.

"Ilya," Shane says, "why do you smell like…why do you have a…"

He pulls back, eyes wide. Ilya gives him a sympathetic smile.

"You do not remember?"

"You bit me," Shane says, his big watery eyes locking on Ilya's neck.

"You bit me back," Ilya murmurs, trying and failing to add some levity to the moment.

"You mated me," Shane continues, as if Ilya hadn't even spoken.

“I had no choice,” Ilya says softly. “They said it would save you.”

Shane looks down at himself, one hand coming up to brush the bite marks on his own neck. He shudders visibly.

“Sorry, it is not the neatest.” Ilya smiles tightly. “I was in a hurry. You were dying, and all.”

“Oh my god.” Shane breathes the words out, his voice distraught. The smell of *omega in distress* floods the room, utterly sickening.

“No, no is okay *milyy.*” Ilya quickly reaches over, letting Shane scent his wrist. “You are okay, both of you. Is what matters.”

“I’m sorry,” Shane sobs, pressing his cheek against Ilya’s forearm. “I’m so sorry.”

“Shane,” he coos, “there is nothing to be sorry for. You almost died, is not your fault. What is sorry?”

“You were forced to-” Shane hiccups another sob, “you had- we- I’m sorry.”

“Shh, is okay, is okay.” Ilya can’t stand this. He climbs into the bed, grateful they’d put him in a larger, alpha-sized cot. He’s careful not to sit on Shane or press on any important wires or tubes. He wraps his arms around Shane's body, pressing him close, until Shane’s nose is nudging at the bite mark on his neck.

He breathes in slowly, letting Ilya’s scent wash over him. Ilya tries to relax, hopefully forcing some calmness into his scent. Shane seems more at ease like this, pressed into him.

“Just relax,” Ilya murmurs, rubbing his hand down Shane’s spine. “Was a scary day. You are okay. Pup is okay. Is all that matters, Shane.”

“It’s *not* okay,” he sniffles.

Guilt wrenches in Ilya’s chest. He knows it is unfair that Shane was forced into this, but he was hoping that at least he’d be happy at being alive. He’s so distraught, Ilya can’t deny that it hurts a bit. Being mated to Ilya is obviously not ideal, but he didn’t think it would be so… well, objectionable.

It was against his will. Shane had a plan to not let his life be determined by alphas. And Ilya has now forced him into a mating bond he did not want. It’s beyond evil, he knows. Shane does not deserve any of this. How did this fucking happen?

“They say we can break the bond, after pup is here,” Ilya offers quietly, hoping it at least eases some of Shane’s panic. “Too dangerous right now, while she is still growing. You have been through a lot. But after, when you are both stronger, we can do that.”

Shane sniffs again, looking up at Ilya with his big doe eyes. Ilya hates how miserable he looks, wants to fix it at all costs. This information doesn’t seem to make him any happier.

“Break the bond?” Shane asks quietly.

“Yes.” Ilya nods, brushing his fingers down the bruising on Shane’s cheek, ever-so-gently caressing the damaged flesh. “Nurse says it is painful and difficult, but it is possible.”

Ilya is hoping this will calm Shane’s worries, knowing that there is at least a light at the end of the tunnel. That Shane can be freed from this trap, soon. He does not have to be stuck with Ilya for eternity. Not like Ilya’s mother was stuck. He will not condemn Shane to that same fate.

Instead, Shane’s brows are furrowed, his nose wrinkled. Distress sinks into the air again, permeating the small space between them.

“Do not worry,” Ilya murmurs, scenting him again until the apple scent sweetens. “It will be okay, Shane. You will get your pup here safely, and then we will take care of this. I promise, is not forever.”

A small whine curls out of Shane’s throat.

Ilya figures he should stop talking. Whatever he’s saying isn’t helping right now.

Instead, he pulls Shane close, lets him rest his face in the crook of Ilya’s neck, and tries to keep them both from losing their minds.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

you may notice the chapter count went up...OOPS!! heh heh. i swear to god this thing will not go on forever lmao, but lots of fun stuff is happening and i basked in it a bit. i hope you enjoy as much as i did!

i hope you enjoy

thank you for reading <3 <3

PLEASE BE NICE

Somehow, they fall asleep like that.

Shane is so warm beside him, and the rhythmic sound of his breathing is a soothing balm on Ilya's wrung out body. Their smells are mingling together, and Ilya realizes as he's drifting off that they smell *mated.*

What wakes him, is the sound of a door opening, and a quiet gasp.

His eyes flutter open, and he glances down. Shane is still asleep in his arms, cheek smushed into his chest, snoring softly. He looks at ease.

Ilya glances up and sees two people standing beside the door. A woman, tall and slim, with Shane's complexion, and straight black hair. Beside her, a man with blue eyes and light colored hair. Ilya can see small, recognizable things in both of their features. The woman's pinstraight nose, and her exacting gaze. The man's eyebrow shape, and the quirk of his lips.

Shane's parents.

They're both betas, Ilya realizes. He can smell them, they aren't wearing scent patches. And, why would they need to? They smell like…well, *nothing.* It is hard, near impossible at times, for two betas to conceive a child together. And for that child to present as anything besides a beta? Shane really has always been exceptional, hasn't he?

"Hi," Ilya croaks out quietly, afraid to jostle Shane too much by getting up.

"You're mated," Yuna says, her eyes huge, her expression disbelieving.

“It was an emergency,” Ilya explains in a whisper, “he was dying. The rejection sickness.”

David brings a hand up to cover his mouth, expression distraught. “Oh, Shane.”

Shane stirs, mumbling something incoherent as his eyes slowly open. He looks up first at Ilya, smiling blearily, before he registers the other people in the room. He goes completely still.

“Baby,” Yuna says, moving toward him.

With a whine, Shane clings to Ilya, burrowing deeper into his embrace. Ilya wraps his arms around Shane, growling involuntarily at Yuna. He hadn’t meant to do that, but Shane’s immediate fear made his entire body go alight with protectiveness.

“Easy,” David warns, placing a hand on Yuna’s bicep.

“He’s my son,” she snaps.

“How are you here?” Shane asks, voice raspy with disuse.

“Ilya called us, son,” David answers diplomatically.

Shane looks up at Ilya, betrayal displayed across his face.

“They are worried about you, Shane,” he murmurs, lowering his voice to a soothing lull. “They have been trying to find you, trying everything. They did not even know you were having a pup.”

Shane blinks rapidly, glancing back in the direction of his parents. “You didn’t?”

“No honey. No one called us, not the hospital, or the league, or…*the alpha.”* Yuna’s nose curls up with visible disgust. “None of your friends knew where you were, or what was going on. We heard rumors but…without you there…”

“I left without telling anyone,” Shane admits quietly, “when you guys didn’t come see me in the hospital, I thought…I thought-” His voice breaks.

“Thought what, honey?” Yuna asks.

“I thought you didn’t want me anymore,” he sniffs, “because I was pupped up, unmated, unemployed…kind of your worst nightmare to have for a child.”

“Shane,” David exhales, and Ilya swears, he can *see* the man’s heart breaking. “You are our son, there is nothing you could do, no situation you could be in, that would ever make us stop loving you. We just want you to be okay, to be happy.”

Shane wipes at his eyes, looking hopefully at his other parent. Ilya gets the sense he wasn’t as worried about his dad, anyway.

“Mom?” he asks, voice wobbly.

“Shane,” Yuna steps closer to him, extending her arms, “you are my baby. That pup is my grandchild. I do not care if you ever play hockey again, or *what* you decide to do, as long as you’re here, and safe. I love you so much.”

A small sob breaks out of Shane’s throat. Ilya rubs his back soothingly, pressing his cheek into Shane’s hair. He feels Shane inhale his smell.

“I’m sorry,” Shane tells them, his voice weepy and wet. “I was just so fucking scared, and I’d already been rejected so badly it almost killed me, I couldn’t stand- I couldn’t have possibly survived if *you-”*

“Never,” Yuna says, shaking her head with tears in her eyes. “Never, Shane. You will never, *ever* lose us.”

Shane opens his arms, and Yuna rushes forward.

Ilya carefully untangles himself from the bed, giving them space, as David moves forward too, joining the embrace. Ilya steps to the side, feeling like an outsider, an imposter, and a burden all at once.

He shouldn’t be here, intruding on this. He doesn’t belong here with this loving family. This mother and father who are clearly on equal footing, who love each other as partners, and dote on their son.

It couldn’t be more different than what Ilya is used to. This is what Shane deserves. A real family, not fractured, broken pieces of it. Not what Ilya can offer him. A forced mating with a man who has never once seen a good example of real fatherhood in his life.

He turns for the door, deciding to leave and give them space. He’s stopped by Shane’s voice, carrying across the room. He sounds frantic.

“Where are you going?” he demands.

Ilya pauses with one hand on the doorknob. “Just giving you three some privacy, Shane.”

“Please don’t leave.” His voice is pleading.

“Shane, honey, Ilya might need a few moments to himself,” Yuna says softly. “And we have some catching up to do, the three of us.”

“No, no.” Shane shakes his head, looking at Ilya with big, frightened eyes. “You can’t leave me, Ilya, please, don’t leave.”

Distress permeates the room. Ilya’s heart thunders in his chest. *Protectprotectprotect.*

“Okay, Shane.” Ilya immediately crosses the room and stands beside him, brushing his fingers down Shane’s hair. “Relax, is okay. I am here.”

Shane settles at that, sighing softly. He nestles against Ilya’s side.

“They are mates,” David murmurs quietly to Yuna, who looks distressed.

“Shane has been through a lot,” Ilya tells them hoarsely. Shane is quietly scenting him. His parents look a little perturbed at seeing their son act so…*omega.*

Before they can reply, there’s a gentle knock at the door. The four of them all look up as a doctor enters. She’s a tall beta woman, with a firm expression and a starchy white coat.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Keyes.” She nods at the room. “Hi Shane, how are you feeling?”

Shane hesitates, before replying, “um, I’m okay. Really worn out, like I just played two games back to back with no breaks.”

“Body a bit achey?” she asks.

He nods.

“Perfectly normal, all things considered,” she says. “We have some things to discuss. Are you okay with talking in front of everyone here?”

Shane nods again.

Dr. Keyes glances at her tablet, and then sighs. “Well, I think we should start with some good news. Your pup is very healthy. She’s developmentally right on track, a bit small, but developing just right. You and her could both stand to gain a little weight, so let’s make that a focus moving forward, okay?”

Yuna is transcribing this onto a notes app on her phone. David is listening intently. Ilya is stroking Shane’s hair, letting him scent his wrist while the doctor speaks.

“Okay,” Shane agrees quietly.

“And, on to the less fun topics.” Dr. Keyes looks at Shane and Ilya somberly. “Ilya, you saved Shane’s life today with the mating bite. His body has been desperate for alpha pheromones to support the pregnancy, and the synthetic stuff just has not been cutting it. Some omegas have a harder time carrying to term, and without a mating bond, it’s unlikely Shane and the pup would have made it.”

Ilya can’t help the small whine in his chest at the thought of it. Shane nudges him, soothing his distress with the smell of apples and vanilla.

“All of that said,” she continues, “we are still very concerned. This is a lot of emotional and physical trauma to endure during a gestation. For Shane and the pup’s health, we are recommending modified bed rest.”

At that, Shane sits up straighter.

“No exercise aside from light stretching and minimal walking. You’ll want to be in bed, or reclined on a sofa or comfortable chair for most of the day. No heavy lifting, nothing to get

your heart rate too fast. Lots of rest, fluids, and food." She holds her hand up before Shane can object. "This is non-neogitable. Your body cannot take any more stress."

"We will wait on him hand and foot," Yuna says to her, finally setting her phone down, notes taken. "We have a cottage just outside of Ottawa, it will be perfect."

At that, Ilya's head darts sideways to look at her. "Wait, you are leaving?"

"And taking Shane home," she says. "He needs to be somewhere safe and familiar."

"My apartment is safe," Shane insists.

"Your apartment is *not* safe," Ilya tells him sternly. "But my house is."

"Absolutely not!" Yuna exclaims. "Shane, you're coming back with us. We're your family."

"I am his mate," Ilya replies defensively.

"Not on purpose," she bites back.

Ouch.

"I can put this to bed," Dr. Keyes interjects. "Shane is not cleared for flying."

"Then we'll take a road trip!" Yuna responds without missing a beat.

"A lengthy trip by car is still risky," the doctor says, "and Shane *needs* to be near his alpha. This is a medical necessity."

Yuna looks conflicted now. "He *needs* to be around Ilya?"

"Yes." Dr. Keyes' voice bears no uncertainty. "The mating bond is the only reason Shane is alive right now. Separating him from his alpha would bring us right back to where we started. He could die. At that, *Ilya* would be in trouble too, being separated from his mate. Until the bond can be broken, they have to stay in close physical proximity."

Ilya looks down at Shane guiltily. Shane's hands are cupped around his belly now, and he won't meet anyone's eyes.

"I'm staying here," he says, "I have to do whatever is best for the pup. If I die, she dies."

"You're exactly right, Shane," Dr. Keyes says.

"She?" David asks, his expression getting more soft and gooey than Ilya has ever seen a dad look.

"Oh." Shane smiles dryly. "Pup's a baby girl."

"Oh, honey." Yuna presses a hand to her mouth. "A granddaughter?"

"Yeah, mom." Shane exhales a heavy breath. "If we make it through this."

“You will,” Ilya murmurs, a hand protectively splayed on his upper back.

“So, Shane will stay here,” David says softly, “with…you, Ilya?”

“We will get an apartment, close by,” Yuna suggests, “until the pup is born and the bond can be broken.”

“Mom, you really don’t have to-”

“We are not losing you again, Shane,” she says curtly. Her voice, while firm and a bit unsettling, belays her true anxiety. She’s a mother, who lost her son for months, no idea if he was alive or dead. Now, she’s come to a strange country, found him pupped up and at death’s door, mated to a stranger against his will.

Ilya thinks, all things considered, she’s being pretty fucking cool about it.

“Okay,” Shane says. He looks at Ilya, grimacing. “I don’t need to sleep at your house, I’m sure we can stay at our own-”

“Shane,” Dr. Keyes interrupts softly. “While I understand this isn’t exactly a perfect situation for either of you, you cannot live alone right now. You will need someone to look after you. And your body will need Ilya’s nearby as much as possible.”

“Is okay,” Ilya says, even though he feels sick to his stomach at how badly Shane is trying to get out of living with him. “He can stay with me. I will look after Shane and the pup.”

“So will we,” Yuna adds, looking anxious.

“Of course,” Ilya says to her, “I will get you your own key.”

That seems to settle her nerves a little. She nods, eyes haunted. “Thank you, Ilya.”

“When can I leave?” Shane asks the doctor, gesturing to the monitor on his belly. “Is she going to be okay?”

“I think we will discharge you tomorrow, if your vitals stay steady and we see no distress with the pup,” Dr. Keyes replies. “This will be with strict aftercare instructions for both you and your alpha to read through and acknowledge before leaving.”

“Thank you,” Shane says.

“Of course. I’ll be back in a bit to check in, and you’ll see some nurses pop in as well. Buzz if you need anything!”

The doctor leaves, and the room gets uncomfortably quiet. There’s a few beats, before Shane curses quietly, dropping his head in a groan. Distress fills the room again, making Ilya’s skin prickle.

“Shane?” he asks worriedly.

“I’m fine,” he mutters, “I just realized how much this is going to *cost.* I’m not in Canada anymore.”

David arches an eyebrow in Shane’s direction. “Son, you had a ten million dollar contract last year. I know you’re not playing anymore, but don’t tell me there’s no nest egg?”

Yuna studies Shane’s shameful, red face for a moment. Her nose curls up the next moment. *“He* took it all, didn’t he?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Shane tries.

“Let me just get this straight.” Yuna’s hands are on her hips now. “He controlled the money, he controlled *you*, he pupped you up, ruined your career, and almost killed you. Now you’re telling me, he’s also *stolen* from you?”

In lieu of an answer, Shane crosses his arms over his chest. He hesitates slightly, when the motion makes the IV in his hand tug, but sticks to it.

“You don’t have to tell me how stupid I was,” he mutters, “trust me, I’ve been dealing with the consequences.”

“You aren’t stupid, son,” David steps forward, watching Ilya with wary eyes. Ilya keeps a protective hand on Shane’s back, but doesn’t prohibit the other man from getting near him.

“I don’t want to keep talking about it,” Shane replies, his gaze pleading. “It’s over. He’s gone. I need to focus on my pup.”

“And yourself,” Ilya adds quietly, his thumb brushing softly against Shane’s neck.

Shane offers him a weak, grateful smile. Ilya returns it to the best of his ability.

Yuna exhales, running a hand through her hair. It’s clear she’s not willing to just let this drop, but for Shane’s sake, she at least puts it to rest for now.

“Alright.” Yuna sighs, leaning her hip against Shane’s cot. A small smile dawns on her face, warmer than before, something more tender.

“We need to talk baby names.”

Ilya doesn’t extract himself from Shane’s side, until the omega is sound asleep. It’s just after nine in the evening, and Shane finally slumped over on his pillows with a deep snore. Both of his parents are still at his side, but Ilya has some things to take care of.

He steps into the hallway, first, trying to center himself back in his body. He feels a weird, yearning tug in his chest, the urge to run back into the room and plant himself at Shane’s side. It’s the mating, he knows, urging them to be close.

Breaking this thing is going to be a *bitch,* won’t it?

The first thing he does is call out of work for the next three days. Kent is pissed at the late night phone call, and even more pissed at Ilya bailing on three shifts, but when Ilya says three simple words, there isn't much he can do about it.

"I am mated."

A mating is the most sacred bond two people can have. Kent, as shitty as he is of a boss, is well aware there is no recourse he could take. Ilya has mated, his mate needs him, legally he can take as much time as he wants.

He won't do that, of course. He has bills to pay, and now a mate and pup to feed. But, he needs to be here through the end of this week to get Shane settled and help his parents find their footing. Yuna had told him they got a hotel near his house for the foreseeable future, until they can secure a small apartment. She probably would have asserted they move in too, if David hadn't given her those big blue warning eyes.

The next thing he does, as he paces around in front of the vending machines on the first floor, is call Bood. He has to call three times before he gets an answer.

"What's up, Roz?" Zane asks through the receiver. "I'm kind of in the middle of an epic pregnancy foot rub right now."

"This doesn't count toward my hour!" Cassie yells.

Bood laughs. "Of course not, baby. Make it quick, Rozanov."

"Shane and I are mated," Ilya says, the words sounding foreign even to his own ears.

There's a lengthy pause. "That is…good, yes?"

"It was not our choice."

"You mean…?"

"The rejection sickness was going to kill him. He needed a mating bite. So I- I did what I had to do."

"Did he bite you back?"

"Yes."

"Shit. So you're *mated mated*, for real."

"Yes, for fucking real." Ilya rubs a hand across his forehead. "They say we can break the bond, but not until the pup is out and Shane is safe."

"Fuck. I've never even heard of that. Breaking a bond. Not, you know, voluntarily like that."

"Apparently it will be very painful and dangerous." Ilya sniffs, voice darkening. "He still prefers this, to staying mated to me."

“Oh, Ilya…”

“Is fine.” He presses two fingers to his eyes, trying to collect himself. “I just…I feel like a piece of shit.”

“Hey, you’re not, man. It wasn’t your fault. You saved his life, it sounds like.”

“And *forced* him to mate me. What kind of- I mean, what is wrong with me, eh? I get this phantom mating and then I *make* him-”

“That’s not what it was about, Roz, come on you know that.”

“But the result is the same,” Ilya insists, “my alpha wanted us to mate, and now we are fucking mated. Shane wanted to do things on his own, and now-*fuck*. He would not even let me leave the room. He *needed* me.”

“God. Yeah, it’s…it’s a lot, man.”

“I am sorry for calling. No one else knows about any of this, so.”

“It’s alright. You’ve had a fucked up day. Will I see you tomorrow?"

“No, I am going to be out for a few days. I had to tell Kent I was mated. I am sure that will make it around tomorrow.”

“Yeah…the guys’ll probably know it’s Shane. Brace for the *congratulations* texts.”

Christ.

“I’d better get back,” Bood says quietly, “let me know if you need anything, okay Roz?”

“Thank you. Oh, wait. Um, Bood?”

“Yeah?”

“Is Luca okay? After the way I came in. I think I scared him.”

“Oh. Yeah, he’s alright man. He said no alpha had ever apologized to him before that. So, you know, you’re not as shitty as you think, hm?”

Ilya manages a brisk laugh. “Or alphas are just the fucking worst.”

“Probably that. I mean, not me, I rock, but yeah. Most.”

“Get back to your wife’s feet.”

“Happily!”

The line disconnects, and Ilya exhales a heavy sound. He glances around him, the bustling waiting room of the lobby. He thinks, against his will, about when he found his mother. He’d been hoping to call an ambulance, to get her to the hospital so she could be saved.

His father had gravely informed him that there would be no saving her. Ilya didn't think he looked particularly broken up about it, all things considered.

It's hard to imagine. His father and mother had been a mated pair- matching bite marks on their necks, the same way he and Shane have now. He has only known Shane for a few months, yet already the thought of something happening to him is untenable. So much so, that he'd stolen both of their agencies to save his life. So much so, that now he is going to be *living* with him to keep him and his pup healthy.

How could his father have ever hurt his mother? The thought of any harm coming to Shane makes Ilya's skin crawl, and his stomach churn. How could his father's biology ever allow *him* to be the one doing the hurting?

He brushes his fingers against the bite mark on his neck, messy, deeply ridged indents. The shape of Shane, pressed into his skin for eternity. Even when they break their bond, his bite will remain, permanently etched into Ilya's being.

He wonders, as he heads back for the elevators, if this world will possibly ever figure out a way to live between the blurred lines of biology and humanity.

When Ilya enters Shane's room again, he comes upon an upsetting scene. Yuna is standing by Shane's bedside, comforting him as he burrows into her chest and cries. Not the kind of cry you do when you watch a sad movie, or the kind when your pet turtle dies. He's fucking *wailing*, sobbing against her as she rubs his back and desperately tries to comfort him.

The smell of distress and sour apples infiltrates Ilya's nose, and he lets out an involuntary growl, starling Yuna and David, who both turn to look at him. His eyes zero in on Shane, still weeping.

"Milyy," he says as he moves toward him, arms extending as if independent from his body. "What is happening?"

"You left," Shane chokes out, face flushed red, words thick with tears. He looks completely inconsolable.

Ilya pauses, perplexed.

"He woke up and you weren't here," Yuna explains, her brows furrowed, her voice restrained.

"Oh. Shane." Ilya moves toward him, doing his best to let calming pheromones into the air. He wraps his arms around Shane's body, which is trembling, burying his face in Shane's dark hair.

"You left," he repeats raggedly. His skin is warm and flushed.

"I know, I am sorry. Just to use the phone. I am here. I promise, I will not go anywhere, da?"

"I'm sorry," Shane manages, voice weak, "I'm sorry, Ilya, I'm so sor-"

“Shhh, is not your fault, *milyy.* Is okay, I promise, is okay. Here.” He extends his wrist and lets Shane scent him until his shoulders relax. “There, see? I am here. Alpha is here.”

Shane lets out a small noise, somewhere between a sigh and a purr of contentment. He settles against Ilya’s side, eyes fluttering tiredly.

Ilya looks down at him, throat tightening as he thinks about that fiery, shouting omega who’d come to his doorstep, furious at the thought of *needing* Ilya for anything. Needing an *alpha.*

Now, betrayed by his own body, betrayed by his biology, betrayed by Ilya, Shane is desperate and at the mercy of his inner omega. It makes Ilya feel sick, knowing this is in some way his fault. Knowing he’s taken Shane’s agency, made him reliant on his alpha to feel safe.

By the disapproving expressions on both of his parent’s faces, Ilya knows they feel it too.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers to them, tortured.

Yuna shakes her head, her deep brown eyes distraught. “Don’t screw this up. He’s been thorough enough.”

Ilya looks down as Shane quietly relaxes beside him, knowing that she’s completely right. He cannot fuck this up. Shane *has* been through enough.

“It is just until the pup comes,” he tries. “When it’s time, I will not stop him from breaking the bond, I swear to you.”

