dropping like flies

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/80838261.

Rating:	General 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
Additional Tags:	Married Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, Retired Hockey Player Shane Hollander, Retired Hockey Player Ilya Rozanov, Kid Fic, Sickfic, Domestic Fluff, Domestic, Sick Ilya Rozanov, Sick Shane Hollander, Vomiting, Parents Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander, Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov, POV Ilya Rozanov, POV Shane Hollander, why have one get sick when they can ALL get sick, Tooth-Rotting Fluff, Ilya Rozanov Takes Care of Shane Hollander, Shane Hollander Takes Care of Ilya Rozanov, One Shot, Not Beta Read, Fluff, Family Fluff, Slice of Life, shane and ilya taking care of their babies, and their babies taking care of shane, don't even get me started, also shane and ilya having a very clingy daughter feels soo correct to me, Girl Dads, Boy dads, Parent Shane Hollander, Parent Ilya Rozanov, Soft Ilya Rozanov, Soft Shane Hollander, computer make these guys super sick and affectionate, Post-Book 6: The Long Game (Game Changers), Parenthood, shane got his md in another fic in this series and now he's getting his nursing degree
Language:	English
Series:	Part 10 of Our House
Stats:	Published: 2026-03-09 Words: 7,036 Chapters: 1/1

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by hollanov_1410

Summary

Shane came through the door with four cases of Pedialyte stacked in his arms. Ilya had asked him to pick up one on the way home. One.

"Last time Niko had the flu, he liked the grape one best," Shane said, studying the cases with his brow furrowed. "But that was over a year ago. And his favorite Gatorade flavor right now is lemon-lime, so I figured it'd be safer just to get a variety pack—"

Ilya stood beside him and watched him unload the cases. There were times—many times—when Ilya's feeling of endearment toward Shane was so overwhelming, so consuming, that the only way he could describe it was that he wanted to crawl inside his skin and live there.

He settled for stepping in close and pressing a kiss to Shane's temple instead.

Or,

The flu sweeps through the Hollander–Rozanov household. Just as Shane thinks he's the last man standing, he goes down hard.

Notes

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

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

thank you for reading! xx

See the end of the work for more notes

Getting the kids out of the house on time was a battle most mornings. So when Ilya came into Niko's room and found him still dead asleep in a tangle of covers, it wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

"Niko." Ilya had already given him a five-minute warning. Ten minutes ago. "I'm telling you one more time. Get up, or I send your father in. And he will not be so nice about it."

Niko was still buried in the covers, completely still. Didn't utter a sound.

Ilya nudged him again. "Nikolai, come on. Don't pretend you cannot hear me."

Still nothing.

Ilya's heart spiked with genuine concern now. He didn't like how limp Niko felt under his hand, how there was zero resistance when he nudged him. He pushed harder this time, actually jostling him. "*Niko.*"

A groan finally escaped—low and miserable, words garbled into the pillow.

Ilya's chest eased slightly at the sound, but immediately tightened again when he registered the heat radiating off Niko's body even through the thick comforter.

Ilya furrowed his brow. He brushed his black hair back and put his hand on his forehead. He was burning up.

"Oh, *solnyshko*," Ilya murmured, his voice softening. "You are actually sick? Not just ignoring me on purpose to avoid math test?"

Niko cracked his eyes open. Bloodshot, skin pale and waxy, the look of someone who had been fighting something off in his sleep and losing. He stared at Ilya for a long moment like it was taking real effort to focus.

Then he pulled the covers back over his head with a weak hand and groaned, "S'too bright."

Ilya smoothed the blanket out around him automatically, then got up to pull the curtains closed. Ilya knew they were just a few years away from when Niko being a teenager, where there would inevitably be mornings where he was hungover and miserable and groaning about the light for entirely *different* reasons than a flu-induced headache. He tried not to think about that too hard.

He went back over to Niko's bed and leaned down, pressing a kiss to what he hoped was Niko's forehead through the blanket. "I'll get some medicine."

A muffled grunt that might have been an agreement.

Ilya found Shane in the kitchen, in the middle of the morning routine chaos. He was standing at the counter packing lunches with assembly-line efficiency—sandwiches cut into triangles because Max insisted they tasted better that way, apple slices in containers with a squeeze of

lemon so they wouldn't brown, carrots because Shane was convinced their children would develop scurvy without constant vegetable intervention even though Ilya still wasn't convinced that was a real disease.

Mila was at the table eating cereal, slurping it noisily, milk dribbling down her chin. It was the only brand of cereal Shane allowed in the house, some organic low-sugar thing that, in Ilya's honest opinion, tasted like a horrific hybrid of sawdust and cardboard. But Mila seemed to genuinely enjoy it, which remained one of the many inexplicable mysteries of parenthood. Ilya suspected it had something to do with the time he'd taken a loud, theatrical bite of it during a particularly committed hunger strike on her part—he had made deliberate eye contact, said *mmm* like it was the best thing he'd ever eaten in his life. She'd watched him with suspicious eyes for a long moment. Then ate the entire bowl.

