

santa, can't you hear me?

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/76884131) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/76884131>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Original Children of Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov , Anya , Ilya Rozanov's Dog
Additional Tags:	Kid Fic , Christmas , Fluff and Humor , Comedy , santa as a general concept , both derogatory and complimentary , Everyone's just doing their best , Post-Book 6: The Long Game (Game Changers) , Spoilers for Book 6: The Long Game (Game Changers)
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-01 Words: 13,172 Chapters: 1/1

santa, can't you hear me?

by [jarpadsalecki](#)

Summary

“Santa won’t like the ginger ale if it’s Canada Dry, Ilya,” Shane explains drily. “He’s from the North Pole, not Canada. Don’t you know that?”

OR:

Shane & Ilya's daughter is afraid Santa won't come this year.

Notes

New Year's Day still counts as the holiday season, right?

thank you to [erisenyo](#) for the beta, [dntat](#) for guidance on the parenting/children of it all, and [shanehollandertwentyfour](#) for helping me figure out these damn names lol

all the Russian is based on my own research, feel free to correct me on anything!

title is from [Santa, Can't You Hear Me?](#) by Kelly Clarkson & Ariana Grande

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

The first time Shane notices something is up with Katerina, she's sitting in front of the TV watching the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

Obviously they don't celebrate American Thanksgiving, but one of Kat's friends *had* to mention that *her* parents put the parade on for them every year, because they have family in Maine, but mostly because of the floats, so now Shane and Ilya are forever cursed to have to figure out what day in November this stupid parade is every year lest they face the children's wrath.

So, Kat and Theo are watching the parade—well, Kat is watching, Theo is... playing with one of his boogers, oh no. “Theo, baby, no, that's yucky,” Shane fusses as he runs over and wipes Theo's face with a tissue.

Theo snuffles once after the onslaught is over, then shrugs. “Kay.”

Then he gently rests his tiny booger-hands on the carpet.

“Okay, let's wash our hands,” Shane says, hoisting Theo up under his armpits and hauling him over to the kitchen. Theo just lets it happen, like one of those cat videos where they hang limply in their owners' arms, and Shane nudges the footstool into place in front of the sink before setting Theo down onto it.

He turns the faucet on, makes sure the water isn't too hot, and helps Theo lather up his hands. “Remember to sing the song twice, okay?” Shane says.

Theo nods and then dutifully opens his mouth to shout, “A, B, C, D, E...”

Okay. Shane leaves Theo to his singing and goes back into the living room, where—yeah, Katerina is still nervously twisting the fabric of her sleeves in each hand while watching the screen. Shane sits down beside her to watch, stretching his legs out in front of him.

“Coming up, it's Santa Claus! The Christmas Season will officially begin, next only on NBC!”

“Kat?” Shane says when a commercial for toilet paper comes on and Kat is still twisting, “You okay, honey?”

Katerina gnaws on her lip, then shrugs.

Shane reaches out and gently touches her hand. “Are you feeling a little nervous?”

Katerina pauses, then slowly nods, eyes still glued to the screen.

Shane nods back. “Okay,” he says. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Katerina shrugs.

Hmm. Shane doesn't want to push, but he always worries whenever Kat gets anxious. Even though she's eight now—and, Christ, did the time *fly*—Shane still feels a stab in his gut whenever his kids are feeling anything but happy.

But, by now, he knows she'll tell him if she wants to. That's exactly why he and Ilya don't push. So, instead, he lifts an arm and asks, "Can I have a snuggle?"

Katerina flashes a toothy smile, if a brief one, and burrows into Shane's side. She goes back to chewing on her lip but her hands stay idle, wrapped around Shane's arm. He tilts his head to rest atop hers, breathing in her curls.

"...NEXT TIME, WON'T YOU, SIIIIING....WIIIIITH.....MEEEEEE!" comes Theo's voice from the kitchen a second later. Shane jolts, having been half-lulled by the monotonous commercial sounds coming from the TV. He hears the sound of the faucet being turned off and then Theo yells, "ALL DONE, DADDY!"

"Okay, good job!" Shane lifts his head to call. "Come sit with me and Kat!"

He hears the skid of the foot stool moving out of place (meaning Theo probably jumped off of it), then the scuffle of socked feet pattering across the kitchen, and then he's got an armful of baby Theo crawling into his lap.

Shane hugs Theo close to his chest with his other arm and kisses the top of his head. "No—" *kiss*, "jumping—" *kiss*, "off the foot stool—" *kiss*, "mister."

"Sorry," Theo says, then yawns.

Shane gives an exasperated chuckle and then the parade comes back on. They see a big float depicting...something (Theo asks, "What's that?" to which Shane responds, "Uh...Garfield? I think? Or, Snippy? Is that his name?" which doesn't help, and feels like something he and Ilya may need to rectify); someone from, Shane thinks, the Disney Channel performs some pop Christmas cover with the Sesame Street cast; and then around the corner comes Santa's sleigh.

Kat stiffens at Shane's side and watches, rapt, as nine animatronic reindeer mimic pulling the sleigh/float down West 34th Street, its leader sporting a glowing red nose. Elves in red-and-green stripes and fake-tipped ears wave cheerfully at the crowd. It looks cold as fuck out.

Santa Claus, appropriately bedecked in red, looks directly at the camera and presses his finger to the side of his nose with a wink, before going back to waving at the crowd and pretending to *ho ho ho*.

"And there you have it, folks! The Christmas Season has officially begun with the arrival of good ol' Saint Nick. From our family at NBC to yours, thank you for joining us, and Happy Tha—"

"He needs to lay off the milk and cookies," Theo pipes up over the TV announcers as Santa continues to clutch his belly.

Shane sputters out a surprised laugh. “Yeah,” he replies on instinct, then winces and hurries to continue, “I mean, it’s Santa. He’s *supposed* to eat lots of cookies, or else he wouldn’t be Santa, right?”

Theo thinks about this, then shrugs. “I guess.”

“He needs lots of energy to fly all around the world and deliver presents to everyone,” Shane adds, pleased with his quick thinking.

Theo thinks some more, then gasps. “We should leave eggs out instead!”

Shane blinks down at his son. “Huh?”

Theo twists around in Shane’s lap and looks up at him imploringly, little palms pressed to Shane’s chest for balance. “He’s gonna get *sick* if all he eats is cookies! We should leave out eggs! ‘Cause they have protein!”

“Protein,” Shane corrects. “How do you even...never mind. Yes, protein gives you energy, but Santa—”

Katerina finally rips her gaze away from the TV to look up at Shane, eyes panicked. “What if Santa’s stomach hurts by the time he gets to our house? Won’t he be mad if we just left out cookies like the rest of the world?”

“Um...”

“He’ll throw up all over our presents,” Theo says matter-of-factly.

“Okay, gross,” Shane says. He is officially in over his head. “Santa isn’t going to throw up in our house. Or at all.”

“He won’t know where our bathroom is if he needs to throw up,” Kat says in a grave tone, like Shane’s words have just unlocked a dozen new fears.

Theo turns to his sister. “We could make a sign,” he suggests. “SANTA THE TOILET IS THIS WAY! With an arrow.”

Kat nods, but she looks unsure. “Maybe we should leave a bowl out for him to throw up in just in case...”

“Guys, we’re not gonna leave one of our bowls out for Santa to throw up in,” Shane interjects. Two shiny, adorable pairs of eyes look up at him, and he realizes his error. “Because Santa isn’t going to need to throw up! Santa will be okay. He loves cookies. He wants the cookies.”

Theo and Kat look at each other, and for a second Shane thinks he’s convinced them, until Theo says, “If he has an upset tummy he could have some ginger ale.”

Kat perks up. “Yes! We have lots of ginger ale!” She turns to Shane again. “Daddy, we can give Santa some of your ginger ale, right?”

“Well, sweetie, it’s all of our ginger ale, but—”

“Wait,” Kat says, frowning. “That won’t work.”

Finally, his daughter is seeing reason.

“Santa won’t like Canada Dry! He’s from the North Pole! We have to get a different brand!” she continues, slapping her hands to her cheeks at this revelation.

“Oh my god,” Shane mutters.

Thankful-fucking-ly, Ilya comes through the front door at that moment, and the children are interrupted by Anya and Kolya rearing up from where they had been asleep in front of the fireplace and launching themselves at Ilya, barking up a storm.

“Ohhh, my puppies, did you miss Papa? I know, I am gone forever, you must think you will never see me again...” Ilya is babbling at them as he sets the grocery bags on the counter. Then he kneels down and starts cooing at the dogs in Russian, using his left hand to ruffle between Kolya’s ears and his right to stroke Anya’s fluffy chest.

They had gotten Kolya as a puppy a few years ago—a Christmas gift for the kids, but mostly for Ilya, who had picked him out, and named him, and tied a big bow around his neck—and while Shane does not exactly love the extra noise, or how much harder it is to keep Kolya out of the bed than Anya, he *does* love seeing how soft his husband gets for the dogs.