“You’d better not,” she replies, emotion swelling in her voice. “He had a *life,* dreams… he was *more* than just-”

“Yuna,” David mutters, shaking his head at her. “Don't talk like that, please.”

“He *is* more than *just an omega,”* Ilya fills in the unpleasant end of her sentence with a frown. “He started over entirely on his own, with nothing. It is incredible how strong he is.”

“And look where it got him,” she gestures unhappily toward the now-sleeping omega. “I’m sorry if I seem insensitive, it’s just, I hate to see him like this. He never wanted to be this needy, helpless thing. He fought so hard *not* to be this.”

“He is not helpless.” Ilya shakes his head, brushing his fingers along Shane’s neck gently, to keep him calm and asleep. “He is just going through a hard time. It will get better. He will be back to normal.”

He has no idea, as he says these things, how he knows them, but he does. He may not know Shane as well as his parents do, but he’s witnessed his fierce spirit, his incredible will. Shane will make it through this, and despite his medical needs, he certainly won’t rely on Ilya to do it.

“He will be okay,” Ilya says again, this time more firmly. “We should all know better than to doubt Shane Hollander.”

Shane’s parents glance at each other, and Yuna deflates a little. She nods, once, very sure.

“At least guess we agree on that.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> fuck it chapter 8!! this fic is basically entirely written so, im ahead and just gonna start posting :)
>
> mind the tags!! typical angst but also some softness too.
>
> the "angst with a happy ending" tag is doing some hard work here but i PROMISE a very happy ending <3
>
> i hope you enjoy thank you xx

“Your kitchen is a good use of the space,” Shane comments casually, as he steps into Ilya’s kitchen. Ilya stands behind him, setting Shane’s bags down by the doorway, and arching an eyebrow.

They’ve just returned from collecting his things from the apartment, what little there was to collect. Yuna and David are checking into a hotel a mile down the street, and making arrangements for things back home. Ilya has to admit, it's admirable and beautiful how immediately dedicated they are to their son. Completely uprooting their lives to stay here with him for the duration of his pregnancy. It is an amazing thing. Ilya hopes if his mom were still around, she’d do the same kind of thing for him.

Shane had been cleared by Dr. Keyes to come home on his modified bed rest. Basically, he’s allowed to lounge around the house, but nothing more. No exercise, no intense physical activity, no rough sex.

“*Won’t be an issue,”* Ilya had assured her, intending to assuage any concerns and reiterate that he would make sure Shane didn’t lift a finger. He doesn’t know why it made Shane’s expression darken.

“Ah yes, is why I bought it,” he teases lightly. “So efficient.”

Shane rolls his eyes, turning to face Ilya. He seems a little more himself now that they’re away from the overwhelm of the hospital. His snarky, sarcastic self, that is.

“You don’t strike me as the type who does a lot of cooking,” Shane retorts.

For some reason, that makes Ilya’s chest puff up. He doesn’t like the implication that Shane, *his omega*, thinks he could not cook or provide good food to him and the pup.

“I used to cook a lot with my mom,” he says with a small shrug.

At that, Shane softens a bit, rubbing one hand slowly over the swell of his belly. It's more noticeable now, as he stands here in a t-shirt and sweatpants.

"That's really nice," he offers, "what kind of things did you guys make?"

"Oh, all kinds of stuff." Ilya waves a hand. "Lots of meat and vegetables with cheese. Lots of dessert."

"Mm." Shane's eyebrows arch. "Meat and cheese."

"You are hungry?" Ilya asks, feeling that pull in his chest again. *Protectprotectprotect.* His omega is hungry, he has to fix this for him.

Chill out, he tells his body, a little desperately.

"I could eat," Shane replies, "I'm supposed to gain at least one pound a week before my next appointment."

"Very easy." Ilya waves a hand. "I do this by accident all the time."

Shane laughs, and the sound is clear, warm, inviting. Ilya can't help but lean into the sound, his eyes glued to the curve of Shane's lips, and the subtle glow of a pink flush under his freckles.

"I will order food," he offers, "we are both too exhausted to cook, eh?"

"If you say so." Shane nods.

"I can order something good, yes? Does not have to be salad?"

Shane snorts out another laugh, but then pauses, like something just occurred to him. "Hm. The other day, in the morning, when we woke up and you were sick. Are you okay? Was it really the salad?"

Panic seizes Ilya's veins. He cannot tell Shane about the phantom mating, for utter terror that Shane might think he somehow *orchestrated* this forced mating. Or, god forbid, he feels guilty and decides not to break the bond out of some sort of obligation. He seems the type. Too selfless.

"Yes, salad is not good for me." Ilya waves a hand dismissively. "Or the pup. The pup needs pizza, so does her father."

"I haven't had pizza in years," Shane admits.

"It was disgusting Canadian pizza, I am sure."

Shane scowls. "Canada is amazing."

"Da yes. Maple syrup and Justin Bieber and ketchup chips, how could anyone live without?" Ilya smirks teasingly at him.

“Okay, just order the food, jackass.” Shane rolls his eyes and reaches over to grab one of his bags.

Quickly, Ilya swoops in and picks it up first, looking at him with utter disbelief. “You have lost your mind?”

“Excuse me?” Shane demands.

“No heavy lifting, Hollander.” Ilya gestures to the bags in his hands.

“Maybe they’re heavy to *you,”* Shane mutters.

Ilya resists the urge to roll his eyes. “Just go sit down, hm? You will give me a heart attack.”

Shane mumbles something unintelligible under his breath, but heads into the living room to plop himself down on the L-shaped sofa. Ilya deposits his bags in the guest room upstairs, and exhales once before he walks back down. He places a delivery order online with a local pizza place, and parks himself beside Shane on the sofa. Close enough that they can smell each other, but not so close that they're touching.

“So,” Shane says, running his fingers along the seam of the couch fabric.

“So,” Ilya replies.

“Why doesn’t your house smell like you?” Shane asks, arching an eyebrow at Ilya.

Ilya is a bit surprised by the question. “I use a lot of scent neutralizing cleaning products. And I usually patch.” He touches his neck, fingers ghosting over the bite mark. He shudders.

“Why?” Shane asks.

“I just prefer it that way,” he answers immediately.

“You aren’t really looking for, um, a real mate, are you?” Shane inquires, his voice getting tenuous around the word *mate.*

Ilya looks back at him intensely. “What does this mean? *A real mate?”*

“I mean, someone you *actually* want to mate with for life,” he explains. “It doesn’t seem like you want that. It seems like you'd rather be alone.”

Ilya clears his throat. “It is easier that way, I guess.”

Shane’s face falls. “Of course it is. I am really sorry, that we’ve…*disrupted-”*

“Stop.” Ilya places a hand on his knee, ignoring the jolt of electricity in his body at the contact. “Stop worrying about this. Just focus on you and your pup. Please.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” Shane insists. “After all this is over. I’ll make it up, somehow.”

Ilya wants to remind him there is nothing to *make up*, but he knows Shane is feeling like a charity case already. “Fine. You owe me one, da? Sound fair? When I need a favor, I call, you have to do it.”

“That sounds fair,” Shane agrees. Then, he hesitates. “Nothing weird.”

“No no, you cannot put rules on it. It’s any favor.”

Shane rolls his eyes. “You are aggravating.”

“It is part of my charm, is how I sell lots of cars.” Ilya wags his eyebrows teasingly.

“Is that what you always wanted to do?” Shane asks. “Sell cars?”

“Mm, no. When I was a stupid kid I wanted to be king of the world.”

Shane’s lips curve up in a cute, teasing smile. “King of the world, huh? What would you do?”

“I wanted to give everyone free mansions and lots of desserts.” Ilya chuckles at the faint memory. “Obviously nothing has changed.”

“Why did you leave Russia?” Shane asks.

At that, Ilya hesitates.

“Sorry if it’s too personal,” Shane adds, “you don’t need to answer.”

“No, ah, is okay.” Ilya gestures to his neck, laughing in the hope it breaks the tension. “We are mates for now, right? We can be honest.”

“Yeah.” Shane smiles at that. It’s so cute it is almost unbearable.

“I moved here for college,” Ilya explains quietly. “I went to business school. I had wanted to leave Russia for a long time. Too many bad memories, and just…not a good place, for me. I have only been back once or twice since. Once when my father died a few years ago.”

Shane’s eyes are intent on Ilya’s face, studying him. “Were you close? You and your dad?”

Ilya exhales a light breath. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“Sorry. I’m like, living in your house. I just…want to know things about you. I can stop.”

“No, is okay. He and I were not close.”

Shane’s brow furrows. “What about your mom?”

“Ah. Yes. I was close with her.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It was a long time ago, anyway.” Ilya clears his throat roughly. “Your parents, though. They are great.”

Shane runs his teeth over his lower lip. “Thanks for calling them.”

“Of course. I am sorry if it was crossing a line, but I thought they should know.”

“It definitely was, but, at least you tried.” Shane’s expression sours. “When this happened before, no one cared enough to tell them. No one cared enough to save me.”

When he says *no one*, Ilya knows he means the alpha who did this to him.

“I will go beat him to a pulp, if you want,” Ilya offers, “just give me his address. I will show him how Russians settle arguments.”

“Tempting,” Shane replies with a quiet laugh. “But I really would rather just…move forward. He’s nothing to me now. I know my mom wants me to try and get the money back, and try to fight my termination, but really it’ll just be this huge legal battle that sounds…” He looks down at his protruding tummy. “Exhausting.”

“I get that,” Ilya murmurs. “I personally think he should pay in dollars and blood for what he did to you, but, I understand wanting to never think about him again. I have things I would like to forget, too.”

“My mom is intense sometimes,” Shane says, pursing his lips. “It’s good, I mean, it’s why I was so successful before this happened. But, it’s also…”

“A lot?” Ilya guesses.

“Yeah. A lot. It’s like, she was so afraid when I presented as an omega, so afraid of how the world would treat me, that she doubled down and just made everything so much harder. She made me almost *afraid* to act like an omega. Do you know I’ve never made a nest?”

Ilya arches an eyebrow. “That is…surprising, at your age.”

“I know. I spent so many years on such a high dose of suppressants, it’s honestly a miracle I got pregnant at all.” Shane looks down at his belly, smiling now. “My miracle.”

Ilya’s chest tightens painfully at the sight of it.

“That’s why I don’t care about any of it,” Shane continues, “the money, the hockey, *revenge.* None of it matters to me now. All I can think about is making sure she gets here okay. I don’t care how stupid that sounds. I just want my daughter to be safe.”

“It is *not* stupid.” Ilya scoots closer, unable to help the instinct. “You are a good father. Very fucking good, and she is not even born yet.”

“The thought of going through a legal battle or money fighting shit or- anything like that with her around.” Shane shakes his head. “I can’t waste the first years of her life chasing revenge. That’s time I’ll never get back. I just want to rebuild my life.”

Ilya's eyes soften. He knows better than anyone how correct Shane is. *Time* is something that can never be replenished. Money and accolades, all of that is replaceable.

"That is very wise, Shane." He squeezes the omega's knee once more. "She is a lucky pup."

"I hope you're right." Shane offers him a small, tentative smile. "Thank you. For saving us."

"Of course," Ilya replies. As if there were ever another option. "And now I will save your tastebuds. Pizza and garlic bread."

Shane laughs, a bit of the tension in the air easing off. Ilya is glad to see him smile and look relaxed. It settles the anxious protective instincts roaring in his blood.

They eat pizza on the couch together, while Shane frets over potential spills and Ilya tells him not to worry. He isn't sure why, but it makes him feel good to see Shane actually eating so much. It fills his chest with a strange pride, a feeling of accomplishment, to see the omega go through three slices of pizza, and then start on the garlic bread.

"I'm going to be so bloated," Shane mutters, "all the carbs."

Ilya rolls his eyes. "Shane. You are pregnant. There is no *bloated.* That is all pup."

Shane chuckles, rubbing a slow hand over his distended middle. Ilya would be lying if he said he *didn't* notice a difference in Shane's belly before and after all the carbs, but he's not stupid enough to point it out. He doubts Shane would find it as adorable as he does.

"Well, it doesn't matter anyway." Shane shrugs. "I'm not playing hockey, hell I'm not even allowed to teach it anymore."

"What did you tell work?" Ilya asks, picking at his own bread.

"The truth. They were nice about it, but obviously they can't pay me unless I work." He exhales. "There goes my health insurance. America is so weird."

"We are mated now," Ilya reminds him, "I already put in a request to add you to mine."

Shane's eyes soften. "You did?"

"Of course. You will be covered." Ilya chuckles. "You can literally do it on your phone through our work app, Shane, is not a big deal."

"It was just nice of you to think about, is all," Shane murmurs, taking another bite of garlic bread.

"As long as we are mated and you are here, I will take care of you." Ilya offers him a small smile. "You should at least get *something* out of being stuck with me, ah?"

"I'm not-" Shane furrows his brow. "Don't say that. *Stuck with you* like you're something bad." He shudders, leaning in. Ilya instinctively extends his wrist for Shane to scent. Obviously, his omega didn't like that self-deprecation.

“Sorry,” Ilya whispers, watching Shane nuzzle into his skin.

“It’s fine,” he murmurs, looking up at Ilya through his eyelashes. He’s so utterly beautiful it nearly makes Ilya lurch forward and press their lips together. They’ve only done that once, right after the mating, and neither of them have brought it up. They weren’t exactly in their right minds.

“Thanks for dinner,” Shane says, eyes soft and warm. “I know, um, I know this wasn’t exactly planned and you’ve been forced into this really shitty situation, but I’m so grateful-”

“Hey.” Ilya shushes him, moving closer until their thighs are pressed together. “*I* am not stuck either, okay? You are my friend. I care about you and your pup. You staying here until you can safely deliver her is not a problem. Just, try to fucking relax, Hollander.”

Shane snorts out a laugh. “You have this uncanny ability to say something really sweet and then totally ruin it right after.”

Ilya cocks an eyebrow. “I try.”

Shane grins and picks up another piece of garlic bread.

They part ways before bed that night. Ilya walks Shane to the guest room, just down the hall from his and separated by a small bathroom. It’s nothing impressive, but it has a queen sized bed with a plush comforter, and lots of space for Shane’s things in the matching dressers. He watches as Shane nudges the comforter aside, pressing his fingers into the sheets.

“I have other sheets, if you do not like these,” Ilya offers, wanting desperately to make Shane comfortable.

“Oh, no it’s okay.” He shakes his head. “I’m used to sleeping in strange places, you travel a lot as a hockey player.”

“Right, of course.” Ilya nods, studying him. “Then why do you look so unhappy?”

Shane’s cheeks flush that adorable shade of pink. “Um, it’s stupid.”

Ilya arches an eyebrow. “What?”

“I- it’s not *me* but…my body wants…” Shane rubs his eyes. “I wish it smelled like you, that’s all. The alpha pheromones. They’re calming.”

Oh.

Shane looks humiliated, Ilya cannot let that stand.

Instead, with a grin, he throws himself on the bed. Shane exclaims in surprise, stepping back to watch while Ilya rolls around on the comforter, nuzzling his hair into the pillows and sheets.

“Oh my god,” Shane laughs, “you are so annoying.”

“Shhh Hollander, I am very busy making sheets smell like sexy car salesman.” Ilya rolls in another circle, tangling his ankles up in the sheet with a curse. He rubs his curls into the pillow cases, trying to smudge off as much of his scent as possible.

“I think you’ve covered it,” Shane says after a few moments of watching Ilya writhe around on the bed like a suffocating fish.

“Give it a sniff, let me know.” Ilya curls over on his side, chin resting on his hand as he wags his eyebrows teasingly.

Shane rolls his eyes, but leans in to delicately sniff at the bedding. A small smile teases the corners of his mouth. Beautiful.

“It’s good,” he says, “thank you.”

“Of course.” Ilya climbs off the bed, and shrugs out of his hoodie. He drops it on the tangled up sheets. “If it helps.”

“Thank you.” Shane reaches for the hoodie, pressing it close. He exhales. “You smell like oranges, but sweeter.”

Ilya offers him a shy smile. “Is a good smell, I hope.”

Shane looks tentative before he speaks again, like he’s afraid he shouldn’t be saying what he says.

“When I was a kid, we used to drive out of town on Sundays to this farmers market. It was a big event, with a petting zoo and hay rides and all kinds of shit kids like.” Shane smiles fondly, turning the fabric over in his hands. “I was always too scared to pet the goats, and the tractor was so loud it hurt my ears. I mostly… kind of hated going.”

Ilya’s eyes soften at the image of a tiny Shane, freckly cheeks and crinkled up lips when he smiled. Being led by the hand around by his father, missing teeth and bright eyes.

“All I wanted to do was hockey,” Shane explains, “I was on the ice any moment I could be. So, it felt like a waste of a day. I guess even back then I was a little too serious about it.”

Ilya can picture this too; Shane, way too young, pushing himself way too hard to fight who he is. To hide himself. To make everyone else see something different.

“But, my parents would always get in line for cider. And, my dad would give me a few dollars to go get myself a treat from this little homemade candy shop.” Shane chuckles softly. “It was so quiet in there. All the candy was organic and fat free, probably *disgusting* to any other kid so it wasn’t that busy. The lady who owned the shop knew who I was after a while, and she always greeted me in Japanese. She was from Canada originally but she’d lived in Okinawa for a while.”

“You speak Japanese?” Ilya asks, a little taken aback by this. Shane had never mentioned it before.

“A little, just what I learned before my *ojichan* died. Mom wanted to…*really* become Canadian, so she didn’t speak it much at home.” Shane shrugs half heartedly. “Anyway, this little shop was super quiet, and it had all these soft dimmed lights, and flute music playing. I would use all the money my dad gave me and buy up a bunch of these little orange candies. They were dried orange slices with a sugar casing on them. I would share the bag with the shopkeeper, and we would have a short conversation in Japanese while she waited for me to finish.” Shane’s smile spreads, cheeks crinkling. “And, I dunno, with the chaos outside, in that quiet little place, the sticky orange smell on my fingers, I felt so *safe.*”

Shane turns, looking at Ilya through his eyelashes. He grips the hoodie between his fingers, expression softening.

“You smell like those candies,” he explains quietly.

The words he doesn’t say are plainly laid between his actual sentences. *You smell safe.*

“Oh,” Ilya says, taken aback. He wants to tell Shane his own story, the sugary apples and sharlotka in the kitchen with his mama. The safety and security of his own childhood, and the way it’s wrapped up in Shane’s sweet scent. He wants to tell Shane everything.

But, the omega speaks first, laughing nervously. “Sorry. Is that super fucking weird and personal? I um, I’m sure it’s just the mating thing. I read somewhere that mates smell better to each other, so it’s probably just a, you know, *my body tricking me* thing.”

Ilya wilts.

“Well, thanks for showing me to my room.” Shane clears his throat, still smiling that nervous, phony smile. “G’night.”

Ilya blinks, feeling like an idiot. “Of course. Yes, um, goodnight, Shane.” He heads for the door, hesitating with his hand on the knob. “If you need anything at all, come in, okay?”

“Sure. Thanks, Ilya.”

Ilya walks down the hall, hearing the door close behind him, separating him from Shane.

Mate, his body yearns urgently, *pup, mate, mine.*

No, he tells himself, *not ours. Not forever.*

Sleep does not come with ease.

Ilya tosses and turns for hours, trying to shut his brain off. He’s too overwhelmed by the events of the past few days to make much sense of his thoughts.

When dreams come, they’re torturous.

It's a cold, rainy morning. His small feet are sock-clad to combat the icy chill of the hardwood floors. His Mama has been sleeping in for a very long time. Dad left for work hours ago, and she hasn't come out of the bedroom.

This is not uncommon. Mama spends a lot of time hiding in the bedroom. Alexei says she hates them, him and Ilya. That she regrets having them. Ilya doesn't think that's exactly true, but he does get the feeling, maybe, it isn't completely false either.

"Mama?" he asks, rapping gently on the door. "It is past breakfast. Are you hungry?"

Alexei and he had prepared themselves something to eat, as they usually did on her bad mornings. But it isn't like her to not at least make an *appearance.*

"Mama?" he tries again, gently pushing on the door. The room is well lit by the drawn curtains.. The window is open, which is unusual for a rainy day. Ilya spots the lump of his mother's frame under the covers, where he usually finds her sleeping.

He races to the side of the bed, extending his hand to touch hers, where it's hanging out of the blanket. Her skin is ice cold when he brushes against it, and it makes him rear back.

Ilya had presented as an alpha last month on his birthday. It was somewhat early, at twelve. His father had been so proud to have two alpha sons. Ilya thinks it's the only time his father had ever smiled at him.

His mother, though, she had seemed almost…*perturbed* by the idea. Ilya tried to ask her about it, but she just kissed his hair and told him she loved him. He'd started to notice her scent, it was like lavender and flowers.

"Mama?" He touches her hand again, eyes going wide when he realizes he can't smell the lavender anymore.

His vision tunnels, and the setting changes.

Now, he's standing in Shane's small studio apartment. There's blood all over his hands. On the floor, a limp body with dark hair and a round belly lies before him.

You have to bite him, a voice says in his ear.

Ilya picks up the body, teeth grazing his neck.

Bite him, the voice insists, *it's what you alphas do anyway, isn't it? It doesn't matter if he says yes. Just bite him. Take control, alpha. Just like your father always did.*

Ilya bites down on his neck, and Shane screams.

"Ilya!"

He startles awake, heart thundering in his chest, as he realizes he's sitting up in his bedroom in Boston. His skin is sticky with sweat, breaths coming ragged and uneven in his chest. He fumbles around in the dark, gasping for air, until he hears a quiet, high-pitched whine.

Shane is standing in the doorway, hands cupped protectively around his belly, distress seeping out of him in nauseating waves. Ilya realizes, *he'd* shouted his name,

“Ilya,” Shane repeats, voice a whine, “can I come in? You’re scaring me.”

“Shane, I am sorry,” he gasps, “just- just a bad dream. I did not mean-”

“You smell *terrified,"* Shane whimpers, “you’re so scared.”

“I’m okay, I promise.” Ilya tries to settle his nerves, but his heart won’t slow its rapid flutter. His mind is a disaster.

Shane ignores him, and shuffles into the room. He climbs into the bed beside Ilya, his weight heavy and warm as he presses into Ilya’s side. He cups his hand on the back of Ilya’s curls, and drags his face closer, until his nose is pressed into the omega’s neck.

“Scent me,” Shane murmurs, threading his fingers through Ilya’s hair, “please, alpha, calm down.”

Ilya does as he’s told, inhaling Shane’s sweet scent. His eyes close, and he leans deeper into the warm skin of Shane's neck. Sweet apples, a dash of vanilla, notes of cinnamon.

Safe, his body says, *safe, mate. Safe, mine, mate, pup.*

“Shane,” he breathes, wrapping his arms around the omega’s waist and tightening his grip.

“I’m here,” Shane murmurs, still stroking his fingers through Ilya’s hair. It’s soothing, the gesture. “I’m here, you’re okay. Just breathe.”

Ilya tries to listen, but his breathing refuses to slow down.

“Hey, hey, you’re okay.” Shane shushes him softly.

“Are you?” Ilya gasps. “You and the pup? You are safe?”

“Yes, of course. We’re safe here with you. Here.” Shane takes Ilya’s wrist and carefully brings it down until his large hand is splayed out over the crest of his swollen belly. The skin is taut and tight under his t-shirt, warm. “Pup’s right here. She’s okay, she’s safe. We’re here with you.”

For some reason, having his hand protectively shielding Shane’s belly *does* calm his nerves. Ilya’s breathing evens out, shoulders relaxing, as Shane continues to stroke his hair and shush him. The smell of warm spiced apples fills the air, absorbing his other senses.

“There you go, good boy.” Shane hums quietly in his chest, a soothing, rhythmic purr that infects Ilya’s body immediately. “Just keep breathing, Ilya. It's okay, I promise.”

Ilya’s head goes limp in the crook of Shane’s neck, nose still pressed into the scent gland. Shane pets his hair and hums quietly, a calming pattern that regulates Ilya’s nervous system.

“So good,” Shane coos. “Just breathe.”

After a few moments of this, Ilya finally finds his voice, muffled against Shane's neck. “Sorry.”

“No sorry,” Shane whispers. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I think so.” Ilya doesn’t pull away, unable to bring himself to separate from Shane’s warmth.

