

if the fates allow

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/76800101) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/76800101>.

Rating:	Mature
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 , Anyia Ilya Rozanov's Dog , Yuna Hollander , David Hollander , Original Characters
Additional Tags:	Holidays , the mortifying ordeal of meeting your partner's entire family , First Christmas as a Married Couple , Depression , Fluff and Angst , Autistic Shane Hollander , Emotional Hurt/Comfort , Food as a Metaphor for Love , Snow , so much snow , it's ottawa in december , Slice of Life , POV Alternating , a LOT of dialogue like these mfs are yapping , pls take that slice of life tag seriously there isn't much of a plot , this is a snapshot of their lives in 13k words , Post-Book 6: The Long Game (Game Changers) , Domestic , Married Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-31 Words: 13,417 Chapters: 1/1

if the fates allow

by [soleilies](#)

Summary

Shane loves his family. He truly does. But he's never been one to enjoy large gatherings, even with people he knows well. And...he's nervous. He's nervous about all of them seeing this side of his life and side of himself that they've never really known, even though he *knows* they all love him and have shown him nothing but support.

He takes a deep breath, watches more snowflakes fall, and releases it. It will be fine. It might even be nice.

in which: it's shane and ilya's first christmas together as a married couple, and shane's entire extended family comes to visit. nothing goes wrong...nothing at all.

Notes

i, too, have succumbed to the heated rivalry and hollanov bug that's going around. shocker, i know!! it's been soooo fun falling in love with these characters over the past month! i watched eps one and two the day they dropped and immediately had to read the books.

this fic is about shane and ilya at its core, but it does feature an ensemble cast of characters. such is the nature of a meeting the family story. i tried my best to strike the right balance <3

title is of course from "have yourself a merry little christmas"

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

It's snowing heavily when Shane wakes up. Bright, winter morning light filters through their bedroom windows. Through them, he watches as fat snowflakes fall from the sky and land on the barren branches of the trees in their backyard. Those branches will be the snow's home for a day, or maybe two. The ground will welcome it for much longer. It'll be a white Christmas this year.

Ilya is still dead to the world—snoring softly at Shane's side and emitting body heat like a very welcome radiator. Shane will let him sleep for as long as he likes. They're on break, and Ilya hasn't been sleeping well. He needs the rest.

They'd lucked out and hadn't had a game on the 23rd, so after practice, they'd taken the rest of the day to relax and do some very last minute Christmas shopping. This year, there were more people to buy presents for than usual. The reason being: Shane's entire extended family—on his mom's side and his dad's side—are coming to Ottawa for Christmas into New Year's.

Each and every one of them had reached out after they'd been outed—if not directly to him, then to his mom or dad—and there had been nothing but support. Most of them hadn't been able to make it to the wedding for various valid reasons, and Shane genuinely did not hold it against any of them—it really had been short notice—but apparently, the aunties of WhatsApp had all decided that there needed to be some sort of replacement celebration, and so they'd all settled on Christmas in Ottawa. It made the most sense. Everyone wanted to finally meet his husband (his *husband!*), and ever since Shane had told Ilya back in November that they would all be here at Christmas, he's been so excited to meet the rest of Shane's family.

And Shane loves his family. He truly does. But he's never been one to enjoy large gatherings, even with people he knows well. And...he's nervous. He's nervous about all of them seeing this side of his life and side of himself that they've never really known, even though he *knows* they all love him and have shown him nothing but support.

He takes a deep breath, watches more snowflakes fall, and releases it. It will be fine. It might even be nice.

He slips out of bed, quiet so as to not disturb Ilya, and heads to the en suite. His skincare routine soothes him and wakes him up some more, and he mentally goes over everything that has to be done that day while he gets dressed. Breakfast, walk Anya, feed Anya, work out, clean, lunch, take stock of the ingredients in the kitchen, meal prep for Christmas dinner, airport pickup. He'd changed the sheets in the guest rooms yesterday, but he should straighten them up again. And maybe clean the bathrooms one more time.

Once he's down in the kitchen, he starts the coffee maker and methodically takes out all the ingredients for today's breakfast of chocolate chip pancakes, bacon and fruit. Anya patters up to him and nudges his calf with her nose while he's measuring the pancake mix. He smiles, and bends down to scratch under her chin, cooing at her cute little face. "Good morning, sweet thing. You're so cute. Do you know that? Do you know how cute you are?"

“Oh, yes, I know. But tell me again.”

Shane startles and looks up, laughing when he sees Ilya standing in the entrance to the kitchen, sleep rumpled and yawning. His husband is so stupid. God. He loves him.

“Very funny. I wasn’t talking to you. But sure, you’re pretty cute too.”

Shane stands, pointedly ignoring the way his knees crack, and heads towards Ilya. They end up meeting each other halfway, and Shane kisses him softly. He runs a hand through those curls he loves so much to muss his bedhead up a little more.

“Good morning,” he says, breaking the kiss a bit sooner than he’d like. “I thought you’d sleep some more.”

“Mm. Good morning, *solnyshko*. I thought so too, but...I had one of those dreams. A falling dream.”

“When you fall in a dream and wake up when you hit the ground. Yeah. Haven’t had one of those since I was a kid.”

“*Da*. Yes, exactly. And after, I couldn’t fall back asleep. So here I am. Teeth already brushed, just for you.” Ilya grins, and he’s the one to kiss Shane this time, a little harder, and with a little more heat than their initial good morning kiss. He backs Shane up against the counter and one of the empty coffee mugs he’d taken out falls over, clattering on the marble. No sounds of shattered ceramic, no problem. They kiss and kiss some more, but once Ilya’s mouth moves down to his neck and he begins to suck, Shane pushes him away. He’s half hard already, like a damn teenager, and now isn’t the time. “After breakfast.”

Ilya groans. “You want me to suffer.”

“Shut up. Don’t you want your pancakes?”

“Hmm...not when there is something else I’d rather be eating.”

Shane rolls his eyes and laughs, fully shoving Ilya off of him—he’d started to suck another hickey onto his skin.

“After. Breakfast. Will you cut up the fruit?”

Ilya sighs, dramatic as always, and pulls away after one last peck. “Yes, honey.”

Shane looks at him, perplexed. “‘Honey’?”

“New pet name. Feels very married couple, yes?”

He cocks his head to the side. *Honey*. He likes it. “I like it. But I think I like sweetheart more.”

“Okay, sweetheart.”

Shane smiles. Yeah, he likes sweetheart more.

They fall into familiar and comfortable domesticity in the kitchen. Ilya slices the oranges and cuts the stems off of the strawberries, Shane mixes together enough pancake batter for the two of them, adding in a ridiculous amount of chocolate chips to get Ilya's favored batter to chocolate ratio. While Shane is flipping the pancakes, Ilya pours cups of coffee for the two of them.

"Thank you," Shane says when Ilya hands him his mug. He takes a sip. Perfect.

"What time will the plane land?" Ilya asks. He's setting the table while Shane flips the bacon.

"5:30. So we should aim to get to the airport at 6. And we'll need to get a taxi for a couple of them, I don't think we'll all fit in the SUV. Not with their luggage."

"They will be so tired. I am tired just thinking of it. Is even longer than flight to Moscow."

"Is it?"

"By a couple hours, yes," Ilya says. "Would you want to go back to Japan one day?"

"One day, absolutely." Shane starts plating the bacon. He would love to go back. It's been such a long time. "I miss it."

They eat in comfortable silence for the most part. Ilya starts to play footsie with him under the table and Shane tries not to let his amusement show. He cuts up two giant chocolate chip pancakes into perfect little triangles and pops each forkful into his mouth, slowly but surely finishing every bite, in spite of the voice in his head telling him to stop. He won't be bested by pancakes. Not today, and hopefully not ever again. He has two pieces of bacon, and a healthy serving of fruit, and when his stomach is full he stands to clear the table. Ilya smiles softly at him, a knowing look in his eye. They load the dishwasher together. Well, Shane loads the dishwasher, because there's a particular way he likes to do it. Ilya rinses the dishes and hands them to him.

"Okay, it is after breakfast now," Ilya says, closing the dishwasher and giving it a thump. "And I am still hungry."

"How astute. You sure you have room for more?"

"Is you. I will always have room."

"God, you're so gross."

"Ah, but you love it."

"Maybe a little."

Ilya, looking very self-satisfied and very horny, crowds Shane against the counter and kisses him with fervor. First his mouth, then his jaw, and then his neck again. He tugs Shane's joggers down along with his briefs and drops to his knees, kissing his hipbone, right on the

spot where he's extra sensitive. Shane closes his eyes and bites his lip when he feels Ilya's hot mouth travel down to his dick. Fucking hell. His husband gives very good blowjobs.

Ilya swallows every last drop. "Yummy," he says with a cheeky grin.