Anya and Kolya also adore each other, and Anya is noticeably more playful and energetic in her older years than she had been before they’d brought Kolya home. And of course, watching their kids get a puppy for Christmas had been priceless. It was one of those moments Shane had dreamed about when he and Ilya had first ever started planning for kids, what feels like a lifetime ago.

Speaking of moments, the only thing Shane loves seeing more than Ilya being soft with their dogs, is Ilya being soft with their kids.

“Papa!” Kat yelps, dislodging herself from Shane and padding over to the kitchen. Theo follows a moment later, scrambling out of Shane’s lap—Shane lets out an “*oof*” as an elbow digs into his stomach—and racing out of the room. “You missed the parade!”

Shane sighs and reaches for the remote to turn the TV off. His knees only creak slightly when he stands up from the floor. It’s fine.

“Oh no,” Ilya gasps in mock horror, as if he and Shane hadn’t specifically planned for Ilya to run errands during the parade so that the kids would be distracted and not be such a handful for Shane while he’s by himself. “What happened? Big turkey on the loose? Did a balloon crash and squish people?”

“No,” Kat giggles, rolling her eyes because Ilya makes this joke every time the parade is on.

Ilya blows a raspberry in disappointment. “Well, there’s always next year.”

“PAPA! Santa is gonna throw up on all our presents!” Theo announces as he barrels straight into Ilya’s legs.

Ilya’s brow furrows as his arms reflexively wrap around Theo’s back to squeeze him into a hug. The dogs, having had their fill of Ilya for now, sniff at Theo for a second before chasing each other down the hall.

“Okay,” Ilya says slowly. “That’s rude. Why is he going to do that?”

“Because all he eats is *cookies*,” Theo replies seriously.

“Well, yes,” Ilya says just as seriously. “He is Santa. Kind of his thing.”

“But if *everyone* leaves out cookies,” Katerina butts in, rubbing one foot nervously along the side of her ankle, “by the time he gets to our house, he’s going to feel sick.”

Ilya considers this for a moment, pursing his lips. “Well, he doesn’t have to eat our cookies if he feels sick. He can just leave presents and go.”

Ugh, why didn’t Shane think of that?

“But he needs *en-er-gy*,” Theo says. Of course. Shane had already forgotten about the— “So we’re gonna leave him eggs.”

Ilya lifts an eyebrow. “Eggs?”

Kat nods. “And ginger ale. In case he still needs to throw up.”

Ilya looks between the two children and then up at Shane, who is now leaning against the door jamb with his arms crossed. Shane shrugs at him as if to say, *I tried*.

“Okay...” Ilya says to the kids. “How about we just leave him the ginger ale, but still the cookies, so he has...options?” He nods to himself, then looks to Shane, who nods back in approval. Solid idea. Compromise. Better than leaving a throw up bowl out.

“I guess...” Katerina says, then her eyes light up. “Papa, did you buy ginger ale at the store?”

Ilya nods. “Of course. We were running low. Is all your Dad drinks.”

“It is *not*—” Shane tries to say.

“What brand?” Katerina presses.

“Um, I think same as always,” Ilya says, standing up and returning to the counter. He rummages through the grocery bags and then lifts up a 12-pack of Canada Dry. “See?”

“*Nooooo*,” Kat and Theo groan in unison. Kat’s hands fly up to cover her eyes in mortification.

Ilya is absolutely bewildered by this reaction and looks to Shane again, gesturing silently at their children.

“Santa won’t like the ginger ale if it’s Canada Dry, Ilya,” Shane explains drily. “He’s from the North Pole, not Canada. Don’t you know that?”

Ilya slowly places the 12-pack down on the counter as he processes this information. “...Right. Of course.”

When their eyes meet again, Shane gives him a flat smile that says, *Next year, you’re on parade duty.*

“We should just tell them,” Ilya whispers to Shane after dinner as they stand side-by-side in front of the running sink.

Shane hands him another plate to dry. “Tell them what?”

Ilya shrugs. “That Santa is not real.”

“*Ilya!*” Shane smacks him on the shoulder, then cranes his head to make sure the kids aren’t in earshot. “What the hell?” he hisses at his husband.

The glint in Ilya’s eyes is devious. “What, did you still think he’s real? Did I just ruin it for you?”

Shane gives him a look.

“This way we don’t have to do this eggs and ginger ale business,” Ilya explains.

Shane sighs and hands him a bowl. “No, we are not going to tell them. It’s not even December yet. By the time it’s actually Christmas they’ll probably have forgotten.”

They do not forget.

(They immediately start buying Schweppes instead of Canada Dry. Shane tries not to be too visibly upset about it.)

And specifically, Katerina doesn’t forget.

The second time Shane notices something is up with her, it’s a few days into December. Theo is downstairs watching a movie while Ilya and Shane are trying to discreetly wrap Christmas presents in their bedroom.

They’ve just finished figuring out how to wrap a very oddly shaped toy for Theo—seriously, do toy companies not realize that parents have to *wrap* their insane packaging?—when Shane

notices they left a basket of folded laundry in the corner of the room. It's mostly filled with Kat's clothes so he takes it down the hall to her room.

It's quiet in there, so he expects her to be reading in the little nook they'd made for her by the window, but when he softly knocks and pushes the door open with his shoulder, he's surprised to find that she's...making her bed.

Well, not making it. The bed is already made. Katerina is meticulously smoothing out the bedspread and tugging at the corners to make sure they're tight. Shane watches her for a moment as she fixes one corner, then huffs in frustration and rounds the edge of the bed to return to the other corner. Then she doubles back again.

"Wow," Shane remarks from the doorway. "Nice job, sweetie!" he makes sure to add, because one thing Katerina does *not* really like doing is making the bed.

She's a pretty tidy kid, all things considered, but of course they have to remind her to clean her room. Most mornings she usually just haphazardly straightens the pillows and pulls the comforter back in a sort-of-straight enough way that the bed is *technically* made. This is a whole other level. It looks like she even *fluffed* the pillows.

Kat just grunts at him in acknowledgement, still laser focused on the corners of the bedspread, so Shane takes that as his cue to bring the laundry basket in and set it by her dresser. As he does so, he notices the rest of the room is in perfect order, too. More than perfect. Her books are all lined up neatly on the shelf and there's not a stray toy in sight.

Which is...weird. Very nice. But weird.

"It's so nice and clean in here," Shane says anyway, in a cheerful tone, because presumably Kat did all this without being asked and that would be a nice habit for her to get into.

Again, Kat barely responds, brows stitched together as she now fiddles with the rest of the bedspread. "What's, uh. What's wrong with the bed?" Shane asks carefully.

Kat huffs again and steps back, hands on her hips, glaring at the bed. "The lines won't match up. I keep fixing it and they're *still* not straight."

Shane steps closer and focuses his gaze (he *knows* he's supposed to start wearing his glasses all the time and not just when he reads, but dammit, he's putting it off for as long as he can) until he sees what she means. There's little horizontal lines in the pattern of her comforter and they're just slightly off from being parallel to the edge of the mattress. Kat moves to the right side of the bed to try and straighten it on that side, but then it ends up being crooked on the left.

"Oh," Shane says. "Well, it still looks great! It doesn't have to be perfect."

Kat's jaw ticks. "They *need* to be straight."

Okay...

“Well, let me put your clothes away and then I’ll help you,” Shane offers, moving back to the dresser and pulling the top drawer open. “Making the bed by yourself can be tri—”

“No!” Kat blurts out, running over to the laundry basket and throwing her arms over the top so Shane can’t get to the clothes. “I can do it!”

Shane raises an eyebrow. The kids never put away their laundry. It’s just something Shane or Ilya have always done. “That’s okay, honey. It’ll only take a minute.”

Kat shakes her head vehemently. “I’ll do it for you! And I’ll put the basket downstairs when I’m done!”

Okay, something is *definitely* wrong, but Shane has no idea what. “Okay...I’ll fix the comforter for you while you do that, then.”

“No!” Kat insists, and this time her eyes look panicked. “I can do it! I just need to make the lines straight and then it’ll be good.”

“It already looks really good, honey,” Shane says gently, crouching down so he can meet her at eye level.

“Not good enough,” Kat mumbles, curling herself further over the top of the laundry basket.

Shane doesn’t understand what’s happening, but he feels his heart crack all the same. “Baby, what do you mean, not good enough?” he asks.

Tears prick at the corner of Kat’s eyes, and she falls into Shane’s arms as soon as he opens them to her. She doesn’t cry, but she does sniffle a little against his neck before saying, in a small voice, “Can you just let me do it?”

“Shh, okay, baby, okay,” Shane whispers, petting the back of her head. He starts to panic a little himself and forces a deep breath in. Katerina gets anxious, they know this, but this time feels different. “Can we compromise, hm? Can we do it together?” he suggests.

Kat pauses for a long moment, then nods jerkily into his shoulder. “And you’ll tell me if it’s good?”