“What was your dream about?” Shane asks quietly, still stroking his hair.

Ilya winces.

“You don’t have to tell me,” he murmurs, “didn’t mean to pry, alpha.”

Something sour fills Ilya’s lungs at Shane’s apology. “No, is okay. Is okay. Um, I was dreaming about my mother.”

Shane looks down at him, brown eyes sharp and inquisitive in the darkness. He has this way of looking at Ilya sometimes, like he’s trying to read his mind and fix all his problems all at once. It’s intense, a little overwhelming. Ilya isn’t used to people…*caring* like that.

“She killed herself when I was twelve,” Ilya explains. The words wobble as they come out, but he forces them steady. “I found her.”

Shane’s breath catches. His thumb smooths gently over the nape of Ilya’s neck, a soothing gesture. “I’m so sorry, Ilya.”

He shakes his head. “It is okay I-I have had lots of time to deal. It’s just, um, it was very hard. After that it was just my father and my brother and me, and my father was not…a nice man.”

Shane’s body tenses, and he pulls Ilya in closer in a protective manner.

“Is okay,” Ilya soothes him with a hand down his back. “He is dead now, too. But when I was growing up, he was very strict. Very controlling. Typical alpha jerk.”

“Did he hurt you?” Shane asks.

Ilya nods, closing his eyes against hot liquid that wants to spill. Shane lets out a little hiss. When his eyes open, Shane’s gaze is fiery, his lip curled. He’s surprised to see the rage there.

“It is okay, omega,” Ilya murmurs, trying to settle his tension. He is not supposed to be getting stressed out, with the pup in tow. “I am safe now. He is long gone. You are here, hm?”

“Yes,” Shane replies instantly. He nestles against Ilya, sighing. “I’m so sorry you went through that, Ilya. You didn’t deserve that.”

Ilya is surprised to feel his eyes prickling with tears. He clears his throat, letting out a wet laugh. “Thank you, Shane. It is nice to hear.”

“What can I do?” Shane asks. “How can I help? I hate that you’re upset.”

“Mm, is the mating, makes you upset when I am upset.” Ilya waves his hand dismissively, before immediately placing it back on Shane’s round tummy. “This is good, this helps.”

“Okay. I’ll sit here all night, if you need.”

Ilya laughs again. “Why don’t you lay down, mm? This cannot be good for your back.”

Carefully, he helps Shane adjust so they’re lying beside each other. Ilya is pressed into his back, face buried in his hair, one hand hovering delicately over his belly.

“It’s okay,” Shane murmurs, guiding his palm back down to cup his stomach. “It’s nice.”

Ilya closes his eyes, breathing in Shane’s scent. *Safety, mate, pup, mine.*

Mine.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Shane whispers into the darkness. Ilya can feel his pulse beating rhythmically. His skin is warm. His words are tentative.

“Talk about what, *milyy?”*

“Your mom, or, any of it. I’m a good listener.”

“Mm, you are.” Ilya nestles closer, exhaling at Shane’s body engulfed by his. “I just…don’t want you to think she was weak. She wasn’t. She was so funny and beautiful, and strong. She had her choices taken from her, as a young omega. She was trapped. She saw no other way out.”

“Oh,” Shane breathes the word out. “That… that’s awful.”

“It was. But I think, or I hope, she is at peace now.”

Shane swallows noisily. “Well, she raised a really good alpha.”

Ilya hums, brushing his nose against Shane’s neck. Shane shudders. “You are kind to say.”

“It’s true. You know you’re like, fucking amazing, right?”

“I-”

“Don’t do that, please. Don’t argue,” Shane begs. “You’ve been saving me since the second we met. And you don’t even expect anything for it.”

“This is just called kindness, Shane,” Ilya mutters.

“Yeah, well, sometimes in this world that’s fucking hard to find.” Shane’s voice softens a bit. “She would be proud of you, I’m sure of that. If my pup presents as an alpha, I want her to be just like you.”

Ilya's eyes squeeze shut against another wave of heavy emotion. He drops his forehead between Shane's shoulder blades, exhaling a shaky breath. How can he possibly tell Shane the weight of these words, and what they mean to Ilya, who has spent his entire life afraid of becoming his father?

"Thank you, *malysh,"* Ilya whispers, voice overcome.

"What's that mean?" Shane asks, the words faltering around a thick yawn. Poor thing, he is exhausted.

"It means thank you." Ilya reaches over and kisses Shane's neck softly, just ghosting over the angry indents of bite marks.

Shane shudders, body instinctively pressing closer to Ilya's. *Mate, mate, mine, pup, protect, mate, mine,* Ilya's body screams.

Ilya cuddles him, trying not to think about how painful it's going to be to break this bond.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

SMUT WARNING!!!!!!! the tags of this fic have been updated so please beware!!!!

as usual i am fucking with omegaverse biology/worldbuilding and doing whatever i want so please suspend your disbelief and have a good time with shane and ilya xx

(you can find me on x @ imbihesgay (https://x.com/imbihesgay) and tumblr @ boopernatural (https://www.tumblr.com/blog/boopernatural) . i share my kofi links there if anyone is feeling generous :)

please come talk to me about hollanov and if you have any fic ideas/requests shoot them my way! i would love to just have some fun convos about these two and brainstorm

i hope you enjoy <3 <3<3

thanks for reading !!

They fall into a routine, over the following weeks.

In the mornings, Shane does *light* yoga in the living room, because it's too cold on the deck, and it's the only "exercise" he's allowed to do. He stretches his beautiful body, while Ilya pretends he isn't watching from the kitchen, white-knuckling his coffee cup.

Ilya makes them breakfast. Omelets, smoothies, and the occasional donut or croissant, because Shane is supposed to be gaining weight. He still focuses on health, but he's been allowing himself treats every now and then.

Shane's parents come over and keep him company while Ilya works. Shane texts Ilya that they're driving him crazy, and Ilya laughs about it, privately at his desk.

His coworkers bother him for details about what is going on, but he's vague. He doesn't want to have to explain it to them. He's sure Bood has warned them it's sensitive, because they do eventually back off, even Kent. Troy keeps giving him sympathetic looks, but Ilya tries to ignore them.

The weeks pass in a strange bliss. Ilya is not used to having someone waiting for him when he gets home. But now, Shane is there, in the kitchen when he's *supposed* to be resting and Ilya has to practically force him to sit down. Ilya likes cooking for him and the pup anyway, it gives him a sense of control, a feeling of…*caretaking.* He'd never realized how much he desires that before.

They share Ilya's bed every night. Neither of them bring it up, it's just a biological instinct. It's easier to sleep, curled up together in the warmth of the bed. Ilya sleeps soundly with Shane's heartbeat close by.

Shane is thirty-five weeks pregnant when Ilya gets home to find him engrossed in his laptop with headphones on. He's sitting at the kitchen table, completely zeroed in on the screen, brow furrowed with intense focus. Ilya hesitates to disrupt him, but he is a little afraid of how long Shane has been sitting here like this. He has the tendency, Ilya's come to notice, to get too hyperfocused on one task at a time and neglect things like peeing or eating.

"Shane?" he asks, waving a hand.

Shane's gaze doesn't break from the screen.

Ilya pulls out a chair and sits across from him, resting his chin on his fist patiently. Shane seems to notice another human has entered the room then, and he pulls his headphones out, smiling shyly.

"I didn't see you," he says apologetically.

"Survival instincts of a walnut," Ilya teases, "what if I was a burglar?"

"Then why would you use the front door?"

"Maybe I am a polite burglar."

"Then I'm not really worried about what you might do." Shane arches his eyebrows.

Ilya rolls his eyes. "What are you doing anyway? Watching porn?"

"At the kitchen table?"

He shrugs. "You were alone, so."

Shane snorts. "I've given up on *that* part of my life forever. No, I was actually responding to an email."

Ilya decides not to acknowledge the former half of that sentence, instead focusing on his curiosity. "Who emailed you?"

"Um, it's a sports news outlet. They want me to do an interview."

"Oh!"

"Yeah." Shane sighs. "I've gotten about five-thousand requests for interviews after the Metros terminated me, but I didn't want to add fuel to the fire. This journalist though, her angle is different."

"Different how?"

“Different like, they report on omega stories in professional sports and don’t, you know, disrespect them. Or minimize them. They want to talk to me to raise awareness about prejudice against omegas in pro sports.” Shane shrugs. “I guess I’m not the only case like this.”

Ilya studies Shane’s face for a beat. “And you are considering this?”

Shane exhales, leaning back in his chair with his expression dubious. “I’m not, not *really.* I want out of that world, it fucked me over and hung me out to dry.”

“But?” Ilya prompts, filling in the unspoken next word in Shane’s sentence.

“But, her pitch was seductive,” Shane admits. “She’s done pieces on other prominent omegas in the industry. It’s not gonna get me my job back but, I dunno it might…help?”

Ilya leans forward, eyes softening. “Is that what you want? Your job back?”

Shane grimaces. “It doesn’t really matter what I want. My contract was airtight, and I signed it with my medical designation as a beta. I lied, which *is* a breach of contract. It’s not like it was, *legally,* a bad termination. But, I *know* they don’t care that I lied. If I’d said I was a beta and then ended up being an alpha, I’d still be there.”

Ilya nods, jaw clenching with a protective bit of heat that courses through him. “Probably, yes.”

“Doesn’t matter though, because they covered their asses.” Shane rubs a hand across his face. “I’ve been feeling pretty helpless about all of it. I worked my entire fucking life to be there, and they just…took it away.” He reaches down and presses a hand to the crest of his swollen stomach. “I’d take the trade off any day. I’d rather have her. I just wish I didn’t *have* to choose.”

“It is unfair,” Ilya agrees, voice hard. “You should not have to make this choice.”

“The choice was made for me, anyway, when they terminated me.” Shane sighs, chewing on the inside of his cheek. “But, this journalist, she…I dunno. I liked her a lot. We spoke on the phone a bit. She’s an omega and she’s got this huge network of supporters and they raise awareness and rally and, it’s kind of a movement. I didn’t even know stuff like this existed.”

“I guess that is why the *awareness* is important,” Ilya murmurs.

“Yeah, I guess.” He nods. “I’m not sure what good is going to come of me telling my story, but… I still, kind of want to. I just keep thinking, if *I* was hiding for so long, who knows how many others are too? They can’t stop hiding, but at least they’d know they aren’t alone. Keeping a secret like that gets pretty lonely.”

Ilya offers him a small smile. “I have seen that the Metros are on a record high losing streak, since you left. It could be fun to remind everyone exactly why that is.”

Shane glances at him, smirking. “That *could* be kinda fun. But, I don’t know. It could just be me making more enemies. That’s not exactly smart. What do you think?”

“It does not matter what I think, Shane.”

“Well, for all intents and purposes, you’re my mate.” Shane shrugs. “At least right now, my actions affect you. They’re *already* affecting you. I don’t want to bring any trouble to your door.”

Ilya leans forward again, reaching out to give Shane’s hand a brief, perfunctory squeeze. “I like trouble, Hollander. You should start lots of it.”

Shane smiles at him, less dry this time, more earnest. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Fuck them. They treat omegas like shit, then expect them to just roll over and take it quietly. You should not be quiet. You should be loud. Let *everyone* hear it.”

A small laugh, breathless and disbelieving, bursts from Shane’s lips. “Shit. Am I actually doing this?”

“Take one night to consider it,” Ilya suggests, gesturing at his laptop. “I for one, think you should slander their fucking name into the ground. But, don’t forget the pup. No stress, da?”

“Right.” Shane nods again, rubbing a hand over his belly. “I’ll sleep on it and get back to them tomorrow. Maybe I'll do the interview after she’s born, when I’m *me* again. It’s only a few more weeks.”

Ilya’s throat tightens at this reminder- the impending clock on all of this. As soon as the pup is born, Shane and he will break their bond. Shane will probably go back home with his parents to raise his pup in Canada, around family.

And Ilya… Ilya will go back to his quiet, empty house.

“Hey,” Shane murmurs, “you smell upset. What’s going on?”

Christ, they cannot get away with anything around each other anymore. They are so attuned to each other’s smells now, Ilya doubts he could even hide indigestion in front of Shane.

“Nothing,” he assures him, “just thinking about how fun breaking the bond is going to be.”

Shane’s expression twists into something more like a grimace. “I talked with my doctor about it a little at my last appointment.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. I want to know what to expect, since everyone keeps saying it’s this big painful ordeal. I’ll be postpartum then and don’t want to…not be able to be there for her, you know.”

“Of course,” Ilya replies, words strained.

“Basically, what we’ll do is go into the hospital. Better to do it there in case…” Shane winces, “one of us has a very bad reaction. They’ll give us these hormone injections, it will

essentially make our bodies no longer recognize the other as a mate. Our smells will become unfamiliar, and sometimes even scary, and it will make our body chemistry incompatible."

"Oh," Ilya says, a little stunned. "What… what is *incompatible,* in this sense?"

"Basically our bodies will reject each other, so we can never successfully mate with each other again," Shane explains. His expression is neutral as he speaks, like he's reciting information from a pamphlet. "They want to make sure it's a permanent solution, and we don't end up with a one-siding mating or something."

Ilya exhales heavily, tapping his fingertips on the tabletop. "Okay, got it. And this… *procedure,* they do it at the hospital because we could have side effects?"

"Yeah." Shane blinks a few times, wrinkling his nose. "The side effects did not sound pleasant. Sounds like a broken bond makes rejection sickness look like a trip to Disneyland."

"Jesus," Ilya mutters.

"I'm sorry." Shane's eyes are distraught when he looks back at him.

"It is not your fault," Ilya says for the millionth time.

For a few beats, they just stare at each other. The fear and apprehension is palpable in the air between them. Neither says anything about it, though.

"Will you go back to Montreal?" Ilya asks stiffly. "Or Ottawa with your parents?"

Shane's eyes don't leave Ilya's face. "My mom has been saying she's already gotten a nursery started at their place in Ottawa. I guess it would make the most sense to go there, to have the help. It'll be hard, just me."

Right. It makes the most sense. It's practical, logical, for Shane to leave Boston and go back home. He will need all the support, once he is again an unmated omega.

"Being a single dad was not on my bingo card," Shane admits, laughing weakly.

"You will be the most amazing dad in the world," Ilya tells him, no trace of levity in his voice.

"Thank you, Ilya. For everything." Shane's eyes look like he's trying very hard not to cry, and Ilya knows they cannot handle a hormone-induced meltdown right now.

"Enough heavy stuff," he says, "what do you want for dinner?"

"Oh god." Shane laughs again, wiping his eyes dry as he leans back in his chair. "I don't know if you've noticed, but I have been enjoying dinner way too much. Nothing fits me anymore."

At that, Ilya does a double take. He's unable to help himself from studying Shane's form intensely. He's wearing a pair of gray sweats, which is his go-to attire lately. The waistband is

slung down low on his hips, underneath the round curve of his belly. He's got a t-shirt on over it that looks…*tight,* and uncomfortable. It's riding up, thin fabric pulled taut over his swollen middle, a sliver of skin visible underneath the hem.

The sight of it, while enough to make Ilya sympathetic for Shane's plight of outgrowing his clothes, does little to calm the fervent attraction he has for the omega. He looks utterly *stunning.* His skin is glowing deeply, flushed pink in his cheeks, which have rounded out in the recent weeks. His lips are swollen and plump, his nose looks a bit wider which Ilya has heard can happen during the third trimester. His lashes are dark and thick, same as his hair, and his thighs have thickened to help support his increasing weight.

Unfortunately, he's absolutely fucking gorgeous like this, and Ilya's alpha wants to bend him over on the mattress, beg him to present, and take care of this pulsing *need.*

Obviously, he cannot do that.

"I know, it's horrible." Shane tugs self-consciously on his t-shirt, face burning red.

"No, no I am only sorry I did not realize before," Ilya says, wetting his lips with his tongue. "Why have you not, um, sized up?"

Shane winces. "I don't exactly have the money."

Oh.

"Oh, Shane." Ilya adjusts in his seat, trying not to let on how hard the sight of Shane's belly bursting out of his shirt is making him. "I should have realized. I am so sorry. I will take you shopping tomorrow."

"No, no, I cannot ask you-"

"You need to be comfortable," Ilya insists, though he quietly mourns saying goodbye to this almost obscene view of Shane's belly in his too-small shirt. "We will go tomorrow."

Shane's jaw clenches. "I'm going to pay you back, okay? Every penny. You've been taking care of me for weeks. It isn't fair to you."

"You owe me nothing." Ilya waves his hand dismissively. "This is what friends do."

He isn't sure about that, actually, but he does not want Shane to feel guilty. None of this is his fault.

Shane looks down accusatorily at his big bump. "Okay, that's enough growing now. It's getting inconvenient, little pup."

Ilya laughs, getting to his feet and shaking his head. "Do not listen, pup! You must come out fat and happy!"

"Fat?" Shane squeaks. "Don't write checks my body can't cash, Ilya! I still have to push her out!"

Laughing again, Ilya heads for the pantry to hunt down some dinner ingredients. “Yes but think how cute she will be, with chubby cheeks and a little round belly. Pups should be fat and happy.”

Shane scowls. “Easy for you to say, you aren’t giving birth to this fat, happy pup.”

Ilya rolls his eyes. “What does the fat pup want for dinner, anyway? She has liked pasta this week a lot.”

“The pup is not in charge,” Shane argues, and they both know it’s a complete lie. He wilts after one examining look from Ilya. “The pup wants chicken parmesan again.”

“My favorite,” Ilya says with a grin.

“You're just saying that so I don’t feel bad about asking for it so much,” Shane grumbles.

Ilya really isn’t, but he just laughs again, happily setting out the ingredients he’d started stockpiling, since Shane began craving this meal like mad. He begins the process, humming quietly to himself while he cooks. He hears Shane get up from his chair, puttering around in the bathroom before he returns with freshly washed hands.

“Let me help,” he pleads, already knowing the answer.

“Absolutely not. Sit down and relax.”

“That’s all I *do,*” he whines.

“Then you are doing everything right.” Ilya focuses on opening some canned whole tomatoes for the sauce.

Shane leans heavily against the kitchen island, looking at Ilya with big, glimmering eyes.

“What, Shane?” he asks patiently.

“Nothing,” he replies, voice defensive.

Ilya glances at him out of his peripherals. He can’t help but smile at the sight of Shane, leaning against the counter, hands cradling his belly, expression hopeful.

“You want to eat raw garlic again, don’t you?” Ilya demands.

“It smells *so* good,” Shane insists.

“Here.” Ilya cracks two cloves open from the casing and passes them to Shane. “That is *it.* The heartburn was so bad it made you cry last time.”

Shane mutters a few choice phrases under his breath, but accepts his two small cloves of *disgusting* raw garlic without much complaint. He pops one in his mouth and sucks on it, sighing contently as his eyes close.

Ilya shakes his head, resisting the urge to laugh. He's learned *that* gets him a round of waterworks as well. Not worth risking it with third-trimester hormones raging and doing most of Shane's decision making as of late. It's nice, having someone else in the house to think about. Someone else's feelings to navigate, someone else's food choices to think about, someone's warm body beside his. Having Shane here has made Ilya feel like he was finally *living* rather than just existing.

He is not looking forward to the day all of this ends.

"I love Christmas."

Shane says it casually, as they make their way through the crowded corridors of the mall. He'd been cleared by his doctor for this activity, after a picture-perfect ultrasound and beautiful bloodwork results. She has even said she may consider lifting his bed rest recommendation, though she attributes his current great health to his rest and how well Ilya is caring for him. Ilya tries not to get too cocky when Shane tells him that.

The mall is decked out from head to toe with gaudy, tacky Christmas decorations. There are large fake ornaments, colorful ribbons, and a gigantic tree lit up in the middle. Radio Christmas Hits are blaring through the tinny speakers, and frantic last-minute shoppers are making their way rabidly from store to store.

"Christmas is fun," Ilya replies, mostly just because he doesn't want to ruin Shane's adorable smile.

Shane is probably mostly just excited to be outside for the first time in weeks.

He looks utterly adorable. He's wearing his trusty gray sweats, and one of Ilya's big winter coats, pulled tight over his swollen middle. There's a scarf wrapped around his neck, and a beanie pulled down over his ears. The tip of his nose is bright red from the bite of winter air outside. It's utterly endearing.

He's also walking *slowly.* His waddle is extremely prominent now, and Ilya had hovered worriedly on the icy pavement of the parking lot. Luckily, Shane is an athlete and still quite dexterous, all things considered.

They start at the food court, because it's lunch time and Shane needs six small meals a day plus snacks to keep his energy up. Ilya tells him they can get whatever he wants, and to let the pup decide what sounds good.

What sounds good, apparently, is a soft pretzel with cheese, an order of french fries, a chicken sandwich, and an orange creamsicle ice cream, each from a different vendor. Ilya dutifully collects each item and meets Shane at a table in the middle of the food court.

Shane's attention is diverted when he sits, and Ilya follows his gaze to see what he's looking at. His eyes land on a family standing beside the big tree, waiting in line to take a photo with the creepy Santa Claus impersonator. It's a tall man with broad shoulders, probably an alpha just judging by his build. He's handsome, blonde hair and a well trimmed beard. He has his

arm around a shorter man, with a lean, lithe build and curly dark hair. In the smaller man's arms, is a pup. Ilya isn't the best at guessing baby ages, but he'd probably put that pup at around a year or so. The pup is wagging her hands excitedly, waving toward the tree, while her dads laugh and smile. The taller man kisses the shorter man on the head. They both look happy.

Ilya looks back at Shane, who can't seem to pull his eyes off the family.

"Hey," he murmurs, "are you okay?"

The omega startles a bit, turning to Ilya with his cheeks flushed red. "What?"

"Just making sure you were alright," he repeats cautiously.

"Oh. Yeah." Shane clears his throat and looks at the food, smiling faintly. "Thank you for getting this."

"Of course." Ilya nudges the tray toward him, encouraging him to eat. "This is our shopping fuel, hm?"

"Yeah." Shane forces a laugh out and picks up the ice cream.

"Shane." Ilya folds his hands in his lap, glancing sideways at the men and their pup before looking back at him. "Are you sure-"

"I'm fine." Shane shakes his head, laughing again. It's a dry bark. "I just- I *want* that. I know it's stupid."

Ilya's heart clenches. "It is not stupid."

"I didn't love him," Shane murmurs, swirling the ice cream around with his spoon. "He wasn't right for me. We were together in secret. He was a controlling asshole. I was more intimidated by him than anything else. It wasn't *love."*

Ilya's eyes soften as Shane speaks.

"But I wish…I wish I wasn't doing it alone." Shane clears his throat. "It's a bad feeling. Not being wanted. Even by someone you don't want. And knowing that I'll never have-" He looks back at the family. "What *they* have. My pup will never have that. It fucking sucks."

Ilya's forehead furrows a bit. "I thought, um, I thought you said you would rather be alone? I thought you did not want an alpha in your life, if you had the choice."

Shane takes a bite of the ice cream, sighing. "Obviously I don't want a *controlling asshole* alpha in my life. But it would be nice to have someone who loves me back. You know, a nice alpha, like you."

Ilya's heart stutters. The back of his neck feels damp with sweat. He has spent months thinking his presence was entirely inconvenient for Shane, that being here with him was a

cage of sorts. Their biology forcing them together. He'd been feeling like he clipped Shane's wings.

Is it possible that Shane *doesn't* feel that way? Is it possible that he could someday… maybe…feel this way? Feel the way Ilya does for him? That he is beautiful and funny and smart and everything wonderful.

That he is so *easy* to love it comes just like breathing.

Shane must see something on Ilya's face, because he quickly moves on. "Anyway, it's like you said, it's better on my own. No one can let me down anymore." He grins dryly. It's a phony expression. "And at least my pup will never know what it feels like to be left behind. I'll make sure of that."

Ilya fumbles for the right thing to say, struggling to put his thoughts into words. He wants to tell Shane that someone *does* love him, and his pup, very much. But, how can he? They've spent months preparing themselves mentally to break this bond as soon as the pup is here. And, who knows if this is what Shane even wants? A lust for some fantasy is not the same as loving the real alpha sitting in front of him at the table.

Shane looks up from his ice cream, nose wrinkling. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Ilya assures him. "Just, um, I am sorry. About everything."

"Not your fault." Shane waves a hand, then smiles. "Thanks for lunch."