"Shut up."

Ilya laughs from his spot on the kitchen floor, shoulders shaking with it. Shane reaches a hand out to pull him up, simultaneously eyeing Ilya's sweatpants while he does. Hm. Not even a slight tent.

"Hey, you want me to—"

"Is fine. Later," Ilya says. "I just wanted to pleasure you...my *posudomoyka*."

Shane squints at him. "Your...dishwasher?"

"Yes! Very good. A plus!"

Anya barks, making her presence known. She's lying under the kitchen table, wagging her tail. Shane quickly tugs his pants up. God, they really have to stop engaging in sexual acts in front of her.

"Good girl. Sorry you had to see that," Shane says. Ilya laughs at him.

"She is dog. She does not care."

"Yeah but she's...she's like our kid."

Ilya sighs. "I am very sorry, firstborn daughter Anya. Your daddies will be more careful in future. Now let's go outside."

Her ears perk up at the word 'outside' because she's a genius, and she runs from under the table and right into Ilya's lap.

"Yes, yes, time to go out. You love snow so much. Are you excited?" Ilya says, smoothing down her ears. She licks him on his nose and he wrinkles it. "Thank you for the kiss." They make their way to the front hall, Anya barking with excitement all the way there.

"Oh, do not forget neighbour's gifts," Ilya says. He's putting on Anya's little doggie winter coat and boots now. They'd been way more expensive than Shane had any idea dog clothing could be, but: only the best for their Anya. "In dining room, by that one chair."

"Yeah, I'll get it."

Once all three of them are bundled up and Shane has the neighbour's gifts, they head outside into the snow. Ilya looks so fucking cute in his toque walking Anya with snow falling down all around him. Like the main character in one of those shitty Christmas movies, but even more handsome.

They drop off the gift at their neighbour's house—a little something for the parents and a lot of something for the kids—leaving it on the porch. A few minutes into their walk, Anya does her business, and Shane and Ilya kindly avert their eyes. There's a nice forest trail in the neighbourhood that they always walk and it's one of Shane's favourite parts of their daily routine. It's beautiful all year round, but he's finding it extra picturesque today. All the trees are covered in snow, and the snowfall still hasn't let up, so it's like they're in a snow globe.

A few minutes into the walk, Anya finds a patch of snow that she absolutely must dig into, so they stop to watch her.

"She probably shouldn't eat snow, right?" Shane muses. "I mean, my mom always told me not to eat it when I was little."

"Hm. Fresh snow is fine, I think. And she loves it so much. How can we stop her?"

"Good point."

Anya looks back at them proudly, tail wagging and muzzle completely covered in snow. Ilya whips his phone out to snap a picture.

"So, give me run down one last time," Ilya says when they start walking again. "Who is who and who is staying where?"

Shane laughs. "Ilya, I've told you like ten times. It's okay if you don't remember all of their names, you know. I don't think they expect you to know, seeing as they've never introduced themselves to you."

Ilya stares at him incredulously and shakes his head. "No, it is not okay. Is your family. Be serious, Hollander. I have to remember their names. So tell me one more time."

"Okay, okay. *Rozanov*."

So Shane tells him one more time. On his dad's side, there's his dad's sister and her husband, Aunt Michelle and Uncle Charlie. They have two kids, Lisa and James, who are one year and two years older than Shane, respectively. James has two kids of his own with his wife Sophie, twins named Claire and Cleo. They're five, and cute as hell. Then there's his dad's brother, Uncle Mike, who is currently unmarried and coming solo, though he does have a new girlfriend that Shane can never remember the name of who he's certain is too good for him. Lisa, James, and Sophie and the kids are staying with Shane and Ilya, and the others are staying with Shane's parents.

His mom's side is a bit more complicated. She's an only child, but she'd grown up close to her first cousins, Mei and Kaori, in Montreal. They'd moved to Japan with their parents in the middle of high school and only Mei had moved back to Canada, settling in Vancouver when Shane was little. Aunt Mei and Aunt Kaori's mother, his great-aunt Ayane, is the only one from the old generation that's still around. Kaori lives in Kyoto with her husband, Kazuki, and they look after her. Kaori and Kazuki have two adult daughters, both in their twenties, Emi and Yuki, who live in Tokyo. Shane hasn't seen any of his family that lives in Japan since...2013, maybe. They'd all gathered in Montreal for Aunt Ayane's 80th birthday.

She'd insisted on having it there because she missed it. Emi, Yuki and Mei will be staying with Shane and Ilya.

"Right, all the cool young people are staying with us, and all the old people are staying with your parents."

"Aunt Mei is older than my mom."

"Yeah, but she is cool and young at heart by the sound of her. I am happy we get little ones. Claire. Cleo."

"You got it," Shane says, smiling.

Ilya groans. "Is so many names. So, so many. And you barely ever talk about these people, so I haven't had enough...natural exposure to these names."

"I talk about them! We're just...we're just not that close anymore, so they don't come up all that much."

Ilya shrugs. "At least Yuna talks about her cousins a lot. So I know their names well. And David has been showing me pictures of Claire and Cleo. They are very cute."

"Aren't they?"

They've reached the end of the trail. It loops around, so they exit on the opposite side of where they entered and make their way back to their house. Once they're back inside, Shane takes off Anya's winter gear and Ilya organizes her food.

"Breakfast is served," Ilya says, and Anya runs to her bowl and digs in.

In the home gym, Shane jogs on the treadmill and Ilya...lies on a yoga mat with his eyes closed.

"That's not yoga," Shane says, upping his speed.

"Is cool down position."

"You have to actually do yoga before you cool down."

"Says who?"

Shane doesn't dignify that with a response.

"I don't want to work out today," Ilya admits. "But I always want to be in the same room as you, so here I am."

Well, fuck. Shane's heart melts into a little puddle. How Ilya manages to be so romantic without even trying, Shane will never know.

Ilya stays in his "cool down" position for the entirety of Shane's workout routine. Towards the end, Shane is certain he's fallen asleep, but he asks a question not five seconds later.

"How are you finding the Centaurs?"

Shane drops down to a seated position on his balance ball. Ilya still has his eyes closed, but his brow is slightly furrowed.

"The team is good. It's still early days, but we've been playing well this season so far."

"Mm. But how are you adjusting? New team, new people. New captain."

Shane frowns and considers this, his heart pounding faster, and not just from his workout.

"Where's this coming from?" Does Ilya think he's not playing well? Or that he isn't meshing with the others? He knows he has to work harder at forging bonds with his new teammates, it's just...difficult. For him. It always has been.

Ilya opens his eyes. "Nowhere. I am just thinking. You...you are happy? With the Centaurs?"

Shane slides down from the balance ball and lies down next to Ilya on the floor. "Well, the guys are really great. I feel...a lot more comfortable with them than I did with...my old team, by the end. Wiebe is great, too. And so is my captain. Don't argue with me, you are a great captain. And yeah, I'm still adjusting. Like...it is weird not being captain anymore. And...I don't know if I can really call anybody my friend yet, or when I'll get there...but I think I'm happy. I am. I wouldn't trade this for the world, Ilya. I loved playing against you but I love playing by your side even more."

Ilya exhales. He grabs Shane's hand and laces their fingers together. "Okay," he says quietly. "Just checking. And me too. I love playing by your side."

Shane smiles softly, his heart beginning to settle. "We're gonna win so many cups, I swear it."

Ilya brings their laced hands up to his mouth and kisses Shane's fingers. "All because our team has the two best forwards in the NHL," he says. "Me and Troy Barrett."

"Oh, fuck right off," Shane scoffs and pulls his hand away, shoving him playfully. "You're an asshole."

Ilya laughs and laughs, like an *asshole*, so Shane starts to tickle him because it's what he deserves. "Oh, fuck, stop! I take it back, I take it back. Slip of the tongue! I meant to say 'me and my beautiful, sexy, wonderful husband'."

"You better have," Shane says, tickling his side one last time before pecking him lightly on the lips. "Okay." He sighs. "We have shit to do, let's get moving."

"Can we cool down for a few more minutes?" Ilya asks.

Shane checks his Apple Watch. It's just past noon. They have a little time.

“Yeah. A few more minutes.”

“Could you drive a little slower? The roads aren’t the best. It’s been snowing all day.”

Ilya suppresses a groan. “I’m already going slow as fuck, Shane. If I go any slower, we piss everyone off. They’ll all be blowing their horns yelling, ‘why are you driving so slow, even slower than snail from SpongeBob?’”

“Fine, okay. Nobody would ever yell that. But okay.”

“Calm down. We will be fine. Okay? I am a good driver. We just got winter tires.” And really, the roads aren’t that bad. Ilya’s seen much worse. “We won’t crash, okay?”