Although he wants to, Shane doesn’t say *it will be*, because that’s not what she’s asking for. He rocks her back and forth a little. “Yes, honey, I will. Don’t worry, okay? We’ll do it together and it’ll be a good job.”

“Okay,” she sniffles again, but he hears her breathing start to even out. “We’ll do it together and it’ll be a good job.”

They fix the comforter together, and put the laundry away, nice and neat where everything is supposed to go. When they’re done, Katerina is all smiles, completely calm, so Shane lets her take the basket down to the laundry room by herself.

Once she's out of sight he beelines straight back to their bedroom so he can tell Ilya what just happened.

"I just don't know what's got her like this," Shane says when he's done. "I didn't even ask her to clean her room today. Did you?" he asks Ilya.

Ilya, sitting beside him on the bed with a tube of wrapping paper in his lap, shakes his head. "I did not. And you said she used the word *good* a lot?"

Shane nods. "She was really fixated on it."

Ilya purses his lips, wracking his brain. "We have not said anything to her about being bad."

"God, no," Shane confirms.

"If she *was* bad, she'd get that from you," his husband teases, knocking his shoulder into Shane's.

Shane rolls his eyes. "Uh-huh. Well, she's not," he says, knocking Ilya's shoulder right back.

"No," Ilya hums. He looks off into the distance for a minute, absently sliding his thumb along the seam of the wrapping paper. "Do you think..."

Shane turns to him. "What?"

Ilya looks down at his lap. "Do you think is because of me?"

Shane stitches his brows together and places a hand on Ilya's shoulder. "Because of you? Like..."

"Like..." Ilya sighs. "My depression."

"Oh," Shane murmurs, squeezing Ilya's shoulder and taking one of his hands in his. "I mean, they're adopted, so..." he trails off stupidly.

"I know, but," Ilya says, voice tight. "Am I...rubbing off on them? Like, what is word...when you make someone do what you do?"

"Influencing them?" Shane supplies.

Ilya nods.

"I...don't know if it works like that. But no, I don't think so," Shane says, gliding his hand down Ilya's back, then up to his shoulder, then back down again. "I mean, I don't think you get nervous like that, do you? About stuff like... making the bed? And laundry?" Between the two of them, Shane is the one more likely to fret over those things.

"No," Ilya replies.

“Then, I think it’s something else,” Shane concludes. He leans in to kiss behind Ilya’s ear. “The only one you rub off on is me,” he whispers before slowly pulling away.

Ilya snickers, shaking his head fondly and leaning over to smack a loud kiss onto Shane’s mouth. “Maybe let’s finish wrapping these presents and then I can do that some more, yes?”

Shane giggles. “Yes.”

Ilya pats Shane on the knee, then stands up to go retrieve more presents from their hiding spot in the closet. “We will figure out this thing with Kat, I think. Maybe she is just in...a weird phase?” he calls out to Shane once he’s in there. “Like how sometimes I am...cloudy. But then I am okay.”

“Maybe,” Shane calls back. “I hope so.”

A week later, they do indeed figure out the thing with Kat. Sort of.

They get a spectacular snowfall, which means a snow day for the kids, which is one of Shane and Ilya’s favorite kinds of days. They start the morning off with hot chocolate and pancakes, courtesy of Ilya, and then everyone bundles up to venture outside, dogs included.

“Daddy, I can’t put my arms down,” Theo whines after Shane buttons his coat up to the top. The words come out muffled from behind the scarf wrapped tightly around his neck and chin.

“Huh? Let me see,” Shane says, and steps back to watch as Theo, whose arms are spread open like a T, gives a valiant, grunting effort to push them down to his sides, but fails.

“Are you sure you’re not just being silly?” Shane asks wryly, reaching out to squeeze Theo’s arms to his sides himself. “There, you can—” then he lets go, and watches Theo’s arms fly back up to the T position.

Theo looks up sadly at Shane and flaps his arms the little bit he can. Shane sighs and starts unbuttoning Theo’s coat so he can take off one of the many layers underneath.

(He ends up having to take off three before Theo can move his arms normally again.)

First thing’s first is Theo and Katerina have to sing “Do You Want to Build a Snowman?” about four times in a row, in its entirety, while they (of course) build a snowman together.

During this, Shane and Ilya have a competition to see who can build their own snowman faster.

“Done! Ha!”

“Does not count—”

“Yes it *does*.”

“Yours does not have buttons going down the middle.”

“That’s not a requirement.”

“Oh, yes it is.”

“According to who?!”

“Me. The world. Snowmen always have buttons.”

“No they don’t.”

“*According to who.*”

“The song! The ‘Frosty The Snowman’ song.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes!” Shane snaps, then starts singing at double speed, “Frostyyyy the Snowmaaan, wasahappyjollysoul, withacorncobpipe aaaand a *button nose*, and *two eyes. Made. Out. Of. Coal!*”

Ilya just stares at him.

“No buttons!” Shane says, wildly gesturing at his snowman, who has the standard two eyes and— “A *button nose!*” He finished *first*, it’s Ilya’s fault that he added unnecessary details.

“Wow, Daddy, you are not a very good singer,” Theo calls from where he and Kat are finishing their snowman. They’ve given it four arms and six eyes.

“That’s okay, baby, it was not a singing contest,” Shane replies, maintaining his death glare at Ilya.

“Well, if it was, you would lose.”

“Okay—”

“Papa would win.”

“Thank you, Theo!” Shane says in an overly pleasant tone.

“Hey kids, do you think a snowman needs to have buttons to be a snowman? Or is okay with no buttons?” Ilya calls out to the children.

Kat and Theo glance between Ilya’s snowman and Shane’s snowman. “Well, duh, it needs buttons,” Kat declares.

“Yeah, *duhhhhh*,” Theo echoes, sticking his tongue out.

Ilya turns to Shane with a shit-eating grin.

“Who the hell taught them the word *duh*,” Shane mutters, looking forlornly at his buttonless, loser snowman.

“Probably one of the Pike kids.”

“But neither of them have a pipe,” Kat points out. “That’s more important than buttons.”

Both fathers turn to look at her. “What?” they say in unison.

“You forgot the—”

“With a *COOOORN COOOOB PIIIIHPE*, and a buuutton noooooose,” Theo interjects, singing at the top of his lungs.

Ilya and Shane come to the same realization in tandem and in the next second, they’re pushing and shoving at each other trying to get back to the house before the other so they can put a makeshift pipe on their snowman faster.

Kat and Theo stare after them. “They are so weird,” Kat notes absently. Theo nods in agreement, and they go back to their snowman. Snowthing.

In the end, Shane gets the pipe on faster, but Ilya still wins, because as the kids had already decided, a snowman needs buttons and Shane’s snowman is still incomplete without them.

At that point Ilya and Shane have worn themselves out, so they lie down and make snow angels side by side while the kids play Elsa.

Playing Elsa is different from playing *Frozen*, they have been lectured, because when they play *Frozen* they play all the characters. Playing Elsa just means Theo is flinging snow around, singing “Let It Go,” while Katerina pretends to be the giant snow monster from the movie and makes the appropriate monster noises while stomping around *in* the snow.

It’s very specific and Shane and Ilya have learned to be careful to not mix the two games up.

“I wish that movie had never been made,” Shane grumbles to Ilya.

“No you don’t,” Ilya coos. “You love when Theo sings.”

Shane smiles, squinting at the white brightness of the sky. “You’re right, I do.”

“...LET IT GOOOOO, LET IT GOOOOO, ANNA RISE LIKE THE BREAK OF DONG...” comes Theo, sailing in and out of earshot, right on cue.

Ilya and Shane dissolve into quiet snickers.

“Someday he’ll learn the right lyrics,” Shane says, eyes crinkling shut with how hard he’s smiling.

“Nah, I like his version better,” Ilya chuckles. He feels around in the snow for Shane until Shane grabs onto his hand and interlocks their fingers, sighing happily. He would live in this

moment forever if he could.

Of course, that's when they hear Theo screech. And not in the fun, Elsa singing way.

Ilya and Shane both shoot up into sitting positions and look around wildly, spotting Theo a few yards away with his face held in his gloved hands. Katerina is running up to him, looking guilty.

"Uh oh," Ilya mutters as he and Shane quickly stand up and shuffle over as fast as the snow will allow.

As they approach, Theo's cries and whimpers get louder. "*I'm* supposed to do the snow, not *you*," he's wailing at Kat.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Kat is saying over and over. "I'm sorry!"

"Okay, okay, what happened?" Ilya asks when they arrive, kneeling down to peel Theo's hands away from his face. It's red, from the cold and his tears, but he looks otherwise fine.

"She threw a snowball," Theo hiccups. "Too hard! At my face!"

"I didn't *mean* to," Katerina pleads. "It was supposed to fly over your shoulder!"