"Of course, Shane. Anytime."

Anytime, anything, whatever you want. Mate. Pup. Mine.

Quiet, he tells his brain. *Not ours. Not forever.*

"None of this fits." Shane's voice is tense, clearly trying to keep his cool, but Ilya can hear even through the door of the changing room that he's upset.

"We will find something, Shane, do not worry." Ilya frowns and looks down at the pieces in his hand. They're at a men's omega maternity store, but a lot of the options here are…well, as Shane said. They don't fit. He's too tall and broad-shouldered, not built like the typical lean, short omega men on advertisements.

"Fuck," Shane mutters, "I just ripped this."

Ilya frowns. "Is it noticeable?"

"Um, not really."

"Fuck this place, hang it back up. We will go somewhere else."

“Okay.” Shane sighs and Ilya listens to him rustle around for a few moments. He appears behind the open door another second later, red-faced and flushed. He’s holding several hangers.

“Nothing?” Ilya asks dejectedly.

Shane shakes his head. “My shoulders are too big for all of these.” He waves the shirts. “And my fucking ass is too big for all of these.” He gestures bluntly with the pants. “Fucking low center of gravity. Commentators are always saying that. What they mean is I have a fat, stupid ass.”

Ilya thinks the latter is a good problem to have, but he wisely does not say it.

“Your ass is not stupid,” he tries. “I bet it could solve lots of math problems.”

“Ilya. Please. *Shut* up.”

“How’s it going over here you two?” The preppy omega salesmen who had given Shane an unsure eye upon their entry to the store appears then, his expression cautious.

“This is the biggest size you have?” Ilya asks, holding up some of the hangers in his hand.

The omega checks the tags and then nods solemnly. “Yes, unfortunately. Our store is not geared toward alphas.”

“I’m not an alpha,” Shane mutters.

“Well, I know, but your build. It isn’t typical for an omega.” The salesman offers Shane a cheerful smile.

“You should really expand your selection,” Ilya says, “he is not the only omega who is bigger than these sizes.”

“It’s not common,” the salesman replies, “and our designers have to save costs by tailoring toward the majority.”

“Well, can you recommend somewhere?” Ilya inquires. “Another maternity store we can try?”

“I *can,* but I’m pretty sure they’re going to be similarly sized.” The salesman looks at Shane sympathetically. “Have you tried any alpha-geared clothing stores? I’m assuming that’s what you usually wear?”

Shane scowls, nose wrinkling.

Ilya explains, “none of them have the band he needs on the pants, for his belly. Or the give in the shirts. Because most alphas do not get pregnant.”

“I see the difficulty,” the salesman says. He taps his chin thoughtfully for a moment. “There is a generic *big and tall* store down the street, you maybe can find something there? It

probably won't be stylish though."

Shane's eyes narrow.

"Okay, thank you." Ilya drops the clothes in a pile on the bench he was formerly occupying, and takes Shane by the arm. He tows them out of the store before Shane can rip the other omega's throat out.

"What an asshole," Shane growls as they make their way down the corridor of the mall. "*Big and tall store.* I'm *six* feet tall! I'm not fucking Michael Jordan."

"I know, *malysh."* Ilya rubs his back gently as they walk -well, *waddle.* "I am starting to get very frustrated by this. The beds at the hospital are not the right size, and now your clothes. What the fuck?"

"Try living it," he mutters. "The world is not built for omegas like me."

Ilya's teeth grit. He wants to shake the fucking world and tell it to *stop* making things harder on the beautiful Shane Hollander. If he had his way, *everything* would be built to make Shane's life infinitely easier.

As they're rounding the corner, Ilya catches a scent, following close behind. He tucks an arm around Shane's shoulders, and turns to see the young omega man just catching up to them. He smells like cider and a little bit like dog fur. He's short, with a scruffy beard and messy hair under a beanie. Handsome, but mostly unassuming.

"Thank god you stopped," he huffs, "I overheard you talking just now. Did you just come from that maternity store?"

"Yes," Ilya replies warily, keeping a protective arm on Shane.

"That place sucks shit." The man extends a small business card to Shane, who takes it. "My friend owns a maternity store just a few miles up the road, and they cater to *all* omega body types. They do customs, as well!"

"Thank you," Shane says, smiling gently at the man, all traces of anger absolved from his face.

"Of course. Just tell her Harris Drover sent you. She'll take good care of you."

"Okay, we will." Shane nods and smiles at him, and they both watch as he turns on his heel to head back to wherever he just emerged from. He moves back toward a table in the center of the corridor in front of the big lit up tree, sitting down beside a man who turns his head just at the exact moment Ilya looks.

And sees a familiar face.

"Oh," he says aloud, causing Shane to look at him.

"What?" Shane asks, following his gaze.

Troy Barrett brings his hand up to cover his face, already blushing, as Harris sits beside him at the table. Harris reaches over to touch his arm, and Troy leans into it, as though it's something they do all the time.

Oh.

"What?" Shane asks again, more insistent this time.

"Ah, nothing." Ilya shakes his head, then looks down at Shane with a brisk laugh. "Now we have somewhere else to try. Do you feel up to going?"

"Yeah sure." Shane follows along as Ilya turns and leads them toward the exits. Ilya throws his arm around Shane's shoulders again, resisting the urge to laugh as they make their way toward the parking lot.

Looks like Ilya isn't the *only* one keeping secrets from his coworkers.

Thankfully, the second shopping trip is massively successful. Ilya carries in several handfuls of garment bags, while Shane insists he spent too much. There had never been any doubt in Ilya's mind he was about to go bankrupt, not when he saw Shane's eyes light up at the appropriately sized, maternity *Ottawa Centaurs* jersey on display. Apparently, it's Shane's favorite team, aside from his former one. His hometown, he says.

Ilya would be lying if he said it didn't make him giddy to see how excited Shane was about the jersey, and how cute he looks wearing it now. He's fallen asleep beside Ilya on the couch, head lulled sideways against his shoulder, lips slack. The movie they'd attempted to watch after a dinner of Chinese takeout is still throwing blue light across the room.

He looks beautiful like this, fully relaxed against Ilya's side. His scent is soft and peaceful, warm syrupy apples and vanilla. Ilya swears the smell of vanilla is getting stronger the further along Shane gets, but he's sure his nose must be deceiving him.

Ilya strokes his neck softly, the way he likes, and rests his cheek in Shane's hair. Shane shifts slightly in his sleep, but remains out, purring quietly against Ilya's chest. He's so unburdened like this, completely at ease and safe in Ilya's arms.

It's the most soothing feeling Ilya can ever imagine. His omega, well fed, well dressed, happy and content and asleep on his chest. There aren't enough words in his English lexicon to explain how at peace this makes him feel. A feeling he's so desperately needed for a long time.

He tucks Shane a little tighter against him, and lets his own head fall back against the cushions.

Ilya dreams of running his fingers across something soft and velvety.

The warmth pulsing from the touch makes him think it might be Shane's skin. He can't see well, obscured by heat around the edges of his eyes, but he keeps touching. He feels Shane's

thigh, firm and muscular beneath his fingertips. He extends his hand to grip the flesh hungrily, pleased when a heavy weight pushes back against his lap. The heat continues to grow, spiraling from his fingertips up his arms, as if through his veins. It burns through his chest, his neck, down to his gut, where a tugging need begins to pull.

It goes quickly from muted and pleasant, to searing. He lets out a small noise of complaint, shifting his body forward until it's contacting the warm weight again. Slight relief, he notices. He does it again, hands still searching desperately along the velvety skin.

Such a *nice* dream.

"Ilya?" Shane whispers. "Oh, oh my god."

Ilya frowns. Shane doesn't sound happy. The burning heat is up to his face now, and he blinks a few times, realizing he's not asleep. Instead, he and Shane are on the couch together. Shane lying against his chest, and Ilya is *dry humping* his fucking leg.

"Ilya," Shane whispers again, "your rut is starting, I can smell it."

His *what?*

No, this is impossible. Ilya gets bi-annual injections to stave off his ruts. He's religious about making the appointments. They are pre-scheduled out for a few years in advance. He's never missed one.

When is his next one again? He's been so busy with everything lately, taking care of Shane, work, navigating this confusing dynamic, he forgot to check his calendar.

The heat blooms behind his eyes, and he feels the telltale tug in his stomach. He hasn't had a real rut in ages, and now he's…he's missed his shot. His shot was two weeks ago. He missed it. He fucking *missed* it.

He lets out a strangled noise of distress, and Shane quickly reaches back to grab his wrist. "It-it's okay!"

"Shane," he moans, fists tightening as his nails dig into his palms. "You have to get out of here. Call your parents. Have them pick you up."

"No," Shane turns to face him, reaching out to cup his hand gently on Ilya's cheek, "I'm here, I can help you."

"No!" Ilya growls, shaking his head. "I have, um, toys upstairs. I will get them. *Fuck."* His legs cramp up, tightening as he feels blood rushing down in his body. He has to get Shane *out of here.*

Shane is staring at him with big, frightened eyes. "You'd rather have- you don't want *me* to-"

"Absolutely not," Ilya tries to scurry away, but Shane's legs are still lying heavily across his. "You will not do this because you owe me! I need you to get out, Shane!"

Shane blinks at him, tears pooling at the corners of his eyes. *Omega in distress* begins to permeate the air. Ilya lets out a whine, involuntarily reaching for Shane.

Mate, his body pleads.

"Ilya, please let me help. It's not because I *owe* you. Feel, my body wants this *bad."* He grabs Ilya's hand, and before the alpha can react, he guides it to the hemline of Shane's sweatpants. Ilya gasps as Shane shoves his hand in, until he feels how wet and soaked through his bottoms are.

Omega slick, his brain thinks hungrily.

"Fuck," Ilya groans, and all resistance leaves his body.

He grabs Shane by the hips, dragging him until the omega is completely seated on his lap. Shane makes a small, startled sound, but doesn't resist, instead leaning in as Ilya draws their lips together.

The kiss is fervent, impassioned. Heat broils between them, the warmth of their bodies combining with the desperate desire of Ilya's rut. Shane's weight is heavy and solid on his lap, a needed grounding feeling, as Ilya chases his lips with his own.

Shane is a *good* kisser. His lips move in rhythmic motions against Ilya's, his fingers tangle in the curls of Ilya's hair, his breaths come quickly and with small sounds of pleasure. Ilya wants to *drink* him.

His mouth finds the mating bite on Shane's neck. It's healing over well, just scars now. He licks it, pleased when Shane lets out a moan. It must be sensitive. He kisses it now, gentle, but hungry.

Ilya realizes his lap feels damp, and he pulls back, painting as he sees the slick has soaked through Shane's sweats onto him. Shane's face is flushed beet red, his chest heaving, *desire* written all over his beautiful face.

Oh.

"More," Shane pants, "more, alpha."

Ilya's body takes over completely then. He grips Shane's hips, thumbs nestled in the space underneath his round, heavy belly. He's so beautiful like this, ripe and full of life, glowing with the way Ilya has been taking care of him. Warm, flushed, healthy.

"Need to see you," Ilya growls, hands grabbing frantically at Shane's jersey. Shane fumbles, peeling the new shirt off over his head and discarding it on the floor. Ilya is awestruck by the sight before him, Shane's shirtless torso in the dim light of the living room. His shoulders are big and broad, muscle pulling taut, biceps strong. His chest is thick, swollen slightly with faint stretch marks dancing up and down the ends, curling from his shoulders and up from the underside of his pecs. The stretch marks zigzag down his sides as well, curving upward under

the round, heavy weight of his swollen belly. The skin is the same lush, healthy complexion as his face, only slightly marred by the silvery marks.

Ilya's hand reverently moves to touch the warm skin, palm flattening over the crest of his belly. A small foot nudges his hand, and his breath catches, looking up at Shane with watery eyes.

"I trust you," Shane whispers, leaning in as much as he can with his middle separating them, "I trust you, Ilya. *Touch* me."

I trust you.

Touch me.

His hands are moving again, then, touching wherever he can reach. Shane's cock is throbbing in his pants, straining against the tight constraints of his boxer briefs. Ilya palms it, shuddering as he feels the heft and size of it.

"Sorry," Shane whispers, dropping his head with distracted pleasure, "s'bigger than…most… omegas…"

Ilya *growls*. He rolls Shane over gently on the couch and grips the hemline of his pants and boxers, pulling until Shane is naked before him. He's low lit, swollen, breathing heavily, and the most beautiful thing Ilya has ever seen.

And Shane is right. His cock is bigger than Ilya expected. Not that he has much experience, but he's heard male omegas don't tend to sport the same endowments as alphas. If Ilya had to guess, just looking at it, it's damn near as big as his.

It's *gorgeous,* stiff against the underside of his round belly, already leaking. He has to taste, or he'll die.

Without warning, he pops his lips around the head, making Shane gasp and arch slightly off the couch. Shane tastes like fucking heaven, sweet and warm and homey in all the ways Ilya had always expected.

And the *sounds* he makes, as Ilya glides his mouth eagerly up and down his thick shaft. They're downright pornographic. Shane lets out another series of whining moans, his hands fisting in Ilya's hair. He tugs on the curls greedily, head dropped back against the sofa cushions. His long eyelashes flutter, and his lips fall slack, letting the sounds echo into the air.

"Fuck, you're pretty," Ilya spits between gasps for air, "so fucking pretty, *malysh.*"

"Never…had an alpha…do this…" Shane huffs, looking down at Ilya, or *trying* to, over his belly. "Feels so fucking good, Ilya."

"*Stupid* fucking alphas," Ilya snarls, then brings his lips back to the head, kissing and sucking eagerly.

“Oh god, Ilya, m’gonna, *oh god!”* Shane finishes in Ilya’s mouth with a cry of ecstasy, his entire body thrashing. Ilya swallows each delicious drop, sweet and fragrant and musky in all the right ways. Shane’s body writhes while Ilya continues to suck him through it, hands gripping the flesh of his thick, meaty thighs.

After a few moments, he relents, popping his wet lips off with a smirk as Shane’s chest heaves. Ilya’s cock is aching, desperate for release. He, somewhat frantically, rips his own shirt off, shimmying out of his sweats as he palms himself with a shudder. With his other hand, he reaches forward and traces the shape of Shane’s inner thighs, lower and lower until he finally reaches his slick, dripping entrance.

Christ. It’s so wet, and the heat is radiating. Ilya needs to be inside of him so fucking badly.

“More,” Shane whines, “s’okay, Ilya, more.”

“A-are you sure?” he rasps, veins on fire as he uses every drop of restraint in his body to keep himself still. “We do not have to- I- it isn’t what-”

“Yes,” Shane insists, “please! Want to feel you inside me.”

Fuuuuck.

“You are so wet,” Ilya grunts, rising up until his hips are more aligned with Shane’s. “So pretty for me, dripping and hungry.”

“Yes,” Shane hums, fingers clumsily reaching for Ilya. “Need you, alpha.”

Ilya shudders again, placing one protective palm over the crest of Shane’s belly. He feels the pup moving, kicking his hand and rolling underneath the warm skin.

“Is this okay?” he asks again, worried. Lust is clouding his vision, but he bites it back with a burning insistence. He won’t hurt Shane. He won’t hurt the pup. He *has* to be in charge right now, not his biology.

“Yes, we’re fine!” Shane grabs Ilya’s bicep and tugs insistently. “Come on, who’s in the fucking rut right now, you or me?”

Ilya snorts out a disbelieving laugh. “Oh, you are an asshole.”

“Just fuck me already, it’s not nice to tease-*oh!”*

“Yeah, fuck,” Ilya groans as he slowly begins to stuff his cock in Shane’s sopping wet hole, “that shut you up, didn’t it sweetheart?”

“Fuck,” Shane whimpers, hips widening automatically, legs stretching around Ilya’s waist to make room for him.

Ilya’s eyes close as he bottoms out inside of Shane, the sensations coursing through his body damn near enough to *kill him.* Shane’s hole is warm, slick, tight and constricting. Ilya has never done this with an omega before. It’s always been latex condoms and lots of lube with

betas or other alphas. The sensation of *natural slick* against his bare skin is a fucking revelation.

He thinks, maybe, it's mostly because it's Shane. Shane underneath him, hips spread, head reclined, eyes fluttering- beautiful body writhing and sweat-slicked. Shane is so fucking beautiful and being inside of him feels like nothing Ilya could have ever dreamed.

His hips snap forward again, and he realizes he's losing himself in it. For the first time in, maybe ever, he's enjoying this and it doesn't feel like a fucking chore or a distraction. Shane's body is warm and responsive, his touchy little noises are encouraging, and he fits against Ilya like they were designed to be right here.

Ilya pounds into him, relishing in the wet squelch of their bodies colliding. Shane is in pieces beneath him, whimpering and letting out airy moans of ecstasy. The sounds shoot straight to Ilya's dick. He's never been so fucking hard in his life.

"Fuck Shane," he gasps, feeling the beginnings of his orgasm pool in his lower abdomen. "I have to pull out, or-"

"Knot me," Shane begs, fingernails digging into Ilya's forearms hard, "knot me, please, stay, stay here."

"Oh *god,"* Ilya chokes the words out as he feels himself slipping over the edge. His vision goes blurry as he comes, his cock spurting and tensing inside Shane. The next second, his eyes go wide as he feels his knot start to pop. He feels the swelling, the ache beginning to abate as he empties himself into Shane. Cum and slick drips from their combined bodies, running down Shane's spread thighs and soaking the couch. Shane lets out a pleasured wail, his entire body flexing around Ilya's knot.

He's never knotted anyone before. One look at Shane's expression makes him think the sensation is new for him as well.

"You are okay?" He pants, reaching out to cup Shane's sweaty cheek with his palm.

Shane nods, eyes drifting open and shut. His hole clenches around Ilya's knot, as if trying to suction them together.

"I thought… alphas were supposed to be rough and, um, uncontrollable during a rut," Shane breathes heavily, staring up at Ilya through hooded eyes.

Ilya smiles softly, petting Shane's hair, his jaw, his belly, whatever he can get his hands on.

"It is only just starting," he murmurs, "I may get worse."

"I'm here." Shane's fingers reach out and clasp Ilya's. He exhales softly. "I'm here no matter what."

Ilya's heart tightens in his chest. "Me too, Shane."

Shane's lips fall slack in a goofy, fucked-out smile. "So how long does this last anyway? I've never taken a knot before."

Ilya stares at him, mouth dry. "I've never given one."

Their eyes meet, the air between them thick and heavy with the breadth of unsaid things.

"Oh," Shane murmurs, running a hand carefully over his belly.

"Are you okay?" Ilya asks again, worriedly.

Shane nods, this time, with the corners of his eyes damp. "Uh-huh."

"What is it *milyy?"* Ilya asks, cupping his cheek with his voice breaking. Shane suddenly looks so overcome.

"No, no it is fine." He shakes his head, huffing a quiet laugh. "I just wish…nothing, nevermind."

"Please, I am *inside* you. You cannot tell me?"

"Nothing I just… always assumed the only person I'd let knot me would be, like, my *real* mate." Shane lets out another slightly hysterical laugh.

Ilya's throat burns. "Ah. I am sorry…"

"No, no this is why I didn't want to say anything." Shane grabs Ilya's jaw, urging him down for a kiss. It's quick, firm, chaste. "Let's not ruin this moment, please. I feel so good."

"Me too," Ilya assures him quietly.

"Better than a toy?" Shane inquires, and there's a devastating note of genuine concern in the question.

"You really *are* insane, Hollander." Ilya nips at his jaw with a laugh. "Was the best I have ever had. No toy compares."

Shane's cheeks flush bright red. "Really? Cause I was worried… you didn't want me."

"Shane." Ilya stares at him, shaking his head. He cannot let his omega, his *mate*, his friend, sit here and think these things. "I loved every fucking minute of that. I love *every* minute I get with you."

The omega's gleaming brown eyes get softer at that. "What?"

"Ya tebya lyublyu," Ilya murmurs, finding safety in the protection of a language barrier. He runs his fingertips along Shane's hip, the soft skin creasing where it leads into his round tummy. Beautiful.

Shane captures Ilya's fingers in his own and squeezes. He looks up at him with those big beautiful brown eyes.

"What does that mean, Ilya?" He whispers. "Please."

Ilya swallows the lump in his throat, looking down to meet Shane's eyes. He takes a beat to take stock of this moment, exactly where they are. Connected in their most vulnerable way, mating marks on their necks, living together, laughing together. He thinks about Shane's smile, his dry sense of humor, his fiery intellect. He thinks of Shane's freckles and his curved upper lip and his choppy black hair. He thinks of Shane's muscular body, his bravery and strength.

He thinks of Shane's pup, an innocent, sweet, wonderful baby girl that Ilya has helped care for. He has fed her meals and talked to her and felt her move under his hand.

Mine, his body thinks, *my pup. My mate.*

With a trembling breath, he meets Shane's intense gaze, and murmurs the words that have for so long escaped his grasp.

"I love you."

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

ahhh i hope you enjoy thank you so much for reading xx

HAPPY ENDING I PROMISE!!

these boys do in fact miscommunicate too much but they are also very in love HAPPY ENDING PROMISED!!

enjoy thank you so much !! PLEASE BE NICE TO ME

"Oh fuck," are the first words that come out of Shane's mouth.

Ilya can't help but wince. He's never told someone he loves them before, not like this at least, but he can't imagine *that's* the reply one is looking for. If he weren't currently *inside* of Shane and kind of stuck there, he would probably have run away to dig himself a very deep hole.

"I-I didn't-" Ilya stutters, trying to find the right thing to say. Of fucking *course* Shane doesn't feel the same way. None of this was his choice, and just because he kindly offered to help Ilya through his rut, does not mean-

"I love you too," Shane stammers out, looking surprised by his own words.

Ilya blinks down at him, eyebrows arching. "Oh."

"Come here." Shane grabs his face again and pulls him in. The kiss is rhythmic, impassioned and lewd. His tongue scrapes against Ilya's, his teeth bite down on his lower lip, a faint imitation of the way he'd marked his neck permanently.

And Ilya's body completely gives in.

"I love you," he whispers against Shane's mouth, bones going slack as he collapses on his back on the couch, dragging Shane with him. *"Ya tabla lyublyu, moy lyuibimyy. My baby. Malysh."*

"L-love you too," Shane gasps between kisses, "love you s'much, alpha."

There isn't much talking after that, because the lust and the hormones of his rut completely take over.

The rest of his rut is *filthy.*

They fuck in the bedroom, Shane on hands and knees, biting down on his knuckles as he fists the sheets and cries out. They fuck in the kitchen, Ilya hoisting Shane's heavy body upright until his arms physically give out and they finish on the cold linoleum. They fuck in the bath, Ilya gripping Shane's thick thigh with so much effort he's breathless for a half hour afterward.

It lasts for a week, which makes sense considering it's been so long since he's really had one. And he's never had one with a *mate* before. It's transcendent. He can't help but keep saying those three words to Shane, completely full-throttled in both passion and earnestness. Shane says it back, usually with his face pressed into a pillow or his mouth occupied by Ilya's tongue.

By the time the rut is over, Ilya's house is a disaster, the fridge in the kitchen is pitifully empty, and Shane is thirty-six weeks pregnant. It's an odd thing to make note of, as Ilya begins bundling up dirty sheets and soiled boxers to bring to the laundry room, but each week in a pregnancy is essential, and they've basically spent the past one doing nothing but fucking and eating.

Normally, Ilya dreads his ruts. It's the very reason he staves them off with the injection. But this one, well, it was the best week of his life.

"Hey wait." Shane catches him in the doorway of the laundry room, and Ilya turns to see him standing there in nothing but a pair of tiny blue shorts and a white tank-top that stretches rather pitifully over his large belly. There are bite marks on his thighs and soft purple bruises from the indents of Ilya's fingers. He hadn't meant to be so rough, but Shane had *begged* for it…

"What's up?" Ilya asks, dumping the laundry into the machine.

"No wait!" Shane scurries forward and nudges Ilya out of the way, reaching into the washer with both hands to collect the pile of dirty clothes. With his brows furrowed, he picks out a few undesirable items, letting them fall back into the washer without a second glance. With the remaining armful of clothes, he turns and exits the laundry room wordlessly.

Okay then.