“Okay, sorry. Sorry. I’m being annoying.”

Oh, fucking hell. The car descends into silence. Ilya sighs, and he slows down. Shane has been periodically tense all day long. All week long, actually. As long as Ilya’s known him, he’s been like a bow strung too tightly, constantly on the verge of snapping, and Ilya does everything he can to make sure that doesn’t happen. Sometimes there’s only so much he can do. So right now, if all Shane wants is for him to drive extra cautiously, he’ll do it.

“No, not annoying. You’re right, is better to be safe than sorry. That’s the saying, right?”

“Yeah, that’s the saying.”

“Everyone else made it to your parents’ place?”

“Yeah, mom just texted. You already know they picked Aunt Mei up this afternoon. Auntie Michelle and Uncle Charlie plus their kids and the grandkids just got there. And Uncle Mike got an Uber from the train station and he’s almost there.”

“Your uncle Mike. What’s his girlfriend’s name again?”

“You *know* I don’t remember. I think it’s Anne or Amy or something? But she’s not coming, so you don’t even need to know.”

“It would probably impress him if I knew, though.”

“Trust me, you don’t need to worry about impressing Uncle Mike.”

“Ah, he’s a fan?”

“Big time.”

“Anyone else? I have my Sharpie ready to go.”

“Aunt Mei, for sure. And James.”

“I’m shocked! I thought your family would all be Rozanov haters. Hollander forever and all that.”

“Well...Lisa was a pretty big Rozanov hater. But she’s come around. Since, you know.”

“Since I am your husband now.”

“Exactly.”

They drive in comfortable quiet for a few moments before Shane says, “The snail in SpongeBob has a name, by the way. It’s Gary.”

“Wow, I can’t believe you know this. I thought you only watched hockey documentaries as a small child.”

“I don’t actually live under a rock, you know.”

“No, you don’t. Patrick does.”

Shane laughs—a real laugh, surprisingly loud and entirely unrestrained—and Ilya glances over at him, a smile twitching at his lips. God. He loves the sound of Shane’s laugh. It might even be his favourite sound. Ilya says a lot of dumb shit just to try and hear that laugh.

The light turns red, so Ilya rolls to a stop along with the line of traffic ahead of them and turns to look at his husband again, this time for longer. Shane is leaning his head against the window now. Ilya knows he does this because he likes the sensation of the cold glass against his skin when the car gets too stuffy. He turns down the heat, and continues to study the lines of Shane’s face. It’s a lovely face. Even in the low light, Ilya can see his pretty freckles. God. He is so beautiful, and he is such a wonderful man. How did he get so lucky? Ilya has wondered this hundreds if not thousands of times. How did he get so fucking lucky? How is he the one that gets to call Shane Hollander his?

“The light’s green, Ilya,” Shane says softly.

“Sorry,” Ilya steps on the gas. “Your pretty face distracted me. It’s like you have powers! Just one look and I’m in a trance.”

Shane laughs again, and something in Ilya’s heart settles, clicks back into place. He feels totally and completely content in this moment in time. He hopes the feeling lasts.

He knows it won’t.

The airport is busy, and finding a place to pull over and wait in the arrivals area proves nearly impossible, but they do it.

Shane unbuckles his seatbelt and slides his sunglasses on. At 6 PM. In winter. “Okay,” he says. “I’ll run inside and see if I can find them. Call me if you have to circle and change spots.”

“You know, I think those will make you stand out even more,” Ilya says, gesturing to the glasses. “I don’t think people will bother you. Everyone is too busy with their own shit.”

“Oh, shit. You’re probably right,” Shane admits. He takes the glasses off. “Okay, bye. See you.”

Ilya grins, hopelessly endeared. “See you.”

Shane walks into the airport and Ilya watches him go, tapping the steering wheel. He makes sure the hazards are on, then he disconnects his phone from the car’s Bluetooth, because maybe one of Shane’s cousins will want to play their music on the drive to Yuna and David’s. Then he fiddles with the radio, flipping from station to station: Country. Rock. Pop. Ads. Christmas music. He stops there. ‘Tis the season and all. “Winter Wonderland” plays while he mentally drills the names of Shane’s family again.

He hopes they like him. He’s not sure what they know about him. The hockey fans would know his public facing persona, which is fine, but that isn’t all that he is, and he wants them to know that. And his public image has shifted over the past several months, probably for the better. He’s certainly not being labeled a playboy anymore.

What will he even talk about with them? From the sound of it, most of them are highly educated and...science-y. At least one of them is a doctor. He doesn’t know shit about science. He really only knows shit about hockey and...sports cars. Talking about hockey will only get him so far.

Ilya watches the airport doors for any sight of them, but there’s nothing yet. He taps the steering wheel again. “Winter Wonderland” turns into “Last Christmas”. He hopes they all like the Christmas gifts they’d chosen. Shane had said money and Christmas cards would be enough, but Ilya had insisted on trying to find at least one tangible, thoughtful gift for each of them, because it seemed like the right thing to do. But maybe just money would have been safer. God, he’s never thought so much about Christmas in his life. Ilya had never really understood the hype around it until he’d gotten with Shane—they don’t celebrate it in Russia—but all it had taken was the first Christmas he’d spent with Shane and Yuna and David for him to get it. What’s not to love about eating good food and being surrounded by the people you love? That had been the first time he’d ever experienced that. He wants—needs—this year to be just as good, but there’s this persistent creeping dread that he’s been trying his hardest to ignore twisting through his insides like poison. A slow, inconvenient suffocation.

Ilya’s hand subconsciously reaches for the chain around his neck, fingers clasping around the cross and the ring that hang from it. The precious metal is cold against his fingertips. He rubs them between his fingers and closes his eyes, the last of his good mood slipping away like sand in his hands. Fuck.

Maybe it shouldn’t be a surprise. Historically, for him, the holiday season has often been filled with melancholy. So many happy, smiling families everywhere, while he’d had none of that. At least not after the age of 12. He’s always tried not to let it get to him, usually with a 50 percent success rate, but the weariness he feels now is more than a little frustrating. He should be fine. He’s taking his meds, and everything is fine. He shouldn’t be feeling anything close to how he had been feeling last year, which had been a disaster for several reasons. He

knows there won't be a repeat of that. This is their first Christmas as a married couple, and he just wants it to be a good one. Maybe he's getting too in his head about it, about meeting the rest of Shane's family. But it's hard not to when he so badly needs it to go well. He needs them to accept him, because this family that he's married into is the only family Ilya has left. He takes a deep breath, drops his hand from his neck as "Last Christmas" turns into "Underneath the Tree", and his phone buzzes with a text.

jane (husband ❤️): Found them. We're heading out now.

ok! i will pop the trunk

jane (husband ❤️): 👍

A moment later, Ilya sees them. He relaxes his face into an expression he hopes is approachable and friendly, and he steps out of the car to say hello.

"Hello! Hi. I can help you with that," he says, taking a suitcase from a woman he assumes is Kaori. She's very petite—even shorter than Yuna.

"Hi, thank you! You must be Ilya! Sorry if it's heavy. There's a lot of food in there."

"Is not heavy at all." He's lying through his teeth. It's much heavier than he'd been expecting. This woman must have packed bricks.

"Of course it wouldn't be for you. You've got all those hockey player muscles!"

There's an embarrassed groan to his left. "*Okaasan*, please don't be weird. I'm begging you."

"That wasn't weird, Emi!" She says something else in Japanese, and Emi responds with another groan.

Ilya smiles to himself. He likes them already.

Shane's at his side again, loading another suitcase into the car. He catches Ilya's eye and gives him a small smile before turning away to grab another bag. Ilya says hello to the rest of their little group and helps pack the trunk, and once it's closed, they sort out seating arrangements.

"Aunt Ayane, you can sit in the front. It's the most spacious," Shane says, opening the door for her.

"Oh, you've always been such a gentleman. Thank you, darling."

"Of course, Auntie. And there's a seat warmer right here—"

Ilya directs his attention to the others, opening the door for the back row.

"We're going to find a taxi. Shane offered to help, but we'll be just fine." This comes from the only man in the group, Kaori's husband. Kazuki. "The kids can go with you."

“Ah. We will pay,” Ilya says. “For taxi. When you get to the house.”

“Oh, please don’t worry about that,” Kaori says. “Really, you don’t have to.”

Ilya nods, acquiescing. Kazuki and Kaori walk off with the rest of the bags that wouldn’t fit in the car, waving bye to their daughters, and Emi and Yuki slide into the car.

Shane, finished fussing over his aunt, sidles up next to him. “Do you want me to drive?” he asks.

“No, no. I’ll drive.”