"*Elsa* does the snow," Theo growls. "I do the snow and the monster is supposed to just stomp around! You're only supposed to do snow when we play *Frozen*!"

Ilya and Shane exchange a look. These kids.

"I know, I know," Kat says. "But...he *is* a snow monster."

"Okay," Ilya interrupts. "Was accident. Is okay. Theo," he says, cupping Theo's face and peering closer. "Are you hurt? Or was just scary?"

Theo sniffs. "Just scary."

Ilya nods and presses a gentle kiss to Theo's nose. "Better?"

"A little," Theo says in a tiny voice.

"Hmm," Ilya says, then hauls Theo closer and starts planting kisses all over his face until Theo is shrieking with laughter.

"Papa, I'm better! I'm better!"

Ilya releases him. "Okay, if you say so."

"I'm sorry," Kat says again, and her lip starts to wobble.

Theo sighs dramatically. "I *guess* it's okay."

Shane kneels down beside Kat and rubs her back. “It’s alright, honey. Theo’s okay. We just need to be careful not to hit faces, alright?”

“I—I didn’t mean to,” Kat repeats. “I...”

“We know you didn’t, sweetie.”

It was apparently the wrong thing to say, because Katerina promptly bursts into tears.

“Woah, hey,” Shane is immediately pulling her into his arms, letting her cry into his scarf. “Hey, what’s up?”

Katerina just shakes her head, crying harder.

Ilya whispers something in Theo’s ear, patting his back once, and Theo runs off to play by himself. Still on his knees, Ilya shuffles forward until he can run a hand down Katerina’s back. “What is wrong, *malyshka*? Hm?”

“I,” Kat lets out between sobs. “I’m n-not... being good.”

Ilya and Shane share a concerned glance over her shoulder. “What do you mean, love?” Shane asks.

“I h-hit Theo...in the face,” Kat hiccups. “And my room is m-messy, and I can’t make the bed right...”

“Oh, sweetie—”

“And now I’m *crying*!” Kat wails. “That’s, like, the number one thing!”

Wait. What?

“What do you mean, number one thing?” Ilya asks, looking as puzzled as Shane feels.

Katerina snuffles and turns her head a little so she can face Ilya and Shane. “You better watch out, you better *not cry*,” she recites, and the words set her off again. “And I’m—I’m *crying*!”

Oh no.

“This is...about Santa,” Ilya realizes.

Kat nods furiously, fat tears rolling down her cheeks. “He sees *everything*. He knows if you’ve been bad or good. So I have to be g-good, or he won’t come!”

Good, Shane mouths at Ilya, who nods minutely. It’s all making sense now. Her nerves before Santa arrived at the parade, worrying that Santa would be mad if they left cookies out like everyone else, not wanting to let Shane do chores for her...

“Honey, you *are* good,” Shane insists. “Santa knows you didn’t mean to hit Theo. He doesn’t mind if your room isn’t perfect.”

“And he is very grateful that you were concerned about his ginger ale,” Ilya adds.

Katerina shakes her head again. “But he watches the whole year! He saw every time I wasn’t nice to Theo, or didn’t clean my room when you told me to, or pretended to like Daddy’s smoothies, or didn’t do my homework!”

“When did you—never mind,” Shane mutters, ignoring the way Ilya’s lips twitch at that.

“And *now*,” Kat continues. “It’s Christmas, and I have to be good to make up for all the times I was bad so that Santa doesn’t leave me coal!”

“Kat—”

“Or, he might not even come at all, and then *none of us* get presents,” she says, lip wobbling again. “All because of *me*.”

Ilya and Shane look at each other again, at a loss for the right thing to say. Eventually, Ilya tries, “Santa is busy guy. I don’t think he is keeping score so closely, hm? Probably he only looks at big picture.”

Katerina gives him a withering look that could rival Shane’s. “He checks the list *twice*, Papa.”

“Right,” Ilya sighs. “Of course.”

When they get back to the house, the kids shed their many layers at lightning speed and dart into the living room, followed by the dogs, to do who knows what. Ilya and Shane take a moment to sidebar in the mudroom, straightening out the kids’ boots and folding their snowsuits.

“We could always...y’know...” Ilya starts.

“*We are not telling them that Santa isn’t*—” Shane stops himself, then lowers his voice to a whisper. “That Santa isn’t real. Come on.”

Ilya shrugs, bending down to unlace his own boots. “Would solve many problems.”

“You don’t really want to tell them, do you?” Shane asks with a frown. “It’s, like, half the fun of Christmas at their age. We have *maybe* a year until Katerina finds out anyway, and then Theo will be right behind her.”

“No, I don’t,” Ilya says, leaning forward to kiss Shane’s pout away. “You’re right. Is too fun.”

“Well, not fun for Katerina right now, obviously,” Shane mumbles. “I really was not expecting *that* to be what’s got her so upset lately.”

Ilya huffs a laugh. “Me neither. Is kind of cute, but also makes me sad.”

“Yeah,” Shane sighs, grabbing the towel they keep by the front door and wiping up the dogs’ wet pawprints. “I kind of get it, though.”

“Do you?”

Shane lifts a shoulder. “Yeah? I mean, didn’t you worry about this as a kid? Not being good enough and Santa leaves you coal?”

Ilya raises an eyebrow at him. “No. I did not worry about this.”

“Really?” Shane looks at him, skeptical.

“Really,” Ilya says.

“Huh.” Shane considers this as he folds the towel and puts it back in its spot. “I remember thinking about it a lot when I was little, actually. I was always on my best behavior when I went to the store with my mom, or like, whenever we had a substitute teacher, because I had it in the back of my head that Santa was watching, and...” Shane trails off as his own words catch up to him.

Now both of Ilya’s eyebrows have reached his hairline. “Shane.”

“Oh, god,” Shane realizes. “This is *my* fault.”

Ilya starts laughing and reaches for him. “Shane—”

“No, it is. *I’m* the one who rubbed off on them,” Shane continues, nervously running his fingers through his hair as Ilya starts gently squeezing Shane’s shoulders with both hands. “Somehow, I—I made her worry about this!”

“Shane, *moy lyubimyy*,” Ilya says again, squeezing harder. “You did not make her worry.”

“But...” Shane has never felt more distressed.

“Listen,” Ilya cuts him off. “Did *you* tell her Santa wasn’t coming unless she was super good and the best?”

Shane frowns. “No, but...”

“Then is not your fault, hm? Is the stupid song,” Ilya continues, then waves a hand dismissively. “And, like, all the other Santa stuff.”

“I guess,” Shane says, unconvincingly. “But I worry about other stuff. She *sees* me worrying. And fussing.”

“Maybe,” Ilya allows, then cups Shane’s face with both hands. “But that is okay. Is not bad to fuss sometimes. That is a you thing. This is a Kat thing. You don’t see Theo worrying about this, hm?”

“No,” Shane replies, muffled because Ilya squishes his lips together a little. “Heesh mo’ worried about Shanta puking on our shtuff.”

Ilya nods. “Yes. And that is a Theo thing. Because he is a perfect, weird little guy.”

Shane nods back, not quite off the ledge, but feeling less like he wants to second-guess every word he’s ever said in the vicinity of their kids.

“And Kat is a perfect, weird little girl,” Ilya goes on, un-squishing Shane’s lips but still holding his face gently. “So they both have their own, um...weird, little things about them?”

“Quirks,” Shane supplies.

“Quirks,” Ilya says, nodding. “They have their quirks, and I have my quirks, and we all know *you* have your quirks, *bozhe moy*.”

“*Hey*,” Shane chides, but now he’s smiling.

Ilya smiles back and presses a kiss to Shane’s forehead. “So we will figure out this Santa thing. *We* know he is coming. We just have to convince her, hm?”

“Okay,” Shane sighs, leaning his cheek into Ilya’s palm. “But how?”

Ilya shrugs. “I don’t know. Is my first time being a parent,” he jokes.

“Would you look at that,” Shane laughs. “It’s mine too.”

When they enter the living room, prepared to ask the kids what they want for dinner, Theo is wearing one of Katerina’s old play tiaras and waving a wooden spoon at Katerina, who is sitting primly on the couch with her legs criss-crossed.

“I will now turn this simple frock, or coat...this simple froat, into a beautiful ballgown,” Theo announces. Katerina has a green plaid blanket wrapped around her like a cloak.

Theo twirls the spoon around like a baton and then points it at Katerina. “Ballgown!”

Nothing happens. “Ballgown!” Theo commands again. Still nothing.

Ilya leans sideways toward Shane and whispers out of the corner of his mouth, “Nothing is happening.”

Shane bites back his laughter, as Theo starts to whip the spoon around like a light saber, complete with sound effects. “Well, it’s a wooden spoon, babe.”

“Uh, no, clearly is magic wand,” Ilya replies matter-of-factly. Shane holds back another laugh and continues watching.

“Grrrr, come on, I’m counting on you!” Theo growls at the spoon, slapping it against his palm as if to wake it up. He starts to wiggle the spoon at Kat and hums from a high note descending down, squatting closer and closer to the ground as the note gets lower.