Ilya starts the washer and heads into the kitchen to take stock of what they need. He puts in a grocery order on his app, getting all of Shane's favorites and some recent cravings. He has to go back to work tomorrow, so he wants to make sure Shane has enough around the house to snack on. Now that his head is on straight again and he's not cross eyed with lust, he intends to take care of all the tasks around the house that had been left neglected for the past week.

He tidies up the kitchen and living room, stopping while he mops to listen to Shane puttering around upstairs. He isn't sure what the omega is doing up there, but he hasn't asked for help, so Ilya focuses on his own tasks, intending to ensure Shane doesn't have to deal with any of this tomorrow.

By the time the bottom floor is spotless and he's put the grocery delivery away, Shane is standing at the foot of the stairs, looking at him expectantly.

“Well hi.” Ilya greets him with a grin, setting the mop aside as he makes his way toward Shane.

“I have to show you something,” Shane says, with a note of anxiety in his voice.

Ilya furrows his brow at the apprehension on the omega’s face. “Are you okay?”

“Yep. Come on.” Shane begins trudging up the stairs in his slow waddle. Ilya follows behind, enjoying the view of Shane’s perky, round ass in his tiny shorts. Now that he’s seen all of him in great detail, it’s hard not to stare.

Shane stops them just outside the bedroom door. “Okay, before you go in, just, please be fucking gentle about it, okay? It’s my first one ever.”

“About what, Shane?”

With a sigh, Shane opens the door and steps in, allowing Ilya to follow. In the corner of the room, there is what looks like a tornado of dirty clothes and blankets, piled up in a heap. Ilya frowns, wondering how he’d missed so much laundry.

“What are you showing me?” he asks, glancing around the room curiously.

Shane’s expression wilts, shoulders sagging. “You don’t like it?”

“Don’t like-” His eyes catch on the pile of clothes again, and understanding hits him.

Shane has made a nest. His first one *ever*. Nesting is something omegas do when they feel safe, when they want to put down roots, build a cozy corner in their world. Pregnant omegas in particular, build them to prepare for the arrival of a pup, to give themselves a safe place to escape and care for their newborn. This is all as new to Ilya as it is to Shane, but he knows you’re supposed to be supportive and encouraging about an omegas nest- even if it looks like a pile of dirty laundry.

Ilya turns to Shane, who looks about ready to cry. “Your nest is beautiful, Shane.”

“I know it looks like shit,” Shane sniffs, shaking his head. “I’ve never *done this* before.”

“No, no, stop that.” Ilya wraps an arm around his waist and kisses his temple. “I love it. Can I sit in it?”

Shane stiffens a little at that, but then relaxes with a nod. “Okay. Be careful.”

Ilya releases him and closes the distance between himself and the nest. To his alpha brain it really does just look like a pile of dirty laundry, but he can see the intention behind each action. The sides are a bit higher, giving the nest a shelterlike feeling.

Very delicately, he lowers himself into the nest, careful not to jostle anything vital. The nest smells like a perfect mix of their scents, apples and oranges, fragrant and sweet. He opens his arms for Shane, gesturing him forward.

With a huff, Shane lowers himself into the nest, allowing Ilya to wrap him up in his arms. His skin is warm and he smells aromatic. Ilya scents his neck, nose brushing against the scarred over bite mark.

“I love this nest,” he murmurs.

“Whatever.” Shane snorts, but his cheeks are flushed red. “It’s a stupid omega thing, I don’t know why I got the urge all of a sudden.”

“Is not *stupid* just because it’s an omega thing,” Ilya reminds him gently. “I think it is very sweet. The pup will love it.”

At that, Shane hesitates. “About that.”

Ilya immediately notices the change in his scent, more apprehensive now.

“What?” Ilya asks, frowning at Shane’s sudden anxiety.

“Well, it’s just that…” Shane glances sideways at him with a grimace. “My mom has this whole nursery already, in Ottawa. And I know we haven’t discussed it- what we said during the rut- but I wasn’t expecting to… stay here.”

Ilya’s throat tightens. He supposes Shane has a point- they haven’t exactly had a long drawn out conversation about saying *I love you* to eachother. They were both too absorbed in the tantric weeklong sexcapades to do much discussion. But part of Ilya had assumed this meant things were good. That Shane had changed his mind, that Shane *wanted* this.

“You want to go back to Canada?” He asks, almost disbelieving.

“I think so.” Shane nods, running his fingers along Ilya’s chest. “I was stupid to run. My family has been so great and… and my friends probably miss me. I miss them. And I’ve decided I’m going to do this interview with the sports journalist. I feel like if I’m going to be advocating for omegas in the NHL I should be back home with all of that support. It’s going to be hard.”

“I guess so, yeah,” Ilya agrees mildly, still trying to process what this means.

“And I know during ruts alphas say things they don’t mean,” Shane rambles, “I understand if you-”

“I meant it.” Ilya cuts him off immediately, voice surprisingly firm.

“I did too,” Shane replies softly.

They look at each other for a moment, neither really sure what to say, or what comes next. If Shane truly wants to return to Canada, what does it mean for them? Their mating bond will not allow them to be so far apart physically. But Ilya’s life is here. His home, his career, everything he knows. He’d come here at eighteen, terrified and alone, and made it into something safe and familiar. It was the first place where he’d learned to stand on his own two feet, to start over and make his life his own.

Now, he's in love. Mated. And more confused than he's ever been.

"Is not very simple, is it?" Ilya murmurs, gently stroking his fingers along Shane's freckled cheek."You there and me here. Would be very hard, while mated. Maybe impossible."

"Yeah," Shane says. He looks up at Ilya with pained eyes.

"You still want to do it?" Ilya realizes, breath catching. "You still want to break the bond?"

"Do we have a choice?" Shane asks, shaking his head.

Ilya opens his mouth to argue, but he can't find the words. Aside from uprooting his entire life to follow this omega he's known for less than a year to Canada, he has no good answers.

"Lets not talk about this anymore," Shane says quickly. "I want to just focus on the present. My interview is tomorrow."

Ilya's throat is painfully dry when he replies, "yeah, okay. Let's put a pin in it, da?"

"Sure, a pin. That's good."

Their eyes meet, both of them terrified, uncertain of what comes next. Ilya kisses Shane's forehead softly, pleased when it makes the omega sigh and lean in closer.

Mine, his body thinks, a little desperately.

But for how long?

Shane's interview with omega sports journalist Gen Chapman effectively breaks the internet.

At least, the sports side of it anyway.

Ilya gets the notification the week after Shane locks himself away in the guest room to be on camera for the interview. It's a virtual one of course, as he's not permitted to travel so close to his due date or on his bed rest. Ilya can't hear much as he tries to give Shane privacy, so he doesn't get to really hear what Shane said until he watches the video on ESPN.

Shane looks beautiful, of course, because he always does. His cheeks are flushed red, his dark hair is well-combed, he's dressed in his Ottawa Centaurs jersey because it's one of the only comfortable things he has to wear lately. He only appears on camera from the chest up, so just the top half of the logo is visible. Still, Ilya immaturely hopes it pisses off his old coach.

Apparently, the sight of him is shocking to most hockey fans who haven't seen much of him since his unexpected departure. Ilya supposes, looking at the highlight reels and old photos of him that accompany the article, he must look shockingly different. His face has filled out, rounder and softer. His lips and nose look puffy, and his skin is glowing. He's smiling warmly. Compared to the sharply angled, stern-expressioned young man in the photos Ilya sees, he certainly does look different.

He looks *happy*. He doesn't even make an effort to hide the mating mark on his neck. That's kind of fucking awesome.

More than how he looks, Ilya is completely enraptured with his speaking. He knows, logically, that Shane has to be used to public speaking. He must have done it all the time during press conferences or after game interviews. But seeing it firsthand, experiencing the incredible strength and tenacity of Shane Hollander, it's incredible.

"What happened to me isn't an anomaly," Shane says through the camera, talking to the kind-faced Gen. *"I'm not the only omega in professional sports. I'm just the one who got discovered. The NHL defends itself on a technicality. Technically, omegas are allowed. But how many omegas can you name who are in a public facing professional sports role? It goes as high as coaches, team owners, agents. There are no reasonable accommodations for omegas in sports. Alphas get weeks off at a time for a rut, per official NHL policy, but there is nothing in any of the policies that even* ***mentions*** *heats. The locker rooms all talk about us like we're some kind of joke. If you "act like an omega" it means you're weak, pathetic, something easy to dominate."* At that, Shane shakes his head and looks directly into the camera. *"I spent ten years dominating alphas on that ice, and my gender had nothing to do with it. I am an omega man, and I am proud of that. I hope sharing my story helps raise awareness for this issue, and I hope if you're at home watching, you think twice the next time you question whether or not an omega can get the job done. I guarantee, we'll do it even better."*

Shane's parents come over for dinner to celebrate the story going viral. David and Ilya cook chicken parmesan while Yuna and Shane pop fake, alcohol-free champagne and talk about how Shane's interview is quickly rising to record-numbers of viewership and shares.

"I'm so proud of you," Yuna says to him, kissing his temple. "I always knew you would do great things and you always have."

"Thanks, Mom." Shane's cheeks flush and he rubs a hand over his belly, looking down as she probably kicks the shit out of his kidney. "I just hope..somehow, in some small way, I make the world a little bit better. For her."

Ilya watches him with a tugging, desperate feeling in his gut. His beautiful, brave, Shane.

After dinner is finished, Yuna joins Ilya in the kitchen to help clean up. David and Shane announce they're going out to the garage so David can look at Ilya's dad's Lada Niva that he's pretty certain he'll *never* get running at this point.

"He did well," Yuna says as she hands Ilya a plate to dry.

Ilya nods thoughtfully. "He did. He always does. He is amazing."

"He is." She smiles, a fond expression on her face. "I was…I was hard on him. It couldn't have been easy, all the pressure. But I wanted him to make something of himself. To prove everyone wrong. When he presented, *everyone* got this idea in their head that he'd just become someone's pupped up little house husband. I didn't want that. I wanted him to have the freedom to be on his own."

Ilya's eyes soften. "That is understandable. Not everyone is so lucky."

His own mother wasn't.

"If there's a way to balance all of that, I know I didn't strike it." Her face falls a bit. "I just hope… I hope it was worth it. He's been through a lot. I just want to see him be okay."

Ilya's heart aches a bit, looking at her worried face. He can't imagine how hard all of this has been for her, watching her son go through this nightmare, and knowing she wasn't even around for most of it. It must feel so helpless.

"You are a very good Mama," he tells her solemnly. "Shane knows this, and he loves you. He is lucky. Trust me."

Yuna glances at him. "Thank you Ilya. I have to admit I wasn't exactly thrilled to show up and find you two mated but…he's very lucky to have *you* too. I can't thank you enough for how you've taken care of him. I know it wasn't planned, and you didn't have much choice, but you've kept him and my granddaughter safe. I'll never be able to repay that."

Ilya swallows the lump in his throat, a little overcome by the earnest sincerity of her kind words.

"No payment needed." He waves a hand. "Just wash more dishes and we are even."

She laughs and dutifully goes back to scrubbing. A few moments pass in a companionable silence, before she speaks again.

"I was thinking of inviting some of Shane's friends into town and throwing him a pup shower. What do you think?"

Ilya arches an eyebrow. "I think you should ask him, not me. He does not like surprises like this."

"I know. But… well, we'd sort of have to have it here. At your house." She waves a hand. "David and I don't have a good place here to host and Shane can't travel home yet."

Home. Canada. Right. His home is not here, with Ilya, despite the fact that he really fucking wants it to be.

"Of course," Ilya assures her softly, "he should get to celebrate."

"Thank you honey." Yuna reaches out and touches his bicep gently. "Is there…maybe anyone you'd like to invite?"

Ilya is a bit taken back by this question. Sure he's been taking care of Shane, and they are mated and in love, but he isn't…he's not…

Well, *isn't* he?

Ilya has cared for the pup, and taken care of her father. He's fed her, felt her movements gentle and sweet under his palm. He's thought of her future, thought of her sweet little face. His heart has raced in anticipation of getting to meet her. He loves her, wholeheartedly, unabashedly.

His own father never really did any of that, and they were blood.

"You are Shane's mate, for now," Yuna says quietly, and Ilya pretends that qualifier on the end doesn't *kill him.* "You've looked after him *and* her. No matter what happens, I know you'll be in her life. She is something to celebrate, and you should get to be a part of that, if you want to."

"If Shane is okay with it," Ilya tells her.

Yuna grins. "Okay, Ilya. I'm *sure* he'll have a huge problem with it. You are so silly sometimes."

With that, she focuses back on the dishes. Ilya laughs a little, startled by her sarcasm, but also hearing the message underneath.

Shane cares about you. He wants you to be happy.

Or at least, he hopes he's hearing it right.

With the kitchen cleaned, Yuna and Ilya head out to the garage to see what's taking the boys so long. When they enter, David is half-buried underneath the hood of the car, while Shane leans against the side, peering over his belly to try and see what's going on.

Alarm bells trill in Ilya's head at the sight of Shane's protruding belly so close to the engine block. Instinctively, he moves forward and takes his arm, gently pulling him back out of the line of fire. It's stupid, because the damn thing doesn't even *run.*

"What is happening out here?" he asks nervously.

"I think Dad figured it out," Shane says to Ilya, allowing him to gently nudge Shane back another half step.

"I hope you don't mind, Ilya," David says as he pulls back. "Did you know the car has a blown inline fuse?"

Ilya nods, hands on his hips. "Yes, I bought replacement on Ebay. But er, the wiring is…a bit complicated for me." He waves his hands half-heartedly. "I have done everything else, new battery, carburetor, fucking down to the new seat covers. But those stupid, torpedo wires are too confusing for me. They are all grouped together under the dashboard."

David nods thoughtfully. "Well, hey, I'm no expert but I used to help my old man out at his shop. He owned a garage. Mind if I take a closer look?"

Ilya extends his arms easily. "Be my guest, if you want to. You do not have to."

“Oh please, Dad’ll be out here all night.” Shane rolls his eyes. “He used to get mad at me for bringing my car to the shop instead of letting him try to fix it.”

“Cause I would have fixed it for free,” David murmurs, already looking like he’s no longer listening and focused on the car.

The four of them gather around while David works, making light conversation and passing him tools as he needs. Ilya watches with fascination.

When his father worked on the car, he would get very grouchy. He’d shout and snap at the boys to get out of his way, but then moments later need them close by to hold a flashlight or pass him something. There was no winning. He seemed more interested in yelling at them than actually teaching them much.

David is soft. He’s kind and grateful to receive tools passed his way. He’s focused in that intense way Shane gets sometimes, where it seems like nothing could intercept his thoughts. But he’s smiling and laughing as they all talk. He’s happy.

“Ilya, come here, do you want me to show you how to install this replacement?” David asks, glancing over his shoulder.

Ilya nods, moving toward him. “Yes, thank you.”

David begins the installation of the new fuses, explaining each step as he goes. After the first few, he hands the new ones to Ilya and encourages him to try. He forces his hands not to shake, nodding along as David gently walks him through it.

After the installation is done, David says, “great job! Why don’t you start her up?”

Ilya’s throat feels hot for some reason. He nods again and climbs into the driver’s seat, grabbing the keys from underneath the visor. He puts the key in the ignition, not expecting to hear anything, as usual.

Instead, the car roars to life with a thrumming vibration.

His eyes go wide, and he looks sideways at David, who is grinning. Shane and Yuna whoop loudly from outside the car. The car hums underneath him, for the first time in years, alive.

“I thought it would never be fixed,” he admits quietly.

“Just needed a little teamwork!” David says, clapping him on the shoulder. “Well done, son!”

Ilya blinks a few times, exhaling shakily. Something on his face feels wet and hot. He touches his cheek with a trembling hand, realizing with horror that he’s *crying.* He’s fucking crying in front of Shane’s dad.

“Oh.” David obviously notices the tears. “You alright, Ilya?”

“Hey.” Shane’s at the driver side door immediately, concern etched on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Ilya chokes, forcing a painful laugh out of his throat. He wipes at his eyes hurriedly. “Sorry I- this was my father’s car. It has not run in so long, I never thought it-”

I thought it was broken forever. Just like him. Just like me.

“Oh, baby.” Shane opens the door and reaches in, cupping Ilya’s cheek. His thumb brushes the liquid off his face gently. “I know this is a lot. It’s okay, just breathe. It’s okay to cry.”

“I am fine.” Ilya wipes at his eyes again, sniffling wetly. “I am so sorry, David, Yuna, I-”

“Honey, it’s okay.” Yuna appears beside Shane, resting her hand on his leg. “This must be emotional. Your father has passed away?”

Ilya nods, face feeling warm with embarrassment. “Y-yeah. And my mother. She used to take me away in this car, to have picnics or go to the market and- those memories-” He clears his throat forcefully, trying to regain some control. “I am so sorry.”

“Hey, you don’t have to be sorry for feeling grief, son,” David murmurs beside him, “it’s the most powerful kind of love. We all understand that.”

Ilya glances at them gratefully. He does not understand what he possibly could have done to deserve this grace and kindness from this wonderful family, but the way it fills his chest and soothes the pain blooming there is unreal.

“I wish I could tell her that we fixed it,” he admits, finally taking an even breath.

“I’m sure she knows,” Yuna says softly.

“Should we take it for a spin?” David asks.

“I have never driven it,” Ilya admits, “it broke down when I was twelve, just after my mother died.”

“No time like the present.” David smiles warmly at him.

Yuna and David climb into the backseat. It’s a two-door so there’s some finagling involved getting them back there, but Shane is far too pregnant to even attempt it, so he gets passenger. Ilya opens the garage and climbs back behind the wheel, fingers tightening around it. The car is so old that while it idles it vibrates heavily, it’s a little uncomfortable, but no one complains.

Just before he can get it into gear, something shakes loose from the small compartment underneath the radio. Ilya glances at it, reaching down curiously. He’s given the car plenty of attention over the past year, and he was sure he’d uncovered all the random items that might be lingering. Mostly just old change and random things like pens or smudged receipts.

What billows to the floor by his foot is slim and glossy. He grabs it between two fingers, eyes going wide as he realizes he’s just picked up a photograph.

It's his mother. Young, and beautiful. She's grinning, head tilted back, long blonde hair in an elaborate braid, with tendrils framing her face. Her gold crucifix is glimmering at the hollow of her throat. Her arms are wrapped around a small boy, with wild curls and a missing tooth in the front. He's laughing too, eyes squeezed shut as he clings to her. The angle of the photo is so low, as if someone short had taken it. Probably Ilya's brother, Alexei.

Ilya's heart wrenches. His mother is the one who primarily drove this car. His father had a nicer, newer one he took to work. She kept the car quite clean, never leaving things in it overnight or letting clutter build up. His father was military- the whole family was all neat edges and clean lines.

But this, she saved. This photo of herself and Ilya, both looking happier than they probably ever did. She held on to it. Whenever she was in the car, did she look at it? Did she reminisce on whatever had made the both of them smile that day?

Maybe Alexei was right when he said she didn't ever want to have them. Maybe that didn't matter so much, once she held them.

"Oh, Ilya," Shane murmurs, leaning over to look at the photo, "she's beautiful."

Ilya sniffs again, willing himself not to cry. "Thank you, Shane. She was a beautiful person. She was…she was my favorite person."

"I'm sorry," he replies, big brown eyes tender and sympathetic. "It must fucking kill you."

Ilya reaches over and squeezes Shane's hand. Shane tightens his grip, unrelenting and supportive.

"Not anymore," Ilya says.

He sticks the photo of his Mama up on the visor, so everyone can see the smile that made his own, and pulls the car out onto the road.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

you may notice that a chapter 13 got added... its an epilogue :-)

ill probably post the remaining chapters this weekend! its all done :P

i hope you enjoy please be nice thank you and i PROMISE LOTS OF HAPPY ENDING AND FLUFF !!

Yuna Hollander is nothing short of a miracle worker.

Over the following days, Ilya's house is transformed into a spectacle of epic pup-shower proportions. There are baby pink ribbons and bows being vomited out of every corner of every room. Streamers and banners decorate the walls. Floral arrangements are delicately placed at just the right angles. Beautiful invitations on thick parchment are sent out with urgency. The backyard is filled with tables and bench seats with crinkly pink tablecloths. Somehow, she even got several heaters placed around the yard to ensure warmth.

By Saturday morning, an hour before the guests are set to arrive, the place looks professionally done up. Ilya can't even believe this is his bland, sleek house.

He'd told Yuna to invite Bood, Troy, Luca and Cliff. He figures he at least owes his friends the benefit of the doubt, and the chance to meet the omega who has so wholly transformed his life.

Shane is standing in front of the sliding glass door that overlooks the backyard when Ilya comes downstairs. The omega is watching as his mother and father place the finishing touches on the snack and drink displays. It looks like a fairytale out there, and despite the cold weather, Yuna has managed to make it look inviting.

Ilya wraps an arm around Shane's waist, making the shorter man glance up at him. He looks gorgeous as usual, dressed in a pair of maternity jeans and a large, light pink sweater. The contrast of the pink against his darker complexion and his flushed cheeks is utterly breathtaking.

That said, he also looks slightly miserable. The pup is growing pretty large, as evidenced by the arch of his back and the round swell of his middle. He has to keep one arm cupped underneath it when he stands lately, just to relieve himself of a bit of the discomfort. He's only got two weeks until his due date, and the exhaustion shows plainly on his handsome face.

“You look amazing,” Ilya tells him warmly.

Shane scoffs. “Yeah, sure.” The smell of anxiety is curling off of him in waves, souring the scent of apples.

Ilya frowns. “What is wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“I can smell that lie.”

He sighs heavily, shoulders slumping. “I haven’t seen my friends in months. They’re going to be surprised to see me right now. And after everything that’s happened…I just don’t know how this is going to go.”

“They will be nice to you or I will make them leave,” Ilya assures him firmly.

“Charming, threatening to kick my friends out.”

“If I have to.”

Shane glances at him, face falling. “I want it to go well. I want things to be okay.”

“It will be.” Ilya pulls him closer, allowing him to scent his neck. “Today is about celebrating you and the pup. Let us focus on that, da?”

“Da,” Shane mutters dejectedly.

Bood is the first person to arrive. He’s got his teeny tiny pup in a little carrier around his torso, and Cassie is standing beside him with a wrapped gift box in one hand, and a diaper bag in the other. Ilya gives them both a quick hug before relieving Cassie of the things she’s carrying.

“Thank you for coming,” Ilya says, stepping aside so Shane can come shake their hands. “This is Shane Hollander.”

“Hi, I’m Shane.” He shakes both of their hands with a smile, as he leans forward to wave at their pup, who is far too tiny to even realize it. “Your pup is so beautiful.”

“Thank you!” Cassie smiles warmly. “His name is Milo.”

“Hi Milo!” Shane waves again to the pup, who flutters his little eyes and yawns in response. “Thanks for coming, little guy!”

That gets a soft laugh out of everyone, then Yuna comes over to usher them in.

Next to the door is Troy and Harris, the latter of whom is grinning widely. Ilya makes quick introductions and resists the urge to tease Troy about falling for someone the exact opposite of his grouchy nature.

Cliff and Luca show up together, which is odd but Ilya doesn't mention it. Cliff is holding a clumsily wrapped box with Christmas paper on it, and looks completely out of place.

"Nice to meet you man," he says as he roughly shakes Shane's hand, "crazy to meet the man that got Roz here to settle down."

"Hey," Ilya barks in warning.

Cliff throws his head back and cackles. "Sorry, I won't tell him how he turned a hoe into a housewife."

Shane's eyebrows arch, and Ilya panics momentarily at how he'll react to Cliff's less-than-charming sense of humor.

Instead, Shane smirks and says, "damn right I did."

Cliff bellows out another laugh and enters, while Ilya rubs his forehead.

Luca and Shane shake hands, and the younger omega says, "it's really nice to meet you. I saw your interview on ESPN. It was amazing."

Shane's eyes soften at this, and he studies the scent patch on Luca's neck briefly. "Thank you, that means a lot to me."

Luca hesitates, before asking, "was it scary at all? To like, put it out there, that you're an omega? That everyone knows?"

Shane smiles gently at him. "Yes, it was very scary. It still is. But it's who I am. You shouldn't have to hide yourself. Life is too short."

Luca's smile gets a bit more genuine, at that.