The drive is pleasant, if a bit awkward. Ayane is eighty-eight years old and sharp as a tack. She’s very chatty—more energetic than Ilya had expected someone who’s just taken a seventeen hour journey to be, especially considering her age. She’s bragging about how all the teeth in her skull are still the ones she’d been born with. Emi and Yuki are catching up with Shane in the back row, and every so often Emi will throw Ilya a bone. She’s talkative, like her grandmother and, Ilya guesses, like her mother. Yuki seems to be the opposite. She’s quieter, kind of like Shane in a way.

Somehow, Kaori and Kazuki beat them, because they’re already inside and ready to help bring in the rest of the bags when they arrive at Yuna and David’s house.

“*Tōsan*, we’re staying at Shane’s place, right? Make sure to leave our stuff in the car, please!” Emi says, hoisting down the bag of bricks Ilya had put in the trunk earlier. She must be hiding some muscles of her own under that puffy coat.

“We will, don’t worry!” Kazuki says.

“I can take that in for you,” Shane calls to Emi, returning from escorting his aunt inside, but she waves him off. Her dad trails behind her, grinning at Shane.

“She doesn’t even let *me* carry anything for her.”

“Why would I when I’m perfectly capable of doing it myself?” Emi calls from the foyer.

Ilya, itching to be of use, swoops in and grabs the next bag before Yuki, Kaori or Shane can. “Is this one of yours?” he asks Yuki. She shakes her head and Ilya smiles, salutes them, and starts to roll the suitcase inside.

The house is warm and loud when he enters. Jovial voices and shrieks of laughter filter down from the family room and the kitchen into the front hall where he stands, and Ilya gives himself a moment to settle. He rolls the suitcase to the little alcove by the stairs where the rest of them have piled up and toes off his boots. The house smells good—he recognizes the scent of David’s chicken parmesan and his stomach growls in anticipation.

By the time he’s taken off his jacket and hung it up, the others are inside and David and Yuna are there to greet them.

“Yuki! Oh, sweetheart, it’s so good to see you!” Yuna says, pulling her in for a hug.

“You too, auntie.”

“Look at you! You look just like your mom. Remind me, how old are you now?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Oh my goodness, how did that happen?”

Ilya, Shane and David all simultaneously share a look. David cocks his head and Ilya takes that as their cue to follow. He grabs Shane’s hand and the three of them slink away from the front hall.

“I could use some help in the kitchen,” David says. “Could one or both of you give me a hand after you’ve done the rounds?”

“Yeah, of course, Dad,” Shane says.

David heads to the kitchen and Shane leads Ilya into the family room, where he assumes the rest of the group has all gathered.

“You doing okay?” Shane asks him quietly. “It’s a lot for me, and I already know everyone. If you want to take a breather, I’d get it.”

Ilya shakes his head. “No, no. I’m okay.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

Twenty minutes later, Ilya’s wondering if maybe he should have taken Shane up on his offer. They’d gone around the room and Shane had introduced him to everyone. It was all very Canadian, very polite and to the point—except for Mike, Mei, Lisa and James, who’d immediately wanted to talk hockey, and the two little ones, who’d immediately wanted to play. Of course, he’d played with the kids first. They’d brought dolls with them and were enacting a surprisingly intricate story with them. When he gets the sense that they’re satisfied, he switches his attention to the adults again and gets pulled into discussion with Lisa, James and Shane. After that, Mei and Mike whisk him away. And it isn’t that the conversations are bad, or that the people aren’t lovely, it’s just...him. Something is wrong with him. A wave of inconvenient exhaustion washes over him mid-conversation, and he swears he can physically feel his grasp of the English language slipping away from him. His tongue feels thick and slow in his mouth and he curses his stupid brain, begging Social Ilya to make a comeback, because the night is still young, and he can’t just abandon Shane before dinner has even been served. What kind of husband would do that? But it’s tempting. It’s very tempting, because suddenly all he wants to do is lie down.

He was fine earlier. He *was*.

“Ilya?” A soft, low voice that he doesn’t recognize. “David wanted me to grab you. He’s in the kitchen.” He turns towards the voice. It’s Sophie, James’ wife. Ilya had been struck by her when Shane had introduced them—she’s one of the most beautiful people Ilya has ever seen. Her skin is smooth and dark and her long hair falls to her waist, twisted in intricate braids.

Ilya had been certain he was in the presence of some sort of celebrity and Shane had conveniently forgotten to mention it, but when Ilya had asked point-blank if she was famous, she'd laughed and said, "I wish. I'm a psychologist. But I modeled when I was a kid, if that counts for anything."

"Oh. Oh, yes, sorry," he directs this at Mei and Mike. "David did say he needed help. Um, excuse me. Nice talking to you!"

"You too," Mei says, flashing him a grin. "Thank you for humoring us. I know it probably gets old."

"No, no! Really, it was nice."

He gives them what he hopes is a convincing smile and heads towards the kitchen with Sophie. She stops him just outside the entrance and gives him a wry smile.

"I thought you could use a hand," she says conspiratorially. "From one in-law to another."

"Ah. Thank you."

"Anytime. I know how overwhelming it can be. You're doing great. And thank you for being so great with the girls. They slept for the whole drive so they're wired now."

Ilya smiles, genuinely this time. "They are so cute. I play dolls with them anytime."

"I'm sorry we couldn't make it to the wedding," she says. "But congratulations again! I'm really happy for you guys."

"Thank you. And do not be sorry, Shane told me you had a family emergency?"

"Yeah, my dad had a stroke," she shakes her head and sighs. "He's doing a lot better now. But we had to move to Niagara for a couple months so I could help my mom out."

"I am sorry to hear that. I'm glad he's doing better," he says. He considers what he'd like to say next, because he could open up here. He wants to befriend her, and it might help if he shared something equally personal. But...he doesn't want to think about his father right now, let alone talk about him, so he settles on finishing with, "and I'm sure they must have appreciated having you around."

She smiles. "Thank you. You're sweet. Alright, I'm releasing you! Go fulfill your son-in-law duties."

In the kitchen, David beckons him over to the stove where three platters of chicken parmesan lay in dishes on the cooktop. "C'mere. I need your seal of approval before I serve this. Then would you mind putting together the salad?"

"Of course not."

The chicken parmesan is as delicious as always, and Ilya tells David as much. Putting the salad bowls together is boring, grounding work. It's exactly what he needs right now, along

with some quiet, which David seemed to understand immediately, because they're working in silence.

The day had been dragging, but the rest of the evening starts to fly by. They eat buffet style and spread around the main floor of the house. They naturally divide by age, with the younger generation taking over the family room with everyone else in the dining room. He and Shane eat side by side on the couch, and Ilya lets the various conversations taking place in the room wash over him. Shane laces their hands together and begins to rub his thumb over Ilya's knuckles. He's not sure whether he's trying to soothe Ilya, soothe himself, or both, but Ilya's thankful regardless.

Eventually, Ilya finds himself back at their house with seven people to help settle in for the night. It's after 11 PM now, and Cleo and Claire have completely tired themselves out. They're fast asleep in their parents arms, so everyone is being mindful and talking in hushed tones. Anya had run to the front door the moment they'd unlocked it, barking in delight because her parents were finally home, and Ilya had dropped to his knees to try and shush her. Yuki had joined him on the ground, the expression on her face the happiest he'd seen all night when she laid eyes on Anya. Ilya understands; animals are the best. Yuki is the one petting her now, and Ilya can tell Anya approves of her.

"There are three spare rooms, two upstairs and one in the basement," Shane says. "The basement room is the biggest. James, Sophie, do you guys wanna take that one?"

Shane takes charge of sorting the sleeping arrangements, and Ilya helps everyone with their belongings. Everyone except Emi, of course.

It's nearly midnight by the time Ilya and Shane get into bed, freshly showered and absolutely exhausted. Shane had tried to start something in the shower, since he'd never gotten Ilya off earlier, but Ilya had claimed to be too tired. A flimsy lie for him, where sex was concerned. They've shared a lot of sleepy orgasms over the years. What would that be...the sixth or seventh time he's shut Shane down in one way or another over the past month? It's starting to get old. He's starting to wonder if his dick is actually broken. He hasn't even masturbated once in three whole weeks.

"Well. That was a lot," Shane says, pulling the covers over his legs.

"Yes, it was. They are very nice, your family."

"Yeah?"

"Mm-hmm." Ilya's eyes are closing of their own accord. They're so heavy. "They love each other lots. You can tell." He yawns and buries his face in his pillow. "I'm sorry if I was too quiet."

Shane wraps himself around him, pulling Ilya's head to his chest. When he starts to card his fingers through his hair, Ilya feels his eyes burn with tears. "You were perfect," Shane murmurs. "Hey. Are you feeling okay?"

Ilya just nods, not trusting his voice at the moment. All he needs to do is sleep. He'll feel better in the morning. Shane kisses the top of his head and Ilya falls asleep to the calming sound of Shane's breaths and the soothing sensation of his hair being stroked.