“HMMMMMMmmmmmmmmmm.....BALLGOWN!” Theo cries, snapping the spoon in Kat’s direction again.

Obviously, still nothing happens.

“JUST WEAR THE FROAT, IT’S PRETTY!” Theo snaps, then tosses the spoon in the air and stomps away, right towards Shane and Ilya. “Oh, hi Daddy and Papa.”

“Oh, hi,” Ilya echoes, as the spoon clatters to the floor. Shane is discreetly hiding his mouth behind the back of his hand as his shoulders shake. “What are you guys doing?”

“I told him we could play *Wicked* since I hit him in the face,” Katerina replies from the couch, still wrapped in the blanket.

“Yeah. What’s for dinner?” Theo asks, as if that settles that.

“I wish *that* movie had never been made,” Ilya mutters to Shane later, as they cook dinner.

Shane scoffs. “As if. You cry every time we watch it.”

“Is true,” Ilya heaves a dramatic sigh. He plucks Theo’s wooden spoon from earlier out of the utensil holder and inspects it closely. “I am a sucker for the powerful theme of unlikely friendship.”

Jackie is the one who suggests the mall when Ilya fills her in on their predicament over the phone a few days later.

“You think so?” Ilya asks, putting her on speaker phone and waving Shane over.

“I mean, it’s worth a shot,” Jackie’s voice crackles out. “We take the kids every year to get photos with Santa. You could just ask the guy to tell Kat she’s been really good, or whatever.”

Ilya gives Shane a *why not?* face. Shane takes the phone from him and chimes in, “Do you think—hi, Jackie, it’s Shane—do you really think he’d do that if we asked? Aren’t they always, like, weird drunk guys in those outfits?”

“Oh, hi Shane! And no,” Jackie laughs. “They’re not always weird drunk guys. The one who does ours every year is super nice, actually.”

“Well, we can’t exactly make a trip to Montreal just to take Santa photos,” Shane muses, reaching out to straighten his glasses case on the nightstand. “I guess we could see when the mall closest to us is—” Shane turns and finds Ilya pulling something up on his laptop. “Never mind. Ilya’s already Googling it.”

Katerina wrings her hands in her sleeves from the moment they get in the car all the way through standing in line for Santa.

The mall is crowded, of course, being so close to the holidays, but the line for Santa is orderly, facilitated by polite, bored-looking college kids sporting elf ears and curly-cue shoes. In the back of his mind, Shane had been a little worried that they would be recognized, even though he and Ilya have both been retired for years at this point, but so far so good.

Not that they always mind being recognized while they're out with the kids, it's inevitable—but today is, for the most part, about assuaging some of Katerina's worries about Santa coming on Christmas Eve. They don't need any distracting interactions to get in the way of that.

And, yes, it's also about getting cute pictures of their kids with Santa.

There's little Christmas village decorations set up along the ropes forming the line; tall cardboard cutout candy canes, white lit-up Christmas trees, fake lampposts, and various allusions to toymaking are all littered throughout the space. Christmas music blares from the speakers dotting the ceiling.

As they shuffle forward in line bit by bit, Shane absently fiddles with Kat's hair. Ilya is playing I Spy with Theo to keep him entertained while they wait. Shane notices Kat is still wringing her hands and leans down to say in her ear, "Are you a little nervous, Katoshka?"

Katerina nods rapidly.

"About meeting Santa?"

Another nod.

"It's pretty exciting," Shane agrees. "Is it an excited nervous, or a scary nervous?"

Kat thinks for a moment. "Both, a little," she replies quietly.

"I get that," Shane says mildly, straightening up and rubbing Kat's back comfortingly. "You know, I used to feel like that before every hockey game I played."

Kat looks up at him inquisitively. "Really?"

Shane nods.

"But you were so good at hockey," Kat says, confused. "The best, Papa says."

Shane glances in Ilya's direction, who is very obviously trying to *not* meet Shane's eyes, then returns his attention to Kat.

"I was good at it, but I still got nervous. I was really excited to play, because I loved it, but I was also nervous because the game might not go well, or I might not play my best, even though I always tried hard."

Kat considers this. They move up another spot in line. “What did you do when the game was bad? Or you played bad?”

Shane does his best to answer honestly. “I could be pretty hard on myself. Sometimes if we lost a game I would blame only myself, even though hockey is a team sport. Every mistake was an opportunity to learn and improve,” he says, then cringes a little at his own post-loss media training peeking out. “But... looking back, it wasn’t the end of the world if we lost, really. I tried to remind myself there would always be more games to play, that I’d get another chance to be better.”

Kat chews on her lip, nodding, but is otherwise silent.

“It’s a little bit like Christmas, actually,” Shane continues, trying to keep his tone nonchalant. “We might meet Santa a bunch of times, and if for some reason it doesn’t go super well one of those times, we can remind ourselves that Christmas will come again next year, and there will be another chance.”

Shane succeeds in meeting Ilya’s gaze this time, as Kat takes in this answer. Ilya gives him a wink and a thumbs up. Shane returns the thumbs up with a smile.

“Barbra Streisand gets stage fright every time she sings,” Theo says out of nowhere. “And she’s the *best*. S’no big deal.”

Ilya and Shane exchange a bewildered glance. How does their son even know who Barbara Streisand *is*?

“Um, that’s right, Theo,” Shane guesses. They have no way to verify this information right now. *Shane* didn’t even know who Barbra Streisand was until he was thirty.

“Papa, I spy something *red*,” Theo says next, and they move up another spot in line.

“Okay...is it a candy cane?”

“Aw man!”

Several minutes (and rounds of I Spy) later, they are next in line to meet Santa. They have a full view of him now, sitting in a big chair, wearing all the classic Santa accoutrements. He’s flagged by two more grown-up elves who are helping the kids in and out of Santa’s lap and ushering them on.

As far as Mall Santas go, this one could be worse. He’s very clearly got a pillow under his belly, and the fake beard leaves something to be desired, but altogether it’s getting the job done. At the very least, none of the kids seem disillusioned. The opposite, in fact.

“You okay?” Shane asks Katerina, who is staring bug-eyed at Santa. Theo, holding tight to Ilya’s hand, looks equally awestruck.

Katerina squeezes a little tighter from where she’s holding onto Shane’s sleeve, like she has been ever since they turned the corner into Santa’s view, but she nods determinedly.

Shane makes eye contact with an elf standing at the front of the line whose job seems to be just giving the okay for families to go on ahead to see Santa. He leans closer and attempts to discreetly say, “Hi, do you think—”

“Just one more moment, and it’ll be your turn!” the elf cuts him off, overly chipper. And loud.

“Uh, no. I mean, yes, we know. No problem,” Shane says, then, in a lower voice, trying to get the picture across that he doesn’t want his kids to hear him, continues, “I was just wondering if... look, my daughter is super worried that Santa won’t come this year because she doesn’t think she’s been ‘good’ enough.”

The elf’s gaze flits down to Katerina, who is still blissfully unaware, then back to Shane. “Uh huh.”

“Well, uh...” Shane catches sight of her name tag, “...Tinsel, would you be able to maybe ask Santa to... y’know. Talk up how good she’s been, and that he’s definitely, one hundred percent coming to our house this year?”

Tinsel’s expression softens a bit from ‘sleep-deprived elf on customer service steroids’ to... something more human. “I’ll do my best,” she murmurs, finally matching Shane’s volume. “What’s her name?”

Shane smiles. “Katerina. And my son is named Theo—he’s, uh, not worried as much.”

Tinsel nods and they don’t say anything more until, finally, she’s ushering them forward towards Santa.

“Santa, this is Katerina and Theo!” Tinsel announces, her bright elf voice returning.

“Ho ho ho, Merry Christmas, Katerina and Theo!” the Mall Santa greets in a booming voice, waving at them with a gloved hand.

Katerina glances up at Shane, terrified. Shane gives her one last reassuring smile, and she gulps once, then bravely lets go of his sleeve to take a step forward.

Ilya leans down to whisper something in Theo’s ear, and then Theo, less terrified but still starstruck, is following Kat, grabbing her hand once he catches up to her. Shane lets out a shaky breath to himself, and then Ilya is there, pulling him into his side.

“She’ll be okay,” Ilya whispers, seemingly more to himself than to Shane. Shane nods anyway, but he still sinks into his uneasiness the way he hadn’t let himself while in line with Kat.

One of the elves standing at Santa’s side bends down to Kat and Theo’s level, hands on her knees. Her name tag reads *Holly* and she’s chewing gum.

“Okay, kids,” she says slowly, as if Theo and Katerina are toddlers. “You can sit in Santa’s lap to tell him what you want for Christmas, or, if you don’t want to, we can tell him for you and then we’ll take a regular photo.”

Kat and Theo look at each other and, after some kind of silent conversation, look back to Holly and nod in tandem.