Yuna is dutiful in keeping everyone entertained for a bit, doling out appetizers and drinks. David appoints himself as the bartender for the day, offering up mixed cocktails and beers. Harris helps Yuna arrange the present table and they start talking about decor. Ilya can visibly *see* Shane get bored by this and get up to go stretch his legs.

While he's up, the doorbell rings. Their eyes meet from across the room, Shane's scared but determined, Ilya's reassuring. At least, he hopes. They walk together to the front door, and open it to reveal two women.

One is tall and statuesque, with beautiful dark curls, smooth brown skin and elegant features. She's dressed in a pair of expensive slacks and a black long sleeved sweater. The woman beside her, shorter and more petite with fire-engine red hair and big blue eyes, is dressed more for the occasion in a pink dress with wedge boots. Both of their arms are weighed down by gift bags, and each of them are wearing scent patches.

"Oh, Shane!" The redhead hurls the giftbags at her counterpart and lurches forward, pulling Shane in for a hug.

Shane lets out a surprisingly light laugh, wrapping his arms around her and burying his face in her hair. “This won’t be much of a hug, Rose. I’m huge.”

“Oh, shut up gorgeous.” The woman, Rose, has her eyes squeezed shut as she clutches Shane. “I missed you so much.”

Shane’s eyes get soft and his lip wobbles a bit at that. “I-I missed you too. *So* much.”

“And I am what, chopped liver?” The woman beside Rose gestures with an arched eyebrow. Ilya notices her distinct accent, and he looks at her with surprise.

“You are Russian?” he asks her.

The woman sizes him up. She speaks then, and it’s been so long since someone spoke his native language to him, that it takes a moment to process.

“What do you think, eh? And you are what? Swedish?”

“Oh, you’re definitely Russian,” he replies with a laugh.

She grins. *“I am Svetlana. You must be Ilya?”*

“Yes, hi. It is nice to meet you. Really nice. I have not spoken Russian in ages.”

“That explains why you sound like shit.”

He laughs again, shaking his head. *“This is coming from the woman who lives in fucking Canada?”*

At that, Svetlana lets out a cackling laugh, tipping her head back. Ilya laughs too, surprised at how excited he is to have someone else to talk to in his language. He notices from his peripherals that Shane and Rose are both staring at them.

“Sorry,” Ilya says, in English this time. “Hi, my name is Ilya.”

“I assumed,” Rose replies with her eyebrows arched. “Wow, Shane, I saw the mating bite in your interview, and I figured you’d sealed the deal. But I didn’t know he was so *hot.”*

“Rose,” Shane hisses, face flushing red.

“It’s nice to meet you, Ilya.” Rose extends her hand for Ilya to shake. “I see you already met my better half here. And now she finally has someone to talk to in Russian. Score! I’ve been learning, but I suck.”

“It is a hard language,” Ilya says.

Svetlana rolls her eyes. “She is too beautiful to waste time learning things anyway.”

Shane snorts. “Now *that’s* modern thinking right there.”

“Hey, we are both alpha women,” Svetlana defends, “she can be a trophy wife if she wants. No big deal.”

Rose laughs. “And my successful screenwriting career is just a hobby I guess.”

They all laugh, and Ilya glances sideways at Shane. It’s nice to see this side of him, laughing and enjoying himself with people he trusts and loves. When they’d first met, he was so lonely, so isolated. But Ilya can imagine this for him with ease, a life full of people who want to support him and look after his pup. The life he has in Canada. The one that doesn’t include Ilya.

Another car pulls up to the curb before they can continue, and Shane’s face loses a bit of color. Rose and Svetlana glance at one another, then head inside. Ilya hears them being greeted by Yuna excitedly.

“Are you okay?” Ilya asks Shane, but his attention is solely focused on the people getting out of the car.

The man behind the wheel is tall and lean, with a scruff of brunette hair. Plain and unimpressive. He’s dressed in a pair of jeans and a canvas coat over a white t-shirt. He rushes across to help a beautiful woman out of the passenger seat. She’s athletic and petite, wearing a pink jacket and white pants. An alpha man and omega woman, neither wearing scent patches. The woman waves excitedly at Shane, and rushes forward.

“Jackie!” he greets her, opening his arms as she barrels into them.

“Oh gosh, Shane!” she exclaims as she adjusts herself around his large belly. “Sorry, I’m not used to having to be careful with you! Look at you! You’re about to pop!”

Shane laughs softly. “It’s alright. I’m so happy to see you. Did you guys bring the kids?”

She shakes her head. “They’re with Hayd’s parents. Thought it might be easier.”

“I’m grateful to you guys for coming on such short notice,” Shane assures her.

“We saw your interview.” The man, now standing on the porch with a gift bag over his arm, says to Shane.

“Oh, you did?” Shane scratches the back of his neck nervously, shifting on his feet like he’s afraid of being perceived.

A protective instinct flares in Ilya’s chest, and he moves a half-step in front of Shane. His thoughts cloud, unclear to him except for one surging reflex. *Protectprotectprotect.*

“Oh please.” The man turns to Ilya with a scowl. He smells like baby powder and soccer balls. “You think just cause you bit his neck you’re all of a sudden in charge of him or something?”

Ilya’s nostrils flare and his fists clench. “What the fuck did you just say to me?”

“Okay, okay!” Shane extends his arms between them, voice pleading. “Hayden, he isn’t-”

“Seriously Shane? You get fucking *fired,* disappear for months, and then you show up on some interview show pregnant and mated? Do you think I’m stupid? This is the guy who was controlling everything you did, and now he’s got you-”

“No, no Hayden.” Shane shakes his head. “You have it all wrong. He isn’t- he’s not the-”

“I am not a piece of shit abusive asshole,” Ilya growls.

“That was another alpha,” Shane explains, grimacing, like he hates how it makes him sound that his friend is getting confused between the two. “We weren't in love. He’s out of the picture and has been for a long while now.”

At that, Hayden pauses, his gaze falling down to Shane’s large belly, like he’s doing math.

“Hayden,” Jackie murmurs, “this is not the time. It’s his pup shower, please.”

Hayden’s jaw clenches, his icy blue eyes hardening. He glances between Shane and Ilya, concern visibly etched into every feature of his face. Ilya tries to find some understanding deep, *deep* inside of himself. Hayden must be a close friend of Shane’s. To have your friend just disappear and then show up like this, after you obviously noticed he was being abused, it must be infuriating.

“Fuck, dude,” Hayden says, shoulders deflating as the intensity melts off his face. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“I know I have *so* much explaining to do, and I promise I will,” Shane insists, “but for today, can’t we just…have this? Hayd, I’ve missed you so fucking much.”

Shane opens his arms hesitantly and the other man moves forward. Ilya feels that protective prickle flare up again and he resists the urge to intervene, instead hovering nervously as the two men embrace.

“You’re huge,” Hayden mutters against Shane’s shoulder, “when are you due, like a month ago?”

Ilya’s jaw clenches, but Shane just laughs, pulling away to roll his eyes. “You find out your best friend is an omega, *and* having a baby, and the first thing you do is critique his size?”

“Actually the first thing I did was piss off his big scary Russian mate.” Hayden glances at Ilya with an arched eyebrow. “This guy wants me dead.”

Not untrue, Ilya thinks mildly.

“No he doesn’t,” Shane says.

“I don’t?” Ilya inquires.

“Stop it.” Shane looks between them. “I’m so glad you came, man. I was afraid…after finding out I’d been lying to you about being a beta that maybe you wouldn’t want to see me anymore.”

“Hey.” Hayden shakes his head, reaching out to cup Shane’s elbow in a comforting manner. “You’re my best friend. Nothing’s gonna change that, okay?”

Shane’s eyes fill with tears, but he forcefully blinks them back, dropping his head with a loud sigh of relief. “That’s really fucking nice to hear.”

“Yeah man, maybe next time you try talking to someone instead of fleeing the country, okay?” Hayden shakes his head and laughs briskly. “We were all pretty convinced you were dead in a ditch somewhere.”

“I almost was,” Shane confesses quietly. “The alpha who…” He gestures toward his round tummy. “He rejected us. It made me really sick. I was in the hospital for weeks.”

“Oh, so *you* aren’t…” Hayden looks at Ilya, then Shane’s belly, brows furrowed.

I am, Ilya wants to scream, *she’s my pup, my family, he’s my mate.*

“It feels like I am,” he replies, clearing his throat.

“Aww!” Jackie touches her heart, looking at Ilya with big warm eyes. “You’re a sweetheart.”

“He wants me dead,” Hayden says to her.

“You asked for it,” she mutters.

“Ah, we’re all friends here, right buddy?” Hayden extends his hand to Ilya, a peace offering that he knows he has to accept, even if he doesn’t want to.

“Sure.” Ilya shakes his hand, squeezing probably way harder than is necessary.

“This is Ilya,” Shane says. “The pup and I have been staying with him. He mated me to save my life, when the rejection sickness almost killed me twice. And we…we fell in love.” He glances at Ilya when he says this, his lips curving up slightly.

Ilya smiles at him, unable to help the softness that courses through his body at Shane’s adorable face.

“That’s so romantic,” Jackie coos.

“It’s *something,*” Hayden says, looking at Ilya. “Hey, dude, you’re pretty big. You ever play hockey? You’d probably make a killer center. Hockey’s a popular thing in Russia, isn’t it? We played them at the Olympics a few years ago, and-”

“Hayden,” Shane interjects, “he doesn’t want to hear about us beating Team Russia. Go inside and say hi to my mom. Please.”

“Alright alright. Come on babe, let's get our pup shower on.” Hayden throws his arm around Jackie’s shoulders and the two of them enter the house.

“Well, he is the worst,” Ilya says once Shane and he are alone on the porch.

Shane huffs a small laugh. “I know he’s a lot, but he’s my best friend. I was so afraid he would…look at me differently, or things would be messed up between us if he found out.”

Ilya reaches for Shane, pulling him close. He rests his chin in Shane’s hair, feeling the omega wrap his arms around Ilya’s waist. He smiles, as he feels the pup’s kicking nudge against his own stomach.

“Someone is annoyed,” he mutters with a laugh.

Shane hums. “She must be excited about all the new voices.”

“She’d better get used to it, da?” Ilya pulls back and pats Shane’s belly lovingly. “Lots of people who love her.”

Shane smiles, looking down at his protruding middle with warmth in his eyes. “Yeah, I guess so.”

The shower is really fun.

Thankfully, all of their guests mesh together quite well. Even Cliff, who’d shown up looking utterly out of place, gets comfortable and even leads a few pup-themed games. He’s weirdly killer at the blindfolded baby food taste test. Troy, who Ilya had expected to be a surly introvert about the entire thing, wins the “guess how big daddy’s belly is” and is rewarded with a gift bag that includes a pair of fuzzy socks that make him look genuinely excited.

Shane, at the center of it all, looks so happy. He’s smiling so big, laughing and joking around. He’s enjoying the buffet of food Yuna had ordered, and he looks comfortable and safe indulging around their little gathering of people.

Ilya watches him the entire time, having difficulty pulling his eyes off the beautiful omega. He can’t help but think about that scared man he first met so many months ago, alone, isolated, terrified. Now, he’s where he belongs, surrounded by people who love and support him. He doesn’t need Ilya anymore.

It’s a painful thought. And Ilya knows it makes sense that Shane wants to go home to Canada. How could he not, when *this* is what’s waiting for him there? Love, support, friends and family. There is nothing Ilya could offer him that could compare, he knows. And the pup deserves this too, this village.

Honestly, Ilya doesn’t really know what that’s like. *Family.* His own was never something to pine for. He’s spent his entire adult life on his own, clubbing and having casual one-night stands to get him through the isolating loneliness. He has some friends, yeah, but he has no

roots, the way that Shane obviously does in Canada. It's a beautiful thing. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't a little envious.

A few hours pass by, and the energy begins to slow. Shane had decided he didn't want to reveal the name he's picked for the pup, so they move on to having some cake before everyone departs.

"Where is Shane?" Yuna asks Ilya as she begins doling out slices of vanilla cake with pink frosting.

"He went to the bathroom," Ilya replies, passing Rose a napkin.

"Can you check on him? He's been gone a while."

"Sure." Ilya gets up and heads down the hall toward the bathroom, pausing on his way when he hears a voice in the kitchen. Curiously, he makes a beeline for the doorway, stopping just shy of entering when he realizes Shane is on the phone.

"...yeah, I understand. Of course. Wow, I mean…are you sure about this?"

Whoever replies on the phone must say something funny, because Shane laughs.

"Yes, that's right. Three cups."

Ilya frowns. He is talking about hockey? Right now at his pup shower? Who is on the phone?

"I'd have to get cleared by my doctor first," Shane answers, bringing his hand up to chew on his fingernail, "but if so, I would definitely be ready to come back next season."

Come back?

Another reply, and Shane laughs again. "Yeah, you can say that again! I mean, I'm really excited about my pup but, losing hockey has been…yeah, exactly. No words."

Ilya's heart thunders in his chest. Is Shane talking to his old coach? Do they want him back, all of a sudden, after discarding him like trash?

"And you're sure it's okay, I mean, you want me to sign now, and it's fine if I can't start until next season?" Shane bites down hard on his nail, smiling again at whatever the response is. "Well, I appreciate that but I doubt anyone else is eager to hire me knowing I'm an omega now."

Another beat passes and Shane is nodding. "Yes, absolutely. Thank you for saying that. I really am in disbelief, Coach Wiebe. I don't know what to say other than, *yes.* Thank you, so much. I'm so excited. Okay, yes, I will look out for those papers. Thank you, again. Goodbye."

Shane lowers the phone, his eyes wide and disbelieving. Ilya watches as he runs a hand across his mouth, then another over his distended belly. He lets out a small, elated laugh. It sounds genuinely excited.

“We’re going home, pup,” he murmurs to her, his smile spreading.

Ilya swallows thickly, entering the room so Shane can see him. “Hey, Yuna is looking for you. Cake.”

“Oh, right.” Shane nods and pockets his phone, grinning.

“You look happy,” Ilya observes carefully.

“The coach from the Ottawa Centaurs just called me,” Shane says, “he saw my interview.”

“Oh?” Ilya is stunned.

“Uh-huh. I guess since the Metros terminated me he’d been wanting to try and poach me, but I disappeared so…” Shane laughs, shaking his head. “But then he watched my interview and saw his chance. It’s all cleared with team owners. They’re sending my contract over tomorrow. I start as a center next season. They matched my old salary.”

“Holy shit,” Ilya gasps, “Shane this is- wow! You are going back to the NHL?”

Shane nods, expression downright giddy. “I’m going back! Only this time, no secrets. He said, they are proud to have an omega on the team, but he also said you know, it's not about that. It’s about my three fucking cup wins.” Shane lets out another giddy laugh. “Do you know how *badly* I wanted to hear that?!”

“Oh, Shane.” Ilya moves toward him, cupping his cheeks. “I am so happy for you. You deserve this.”

“I do deserve it.” Shane wipes at his eyes, laughing again like he’s in disbelief. “Holy shit.”

“Come here.” Ilya wraps his arms around Shane, allowing the omega to nestle against his chest. Shane brushes his nose against Ilya’s neck, breathing in the smell. Ilya kisses the top of his head, trying not to let Shane see the tears in his own eyes.

So it is really happening. In a few weeks, Shane will have his pup, they will break their bond, and he will bring her to another country, never to return. It never mattered how they felt about each other, it doesn’t matter that Ilya is so in love with him he could die, it doesn’t matter that Shane says he feels the same way. Their lives are incompatible, and Shane has rebuilt his so beautifully, he has no use for Ilya anymore. He will be healthy, happily on his own, playing his sport and making millions of dollars. He hasn’t asked Ilya to come, of course he hasn’t, because he doesn’t need him anymore.

“I told you,” Shane sniffs, looking up at Ilya with a grin, “I will pay you back, Ilya, every penny. I promise.”

Ilya swallows thickly. “You do not owe me a thing.”

Shane’s eyes soften. “Yeah, I do Ilya. You saved my life, over and over. This wouldn’t be happening if it weren’t for you. I owe you *everything.”*

So that's all this was? Ilya wants to ask. *A debt you can repay and move on from without a second thought?*

No. Shane loves him. Ilya believes that. He really, really does.

"I love you," Shane adds, almost as if he could somehow read Ilya's mind. He must smell the distress in the air between them. "This doesn't change that, you know that right?"

Do I?

"I love you too." Ilya clears his throat, forcing a smile onto his face. This is Shane's moment, this is huge for him. Ilya refuses to ruin it with his own petty, pathetic yearning. "And I am so happy for you, *malysh.* You and pup get to be home, you get to do what you love, and you have your family back. Is perfect."

"Yeah." Shane beams. His hand slides over his belly, and his expression lightens. "She's kicking so much, she must be able to tell I'm excited. Here, feel."

Gently, he takes Ilya's wrist and guides his palm until it's pressed flat over the crest of his belly. Her little, powerful feet are pummeling Shane's tummy from inside. Ilya softly rubs his hand over the spot, smiling in spite of the agony currently tearing through his chest.

"There she is," he murmurs, and he can't help but think of the day, so soon, when she won't be right under his fingertips anymore. She'll be in an entirely different country.

Ilya looks down at Shane's beautiful face, so fucking excited and happy. This is what he deserves. He doesn't need to be tied down by this forced mating. He's right, there's no other choice. They have to break the bond, so Shane can go home and fulfill his dreams. He's earned it.

Still, as Ilya stands there in the warmth of their proximity, his hand cradling this sweet, growing pup, he can't help but have one pained repeated, thought.

Please, don't leave me.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

THE FINAL CHAPTER !!! (ch13 will be an epilogue :))

i hope you enjoy and thank you so much for reading !!

please be kind in your comments, and i hope you've had fun with this story cause i know i have!!!

Against all odds, with kudos to his modified bed rest and the gentle caretaking he's been receiving for the past several months, Shane makes it to forty-one weeks pregnant.

This is fantastic news, as far as the pup's development goes. Everything is perfect, fully formed. She's head-down in delivery position and ready to go. She's fat and happy, just like Ilya had insisted she need to be.

Shane, on the other hand, is fucking miserable.

"Get out!" he groans, dropping his head down between his shoulders as he cups an arm underneath the round curve of his belly. "You are big enough, now! Time to get out!"

"Shane," Ilya says softly, unable to hide the amused smirk on his face as he watches the show from his spot on the couch. "You heard the doctor. She will come when she is ready."

Shane's gaze cuts to him, sharp and narrowed. *Angry omega* permeates the air, and Ilya realizes he has made a grave, *grave* misstep.

"Oh, will she?" Shane snarls. "When *she's* ready? What about when *I'm* ready, Ilya? Everything fucking hurts. She's ten fucking pounds already. It is time for her to make her exit before she *kills me!"*

"*Milyy."* Ilya gets off the couch and closes the distance between them, allowing Shane to scent him as he tries to release soothing pheromones. "You want me to do the thing?"

Shane is already nodding before he finishes his sentence. The past few weeks, as his belly has grown to an almost alarmingly round size, it's been murder on his lower back. Ilya has been gently lifting the weight of it in his own arms to help alleviate the burden when he can.

Carefully, *very* carefully, he circles his arms around Shane and lifts the weight of his belly. Shane lets out a low groan of relief, dropping his head back against Ilya's shoulder. The smell of apples is rich and sweet, punctuated by sharp, fragrant notes of vanilla. God, he smells like dessert and Ilya wants to bite him again.

“Sorry for snapping.” Shane clears his throat. “I’m so uncomfortable and I want her out but I’m also *so* scared of her coming out.”

“You will be fine, both of you,” Ilya assures him. “Do not think about this, just breathe and relax.”

Shane nuzzles his nose against Ilya’s bite mark, breathing in his scent with a heavy sigh. They stay like that for a while, just slowly drifting side to side together, as Ilya supports Shane’s body with his own.

The day presses on. Shane spends most of it curled up on the sofa, wrapped in a blanket like a big burrito, watching old movies while Ilya brings him snacks. It’s a cold winter morning, snow falling in gentle drifts outside. Ilya lights the fireplace and brings Shane some hot coco, petting his hair softly as he passes by the couch.

It’s a nice, lazy Saturday. The kind they have often lately, where the two of them just quietly enjoy each other’s company. No expectations of needless conversation, no pressure to get out and *do* something, just the tender intimacy of living parallel to one another, and enjoying the company in companionable quiet.

Shane sips his hot coco with both hands wrapped around the large mug, and the blanket pulled up over his head like he’s a babushka. It’s ridiculously cute. His face, once sleek and angled, is downright chubby these days. He knows Shane feels insecure about it, but he truly looks so fucking adorable it *aches*.

“This is good,” Shane says, smiling at Ilya warmly. “Come sit with me?”

Impossible to resist.

Ilya plops down beside him on the couch, instinctively curling close and sliding his hand underneath the blanket burrito to find Shane’s large belly. It’s bulging out of the bottom of his sweater, warm skin taut and tight. The pup’s little limbs press against his hand, fervent movements, almost urgent.

“She is very active today,” Ilya notes.

“Yeah she’s been a wiggle worm all morning.” Shane’s hand joins Ilya’s and he rubs the spot gently. “She’s running out of room.”

Ilya tilts his head sideways, resting it in the crook of Shane’s warm neck. The movie is an old Star Wars film, one of Ilya’s favorites. It had been fun to discover Shane likes these as much as he does.

“Do you think Luke is hot?” Ilya asks casually.

Shane laughs, shaking his head. “Nah, I’m more of a Han Solo guy.”

“Ah, so you like bad attitudes and talking back?” Ilya teases.

“I live with you, don’t I?” Shane smirks and they both laugh softly.

Shane's laugh dies down, as his brows begin to furrow, and he sits up a bit. Ilya watches him as he sets his mug down on the table and cups both hands underneath the lower side of his belly, grimacing.

"Are you alright?" Ilya asks, worry laced into his voice.

"Um, I think so." Shane glances at him, nose wrinkled. "It kind of hurts. My stomach. Maybe it was the hot chocolate, I don't know."

"What does it feel like?"

"Tight," he says, wringing his hands together in example.

"We should time it," Ilya tells him softly. "It could be a contraction."

"If only I was so lucky," Shane mutters.

Ilya smiles, but logs the time in his phone anyway.

The rest of the day passes without incident. Shane doesn't point out any other pains, but Ilya notices him swiftly reaching to cup his belly a few times, face pinched up, and he logs the moment in his notes app anyway. There's a pattern building, every few hours he'll do it.

When they settle in for bed, Ilya slings a protective arm around Shane's waist, palm splayed over his heavy belly. There's an instinct he can't explain coursing through his body, insisting he stay as close by as possible, not wanting to be more than an arm's length away, in case Shane needs him.

Shane's smell is a little different tonight too. *Heavily* vanilla, tinted with a milky undertone. Ilya isn't exactly sure, because he's never experienced this before, but something inside of him must be certain that Shane is close to labor.

He manages to drift off to sleep, keeping one arm tightly circled around Shane. The rest is fitful, Ilya's body never truly relaxing, until he finally comes to in a dark room, fingers clutching at nothingness.

"Shane?" he sits up abruptly, peering through the darkness of the room at the small lump of a shape on the nest in the corner.

Through the darkness, he hears a low, pained whine.

Ilya is on his feet immediately, scrambling over toward the nest. His knee pushes down as he tries to climb in, but he's met with a feral growl.

"Sorry!" He puts his hands up, remembering that he did not ask Shane's permission to enter. The milky vanilla smell is potent now, tinged with undertones of stress and discomfort. "Omega, can I enter, please? You are scaring me."

After a beat, Shane exhales loudly and says, voice ragged, "y-yeah."

Carefully, Ilya climbs into the nest, instinctively pulling Shane on to his lap. His large, tight belly is a barrier between them, but Ilya can feel it against his side. It's tense and hard.

"You are in labor," he says, more of a statement than a question.

"I think so," Shane whimpers, "it hurts a lot."

"Shane, how long? Why did you not wake me?"

"Not long," Shane assures him, "it just got *really* intense all of a sudden and it woke me. It's happening fast."

"Okay, how fast?" Ilya hovers his hand worriedly over Shane's belly. "Doctor said to go to the hospital at five minutes apart."

In lieu of a reply, Shane's eyes squeeze shut and he leans forward, groaning in pain as he wraps his arms around his belly. Sweat is beading on his forehead, and his body is wrung tight. Ilya pets his hair and holds him, counting silently in his head while Shane rides out the contraction.