A few hours later, his sleep gets cut short when he's jolted awake from a nightmare. His heart is racing and his stomach is churning and—*fuck*, he can't breathe. He stumbles out of bed as quietly as he can and holes himself up in the bathroom, hoping Shane doesn't wake up. Fuck. Fucking hell, he wants his mom. He just wants his mom. She was right *there*, and then she—Ilya groans quietly, bringing a shaky hand up to scrub against his eyes.

Get it together, you worthless piece of shit. You're ruining things again.

He's back in bed ten minutes later. Shane hasn't stirred, and Ilya sighs in relief, settling back in bed next to him. He blinks at his husband's face blearily, eyes heavy with sleep and irritated from his stupid tears. "Merry Christmas," he whispers, and tries to fall back asleep.

Shane wakes at precisely 8 AM and silences his alarm. He checks Ilya's sleeping form, and frowns at how dark the circles under his eyes are. "Merry Christmas," he says quietly.

Christmas mornings used to be Shane's favourite thing in the world. Well, besides hockey. He believed in Santa for probably a little too long, but only because his parents tried so hard to convince him of the lie. One year, they'd even gone so far as to leave a trail of soot coloured footprints leading from the fireplace to the Christmas tree. He'd been heartbroken when he found out it was all pretend, and he'd felt more than a little betrayed. But he'd gotten over it, and now he's glad that his parents tried so hard to keep the magic of Christmas alive. Maybe most of that magic has faded after all these years, but there's a smidge that will never die, he's sure of it.

There's a lot to do this Christmas. Lots of mouths to feed means lots of food to prepare. Christmas dinner will be at their house tonight, and everyone's due to arrive at 4 PM, so it's time to get started on breakfast. He's sure the twins will want to open presents as soon as they wake up, and Shane, Sophie and James had made sure they were all under the tree before they'd gone to sleep, so for all he knows they're already down there ripping open their gifts.

Shane once again decides to let Ilya sleep for as long as he needs, and he gets out of bed.

As soon as he leaves the bedroom, he runs into Emi and Yuki in the hallway, clad in their pajamas, whispering in Japanese. A strange spike of jealousy makes itself known—he wishes, sometimes, that he could speak his mother's language fluently like she can, but he only knows enough to understand bits and pieces. After he's proficient in Russian, he can brush up on his Japanese.

"Hey, good morning. Merry Christmas," he says.

"Merry Christmas," they chorus.

"Everything okay?"

“Oh, yeah! We were just talking about what to do for breakfast,” Emi says.

“Ah. Is there something you want specifically? I was just heading down to get started on it.”

“Well, we thought we could make it, if that’s okay? It’s the least we can do,” Yuki says softly.
“You should relax.”

Shane is touched. “Are you sure? You guys are probably exhausted.”

“Nah, we’re kicking jet lag’s ass,” Emi says. “You down for some Japanese breakfast?”

Shane nods, shooting them a smile. “Yeah, of course. I don’t think I’ve had Japanese breakfast since...well, since I lived at home. Mom used to make it sometimes.”

“Do you think the kids will like it?” Yuki asks. “Are they picky eaters?”

“I don’t think they are...you’d have to ask Sophie or James. Or Lisa, even. But I think they’ll like it. I always really liked those little omelets, and *I* was a picky eater.”

“Tamagoyaki? Yes, we were thinking of making those.”

The three of them head downstairs, where they’re immediately greeted by Anya. It seems like they’re the first people to surface—there are no signs of anyone downstairs. Shane heads to the family room to find something Christmassy to put on for background noise. He settles on *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and then he joins his cousins in the kitchen. He can restart it when the kids come up.

“Do you have the ingredients for miso?” Emi asks.

“Um...we have tofu, I think. And mushrooms and green onions.”

“That’s fine, we brought miso paste and dashi from home.”

Shane laughs. “You were really planning this, huh?”

“Of course. It’s been ages since we’ve seen you outside of a screen! There’s no way we weren’t gonna do at least *one* nice thing for you on this trip.”

Shane starts the coffee maker and takes out three mugs. “You both drink coffee, right?” he asks, belatedly.

“Yes. Emi takes hers with a scary amount of sugar,” Yuki says.

“Leave me alone,” Emi grumbles. “You’re a freak for drinking it black.”

“You know, you guys are pretty much the same as I remember you,” Shane says.

“Last time we saw each other was *obaachan*’s 80th, right? I’m still seventeen at heart, that’s why,” Emi says. “I refute being twenty-five.”

“I think we’ll be like this when we’re eighty too,” Yuki says.

They work in tandem while Shane sits back and watches. When the coffee is ready, he fixes cups for both of them. It's nice hanging out with them like this. They're the cousins he'd seen the least growing up. Lisa and James lived in Toronto and they'd seen each other multiple times a year for birthdays, holidays, and random family trips. But he'd only see Emi and Yuki once a year, at most. The longest stretch of time he'd spent with them had been a summer in Japan when he was eleven, and they were six and four. That summer is vivid in his memories—it had been hot and humid and sticky to the point of discomfort, but so much fun that he didn't mind that much. Yuki probably doesn't even remember it, but she'd followed him around like a duckling all summer.

Seeing them so rarely just meant that whenever they did see each other, they'd have a lot to catch up on. And that was nice, because they didn't have to work too hard to think up conversational topics. But even so, he doesn't want another eight years to go by before he sees them again. He should try harder to stay in touch with them. Now, Emi chats his ear off about teaching karate part time while also trying to pursue music, and when pressed, Yuki chimes in with stories about what it's like being a manga artist.

"Wait, I knew you were an artist. But you've been published?" Shane asks.

Yuki blushes and tucks a stray piece of hair behind her ear. It slips right back out because it's too short to be tucked. "Yeah. I was first published just over a year ago."

"Congratulations! Why didn't I know about this?"

Emi sighs. "First, because she uses a pen name. So even if you knew the manga, you wouldn't know it was her. And second, because she's pathologically modest and begs our mother not to go bragging to people—especially family."

"I just like to keep it quiet. If it comes up naturally, it comes up."

Emi shakes her head. "If I were a bestselling mangaka I'd want people to know it was me."

"I like the anonymity," Yuki says mildly.

"*Bestselling?*" Shane says.

Emi nods sagely. "The rights were optioned for an anime adaptation this fall. How do you think it feels to be me? Sister to a soon to be internationally renowned author, and cousin to the best hockey player in the world. At least you're not famous in Japan, Shane. That would really suck."

Yuki's blush deepens, and Shane shakes his head in bewilderment. Emi looks up and laughs at them. "I'm kidding. I'll be famous one day too, anyway. Mark my words!" She flips her hair back and continues to whisk her eggs.

A few minutes later, Aunt Mei and Lisa surface and join them in the kitchen.

"Good morning! Merry Christmas!"

The chatter increases tenfold with the two of them in the fray, and Shane gets out more mugs.

“Lisa, are Cleo and Claire picky eaters?” Yuki asks.

“No, not at all! They’re foodies in the making. Honestly, those kids would try anything. I have this one student who only eats...”

Shane lets himself zone out for a few moments., the sound of the conversations surrounding him fading. He can already tell he’s going to crash later. This is a lot of socializing. Aunt Mei sits next to him at the kitchen island, and nudges his shoulder, snapping him out of it.

“Morning, kiddo. Thanks for letting me stay with you cool kids. I hope I’m not crashing your party.”

“You could never, Auntie,” Shane says. “It’s no problem. You’re welcome anytime.”

She sips her coffee. “It was lovely to meet Ilya last night. He’s a sweet boy.”

Shane smiles. “Isn’t he?”

“He isn’t what I was expecting. Although, I know I shouldn’t have been expecting anything in particular. One shouldn’t make assumptions about others. Anyway, you did well. *Very* well.” She flashes him a grin. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Shane says quietly. “Sorry for...you know. All of the secrecy.”

“The rest of us got over that pretty fast, don’t worry. I get why you did it. I just want you to know that you could have trusted me. Any of us. Really, Shane. But we don’t hold it against you at all.”

Shane ducks his head. She grips his shoulder and gives it a squeeze. “I love you. Don’t be a stranger next time you’re in Vancouver, okay? I’ll take you guys to dinner after a game.”

He nods. “Okay. I love you too.”

Shane had known, logically, that he had nothing to be nervous about. But how positive everyone had been last night and hearing his aunt say all of this has helped to dissolve that last kernel of anxiety. He feels whatever remaining tension he’d been holding onto melt away.

A few minutes later, the telltale sound of excited children on Christmas morning finally arrives.

“Merry Christmas!!!” The twins run into the kitchen in matching red and white fair isle patterned pajamas, followed by their parents, each decked out in the adult versions.