“We’ll sit in his lap,” Kat answers for both of them. *Okay, that’s a good sign.*

“Who wants to go first?” Holly asks, then snaps her chewing gum.

Theo rushes to say, “Me!” and shoots his hand in the air, bouncing on his toes.

Holly gives Theo a flat smile and sweeps her arm towards Santa. Theo dutifully goes over to him, taking measured steps and holding his arms still at his sides, as if he’s making great effort to keep himself from exploding.

“Holly is not very jolly,” Ilya mutters. Shane elbows him.

The other elf beside Santa—their nametag reads *Sparkle*—gently lifts Theo and plops him in Mall Santa’s lap. Theo looks up at Santa with wide, adorable eyes.

“Oh my god, this is too cute,” Shane says to Ilya, fishing his phone out of his pocket. “We should do this every year.”

He starts snapping his own photos while the professional photographer adjusts the camera. “Hello, Theo!” Mall Santa greets Theo. “What would you like for Christmas?”

Theo just stares for a moment, then, as if suddenly remembering where he is, blinks rapidly, and says something to Santa that Shane can’t hear.

Santa’s eyebrows pinch together for a second, then his mega-watt smile returns. “I...will see what my elves can whip up, Theo! In the meantime, make sure you keep being a good little boy!” he chortles. Shane and Ilya glance at each other. What the hell did Theo ask for?

Sparkle redirects Theo’s attention to the photographer, who gives a thumbs up and starts counting down. “Okay, one...two...three...say Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmaaaaaas,” Theo yells, then cheeses at the camera hard, both the front and bottom rows of his teeth showing.

At this point, Ilya has taken out his own phone for pictures. “Yes, definitely we should do this every year,” he agrees.

Sparkle helps Theo down from Santa’s lap and then he patiently waits at Sparkle’s side for Kat to join him. He catches sight of Shane and Ilya across the way and shouts, “DADDY! PAPA! I MET SANTA!”

“We see! Good job, *solnyshko!*” Ilya calls back.

Holly flicks her wrist at Katerina. “Your turn.”

Katerina looks back at Ilya and Shane. They both give her a thumbs up and their widest grins. She turns back to Santa, takes a deep breath, and walks over.

Tinsel takes this as her cue and steps out of the line to call out to Mall Santa, “Hey, Santa! I heard Katerina has been extra good this year!”

Shane sees Katerina draw a sharp intake of breath at Tinsel’s words as Sparkle places her in Santa’s lap. But Santa isn’t looking at Kat—he’s craning his head in Tinsel’s direction. “What?” he shouts, in a decidedly non-Santa tone.

Tinsel huffs and cups her hands around her mouth. “I said, Katerina has been extra good this year!” she repeats, louder. Shane gives her a grateful look.

“...Oh,” Santa says, looking like he still didn’t hear.

“So...” Tinsel prompts. “We’ll have to make sure the reindeer stop at her house first on Christmas Eve?” More silence. “Right?”

“Uh,” Santa responds, clearly not picking up any of what Tinsel’s putting down. At least not from this distance.

Tinsel looks apologetically at Shane and makes some vague hand gesture to seemingly indicate that she can’t step any further away from her post. Then she catches Holly’s eye and gives her a meaningful look, jerking her head towards Katerina.

Holly rolls her eyes at Tinsel, snaps her gum, and then says to Santa, “Just tell her to be good.”

No! Fuck!

“Ah! Yes.” Santa perks right up and pats Katerina’s back. “Yes, it’s very important that you be good, Katerina, so you make it on my Nice List!” he tells her.

Kat, who had looked mostly confused at the exchange between Tinsel and Santa, now looks like she’s been sent to the principal’s office.

Or, Shane imagines this is what she would look like if she ever got sent to the principal’s office. Katerina’s never been sent to the principal’s office, because she’s one of the most well-behaved ki—*oh, goddammit!*

“Uh, Tinsel,” Shane says through his teeth. “*Tinsel.*”

“I’m sorry,” Tinsel replies, and she does sound sincere. “I’d try again, but...I really have to keep the line moving,” she says, jerking a thumb behind her shoulder, where a hundred impatient families are waiting for their turn with Santa.

“Now, what would you like for Christmas?” Santa is asking Kat, grinning down at her.

“Um,” Kat says in a small voice.

“It’s okay, just tell him what you want for Christmas, and then we’ll take the photo,” Sparkle says in a clipped tone that does not match their words.

“I...” Kat stammers. “I just don’t want coal,” she gets out haltingly.

Santa, the shitty fucking Mall Santa, goes to reply, but Sparkle cuts in with, “Only kids on the Naughty List get coal. Now look at the camera, please!”

Oh my god. This is a disaster. Shane and Ilya exchange equally panicked looks, absolutely helpless to stop it.

Katerina says nothing else. Just looks at the camera with the saddest excuse for a smile Shane has ever seen.

“One...two...three....say Merry Christmas!”

Ilya and Shane slam their respective car doors shut in perfect sync. “We are never doing that again,” Ilya says to Shane in Russian. Shane nods, but also rolls his eyes, because he does *not* need to be told that twice. Or at all.

Then they both turn around to face their kids, strapped into the backseat. Theo is wiggling his feet and looking out the window. Katerina is staring dead ahead, shell-shocked.

“Katoshka,” Shane tries. “Remember what I said about Christmas coming every year? And how there will be more chances?”

Katerina’s lip wobbles, but she lifts a shaky thumbs up. She’s clearly trying not to cry. Because the fucking Santa song told her fucking not to.

Jesus Christ. Shane gives her what he hopes is a reassuring smile, and then turns forward in his seat as Ilya pulls out of the mall parking lot. Shane reaches forward and turns the radio on to give Katerina, and himself, something else to focus on.

“...aaaand Santa Claus, has got a toy, for every good girl and good little b—”

Shane slams his hand on the radio buttons, any buttons, desperately trying to change the channel. It’s still Christmas music, but he succeeds.

Theo immediately starts singing along: “THEEEEN HE SMILED AT ME, PA RUM PUM PUM PUUUUMMM.....”

At least it isn’t a song about Santa.

Shane pulls out the card with the QR code stamped on it that Sparkle had stiffly handed to them on their way out. He scans it with his phone and scrolls through all the day’s photos, passing dozens of faces, until he finds Theo’s and Katerina’s.

Theo looks like a Hallmark movie poster. Poor Katerina looks like someone just told her the world was ending. Which, they’d basically had.

“ME AND MY DRUUUUUUUM.....”

Shane tips his head back against his seat and sighs deeply.

Ilya and Shane are giving Theo a bath later that night when Ilya thinks to ask, “Hey, *rybka*, what did you tell Santa you wanted for Christmas?”

Theo dumps a toy basin of water over his head, then replies, “A bubble machine. Like Glinda. So I can fly around everywhere in a bubble.”

Ilya and Shane look at each other, both trying to telepathically communicate *how the fuck are we going to manage that?! to the other.*

Theo smacks two hands into the water and splashes them both.

It’s a few days before Christmas Eve when Shane gets an idea.

He’s helping Kat wrap presents for David and Yuna, who will be coming over on Christmas day. He had to convince her to let him help with the “we’ll do it together and it’ll be a good job” tactic from before, but he’ll take it.

Shane is pretty sure this is actually the first time Kat’s wrapped presents by herself, and as usual she’s an excellent learner, paying close attention to exactly where Shane creases the wrapping paper and how to maneuver the scissors so they go *shhhhhhh* clean through the paper. Soon they’re working mostly in silence, side by side.

He hears Kat huff in frustration and looks over to see that she’s tugged too hard on the paper and ripped a piece off while trying to wrap a box of new shoes they’d gotten for Yuna.

It’s the third time she’s done it, and since she needs it to be “good enough” (like how Shane’s presents come out, she says), she starts unwrapping the whole thing so she can cut a brand new piece of paper and start over. She casts the torn piece of paper to the side and takes a deep breath before reaching for the roll.

Shane is in the middle of wrapping a gift for David, and something clicks in his head. He pauses his hands, and after a moment’s consideration, tugs hard at the paper he’s folding until a piece of it rips off clean.

“Oops,” he says, a little louder than necessary, so Kat notices. He waves the piece of paper sheepishly at her. “Guess I’ll just have to tape it on like this.”

“But...” Kat pauses, then looks at her own little pile of torn pieces. “But won’t it look messy?”

“Mmm,” Shane pretends to consider this. “Maybe, *or*,” he says, leaning over behind Kat so he can grab one of her pieces that are a different pattern than his. “If I tape *this* on, it’ll look fun. Like we did it on purpose.”

“Oh,” Kat says, and watches Shane tape the opposite-pattern paper to fit over where he’d messed up wrapping. He holds the present up to her so she can see how it looks intentional. “*Oh.*”

Together, they take Shane’s ripped piece and attach it to one of Kat’s presents, then find places for her other pieces on the new presents they wrap. Eventually they run out of new gifts, so they go back to some of Shane’s “perfectly” wrapped ones and cut out small pieces of other patterns to slap onto them randomly, so all the presents match.