"That was definitely less than five minutes," he says, once Shane's expression has calmed and he's no longer groaning.

Fear seeps into the air, Shane's eyes going wide. "I- no, it's too fast. I'm not ready, Ilya, I'm scared."

"Hey, hey, *malysh,* is okay. It is going to be fine. Just take a few deep breaths." Ilya inhales slowly, and exhales the same, moving his hand along with it to give Shane a guide.

Shane's big brown eyes track his movement, wide and afraid. He looks truly beautiful, despite the fear and panic on his face. His gorgeous freckles, illuminated by silver moonlight outside, plush lips parted, skin flushed. He is the most perfect human being Ilya has ever met, and now, he's having a teeny tiny little version of himself. It's so exciting, Ilya has to fight to hide his smile.

"I'm scared," Shane repeats, his voice a whine as more distress seeps into the air. "What if she's not okay? What if she's too big, Ilya? What if I don't know what I'm doing?"

"Easy, easy *milyy."* Ilya scents him, gliding his fingers through Shane's damp, fine hair. He allows the omega to curl up against him closer, nose pressed into his scent gland. "We will go to the hospital, and you will have lots of help, okay? Your parents, the doctors-"

"You?" Shane whimpers. "You'll be there?"

"Of course, if you want me I am there."

Shane takes Ilya's wrist and brings it down until his hand is cradling his belly again. His eyes are glimmering with unshed tears when he looks back at Ilya's face. "You-you love her, right? You'll want to hold her? You don't care that…she isn't y-"

“She *is*, as far as I’m concerned,” Ilya shushes him gently, kissing Shane’s sweat-damp temple.

“I love you,” Shane moans, fists tightening around the material of the nest as another pain seems to sweep through him. *“Ahh,* oh god, Ilya, this hurts.”

“Breathe, breathe, like you practiced.” Ilya does some rhythmic breathing as an example for him, steady and calming. Shane follows his example.

Once the contraction passes, Ilya meets his eyes seriously. “Okay Shane. These are coming very fast now. We have to get out of the nest and go to the hospital. I will call your parents to meet us there, da?”

“I’m not ready,” Shane argues again.

“It’s okay, let me handle it. The go bag is packed, I have all your things ready. Let’s just get you up and get you some clothes.” Ilya disentangles himself from Shane’s flushed body, wincing when the omega cries out unhappily.

“We have to get you out of the nest.” Ilya extends his arms for Shane. “Come on, sweetheart.”

The omega shakes his head, eyes tearful and frantic as he clings to one of Ilya’s sweatshirts. “N-no. I can’t. It’s safe here, I don’t want to leave. Smells like you here. I want my pup here where it’s safe.”

It’s clear that Shane is starting to panic, the pain and reality of the situation setting in for him. Ilya can’t blame him, he doubts he’d be any calmer if there was a ten pound human being trying to force its way out of one of *his* tiny orifices.

Still, he has to get Shane to the hospital where doctors and nurses can make sure he and the pup are safe. The nest is a safe *feeling*, but the hospital is actual safety, and he isn’t letting anything happen to his mate or his pup.

“Shane,” he says firmly, “I know you are scared and that’s okay. But you cannot have this pup here. We need to be with the doctors. So it’s time to get up and go to the hospital. I promise you, it will be okay. I will not leave your side, *dorogoy*.”

Shane’s big eyes are watery and frightened. Ilya hates seeing him like this, but he knows they need to move quickly. This pup isn’t pausing to let them get ready, she’s coming no matter what.

Ilya grabs his wrists and hauls him upright, wincing in sympathy at his pained groans. Shane pauses with both feet planted on the floor beside the nest, letting out a guttural sound of pain.

The next moment, both of their feet are damp. Ilya looks down to see a spreading wet spot on Shane’s bottoms, liquid pooling around their feet on the floor.

“Did I just pee my pants?” Shane mutters, looking at Ilya with disbelieving eyes.

“Oh, Shane.” Ilya shakes his head. “I think that was probably the water they talk about. It broke, I think.”

“Oh.” The color drains quickly from his face. “My water is breaking right now.”

“Looks like it,” Ilya replies.

“Oh fuck,” Shane whimpers, “she’s really coming like right now.”

“Yes, sweetheart.” Ilya grips his hands. “Hold on, I will get you a towel and something clean to wear. We are going to the hospital right now.”

Shane nods weakly, watching as Ilya scrambles around the room. He grabs some clean towels from the en suite and wipes down Shane’s legs, laying extras out on the floor to dry up the fluid. Then, he helps Shane into fresh bottoms and a big sweatshirt. Carefully, they make their way downstairs, grabbing the go-bag by the front door and heading for Shane’s car.

After depositing the bag beside the carseat in the back, Ilya opens the passenger door for Shane, carefully helping him up and in. Shane pauses halfway with his seatbelt done, letting out a deep, *deep* groan of pain.

It’s a very scary sound. Ilya goes completely still, extending his hand for Shane to squeeze so hard the bones creak. Shane’s face flushes a very bright shade of red under his freckles, and his entire expression wrinkles up with effort.

“Shane?” Ilya asks in a harrowed voice. “What is happening?”

“Oh my god,” Shane gasps after another moment of very scary noises. “She’s coming out of me!”

“No she isn’t!” Ilya assures him, shaking his head frantically. “Shane, we are seven minutes from the hospital. Don’t worry, we will make it.”

“I feel her,” Shane whines, “she’s so low-“

“Seven minutes.” Ilya reaches over and clicks his seatbelt in, shutting the passenger door. He crosses around and gets behind the wheel. He is *not* delivering any babies today. Not to mention, he spent a fortune buying Shane this car. He’d *love* it if they could avoid a pup being born on the crisp seats.

Shane spends the entirety of the seven minute drive -more like five and a half, with the way Ilya hauls ass- making very scary grunts and groans of pain. He’s gripping the handle above the window with the force of someone trying to hold their limbs together during an explosion. The smell of *panicked, scared omega* is almost suffocating.

“Keep breathing, sweetheart,” Ilya tells him hoarsely, “I see the hospital. It will be okay.”

Mercifully, the lights of the ER bay come into view and Ilya pulls the car into a spot. He shuts off the engine and scrambles out, throwing the bag over his shoulder and then opening the passenger door to free Shane from his seatbelt.

Shane is panting heavily when Ilya takes his arms and wraps them around his neck. Their movement is paused by another contraction, forcing Shane to lean forward and cry out in agony.

"Mmmmmf," he wails, eyes squeezed shut as tears soak his cheeks, *"alpha,* please make it stop, please- please, *ow!"*

Ilya blinks hot liquid from his own eyes, scenting Shane and kissing his sweaty forehead with his own heart breaking a little. "We are here, we will get help, you are okay *malysh.* It is okay. Keep breathing. You are doing so good."

"Ilya," Shane sobs, resting his forehead against Ilya's chest as they stand there half-out of the car in the crowded parking lot. "I'm scared."

"I know baby, I know, it is okay to be scared. Let's get you inside, okay? We will make it better."

"I don't want you to leave," Shane gasps, his grip tightening around Ilya's shirt collar. "Please, Ilya, don't-"

"I am not going *anywhere* Shane, I promise sweetheart. I am here with you. With her." Ilya brushes more hair off his forehead. "Can you walk?"

"No, you don't *understand."* Shane's voice is a whimper. "I don't want to be apart, Ilya. I love you. I want-*mmm, ahh, fuck!"*

"Breathe, breathe." Ilya strokes his back, supporting his weight while another contraction grips Shane's body. He's flushed red, and soaked in sweat, his expression distraught.

Shane lets out a deep, guttural cry, distress filling the air. Ilya glances behind him desperately at the ER doors. Maybe he could go grab someone? Would Shane lose it if he left though?

"I can't bring my pup into the world without- without-" Shane looks up at Ilya with tearful, big eyes. Even now, in the midst of all of this pain, he's so utterly breathtaking.

"Shane." Ilya reaches out to cup his cheek, running the pad of his thumb along the constellation of freckles. "You do not need to worry about anything, okay? Let's go inside and-"

"I love you!" Shane repeats, shaking his head almost frantically "I've been so fucking afraid of just being *honest.* So afraid of getting hurt again. But I don't care right now- now I'm *really* scared and all I want is you. Here. With me always. Ilya please, please will you come to Canada with me? With us?"

Ilya blinks, momentarily taken aback. "What?"

"I don't want to break the bond," Shane rambles, looking at Ilya with tears spilling over his eyelashes. "I love you and I want us to be a family."

Ilya stares at him, trying to process these words. He's dreamt of Shane saying this to him, so many fucking times. And now, with the pup on the cusp of her entry into the world, Shane has revealed that he wants exactly the same thing as Ilya?

All this time…both of them so afraid…

"Please fucking say something," Shane sobs, "I think the pup is literally coming out of me right now."

"Oh god, Shane." Ilya pulls him upright and kisses his lips hard and sloppy. "I love you so fucking much. *Of course* I will come with you. Wherever you go, I will follow."

"Okay, fuck." Shane nods and wipes at his eyes. "We can talk this out later. *Fuck ow fuck, I need,* she's-"

"Okay yes let's go sweetheart." Ilya helps him out of the car and slams the door shut.

It's a messy shuffle to the front doors and Shane's knees nearly buckle by the time they're inside the lobby of the ER.

It looks busy inside, but apparently the smell of an omega in very active labor inspires some urgency. They get roomed remarkably fast, even though they have to wheel in a bed more sized for an alpha man, and while Shane paces around the room in his paper gown and grippy socks, waiting for the nurse to come check his dilation, Ilya calls Yuna.

It takes two tries to get an answer, seeing as it's the middle of the night, but she says they'll head right over.

This, unfortunately, does little to comfort Shane as another contraction consumes his body and he cries out. Ilya hangs up the phone and immediately rushes to his side, comforting him through it until finally the door opens.

A perky nurse in bright pink scrubs enters, beaming with a smile. It's clear that she is surprised by the sight of Shane, whether it's his larger size or she recognizes him from hockey, it's hard to tell. Professionally, she doesn't acknowledge whatever she's noticed.

"Hello there Shane! My name is Danica. I see we're having a big one right now."

In reply, Shane just groans in pain.

"They are coming very fast," Ilya tells her, "every three minutes, I think. Lasting a long time and hurting him very bad."

Danica nods as she slides on some crisp latex gloves. "Sounds like someone's in the transition stage. Shane, do you mind hopping up on the bed so I can check your dilation? See how close we are to meeting your pup?"

Shane huffs a breath out while he clings to Ilya, arms still locked around the alpha's neck. "Can I have the- the um, the epidural?"

“That will depend on how dilated you are,” she says with sympathy written across her features.

Shane whines quietly, but allows Ilya to help him up onto the bed. He grips Ilya’s hand, looking at him with desperation in his eyes.

“I’m right here,” Ilya assures him softly.

“Alright Shane! Just gonna get situated here, and get our exam started. Take a deep breath, you’re going to feel me in a moment here.”

Shane’s expression scrunches up and he squeezes his eyes shut. Ilya leans down to scent him and kiss his neck and murmur gentle nothings in his ear.

“Well.” Danica rolls her stool back and deposits her gloves in the hazmat bin. “I’ve got good news and maybe less exciting news.”

Shane’s expression is alarmed. “What do you mean?”

“The good news is, your pup is almost here! You’re very, very close. You’re about 9cm dilated, fully in the transition stage, which is probably why it felt like the pup was actively coming. Once we get to ten, then we start pushing. And since you’re moving very fast, I don’t think that will take long.”

“And the *less exciting* news?” Ilya demands.

“We are too far along for Shane to receive an epidural,” she says, already appearing to brace herself for the reaction to this.

Luckily for her -while unlucky for Shane- another contraction sweeps through him and he groans out, reaching for Ilya.

“Is okay, just breathe,” Ilya murmurs, scenting him and brushing his hair off his forehead. “You are okay, I am here, sweetheart. You are doing so good, just breathe.”

“Shane,” Danica speaks when his contraction finally ends, “we have some Nitrous gas you can try, to help alleviate the pain. Would you like to give that a go?”

He’s already nodding. “Anything, please, whatever you have.”

“I’ll get that arranged for you honey, hang in there.” Danica smiles and exits the room swiftly.

Shane looks up at Ilya with big, tearful eyes. It’s sort of unbelievable that he could still be beautiful, even right now, but he is. He is breathtaking.

“So,” Ilya murmurs, still running his hands through Shane’s sweaty hair, “Canada is fun, yes? I will enjoy it? Lots of, what, ketchup and maple syrup?”

Shane huffs a laugh, exhausted and shaky. He blinks a few stray tears from his eyes and says, “are you serious? You’ll actually come with us?”

“Of *course.*” Ilya bends down to press a gentle kiss to Shane’s temple, exhaling softly. “I have started over before. I am not scared of it.”

“And…everything else?” Shane asks quietly. “Me, the pup, the mating…are you scared of that?”

“It is the best thing that has ever happened to me,” Ilya replies without missing a beat. “How could that be scary, mm? All this time I was only afraid you would not feel the same way.”

Shane scowls. “Me too. Why didn't you say something?”

“I did! I told you I love you!”

“I said it back!”

“Yes but then you said you were moving to-*oh*, okay, okay.” Ilya’s sentence is cut short when Shane cries out in pain again and reaches for his hands.

He lets Shane break his fingers, helping him slowly breathe through the pain and kissing his hair with tension in his own body. Seeing the omega in this distress and discomfort is unbearable, but something in his body knows he has to remain steadfast and not panic. Shane needs him to hold it together right now, so he can fall apart as much as he wants.

When it finally recedes, Shane gasps out, “getting rejected before almost fucking killed me, you don’t understand why I might not be gung-ho to ask you to move to another *country* with me?”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Ilya cups his cheek, eyes softening. “Of course I understand. You are so brave for saying it now. I never wanted to put any pressure on you, you know? I never wanted you to feel like I was some shithead alpha trying to take control. You already said you felt like you owed me and I did not want you to…make any decisions based on that feeling. It was never because I did not want you. I have *wanted* you since I first smelled apples in that car dealership lobby.”

Shane’s eyes clear a bit, and his brow furrows. “Apples?”

“Oh, yes.” Ilya nods thoughtfully. “You smell like this apple dessert my mother used to make. Nice memories in the kitchen, safe, you know. Like you told me, about the orange candies.”

“I do?” Shane’s lip wobbles. “I smell safe for you?”

“Yes, even before the mating.” Ilya leans down and kisses his bite mark, lips ghosting gently over the deep scars. “I think my body always knew how badly I wanted you, even when my brain was too afraid to admit it.”

Tears spill out over Shane’s cheeks, and Ilya is quick to brush them off with the pad of his thumb. The omega reaches for him, and he gets as close as he can, letting Shane bury his face

in his neck.

“I love you,” Shane sniffs, “I love this. I want this forever.”

Ilya’s eyes close, warmth spreading through his chest. “Oh, Shane. I want this too.”

“Nnngh, oh god, fuck, fuck-” Shane leans forward, arms locked around Ilya’s neck, crying out in pain.

While Ilya is attempting to help him through it, the hospital door opens, and he glances over to see a woman with a clipboard enter. His gaze darkens. She is not here with pain relief, she has fucking paperwork.

“Oh, hi there,” she says, gesturing with her clipboard, “um, I hate to interrupt, it’s just that there’s some consent forms we need you both to sign. The intake forms and birth plan for Shane mentioned that you two had planned to-”

“Please get her out of here,” Shane cries into Ilya’s shirt, “I can’t-she’s-*owww, fuck, fuck!”*

“Just bring papers here!” Ilya snaps, more harshly than he intends to. He’s sure the stench of *protective alpha* is misery for this woman, who is wearing a patch, but he can’t help it. Shane is suffering and she’s talking about insurance or whatever the fuck this is.

The woman scrambles forward and thrusts the clipboard and pen under Ilya, who uses his free hand to messily sign his name on the bottom of the form. He isn’t sure why they need *his* signature on Shane’s treatment forms, but they are mates, so maybe it’s par for the course.

“Shane, honey,” Ilya murmurs, “just sign really quickly, and she will go away.”

“I’ll go away so fast,” she agrees, looking extremely displeased to be here.

Clumsily, Shane scribbles his name across the signature line at the bottom. The woman steps back with a grateful sigh.

“Okay! So once the pup is delivered and Shane is taken to recovery, someone will come by to perform the-”

“Ahhh!” Shane wails, fists tightening on Ilya’s shirt. “Ilya, get the doctor, please! Seriously, I think it’s for real this time! It isn’t stopping!”

“I’ll just…yeah.” The woman scrambles out of the room. Ilya frantically presses the nurse button on the bed, still holding Shane up against his chest.

The door opens again, but instead of a doctor, this time it’s Yuna and David. Their faces are lit up with excitement, which Ilya has to admit, comforts him a little.

“Oh, Shane!” Yuna rushes over, taking Shane’s face in her hands, eyes full of affection. “Sweetie, the pup is coming!”

“No shit!” he hisses.

David covers his mouth with his hand, stifling a laugh.

Yuna rolls her eyes. *"Okay* then, not having the *happy hormones* yet, got it." She looks over to Ilya, grinning. "How are you feeling?"

Ilya hopes his eyes communicate that he is feeling fucking *terrified* but he doesn't want to frighten Shane, so he says, "very excited for pup. Very proud of Shane. I called the nurse because he thinks she is-"

"Coming out of me!" Shane practically screams. "Why is no one urgent?!"

"Honey, it feels like that for a while," Yuna assures him, "her head probably is just barely in your cervix."

"Oh my god, make everything stop," he wails, burying his face in one of the pillows.

"Shane, buddy," David steps closer to the bed and extends his arm. "I brought you some good Ginger Ale. You thirsty?"

At that, Shane's head snaps up. His eyes soften, and he looks at his dad with pouty lips. If he wasn't in so much pain, Ilya would kiss him for how fucking adorable he looks right now.

"I'm not thirsty at all," he says, sniffling, "I feel like I'm dying, but thank you so much Dad. That was so thoughtful."

The door opens again, and mercifully, it's the nurse this time. Danica is all smiles when she approaches, despite the fact that Shane is currently being gripped by a contraction that has him making some downright horrifying noises.

"He thinks she is coming now," Ilya says grimly.

"The *gas?!"* Shane demands, somehow managing to get the words out through his shouts.

"Oh yes and where is the gas?" Ilya adds.

"On its way, Shane," Danica affirms. "Do you mind rolling over on your back so we can check you?"

Shane sobs and nods, turning over with Ilya's help.

"Is everyone okay in the room?" Danica checks.

Shane nods again. "Want them here, s'okay."

David and Yuna both go stand by his head, taking a respectful position out of the line of action, but close enough that they can both lean in to murmur quietly in his ear. Shane seems to be a bit relieved, having his family nearby.

"Okay Shane, feeling me." The room goes mostly quiet as Danica begins her exam, but it doesn't take long for her to break the silence. "Oh! Wow, yeah she is right there, huh?"

“I’ve been fucking saying!” Shane growls.

“Okay, hon, we’ll get the gas and the doctor and get this show on the road!” Danica pops up on her feet and heads for the door with significantly more hustle in her step this time.

“The gas made me nauseous,” Yuna adds, glancing at Shane with worry on her face.

“You have to stop talking,” Shane snaps at her.

“Why am I the only one he’s being mean to?” she demands, looking at David.

“Because I brought Ginger Ale, and he keeps his mouth shut.” David smirks and gestures between himself and Ilya.

Ilya averts his eyes, focusing all his attention on Shane while quietly, *emphatically* agreeing.

A team of nurses comes in then. One gets Shane hooked up with the gas mask, which he is eagerly grabbing for before she can even start giving him instructions. The others help situate the monitors and finally, his obstetrician comes in, gloved up and grinning.

“Shane! So good to see you, dear.” She’s an older woman with wrinkled eyes and a kind smile. “I hear you’re a little marathoner!”

Shane scowls at her from above his gas mask, expression wrinkled, zero semblance of humor left. He is reminiscent of an angry, large kitty cat. Ilya keeps that thought to himself, obviously.

“Hi Dr. Wilson,” Yuna greets her with a warm smile.

“Hello Hollanders!” The doctor glances at Ilya curiously. “A new face? Hi there!”

“He’s my mate,” Shane snaps, removing his mask to get the words out harshly.

“Hello, I am Ilya.” Ilya debates extending his hand for her to shake, but she is wearing gloves and he doesn’t think his hands are even a little bit sterile right now.

“Oh, right!” Dr. Wilson nods. “I forgot about that. Well, let’s not think about all of that right now, let’s get your pup here, huh? How’s that sound Shane?”

“Do I have a choice?” he demands dryly.

She laughs, taking the attitude with good nature. She reaches over to press her hands firmly alongside the skin of his exposed belly. He whines, and Ilya bristles.

“Just making sure we’re all in position,” she assures them, “she’s a big girl, Shane!”

“I want everyone to stop talking,” Shane says to Ilya, expression desperate.

“I will make sure they all shut up for a while, as soon as pup is here, okay?” Ilya kisses his forehead, tension and worry pooling in his arms. “Just breathe, you are so close, sweetheart.”

Shane whimpers, and presses his face into Ilya's neck, scenting the bite mark there and lingering. His hands are shaking, where they're gripping the gas mask. Ilya can hear the fear in each trembling breath.

"You are so brave," Ilya whispers, "so strong, so tough. *Ya tebya lyubulyu,* Shane. I am right here with you, now and forever."

"On your next contraction, let's have a big push, Shane!" Dr. Wilson says. "I'll count you down from ten. Try to breathe and let her head come down nice and slow."

Time gets sort of fuzzy, after that. Ilya knows his hand is being crushed in Shane's grip. He knows Yuna and David are on the other side of the bed, encouraging their son, passing him sips of water, telling him they love him. He knows the doctor is gentle, but firmly instructs Shane on how to push.

He also knows, after twenty minutes, Shane has not made enough progress.

"I can't," Shane gasps, falling back against the pillows and shaking his head, "she's too big, I can't, she won't-"

"Shane, you *can,"* Dr. Wilson assures him. "Yes, she is a bigger pup, but you *are* making good progress. We are so, so close to having her head delivered. I think you just need a little help. Let's try a position change, okay?"

Shane lets out a quiet sob, and Ilya feels his heart ache in his chest. The smell of distress is potent, souring the apple and vanilla aroma seeping out of Shane's skin. He looks *exhausted,* sweat-soaked and tearful.

"Shane, you can do this," Ilya assures him, gripping his hand and kissing his temple. "You can do fucking *anything.* You are three time Stanley Cup winner, you survived starting over completely on your own while growing a pup, you have survived so many things. You will get through this. I know it."

Shane sobs again, blinking up at Ilya as he nods weakly. "Okay, okay, yeah. I can do this."

"That's right, Shane." Dr. Wilson smiles. "Let's get you sitting up a bit with the squat bar, okay?"

She moves to have the nurses adjust something on the bed, only to realize after a half-step, that this bed is designed for an alpha, and does not have built-in delivery features. No squat bar.

"God damn it," she curses, "go grab us a squat bar, please."

One of the nurses scurries out of the room.

Shane lets out a raspy laugh. "I'm so big, it's inconvenient."

"Stop that," Yuna tells him, "you are perfect."

“All beds should just come large and inclusive, Shane,” Dr. Wilson tells him sadly. “I’m sorry.”

If he has an answer ready for that, it’s interrupted by a contraction.

They get a portable squat bar brought over to the bed and help situate him upright. He looks so exhausted, like it’s hard to even hold his head up.

“This hurts,” he admits, “my legs are tired.”

“Here.” Ilya climbs up behind him on the bed without even thinking, bracing his hands against Shane’s lower back to support his weight. He presses his strength into Shane, relieved when it seems to give the omega some relief.

“Fuck, yeah,” he whimpers, “thank you, alpha, thank you.”

“I am here.” Ilya leans in and nuzzles his neck. “Now is time for pup to join us, da?”

Shane lets out a small, exhausted laugh, and nods. “Y-yeah, okay. Okay.”

The position change seems to help. Time gets weird again, but Ilya is closer now, which helps. He nuzzles Shane’s neck, holds his body upright, murmurs in his ear.