“Come on, come on!” Cleo says. “We all have to go to the tree!”

So breakfast preparations get put on hold in favor of opening presents. The only gifts under the tree are ones for the girls, and they keep their audience enraptured with a steady stream of commentary as they open each one.

“I’m glad Santa found us in your house, Uncle Shane,” Claire says, pushing up her glasses. They’re the thing that really helps him tell the difference between her and her sister. “I thought he’d get mixed up for sure!”

“Santa doesn’t get mixed up, Claire! He’s magic!”

“Well, just because he’s a magic guy doesn’t mean he can’t make mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes.”

“Everybody has those days!” Emi sings.

The twins look at her, confused. Emi, stricken, stares down Sophie and James accusingly. “You haven’t shown them Hannah Montana? Well, I can fix that.”

Shane glances at his watch. It’s nearly 9:30. He’ll give Ilya...ten more minutes before he goes to wake him up. Breakfast is almost ready, anyway.

When the girls are finished opening their presents, they sit down to watch *Charlie Brown* with their mom from the beginning, and the rest of the adults head back to the kitchen.

At the kitchen table, Shane checks his phone notifications. There’s several merry Christmas texts from his friends—one from Hayden, along with a picture of Jackie and the kids opening gifts by the tree, one from Rose, one from JJ, and one from Farah. There’s also a couple from his new teammates, Wyatt and Bood. There’s even one from Harris, which he hadn’t been expecting at all, but it’s appreciated. He shoots off his replies and when he’s done, he checks the time again.

“Breakfast will be ready in five minutes!” Yuki says.

“Great, thank you so much. Give me a sec, I’m gonna go get Ilya.”

Shane heads up to their bedroom, the clinking sounds of cutlery fading the farther away from the kitchen he gets. When Shane arrives at their bedroom, Ilya is completely hidden under the covers.

“Ilya? It’s nearly 10. Breakfast is almost ready,” he says, sitting on the bed and placing a hand on the Ilya sized lump under their duvet. He shakes him lightly. “Are you up?”

“Not really,” Ilya croaks. “Sorry. I’m tired.”

“You’ve gotten over nine hours,” Shane says, quickly calculating. He’d watched Ilya fall asleep last night, and he remembers what time it had been. “It’s okay if you need more, though. We can save some breakfast for you to eat later.”

“Not hungry,” Ilya says, and Shane’s mental alarm bells start quietly ringing.

He fully crawls into bed and gently tugs the covers down from Ilya’s head. His husband’s face is smushed into his pillow, and his breathing is labored. The alarm bells reach full volume and Shane’s heart sinks like a rock in a pool. He rubs a hand down Ilya’s back, hoping the touch will soothe him.

“Hey,” he whispers. “Hey. You’re okay.”

“Sorry,” Ilya croaks again, and Shane’s heart breaks. “I’m fine. Go downstairs and be with your family. I’ll come down soon.”

Shane lies down next to him and moves his hand from Ilya’s back to his head of curls. “I think I’ll stay here, actually. Hey. Look at me.”

Ilya shakes his head, so Shane pulls out the big guns. “Baby,” he whispers. “Look at me.”

It takes a moment, but Ilya unburies his face from his pillow and looks at him. His eyes are red-rimmed and he looks completely exhausted. Shane cups his cheek. A loud shriek of laughter sounds from downstairs—the twins, undoubtedly.

“Shane,” Ilya says, his eyes filling with tears. “I don’t want to ruin Christmas.”

“Fuck Christmas, Ilya. You’re not ruining anything.” Ilya sniffs and tucks himself closer to Shane, resting his head just under his chin. It never gets easier, seeing Ilya hurting like this. Whenever he cries, Shane feels like his heart is being crushed, but he knows it’s nothing compared to how Ilya must be feeling. His sweatshirt grows damp where Ilya has his face tucked, and Shane continues to card his hand through his hair, lightly scratching his scalp.

“What’s going on, baby? Do you want to call Galina?”

Ilya shakes his head and sniffs again. “She has day off. It can wait.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Shane. I’m not going to...I’m just feeling off.”

Shane’s heart races and races. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. But I will. Just give me a few minutes.”

“Okay. If I bring up some breakfast, will you eat it here?”

Ilya nods and untangles himself from Shane’s hold, scrubbing a hand across his face. He looks at him miserably. “Merry Christmas. Sorry for crying on you. I have a better gift, I promise.” Shane shakes his head and kisses him, morning breath be damned.

“Stop apologizing. I’ll be back in a couple minutes with the food, okay?”

“Okay.”

Back downstairs, the table has been set and the others are helping themselves to food. The distinctive salty scent of miso soup permeates the air. Yuki’s the only one not at the table, and she looks at him as she closes the fridge, frowning in concern. “Are you okay?” she asks. He wonders what his face is doing for her to be looking at him like that.

“Yeah, um. You wouldn’t mind if I ate upstairs with Ilya, would you?”

“No, of course not. Here, I’ll help you put it together. Do you have trays?”

“Yeah, we do.”

The two of them start on filling a tray with enough soup, rice, vegetables and mini omelettes for both Shane and Ilya.

“Hey, do you want to learn some Japanese?” Emi asks the twins at the table. “In Japan, we always say a specific word before we eat to give thanks for the food and to honor everything and everyone that made the meal possible.”

“What’s the word?” Claire asks curiously.

“*Itadakimasu.*” Emi says it slowly and clearly, and the twins repeat it back dutifully. “Very good! Now, clasp your hands together like this, and say it again. Then we eat!”

Shane tears his eyes away from the table. “Thank you again for making breakfast. It looks great,” he says quietly to Yuki.

“You’re welcome. We’ll help out with dinner too.”

“No, no, please. Let us handle that.”

She glances at him and nods. “If you’re sure.”

“I’ll put Lisa and James to work, if anything. It’s their turn,” he jokes.

“We’ll gladly help, Shane!” James calls from the table. “Lisa is useless in the kitchen, though.”

“Hey!”

“It’s true.”

They finish filling the tray, and Yuki pours a glass of water and a mug of coffee. “For Ilya,” she says. “You don’t need more, right?” Shane shakes his head no. “How does he take it?”

“Two sugars and some cream.”

She nods. “I’ll carry the drinks, you carry the tray.”

“Enjoy your romantic breakfast in bed!” Lisa teases when they head for the stairs.

Halfway up the stairs, Yuki speaks again, soft as ever. “Is he okay?”

Shane bites his lip. “Yeah. He’s just a bit tired.”

Yuki hums. “Well, I hope he’s feeling better soon.”

“Me too.”

Shane nudges open the bedroom door. Ilya's in the bathroom, he can hear the faucet running. He rests the tray of food on the bed and Yuki hands him the water and coffee. She gives him a smile and heads back downstairs, and Shane exhales.

"Ilya? I have the food."

"Okay, I'm coming."

"It's Japanese breakfast, courtesy of my cousins," Shane says when Ilya surfaces from the bathroom.

"Looks good. Smells good."

They settle on the bed and start to eat. Ilya's eyes look dull, and his expression is eerily blank. Shane watches him sip his miso soup, and eat forkfuls of rice and rolled omelets, and resists the sudden urge he gets to feed him himself.

"Could you talk for a bit?" Ilya asks. "Just...tell me what I've missed this morning. Then I'll talk after."

"Yeah, sure," Shane says. So he tells him all about how Christmas morning has gone so far, and watches as slowly but surely, some light starts to reach his eyes again.

"The twins. Do you think they will like making gingerbread houses later?" Ilya asks.

"Of course they will. They asked for you already, you know."

"They can come with us to walk Anya. Yuki too."

"That would be nice," Shane says.

Ilya sighs and sets his empty coffee mug on the side table. He runs a hand through his hair, and looks at Shane, before averting his eyes again. "Okay. I...do not think this medication is working."

Oh. "Oh, shit. Ilya."

"Mm-hmm, it's shit. I've been on it...four months now? In the beginning, it helped. But not so much anymore."

"Have you noticed any side effects?"

Ilya sighs again and shrugs. "Well, my dick doesn't work. And I'm sure you've noticed too."

Shane nibbles on his lower lip and nods. "I've been wondering."

"I'm sorry. I hope it hasn't been too...disappointing."

"What? Ilya, no. I've been...curious, worried. Not disappointed. Sex isn't everything."

"No," Ilya agrees. "But it's a good chunk."

Shane gives him a stern look. "I haven't been disappointed, I mean it. But I know it must be really frustrating for you. What else has been going on?"

Ilya sighs. "Nightmares are bad again. I am tired all the time, no matter how much I sleep. Everything is shit. And I was hoping to make it through holidays before bringing this up," Ilya admits. "Brain had other plans."