When they’re done, and have put all of David and Yuna’s presents under the Christmas tree in a neat little pile, they stand back and admire their work. “Looks great!” Shane declares.

Kat grins up at him. “I love it! Let’s do all the presents like that next year!” she says, eyes bright and carefree.

Shane feels his eyes well up, immensely relieved to see Kat in better spirits, at least for now; he scoops her up in his arms and blows a raspberry into her neck. “Daddy! Put me down!” she shrieks in laughter.

“Hmmm, no,” Shane says, and blows another raspberry, but it comes out fainter on account of how hard he’s grinning.

Then they hear the pitter-patter of socked feet coming towards them, and Theo careens into the living room, with a blanket tied around his neck like a cape, riding a stick horse. “Woah, steady, steady!” he’s shouting, then pretends to fall off the horse and onto the floor. “*Noooooooo!*”

Before Shane and Kat can ask, they hear the approach of loud, slow stomping, and in comes Ilya. His hands are held up near his face in a clawed position, and he’s making an awful growling sound that cuts short as soon as he sees Shane and Kat. “*Grrrr*—oh, hi,” he says, audibly catching his breath.

“No! Get back! Get back, I say!” Theo yells, and picks up the toy horse, waving it around at Ilya like it’s an actual stick instead of a horse. “Get ba—” he stops mid-shout and looks Ilya up and down. “Papa, you forgot the cape!”

“Oh, oops.” Ilya stops and feels around his neck for something. “It must...have fallen off. I’ll...go get it,” he pants, then turns to exit the room. “We...are doing *Beauty and the Beast*,” Ilya explains as he passes Shane and Kat. “This is...the part...where the wolves try and eat Belle.”

“Right, of course,” Shane says, placing Kat back down on her feet. “How could I forget?”

“You need the cape so you can become the Beast and save me!” Theo calls after Ilya, still on the floor with the stick horse.

“Yes, I know!” Ilya calls back from down the hallway.

Then Anya and Kolya come barreling in, immediately zeroing in on Theo to kiss all over his face. Presumably, these are the wolves eating Belle.

Kat walks over to Theo and looks down at him. “Do you need to borrow my tiara again?” she asks.

With the dogs still licking his face, Theo rolls his eyes to the ceiling while he considers this, then answers, “I think that would be best.”

The wrapping paper gives Shane another idea, and he tells Ilya about it as soon as they wake up on the 23rd.

“Okay,” Ilya mumbles, still half-asleep. Then Shane’s words sink in and his eyes fly open. “But you are making chicken parm tonight!”

Shane cards his fingers through Ilya’s hair. “It’s Christmas,” he tells him. “We’re all making sacrifices.”

Ilya squints at him. “What sacrifice are *you* making?”

“Well,” Shane says. “I’m sleeping next to you, aren’t I?”

He breaks into a grin as Ilya flips them over in the bed, laughing, and they end up being very late to wake the kids up for breakfast.

“Daddy,” Theo says that night, after Shane presents his family with the dinner he made for all of them. “That doesn’t look right.”

Shane furrows his brow, pretending not to know what Theo’s talking about as he inspects the serving plate piled with badly charred food. “What do you mean?”

Theo just gives him a look mixed with pity and disdain. As much as a six-year-old can convey those emotions, anyway. “Papa,” Theo announces. “Daddy burned dinner.”

“I know,” Ilya says from across the table, hands clasped in front of his chin. He’s staring mournfully at the plate as if it’s their house that burned down rather than a family-sized batch of chicken parm. “I know, Theo.”

“Oh, rats, did I?” Shane gasps, feigning shock. “Wow. That’s pretty bad.”

“Yeah, it is,” Kat says nervously from beside Theo. Just as Shane suspected she would.

“Well!” Shane shrugs, and clears the plate away, nonchalantly tossing the chicken parm into the trash can. He hears Ilya wince audibly. “Good thing I made the pasta to go with it, huh?”

It's true; he'd made a double helping of pasta, even, because the plan all along was for the main event of chicken parm to become a bust.

So, they all eat their pasta without incident, although Shane notices Kat eyeing the trash can warily throughout, no doubt thinking about how Shane had (technically) ruined dinner.

Which he had also planned for—so that Part Two would have maximum impact.

On Christmas Eve, after dinner, Kat helps Ilya make scrambled eggs (she cracks the eggs very, *very* carefully), while Theo helps Shane make gingerbread cookies.

"Someone's in the kitchen with Diiiiinaaaaah, someone's in the kitchen I knooooooooow," Theo sings from atop his footstool while he dutifully helps Shane roll the cookie dough out.

They take one of the fancy dinner plates out and pile it up with eggs and cookies. Ilya puts a little sprig of parsley on the eggs as a garnish, which he finds endlessly funny, and the plate is left out prominently on their living room coffee table.

With the eggs and cookies absolutely *not* touching. Katerina is adamant about this. And honestly, so is Shane.

Kat and Theo are finishing taping up their SANTA THE TOILET IS THIS WAY sign (with an arrow) when Shane walks in from the kitchen holding a cold, fresh can of Schweppes's ginger ale.

He places it next to the plate of eggs and cookies. Kat walks over and eyes the can dubiously. "Should we open it? So he doesn't have to?" she asks.

"No," Ilya replies from where he's sitting on the couch, Theo already tucked under his arm. "We don't know what time he will come. If we open it now, might be flat by the time he gets here. Come on, let's sit."

Katerina makes a *duh* face at herself, then goes over to snuggle up under Ilya's other arm. Shane's heart melts at the sight of his husband and kids together, in their cozy Christmas pajamas, and quickly whips his phone out to take a picture. He takes another picture of the dogs curled around each other by the fireplace for good measure.

He then looks at Ilya meaningfully, eyebrows raised. Taking his cue, Ilya says, "Uh oh, where is *The Night Before Christmas*? I thought I had it right here," and pats around the couch cushions, pretending to look for the book and throwing in a tickle at Kat's and Theo's ribs while he's at it.

"Oops, I must have left it in the office by mistake," Shane lies, raising his voice over the screeching giggles of their children. Well, *technically* it's the truth. He did leave it in the office, but on purpose.

Ilya winks at Shane as he exits the living room and heads down the hallway. In their office, Shane opens the top drawer of the desk and pulls the book out, right where he left it, and then

plucks two small wrapped parcels out from where he'd hidden them behind the armchair.

He makes sure he's wearing a surprised expression when he comes back into the living room. "Wow, look!" he gasps, holding the parcels out in front of him. "These were at the front door!"

Kat and Theo's heads instantly pop up from behind the back of the couch. Ilya twists around to face Shane. "Oh, wow, what is that?" he asks.

The kids immediately scramble out of Ilya's hold and rush over to see what Shane's holding. "What is it?!" Kat demands, echoing Ilya.

"I don't know," Shane says, affecting a tone of awe. "Let's read the inscription and find out."

The three of them sit down right there on the floor, beside the coffee table. Ilya gets up off the couch and comes to kneel behind Shane, looking over his shoulder at the little tag on one of the parcels.

"To Shane and Ilya, from Santa Claus," Shane reads his own handwriting out. He waits for Kat and Theo to gasp and exchange wild glances before continuing. *"I'll be back tonight with presents for Katerina and Theo, but this year, I wanted the grown-ups to get their presents early."*

Katerina squeaks when she hears her name. Shane leans his head back toward Ilya, hoping his shock looks real. "Oh my gosh, Ilya! Santa brought us our presents early!"

Ilya grins and squeezes Shane's shoulders. "Wow! I can't believe it!"

"And he's coming *back*," Katerina squeals, and starts to jump up and down, prompting Theo to join her. They hold hands and bounce around the room, yelling joyfully, if nonsensically.

Bingo. "That's what it says!" Shane calls out to her, then exchanges a look of utter *relief* with Ilya. He looks at the inscription again. "Wow, Santa even put my name first," he says to his husband.

Ilya glares at him and squeezes his shoulders again, harder. "Cute."

"But wait," Katerina pants, when the kids' jumping has ceased and they're back on the floor, inspecting the tag closely. "Daddy, *you* got a present?"

"Yep," Shane says, popping the *p*.

Katerina looks skeptical. "...Is it coal?"

Shane had a feeling she would ask that. "I hope not! Let's open it and see."

Everyone leans in close as Shane carefully unwraps one of the parcels to reveal... a little porcelain figurine of a centaur holding a hockey stick. "Not coal!" Shane announces.

Kat looks pleased, if not highly unimpressed by the gift, but she still asks them to open the other one. Her and Theo watch as Ilya opens up a small scented candle with Ottawa colors on the label.

“Not coal,” Ilya confirms, proud.

“Those presents are kinda ugly,” Theo says, and now it’s Ilya’s turn to receive the look of pity.