It’s horrible, listening to Shane let out deep, *awful* sounds of agony. When the pup starts to crown, Ilya is worried for a moment, truly, that Shane might actually be dying. But he isn’t, he keeps going, keeps pushing, keeps surviving.

“Almost there, Shane, she’s turning!” Dr. Wilson announces, once the baby’s shoulders are halfway out. “Keep pushing, hon! You’re doing amazing!”

“Nnngh, ahh!” Shane lets out a final cry of pain, and then, something else happens.

A shrill scream. High pitched and deafening, as Dr. Wilson lifts a small, squirming pup from between Shane’s legs.

“Oh my god,” Shane sobs, “oh my god, my pup. Oh my god.”

They get him lying back on the pillows quickly, and Dr. Wilson passes him the small little baby. Shane sobs again, holding her against his chest with tears and sweat soaking his face.

She’s so unbelievably tiny, yet, sort of a chunky thing. Squishy arms and legs, wrinkled little fingers, a head full of dark, curly hair. She favors Shane, that much is clear, from her eyes, to her complexion, to her black hair. And, of course, her attitude.

“Attagirl,” Shane whispers to her, completely enraptured, “you tell ‘em, sweetheart. You let ‘em know.”

“Oh, honey,” Yuna says wetly, “she’s *beautiful.”*

“She looks just like you, kiddo,” David adds, his own voice wobbling.

It hits Ilya just a second later, how strong the smell of vanilla is now. The scent that's been slowly growing stronger and stronger over the past few months.

It's *her*. That sweet, fragrant little aroma, budding inside of Shane and now independent from his apple smell. This little vanilla bean, crying and squalling in Shane's arms.

Ilya doesn't realize he too is crying, full on *sobbing,* until Shane looks up at him through his own teary eyes, and grins.

"Look, Ilya!" He says. "She's here!"

"She is *perfect,"* Ilya cries, leaning down to wrap his arm around both of them, mate and pup. "You did so fucking well, *malysh."*

"I can't believe I did it." Shane lets out a disbelieving, exhausted laugh.

"You fucking did it." Ilya kisses him, fiercely and passionately. Their tears and sweat mingle together, and it should be gross, but it's fucking beautiful.

"Do we have any volunteers to cut the cord?" Dr. Wilson asks softly, still smiling.

Shane looks at Ilya, big eyes hopeful. "Would you?"

Ilya touches his chest. "I would be honored, Shane. Are you sure?"

"Yes." He nods. "Please."

Ilya forces his hands to remain steady as the nurses show him exactly what to do. He successfully severs the cord, tears still soaking his face.

"Does she have a name, baby?" Yuna asks Shane, petting his hair lovingly.

Shane nods, smiling down at the pup. "Yeah, yeah. She's Melodie. Melodie Ilyichna Hollander."

Ilya's breath catches in his throat, and his eyes meet Shane's, disbelieving.

"Guessing Melodie is some hockey player," Yuna says to David, who nods. "But, Ilyichna? That's unique."

"It is how we do things in Russia," Ilya explains, voice shaking dangerously. "The middle name is, well, of the father. Ilyichna…it means *daughter of Ilya."*

Shane smiles shyly at him. "I hope it's okay. I did some research."

Ilya shakes his head, closing the distance between them until their lips are pressed together again. This time, with so much emotion coursing through his body, he's afraid he might actually pass out.

"I love you," Ilya tells him through his tears, "I love you so fucking much."

“Language!” Shane teases, covering the pup’s ears with one hand. “But, I fucking love you too.”

Thankfully, delivering the afterbirth goes smoothly, and all of Melodie’s testing comes back perfect. Shane is feeling up to moving around a few hours later, and he manages a shower with some help from one of the kind nurses, after refusing to let any of his family help.

Night has turned to early morning, the sun cascading over the buildings outside their window in the recovery room. Shane is sleeping, David is down in the cafeteria getting coffee, and Yuna is watching while Ilya carefully maneuvers the pup in his arms.

He’s heard lots of stories before about alphas trying, and failing to bond with pups that are not of their body. He’s heard their bodies sometimes flat out reject the pup, making a relationship completely impossible.

Looking down at this sweet, beautiful little girl, he finds that really fucking hard to believe.

She is absolutely breathtaking, just like her father. Her complexion is darker, with ruddy, fat little cheeks. Her hair is soft and wispy, little curls over her tiny skull that Ilya smooths his fingers over. It’s too early to make out too many discernable features of her squishy little face, but he can tell already, she will grow into Shane’s mini-me.

Two of Shane? How the fuck could his body ever reject that?

“You look so natural, like that,” Yuna murmurs, and Ilya startles a bit, almost having forgotten she was here.

“Like what?” he asks, voice a bit gruff as he adjusts the pup in his arms gently.

“Holding a pup.” Yuna smiles gently. “You two look very comfortable together.”

Ilya manages a quiet chuckle. “She has not objected so far.”

“Of course not. She’s *Ilyichna.”* Yuna arches an eyebrow at that. “How long did he have that one up his sleeve?”

Now, he grins at her. “He is full of surprises, da?”

Yuna glances over at Shane’s sleeping form. He looks exhausted, which is no surprise considering he just naturally delivered a ten pound pup in only a few frantic hours. His cheek is squished into the pillow, choppy little bangs askew over his forehead. His apple smell is sweet and rich, somehow deeper than it was before, after going through this. Matured, tender, at ease.

“I’ve been making calls left and right to lawyers and financial advisors and all of these people to try and see if there’s *anything* we can do about…you know, his situation.” Yuna makes a vague gesture with her hands.

“His situation?” Ilya asks, brows furrowed.

“He’s starting over from scratch,” she reminds him, “that shitty asshole alpha took everything. But, everyone’s said the same thing. Since Shane *willingly* gave it over there’s nothing that can be done.” Her expression sours. “*Willing.* As if an omega in an abusive relationship has any control at all.”

“The world is not built for omegas to have control,” Ilya replies, jaw tight as he glances over at Shane. “But, he is taking it back in his own way. He will be okay, Yuna.”

“I know.” She sighs, running a hand through her hair with a huff. “It’s just a horrible feeling not being able to protect your child. To not know who they might meet that…could hurt them. And you’re completely powerless to stop it.”

Ilya grimaces. He can imagine, in some way, what she’s talking about. It’s not like his mother was his *child* or anything, but he remembers that powerless feeling. Watching her be hurt, knowing there was nothing he could do. Still blaming himself for it anyway.

“I think, our job as the people who love him,” he says quietly, “is not to try and fix it for him, or try and protect him from it. I think our job is to be here when he needs us. When dealing with it is so fucking exhausting. We can be that safe place to land. Remind him it is all still worth fighting for. You know?”

“That’s wise,” she muses, smiling down at him, “you’re gonna be a great dad, Ilya.”

Ilya’s eyes soften, brushing his fingers over Melodie’s soft cheek. “I…I hope so.”

“And it’s a nice feeling, now,” Yuna adds, reaching over to squeeze his arm. “Now, I don’t worry about him as much. Not with you in his life.”

Something in Ilya’s heart shifts at that. He’s known, objectively, that Yuna and David have both grown to like him over the past few months. He knows, now, how truly Shane loves him. He knows that being an alpha does not mean he has to inherently make someone else’s life worse.

But to hear from a scared mother who has been through a lot recently, that she feels safe with her only child in Ilya’s arms? He doesn’t think he has the words.

“I do not know what to say,” he admits, voice thick with emotion. “Thank you. I will always be here for him, as long as he wants me.”

Yuna smiles at him, with all the warmth and earnestness only a mother can really exude. “I know, Ilya. Trust me, I know.”

“She’s pretty cute, isn’t she?” Shane glances over at Ilya, who is currently rearranging the concoction of mixed juices and snacks on Shane’s bedside table. His parents had gone home a few hours ago to start getting things in order.

Shane is laid up in his recovery bed, Melodie curled up in her baby pink swaddle, wrapped tightly in his warm arms. He looks breathtaking, even with dark circles of exhaustion under

his glimmery brown eyes. He's got a glow under his skin, a warm, happy pink flush. Their health is good, thank god, Shane's body handled the stress of delivery well, supported by Ilya's alpha.

That makes an odd burst of pride dart through his chest, and he allows himself to bask in it, just a little. Maybe being an alpha is not the worst thing in the world. Maybe, with Shane, with what they have, it even sort of works just right.

No imbalance or unfairness, like his parents had. Just…just this, their family, their love.

"She is the cutest pup in the world," Ilya assures him.

Shane shifts slightly in the bed, cooing softly when Melodie makes a noise of discontent. "Shh, s'okay, sweetheart. Daddy's here. You're okay. Keep snoozing."

The sight of them together, father and pup, is so endearing that it almost aches. Shane is so gentle with her, touches and voice rounding out around the edges to be so tender. Ilya is worried his chest might actually burst open, from how much love is overflowing.

"We need to start getting things in order for the move," Shane says to him, "will you want to sell your house? Or maybe rent it out? Something less permanent, just in case you decide-"

"I will sell it." Ilya shakes his head firmly. "There is no need to have something temporary. I know what I want."

Shane smiles at that, cheeks flushed. "Okay, if you're sure."

"I will use the money to keep us afloat for a bit, until I can find some work." Ilya purses his lips. "They *do* have car dealerships in Canada, I assume?"

"Of course." Shane rolls his eyes. "I'm sure you'll find something. But there's really no rush, you know. I just signed with the Centaurs. So, my salary will…more than cover us."

"That is right." Ilya arches an eyebrow. "I am trophy alpha now?"

Shane snorts. "I guess so. But, it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, you know, to let me take care of you for a while."

"Ah, how about we take care of each other?" Ilya kisses his forehead sweetly.

"That works for me." Shane gives him a big, gummy smile, his eyes crinkling with it. It's the most happy and at peace he's ever looked. It makes Ilya feel a little giddy.

There's a knock on the door, and they both turn to see a nurse entering. She's smiling at them, but there's a hint of wariness under the expression. She's dressed in black scrubs, with her hair pinned up.

"Hello guys," she says quietly, shutting the door behind her. "I'm Mariela. I'm here to give you your injections. Is this a good time to start?"

“Injections?” Shane asks, shaking his head.

She cocks an eyebrow. “Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, right? We have consent forms for a round of injections for bond separation.”

Both of them pause for a beat, confused about when they signed this form, considering they decided before entering the hospital they would not be breaking the bond. It seems to hit them both at once- that frightened woman who had entered in the heat of Shane’s contractions with her clipboard.

“That’s what we signed?!” Shane looks at Ilya accusatorily. “You didn’t read it?!”

“We were both a little preoccupied!” Ilya replies.

Mariela hesitates. “Should I come back later?”

“Please don’t come back at all,” Shane says to her, “we don’t want-we- we are staying mated. We don’t want to break the bond.”

“Oh!” Mariela glances between them, her eyebrows furrowed. “Well, forgive me, gentlemen, but agreeing to break a bond is a pretty serious thing. I know right now the hormones are all over the place, but-”

“He is mine,” Ilya cuts her off sharply, shaking his head, “I am his. We are mates, we are family. Please do not ask us this again.”

“Well, okay then.” Mariela nods, backing toward the door. “I will pass this information along.”

She exits, and Shane glances at Ilya, his gaze softening. “You’re really serious.”

“Of course I am serious, I’m moving to fucking Ottawa.”

Shane laughs, carefully adjusting Melodie in his arms so as not to wake her. “You’re such an ass. You’re going to like Canada, just watch.”

Ilya can’t help but smile at that, reaching over to cup Shane’s beautiful, freckly cheek. “I am sure I will love it. I will be with you, and with her. That is all I need.”

There’s a brief flash of hesitation in Shane’s face now, when he responds. “And you’re sure you aren’t…aren’t worried about starting over? Again?”

With a shake of his head, Ilya leans in and kisses Shane. It’s soft, their lips moving with a rhythmic, well-practiced tenderness. They fit together so easily, it’s hard to believe they’ve spent so long being afraid to acknowledge it.

“We are starting over *together,”* he murmurs, “no matter what happens, it will be okay.”

Shane looks completely set at ease by that. Knowing that, despite the fact that it *is* pretty scary, they are doing it together.

Chapter 13: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

thank you <3<3<3<3

"Melodie, *dochenka*. You cannot wear Crocs, I am sorry." Ilya rests his hands on his hips, watching as his pup scowls at him for the very unacceptable act of enforcing Shane's strict charity gala dress code expectations.

"Papa, they are fancy!" Melodie shakes her head dismissively with all the discontent and scorn a five-year-old can muster. "These ones are purple so they match my dress." She gestures unconvincingly toward her purple gala dress.

Ilya looks at her with sympathy. She hates dressing up fancy in uncomfortable clothes, the same way Shane does. But, he has to admit, in spite of that she looks adorable. Her dark hair is pulled up in an elaborate, curly updo that had taken Ilya an hour to get just right and seal with ozone-destroying levels of hairspray. She's wearing tiny dangling dinosaur earrings. Her gala dress is ruffley, lavender purple that compliments her beige complexion beautifully. Yuna had let her borrow some colorful chapstick, and it's smeared a bit messily over her lips. Even though she isn't smiling right now, Ilya can still see the curve in her mouth where it matches Shane's exactly.

"What did Daddy say?" Ilya asks her.

Melodie's scowl deepens. "He said no Crocs cause it's a special night and Crocs aren't special shoes."

"Why don't you want to wear the nice strappy sandals we got you?" Ilya gestures to the complex-looking shoes on her nightstand.

Melodie's expression sours. "They hurt my feet! My Crocs are comfy! Please Papa, can I wear 'em?"

Her big eyes get all soft and pleading, the spray of freckles over her delicate little nose wrinkled up with her hopeful expression. She clasps her tiny hands together in a begging gesture. Wildly melodramatic, but unfortunately, foolproof.

How is he supposed to look at a miniature Shane and say *no?*

"What kind of bribery is going on in here?" A voice from behind him gets their attention, and they both turn sheepishly to find Shane in the doorway of Melodie's bedroom.

He's standing there with his hands on his hips, an eyebrow arched expectantly. He too is dressed for the occasion, in a pair of pinchy loafers, a sleek pair of maternity slacks, and a well-fitted button down shirt. Even with the swell of his six-month pregnant belly, he looks svelte and put together. His hair is gelled neatly, and he already has an air of formality to him in preparation of the night.

A note of bitterness tints Melodie's sweet vanilla scent. "The sandals hurt my feet, Daddy. I wanna wear these."

Shane's eyes cast down to her Crocs, and he is already shaking his head. "Mel, baby, remember how we talked about fancy nights? This is a fancy night tonight. We have to dress fancy."

"Why?" she demands.

At that, he falters, brows furrowing. "Um, well, it's just what you do."

"How come?" she presses.

Shane looks at Ilya for help. Ilya shrugs. "I wanted to let her wear them."

"Alright, I guess." Shane exhales, letting his arms drop down to cup under his belly. "Crocs can be fancy. Why not?"

"Yes!" Melodie does an excited twirl and races for Shane, hugging him around the legs with a squeal. "Thank you Daddy!"

Shane smiles at that, bringing one hand around to carefully cup the back of her hair. "Of course, honey. Are you guys ready to go? I have to give a speech in like an hour and I want to eat first."

"Ah, yes, let's feed Daddy and the pup." Ilya swoops over and wraps an arm around his waist. "Do you want to eat there, or I can grab you a snack before we go, or-"

"Babe, I'm all good." Shane stops him with a hand to his cheek, and a smile. "I will eat there. But only if we go now, come on guys."

It's a big night tonight. Ilya can't help his smile as they load up into the car and begin the trek to the gala hall. It has taken years of blood, sweat and tears to get here, to tonight. But through Shane's determination, perseverance, and their teamwork, it's finally come together.

"What are we doing again?" Melodie asks, leaning against the window to watch Canadian countryside pass by her as they drive.

Ilya glances back at her, smiling at the sight of her alone in the spacious backseat of the SUV he'd bought for Shane five years ago. It's well-loved by now, with snack wrappers stuffed into the doorhandles and stuffies loose at random throughout the seats. They are going to have to clear some room for a carseat on the other side, but thankfully, this is a good family car.

“We are going to the charity launch gala,” Ilya reminds her, “do you remember what that means?”

Melodie thinks hard. “Daddy said it means I get to see Uncle Zane and Milo.”

Ilya laughs, glancing over at Shane, who is smiling behind the wheel. “Yes, it does mean that honey. They RSVPed so they will be there.”

It’s a bit of a hassle to get inside the venue, because thankfully the parking lot is already full. There is a whole team here making sure the event runs smoothly, led by none other than Yuna Hollander of course. They get inside, and Ilya and Shane pause at the entrance to the back stage area of the ballroom.

“We will go find our seats,” Ilya says, smiling as Shane leans in for a kiss. “I love you, *moy lyuibimyy.”*

“I love you more,” Shane replies, bringing a hand down to cup his side with a soft hum. “Pup says he loves you too.”

“Love you pup!” Melodie leans over and pats Shane’s belly.

“Go be great.” Ilya kisses Shane once more, then scoops Mel up into his arms. They find their table at the front, and he sits beside Bood, Cassie and Milo. Immediately, Milo and Melodie begin rambling on about nonsensical five year old topics that they haven’t had the chance to discuss since the last time the Boodram family visited. On the other side of the table, Troy and Harris Drover sit beside Hayden and Jackie Pike. All of their children are seated around them, talking excitedly and making messes of their fancy clothes.

Rose and Yuna are somewhere backstage, helping to make sure everything runs smoothly, which leaves David and Svetlana to sit on Ilya’s other side at the table. The atmosphere in the room is exciting, teeming with anticipation and nerves. Ilya has to admit, as much faith as he has in his husband, and as full as the room is with donors and journalists potential *future* donors, this is all new and a little scary.

Svetlana and Ilya have a lengthy chat in Russian, and before they can finish, the lights on stage come on, and the MC is announcing Shane’s entrance.

He walks on to the stage, glowing under the harsh beams of light. He’s smiling easily, walking like his back *isn’t* currently killing him from the weight of their growing pup. The gold band wrapped around his ring finger gleams in the spotlight. He looks utterly infallible, perfect.

There’s a round of polite applause and some whooping from his hockey teammates to the table at Ilya’s right. They’re on hiatus for the season right now, having just won their third cup since Shane joined the team. He’d dominated an entire playoff run and then successfully secured their third cup before falling pregnant near the end of the season.

Shane grins, speaking carefully into the microphone on the podium. “Hello everyone. How’s the food?”

There's a polite lull of laughter, and Melodie leans over to Ilya, tugging on his shirt. "Papa, Daddy's up there."

"I know *malyshka,"* Ilya murmurs, "let us hear what he has to say, da?"

"Well, I won't waste too much of your time, I know we have dessert coming." Another polite roar of laughter, and Shane continues. "For those of you who don't know me, my name is Shane Hollander. I am thirty-three years old. I am a center for the Ottawa Centaurs-"

A boisterous, deafening roar of cheering from his team's table. Shane laughs alongside the rest of the room.

"-thanks, guys. I am a father of one beautiful child, soon to be two. I am married to a wonderful man. And, I am an omega."

The room gets a bit quieter, more solemn as they really tune in.

"For a long time, that last one isn't something I would have shared." Shane looks out over the room, his eyes catching Ilya's. "For a long time, it was something I felt ashamed of. I was raised in an environment that suppressed everything *omega* about me. I was pushed to hide an important part of myself, to make the world more comfortable with me. I thought I had to pretend to be something I wasn't to earn respect."

Ilya reaches down and wraps his fingers around Melodie's tiny hand. She looks enraptured, even though what Shane is saying is probably a bit too complex for her to follow.

"I know I am not the only person in the room who understands this feeling. Omegas are taught to shrink ourselves, to hide, to be *easy to swallow* and forgiving of betrayals. It's exactly the kind of societal conditioning that makes us desirable targets for abuse."

Beside Ilya, David shifts uneasily in his chair. He never likes hearing Shane retell the things he'd endured at the hands of the alpha who hurt him, and Ilya doesn't blame him. He isn't a fan of it either, even now, so many years into safety together.

"I had a secret that made me very scared. Scared I would lose everything if it got out. That made me easy to manipulate." Shane clears his throat, gripping the edges of the podium. "I was taken advantage of by an alpha, who left me with nothing. I was made to feel inferior, and then I was nearly killed in the process of escaping that situation. If it weren't for my incredible husband, Ilya, I would not have made it out of that situation with my life."

Ilya swallows thickly, eyes locked on Shane.

"My story is not unique. And there are many that are much, *much* worse. My fortune is in my family-my daughter, my husband, my parents and friends. All the people who have helped me rebuild my life to what it is today. I'm in a position so many omegas can only *dream* of. So many are not lucky, like me. So many spend their entire lives in fear, under someone else's control, never truly getting to experience freedom or safety."

Ilya grips Melodie's hand a bit harder, unable to help picturing his mother's face. How beautiful she was. How sad.

"So, thanks to all of our generous sponsors and donors that are here tonight." Shane gestures with his arms toward the full ballroom. "We are able to do something about it."

Behind him, the red curtains draw to reveal an eloquently penned banner. The words are clear, simple, but beautifully displayed behind Shane.

THE IRINA FOUNDATION

Seeing his mother's name, even though Ilya *knew* this was coming, makes his throat feel tight and his eyes hot with tears.

"The Irina Foundation," Shane says into the microphone, his voice proud. "This is an organization we have been building for a while now, and it has finally come together. Tomorrow, will be the grand opening of our omega shelter, which aims to house and support omegas getting out of dangerous situations. We will also be unveiling a list of local vendors that have generously agreed to donate their time and resources in support of the shelter. Our aim while getting these omegas to safety, is to teach practical life skills and provide social experiences. I'd love to shout out some of these vendors for their contributions, as we've already had so many sign-ups, our rosters are full for the next six months. Thank you to Brandon Wiebe, head coach of the Ottawa Centaurs, and the entire Centaurs team for donating ice time and your personal time for skating lessons for the residents of the shelter and their children. Thank you to owner Ilya Rozanov, and the entire staff at *Mel's Mechanics* for donating your resources and time to teaching basic car maintenance and mechanics to our residents. Thank you to John and Michelle Brown for…-"

Shane goes down the list, thanking the vendors and donors and everyone who has come together to help make this possible. Each vendor gets a round of applause and some cheering. Ilya's eyes feel wet the entire time, hearing the way Shane has rallied community and pooled together so many resources to help other omegas that were once like him. Alone, afraid, not sure where to start or what to do next.

The way his mother was. And maybe, if she'd had a place like this, she'd still be here today.

"I thank you all for your time," Shane says at the end of his speech, "I know I've taken up a bit of it, and I'm appreciative of you all. I want to close out this speech by saying one more thing." He turns, eyes landing on Ilya and Melodie. "Ilya, you are everything to me. You have given me more than I will ever be able to express. You have given me life, happy children, a beautiful family. But, more than anything, you have given me the strength I needed to get here today, on this stage, to try to make things better for people like Irina Rozanova. She deserved everything I've been given. I can't go back and give it to her, but I can make sure that someone else doesn't share her fate."

Ilya does cry now, wiping at his eyes with both hands while David reaches to scoop Melodie on to his lap. She's clearly very worried about Papa's tears.

"Ya tebya lyublyu, malysh," Shane says, and then smiles. "Thank you everyone! Enjoy your night!"

There's another round of deafening applause. This time, Ilya and everyone at the table stand up, clapping so hard his hands hurt. Tears are running down his cheeks. He isn't even embarrassed to let them fall.

"David," he turns to his father in law, "can you watch Mel for a moment? I need to-"

"Of course, kiddo." David smiles. "Go and get him."

Ilya races from the table, across the ballroom, up the stage and through the curtain, where he finds Shane, shrugging out of his suit jacket and wiping sweat from his forehead.

"Oh, hey," Shane smiles at him, breathless. "Was that okay? I feel like I stumbled a little when I got to-"

His sentence is cut off by Ilya grabbing him and pressing their lips together. Shane startles a bit, laughing into the kiss, until he settles against Ilya's body, relaxed.

"I love you," Ilya chokes out, once their lips part. "I love you so much I could die."

"Don't do that," Shane murmurs, cupping his cheek softly.

"I will not," he promises, "I am not going anywhere."

He kisses Shane again, deep and fervent- consumed by the familiar safety of his sweet apple smell.

The smell of *home.*

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