"Fuck, I'm sorry," Shane says. "I really wish you weren't going through this."

Ilya shakes his head, mouth twisted into a sharp frown. "I wanted to be...normal for your family. I tried." His eyes fill with tears again and Shane swears under his breath and pulls him into a tight hug. "I'm sorry you have to deal with this. With me."

"Ilya, stop. Please stop apologizing. This isn't your fault, it's not something you can... control, okay?" he says. "And don't worry about the others. They love you already. Plus, I honestly don't think there's a normal person in this family. Whatever 'normal' even means."

Ilya laughs wetly. "You might be right, actually." Shane laughs too, and presses his cheek to Ilya's shoulder.

"I spent years trying to be normal and it killed me inside. You know I'm still...trying to work through that shit. And I know it's not the same as what you're going through, but one thing I do know now is suppressing shit is never good. I don't give a fuck if it's my birthday, or Christmas, or our wedding anniversary or what. If you aren't feeling well I want you to tell me, so I can help you feel better sooner."

"Okay."

"Yeah?"

"Mm-hmm. Same goes for you."

They hold each other for a few more moments. "I really am sorry that Christmas so far has been shitty," Shane says. "You were looking forward to it."

"Oh, well. It can still be salvaged if your parents bring the jam cookies later."

"They made so many of those this year now that they know you love them."

"Really?"

"Really."

The two of them stack up the empty dishes on the tray and Ilya tells him he's feeling well enough to head downstairs. They decide to call Galina tomorrow, and bump up Ilya's next appointment. He won't be able to go until after New Year's but he assures Shane that he'll be fine for the next few days and Shane believes him.

Shane thinks he's justified in thinking that everyone loves Ilya already because when the two of them get downstairs, it's like his presence brightens the whole room. The day had gotten

off to a shaky start, but Shane feels hopeful about the rest of it.

Ilya, Shane, Yuki, Sophie and the twins all take Anya for her walk. The weather is snowy, like it had been yesterday, and the girls seem to want to play in the fresh coating of snow just as much as Anya does. This, naturally, leads to a snowball fight as soon as they get back home. Lisa, James and Emi join the fray when they notice the commotion, and after a good fifteen minutes of slinging snow at each other, the whole group is soaked and freezing. They head inside for hot chocolate, and they sip it around the fire in the family room. Emi and Yuki set up a game of shogi, and Sophie puts on *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* for the twins.

Before he knows it, it's after one o'clock and time to start preparing for dinner. He takes over the kitchen with Ilya, James and Lisa, and the four of them spend a couple hours chatting while they season meat and chop vegetables and pop various dishes into the oven. The smell of baked turkey takes over the whole house, and it has Anya sniffing and scavenging around the kitchen like crazy. Shane knows Ilya will take pity on her later and give her some scraps. While they work, Lisa complains endlessly about the state of the healthcare system and how understaffed they are at her hospital and they all let her because she deserves to let off some steam, and James promises to send Shane and Ilya advance copies of the million dollar video game he's developing. This news had thrilled Ilya, and the conversation centered around video games for slightly too long, if Lisa's expression was anything to go by.

Everyone naturally disperses at around 3:30 to get ready for dinner, and Shane takes the opportunity to check in with Ilya.

"I'm...okay," he says. "How are you doing?"

"Me? I'm fine." Shane considers. "I'm getting a little tired, I guess. If I'm quiet tonight that's why."

"What's the plan for tomorrow again?"

"James wants us to take the kids skating at the skate trail. And I think mom made dinner reservations at Alora."

"Skate trail? When we could take them to the rink and give them VIP treatment?"

"For the ambiance. They put up Christmas lights on all the trees. It's really pretty, I went all the time when I was younger. And you know we would've had to have planned ahead to get them access to the rink."

Ilya waves him off. "I am captain! Would be fine. But skate trail sounds nice too. Anyway, sounds like we can have the morning to ourselves."

"We can," Shane says. "I'm sure they'll survive without us for a few hours."

"Do you think your cousins could make breakfast again? It was good."

Shane smiles. "I think they will."

Shane and Ilya position themselves near the door at five to four, and Shane takes a moment to check his husband out. He looks way hotter than anyone in a fair isle sweater should have any right to look, but he's Ilya Rozanov. He looks good in everything. Shane kisses him right as the doorbell rings and he springs away, startled. Ilya laughs in his face. A moment later, both he and Ilya are enveloped in back to back hugs from his parents and there's a chorus of "Merry Christmases" all around. Food is carried to the kitchen, including a massive tray of jam cookies, and Ilya sneaks one and pops the whole thing in his mouth.

The rest of the evening goes even better than Shane had hoped. A gingerbread house decorating competition ensues, and Emi insists on it being Team Japan versus. Team Canada, like they're in the Olympics. Shane knows the competition is rigged for Team Canada, because Cleo and Claire are on it, but he's not complaining.

"This is the best gingerbread house I have ever seen," Ilya says. "Look at the detail here!" The detail in question is a blob of icing forming an unidentifiable shape next to the gingerbread door. "You are so talented! And I love this gummy placement! Much better than whatever Shane was trying to do." The twins giggle and Shane shakes his head in amusement.

"He's gonna be their favourite uncle for the rest of eternity, isn't he?" he asks Sophie.

"Oh, yeah. You've been demoted for sure," she says, giving him a sympathetic grin. Shane had never stood a chance, really.

Team Japan's house is genuinely impressive and intricately decorated. They'd had the advantage of having Yuki, and Aunt Ayane, who'd been an artist herself back in the day. But nobody is upset when Aunt Michelle and Aunt Kaori—the appointed judges—announce Team Canada's win.

Soon enough, dinner has been served and eaten and the sound of lively conversations in both English and Japanese fills the house. Shane and Ilya are in and out of the kitchen, ferrying the dirty plates from the dining room to the kitchen sink, and eventually Shane bumps into Ilya while he's exiting the kitchen and Shane's entering it. Shane nearly drops the stack of plates he's holding. Just when he's about to apologize, a tiny voice yells "Kiss, kiss!!"

Shane and Ilya both swivel their heads to look at Cleo, who's pointing somewhere above their heads. The din of conversation begins to hush and a distinctly Lisa sounding cackle rises above it. Shane sighs and looks up, and sure enough, there's mistletoe hanging where there definitely wasn't any before.

Ilya grins. "We've got an audience. Why don't we give them a show?"

"Nothing too crazy! There are five year olds present," Shane hisses.

"We're nearly six!" Cleo says. Lisa starts to laugh again, and soon enough everyone's joining in. Emi starts a "kiss, kiss, kiss! But only if you want to!" chant and Shane's shoulders begin to shake with laughter of his own.

"I think we have to kiss, Hollander."

“I think so too.”

Ilya kisses him, hard enough that Shane nearly loses his grip on the plates again, and a round of cheers and applause erupts from the family room. Shane grins against Ilya's mouth then ducks his head, breaking the kiss. He's giddy and embarrassed all at once to be kissing his husband underneath a sneakily hung mistletoe on Christmas, surrounded by nearly every person that he loves and who also loves him. For so long, he'd never thought he could have this, and part of him still can't believe he does. But he's so grateful for it. He'll hold onto it, and cherish it, and never let it go.

“I love you,” he whispers into Ilya's chest. “So much.”

“I love you too, *solnyshko*.”

“God, you two are cute,” Lisa says. “You should thank me for hanging that up!”

Towards the end of night, Shane finds himself in the kitchen, clearing up with Ilya and his parents.

“How are you feeling, sweetheart? You did a lovely job hosting. I know it must have been a lot,” Yuna says.

“It kind of was. But I'm feeling good,” Shane says honestly.

“And you, Ilya? It's a lot of new people. You haven't complained even once!”

“Why would I complain? Is very nice, nothing to complain about. Your family is wonderful.”

Yuna smiles at him indulgently and pats him on the cheek. “Such good manners. Well, they're your family now, too.”

“I wouldn't hold it against you if you complained about Mike,” David chimes in. “Just saying. Matter of fact, I give blanket permission.” Shane snorts at this, and that sets everyone else laughing.

“Oh! Your presents are in your room. I snuck them up earlier.”

“Mom, you didn't have to—”

“Yes, we did. You're our boys, you're crazy if you think we'll stop giving you presents!”

“Okay, well, thank you.”

“Thank *you* for yours. I'd been telling your dad that we needed to replace that recliner for years—”

“It held up well!”

“—and this one is much, much nicer. More comfortable too—”

“The old one was comfortable.”

“Oh, just admit it, this one is better.”

The night winds down, ending with everyone lounging around sipping wine, and in David and Ilya’s case, vodka. Cleo and Claire are fast asleep on a blanket on the floor, Anya wedged in between them, also fast asleep. Both Sophie and Ilya are taking pictures of them.