“Yeah, kinda,” Kat agrees. Then her face blossoms into a grin, and she throws her arms around Shane’s neck. “You made it on the Nice List, Daddy!”

“I sure did,” Shane laughs, rubbing her back. He watches Ilya discreetly shove the figurine and the candle behind himself before Theo can get a closer look and realize Shane just wrapped up random shit from around the house.

“Even though you messed up the wrapping paper, and burned dinner, and you even yelled at Santa’s *elf*—”

“Okay, I did not *yell*—” Shane had exchanged *firm words* with Sparkle after Katerina’s photo, sure, but—

“—but you’re still on the Nice List!” Kat finishes. Her voice sounds like a heavy weight just got lifted from her shoulders. *Thank fuck.*

“It must be like I said,” Ilya chimes in. “Santa is, like, big picture guy, you know?”

Kat lifts her head from where it was buried in Shane’s shoulder and blinks between Shane and Ilya, letting it sink in that her parents were absolutely right this time. Then she smiles toothily again. “Yeah!”

“Hey,” Shane realizes, pulling farther away from Kat so he can face her. “Why are you only surprised that *I* made the Nice List? What about Papa?”

Katerina shrugs, looking sheepish. “Papa has never burned dinner.”

Ilya erupts into laughter. Shane, for lack of a more appropriate response, just hugs their daughter again.

“*'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house,*” Ilya recites, both kids’ eyes following the page while he reads, even as they blink sleepily. “*Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.*”

Ilya glances up at Shane and smiles, eyes twinkling, before returning to the book.

Shane has never felt happier in his life.

“The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,” Ilya continues slowly. “In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there...”

Hours later, Ilya and Shane are back downstairs, standing grimly over the cold plate of scrambled eggs and cookies.

“You eat the eggs,” Ilya whispers, flicking the pom-pom at the end of his Santa hat out of his face.

“No, *you* eat the eggs,” Shane hisses back.

They both look up from the plate at the same time and lock eyes. Resolutely, Ilya holds out one palm and places his other fist in it. Shane mirrors him.

“Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

“FUCK!”

“*Shhhhhh!*”

Ilya ends up having to eat at least a few bites of the hours-old eggs (he forgoes the parsley), but they share the cookies, leaving one on the plate with a conspicuous bite taken out of it. They split the ginger ale, too, because Shane is a nice guy, and because he’s going to have to kiss Ilya later anyway.

Which he does, once they’ve put all the Santa presents under the tree and turned out all the lights, by dragging him over to the living room doorway, where Shane had secretly pinned a small bunch of mistletoe earlier in the day.

Ilya catches sight of it hanging above their heads, its outline just barely visible in the darkness. “Is this the thing where you kiss under a leaf?”

Shane rolls his eyes, linking his hands behind Ilya’s neck. “It is, and you *know* it is, because I’ve told you many times before.”

Ilya shrugs as if he doesn’t remember, like he does every time, because he knows it irritates Shane. God, Shane loves him.

Even so, he moves one hand to flick Ilya in the nose, but because Ilya knows him, he catches his wrist just in time and plants a kiss on the inside of it. “There. Kiss.”

Shane shakes his head, feeling gooey. He brushes the tail of the Santa hat out of Ilya’s face again. “Doesn’t count.”

“No?” Ilya says, feigning confusion for a second before giving in and leaning down, his lips hovering in front of Shane’s. “Sneaky,” he whispers, before softly pressing their mouths together.

“You love it,” Shane mumbles between kisses. “When I’m sneaky.”

Ilya makes a low noise in agreement and Shane’s eyes flutter shut, wrapping his arms tighter around Ilya and melting deeper into the kiss.

Shane and Ilya are abruptly woken up by two pairs of little fists and feet climbing all over them.

“DADDY! PAPA! WAKE UP! SANTA CAME!”

“HE ATE THE EGGS!”

It’s barely 6am. They pretend to stay asleep for as long as possible until the jostling turns into pummeling. The dogs’ barking doesn’t help either.

When they do eventually open their eyes, though, they’re both smiling at each other.

Bood has his annual Boxing Day cookout the day after Christmas, and of course the entire Hollander-Rozanov family is in attendance. This includes David and Yuna, who are staying with them for a few days and are currently in rapt conversation with Harris a few yards away.

Shane is sitting around the fire with several of his old teammates and their wives, and he looks up from the conversation to do a quick check of where his kids are.

Katerina is still across the fire from Shane, sitting on the arm of Evan’s chair while she talks his ear off about all the presents Santa got her (well, mostly she’s talking about the books), while he listens attentively. She’s done this to approximately five Centaurs today, both old and new, and Evan will certainly not be the last.

Theo is closer to the house, running circles around Luca, who is patiently sitting on the ground and allowing himself to be covered in bubbles.

Shane and Ilya hadn’t been able to finagle an actual, Glinda-travels-by-bubble machine, but they had been able to get Theo a small, battery-operated bubble machine that spits infinite bubbles as long as it’s got solution in it.

And they’d gotten him a kid-sized replica of Glinda’s actual magic wand. No more spoons at playtime. Of course, they’d gotten Kat the Elphaba broom to match.

So, yeah, a pretty successful Christmas. If Shane and Ilya do say so themselves.

A new bottle of beer slides into Shane’s view then, and he accepts it as Ilya smacks a kiss to his head and resumes his seat beside him.

“How’s Troy?” Shane asks him.

“Oh, fine,” Ilya sighs. “The baby was still giving him trouble going to nap but then Cassie came in to help, so I let them be.”

Shane nods over to where his parents are still talking emphatically with Harris. “My mom looks all too happy to give Harris her newborn crash course. Probably unsolicited.”

“Probably,” Ilya agrees. “But is better advice than any of the other fuckers here have to offer.” He pauses. “Besides us, of course.”

Shane smirks at him sidelong. “Of course.”

Lisa Hayes comes to join them a few minutes later, sitting on the other side of Shane. “Hey, you two,” she greets them.

“Hey, Lisa.”

She smiles warmly at them and settles in, sipping her beer. The conversation around the fire continues, but after a few minutes Shane notices Lisa’s eyes keep darting over to him and Ilya and then away.

Eventually he manages to make eye contact and Lisa can’t hold back a laugh. “What is it?” Shane asks with a chuckle.

“Just, the two of you,” Lisa giggles, waving a hand between them.

“The two of us what?”

“Well,” Lisa pauses and then leans forward in her chair. Shane and Ilya do the same. “It’s not a big deal, really, it’s funny, but I talked to Theo earlier...”

“Oh no,” Shane and Ilya automatically respond in unison. “What did he say?” Ilya asks.

Lisa laughs again. “Oh my goodness, it’s fine, just...” she pauses again to hide a smirk behind her hand.

“Lisa!” Ilya chides.

“Okay, okay,” Lisa says, trying to school her expression. “Theo pulled me aside and told me...well...”

“Told you what?”

Lisa lets out a long breath and says, “He told me that on Christmas Eve, he woke up in the middle of the night, heard something, went downstairs, and...” she flicks her gaze to Shane.

Shane panics. Did Theo see him and Ilya leaving the presents?! “*What.*”

“He saw Shane kissing Santa Claus,” Lisa finally says. “And I can tell he does not know that *you* are Santa Claus,” she adds, nodding at Ilya.

A beat passes. Shane and Ilya look at each other in horror.

“He thinks I cheated on you with Santa,” Shane whispers.

Lisa bursts into laughter again.

Shane whips his head around and finds Theo again, who has now stopped running around Luca and is already looking right at Shane, bubbles streaming directly up in a straight line from where he’s placed the bubble machine on the ground.

Having made eye contact, Theo lifts his finger to his lips and makes a *shhhh* gesture at Shane.

“Oh my god,” Shane says, turning back around to face the fire. “He thinks we’re in cahoots about it. Like it’s our little secret.”

Ilya glances behind himself and shrugs. “Maybe he will become big time divorce lawyer.”

Shane swats him in the arm. “Shut up,” he says, as Lisa laughs harder.

“Or private investigator.”

“*Please* shut up.”

Lisa eventually quiets herself enough to ask, “So, how are you guys gonna fix this one?”

They had, of course, already told her and Wyatt all about the whole Katerina/Santa debacle. This morning, to Shane’s continued relief, Kat had left her bedroom in the normal state of disarray, no bedspread tugging in sight.

Now *Theo* has beef with Santa. For Christ’s sake.

“Fuck it,” Shane sighs, pressing the cold beer bottle to his temple and reaching for Ilya with his other hand. “We’ll deal with it next Christmas.”

End Notes

alexa, play i saw mommy kissing santa claus

the hollander-rozanovs still celebrate new year's eve - ilya just got a lot more into christmas once he & shane started having kids

malyshka = baby

moy lyubimyy = my love

bozhe moy = (oh) my god

solnyshko = my sun

rybka = little fish

thank you for reading!! pls leave a kudos & comment if you enjoyed, and come hang out on [tumblr](#) :)

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