Once everyone staying at Shane’s parents’ house has left, and James and Sophie have put the kids to bed, they stay up later than they’d originally planned, talking and drinking (ginger ale, in Shane’s case) and playing cards.

Emi, everyone quickly finds out, is a morose drunk. And she prefers to speak Japanese, because she keeps slipping in and out of English. She commiserates with Ilya over how stupid the English language is. It gets very heated.

“I miss Hana,” she says, head cradled in her arms, morose again after losing her fifth card game against Ilya in a row. “I wish she could have come. She would help me beat you.”

“Who’s Hana?”

“My girlfriend.”

Shane nearly chokes on his ginger ale. “You’re gay?”

“No, I’m bisexu—”

“Fuck yes!” Ilya exclaims. “I knew there was a reason I liked you! Come, give me high five! For bisexual solidarity.”

They try to high five and they both miss before dissolving into giggles.

“Shane, I post her on Instagram all the time! I thought you knew!”

“He never goes on Instagram,” Ilya says. “Don’t take it personal.”

“I really don’t. Sorry,” he says.

There’s something...really fucking nice about knowing that he’s not the only queer person in his family, and it’s hard to keep the grin off of his face. He’ll have to talk to her more about it.

Sophie convinces everyone to try to play a card game called Kalooki that she grew up playing with her family, but they’re all too tipsy to remember the rules besides Shane. He, of course, memorizes every single rule and is the only one taking the game seriously. It descends into chaos very quickly.

They call it a night at just after 1 AM. His mind had long ago gone into shutdown mode—he’s been running on fumes for hours. He’s certain that he’ll fall asleep as soon as his head

hits the pillow, he's so fucking tired, but he doesn't. Instead, as soon as his head hits the pillow, he jolts back up. "Your present. I forgot it."

Ilya giggles sleepily. "Oh, fuck, I forgot yours too."

Shane heads to the walk-in closet and rummages for where he'd hidden it. His fingers eventually brush the familiar material of wrapping paper and he pulls it out.

Back on the bed, Ilya's sitting cross-legged with an envelope in his hand.

"You know I'm not great with gifts," Shane says, feeling the need to remind him.

"You're selling yourself short. You are not so bad."

"Not a glowing review, but okay. Anyway. Merry Christmas."

He hands Ilya the gift and stands nervously while he unwraps it. Inside, there's a large Italian leather photo album. Ilya glances up at him with wide eyes before focusing back on the album and cracking it open. Shane had filled it about a quarter full with as many pictures as he could find of them over the years. There's a noticeable lack of photos from the early days of their relationship, but he thinks the rest make up for it. A whole two pages are dedicated to pictures of them and Mom and Dad at the cottage, another one dedicated to them with Anya. There's a few of Ilya, Shane, Svetlana and Rose from when they'd all managed to meet up in September. A handful of them with the Pike kids and Jackie (Hayden had been an intentional exclusion).

"Shane..."

"It's a family photo album. You can fill it up with more. You take a lot of pictures, and I know you like to post them online, but I thought you'd like a physical place to put them too," he says in a rush. "And you can put it on the coffee table."

"It's perfect," Ilya says wetly. "I love it, sweetheart. Thank you."

Shane exhales, relieved. "You're welcome." He takes a seat next to Ilya and rests his chin on his shoulder.

"I have many pictures I can add from tonight," Ilya says. "It will get filled in no time. This is so perfect I don't want to give you mine now."

Shane laughs. "Can I have my present? Pretty please?"

"Well, since you asked so nicely." Ilya hands him the envelope. Inside lie round trip first class tickets to Tokyo for the first two weeks of July.

"What the hell? Ilya!"

"You want to go?"

“Yes, I want to go! You literally just asked me yesterday if I wanted to—Oh. You were making sure.”

Ilya shrugs. “Yes. I just wanted to double check.”

Shane will need to brush up on his Japanese sooner than he’d realized, but he’s up for the challenge. “It’s going to be hot as hell. Just warning you. But I think you’re going to love it. You know what would be nice? Going to an onsen ryokan. One of those luxury ones. I was watching this YouTube video about them the other day and they look so nice—”

Ilya shuts him up with a kiss. “Sweetheart, I am very glad you are excited. But I am also very tired. Please tell me more about this onsen place in the morning?”

Shane smiles sheepishly. “Okay. In the morning.”

“Mm-hmm. Let’s sleep.”

When the room is cloaked in darkness with only pale moonlight casting shadows around the room, Shane feels himself drifting off to the calming sound of Ilya breathing. “Goodnight. I love you,” he says. Ilya says it back in Russian, and Shane’s mind succumbs to the deep sea of sleep.

Ilya has always found that the last day of holiday break seems to end the quickest. He guesses the dread of having to get back to reality the next day tends to suck some of the joy out of it. Not that he isn’t ready to get back on the ice, because he is. He just wishes, especially when he’s feeling so run down, that he could have a little more time to collect himself. At least getting thrown back into the thick of the hockey season will probably distract him. Hopefully.

“What did she say?” Shane asks. There’s a look of guarded concern written all over his face, like he doesn’t want Ilya to see just how worried he actually is. This is futile; Ilya knows that Shane is terrified. He’s just gotten off a long phone call with Galina. It’s mid-afternoon, and the house is empty save for the two of them and Anya. Everyone else has gone out for lunch. Shane had recommended a place.

“My new appointment is January third. She says I can either up my dosage or ween off completely and try a different medicine. She wants me to think about it.”

Shane sighs, beckons him over to the couch and pulls him down onto his lap. “Did she say anything about withdrawal?”

“Not much. She will probably go into more detail when I see her. She says Merry Christmas, by the way.”

Shane smiles and kisses him softly. “Well, whatever you want to do, I’m with you, okay?”

Ilya nods and wraps his arms around Shane. He’s so warm. And he smells so nice—the same way he’s always smelled after all these years, because he’s used the same products since he was seventeen; a bit like laundry detergent, with a hint of bergamot, and his natural musk.

Ilya knows exactly how this scent is achieved, and he takes a quiet thrill in having all of Shane's hygiene products memorized just so that he can replenish them when he runs out.

"Can we go back to bed for a bit?" Ilya just wants to lie down with Shane some more. And Anya too. Later today, he'll go skating and have dinner with the family. Tomorrow, he and Shane will be back on the ice. The day after tomorrow, they'll be on a flight to Boston and playing against his old team. On New Year's Eve, they'll be playing a home game against Montreal and he knows Shane is anxious about it but pretending not to be, but all of Shane's family will be coming to that game, and Ilya has a feeling that will embolden him to forget all about Montreal. And then it will be 2022, and the days will keep coming, one after another after another, good ones and bad ones and terrible ones, and there will be so many things to do. But right now, there are none, and the only thing he wants to do is hold his husband for a while.

"Okay," Shane says softly. "Just for a bit."

They walk up to the bedroom, hands intertwined, Anya following at their heels, and Ilya wonders what things will look like this time next year. Probably similar; just the two of them at home on a sacred day off. Maybe next Christmas will be a better one, maybe not, and in the end, this one wasn't all bad. All he knows for certain is that Shane will be by his side, and that alone is something to look forward to.

End Notes

the end, i hope you enjoyed! i wanted to get this fic done faster (actually in time for christmas lol) but it was kind of hard to write while recovering from the flu lmao. the holiday season isn't over until the week after new year's in my opinion anyway!!!! i wish all of you a very VERY happy new year, i truly hope 2026 is kind to you all ❤️

some bonus content if anyone cares:

- ilya adds emi to the groupchat he has with svetlana and luca called “english can suck my ass! 🍑” he adds anyone he knows that has ever complained about the language to it. it's mostly a place to send memes.

- speaking of memes, spongebob is on ilya's mind because wyatt randomly rewatched the entire show and WON'T stop sending him spongebob memes

- uncle mike gets dumped on january 1st

- genuinely felt like it would be even more of a name overload if i included surnames but trust and believe i thought about those too. lol. they are as follows: o'connor for lisa and james and james' family, takahara for yuki and emi, hirano for ayane, mei and kaori, and i even picked a maiden name for yuna: okamoto. yes i am a crazy person

- everyone loved their presents

- the centaurs absolutely kicked montreal's ass on the new year's eve game. montreal goes home crying

- yuki sneakily drew a portrait of shane and ilya kissing under the mistletoe and she left it on the fridge for them to find the morning after she heads back to tokyo, ilya gets it framed immediately

- after going skating with shane and ilya, claire and cleo decide they want to be hockey players. this doesn't mean much, because earlier that same day they'd decided to be pop stars after emi had shown them hannah montana

- i could do this all day but i'll stop now. BYEEE

u can find me on my writing twitter @soieilies or my main @mapofthesoi orrr on tumblr @ronansslynch :))

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