Shane paused mid-sandwich-packing to lean over and wipe the milk from Mila's chin with practiced efficiency, barely breaking stride. He looked up when he heard Ilya's footsteps.

"Niko has turned into very ill Victorian child," Ilya announced solemnly.

Shane furrowed his brow. "He's sick?"

Ilya nodded, coming over to press a kiss to the top of Mila's bedhead. "Morning, *solnyshko*." Then to Shane: "Da. Fever."

"Shit," Shane muttered, already setting down the sandwich and wiping his hands on a dish towel. "How high?"

"Haven't checked yet."

Shane was already moving toward the doorway. "I'll go check on him. Can you finish this?"

Ilya was already reaching for the bread. "Go."

Having a sick 12-year-old and a very *not* sick 3-year-old at home was a more difficult task than Ilya had anticipated.

Mila had decided, with complete conviction, that Niko being home on a school day was a gift specifically for her. Niko had decided, with equal conviction, that he wanted to be unconscious.

These two positions were not compatible.

Ilya had given Mila very clear, very serious instructions before he started on dishes that morning. Stay in the living room. He'd even made her repeat it back to him, which she had, with great solemnity, maintaining full eye contact.

She lasted four minutes.

She ran into Niko's room at full speed. Socked feet sliding on the hardwood before she caught herself on the doorframe. She made a beeline straight for his bed and grabbed onto the duvet with both hands, yanking with her entire body weight. "Niko! Niko, wake up!"

Niko made a sound from somewhere deep under the covers that was less a word and more a physical protest. One bloodshot eye cracked open and found her immediately, squinting against the dim light.

Mila took this as encouragement. She hauled herself up onto the bed—with some effort, her little legs working hard—and settled in beside him, her stuffed dog tucked under one arm. She got her face approximately two inches from his. Studied him very seriously.

"You're sweaty," she said.

Niko coughed, the sound rattling and miserable. "'Cause I'm dying."

Mila frowned. "Dying?"

"Not, like, actually die," Niko mumbled, his voice thick with sleep. He shifted slightly, and his arm moved around her without him seeming to consciously decide to do it. "You shouldn't be in here, Mila. You're gonna get sick."

She held up her stuffed dog in response. Black and white, perpetually lopsided from years of being dragged everywhere. His name was Scoops—a corruption of Snoopy from back when she couldn't quite get the word right, and it had stuck so thoroughly that nobody in the house called him anything else anymore.

"Scoops will help," she said, with complete confidence.

Niko looked at Scoops. Then back at her. Despite everything, the corner of his mouth turned up. "Yeah?"

She nodded and settled herself more firmly into his side, tucking Scoops carefully onto his shoulder like she was placing him on guard duty.

Niko let her. He was too exhausted to do anything but. He closed his eyes again, his arm still loosely around her, her warm weight against his ribs.

Ilya appeared in the doorway a minute or two later, dish towel over his shoulder. He took in the scene—Niko flat on his back, Mila nestled into his side, Scoops stationed on his shoulder.

"Mila. I said stay out of your brother's room, remember? He is very germy. Very gross."

She didn't even look up at him. "Scoops' helping."

"Niko doesn't need Scoops' help right now—"

"He's helping," she said firmly.

Ilya exhaled through his nose and crossed the room. He scooped Mila up off the bed in one motion, earning an immediate wail of protest that Niko was definitely too sick to deserve. He hoisted her up against his chest, her legs wrapping around his middle, and bounced her once. It didn't stop the wailing but did redirect her attention enough that she grabbed onto his shirt instead of reaching back toward Niko.

"Sorry, *solnyshko*," Ilya murmured to Niko. He pressed the back of his free hand to Niko's forehead. Still warm. He reached for the Tylenol on the nightstand, measured the dosage one-handed with the efficiency of someone who had done it many times before, and held it out.

Niko looked at it. Then at Ilya. Then swallowed it down with a grimace.

"Alright," Ilya said, straightening up. "Say bye bye for now, Mila."

Mila, now resigned to her fate on Ilya's hip, looked back at her brother. She raised Scoops and made him wave one floppy arm.

"Stop dying, Niko."

"I'll try my best," Niko mumbled, already pulling the covers back over his head.

By the time Shane got home that evening, Niko had migrated downstairs. He was installed on the couch under what appeared to be every blanket in the house, pale and heavy-eyed, the TV on low in front of him. He wasn't really watching it. Just existing in the approximate direction of it.

Shane came through the door with four cases of Pedialyte stacked in his arms. Ilya had asked him to pick up one on the way home. One.

He set them on the kitchen island with a soft thud and started unpacking them, lining them up in a neat row.

"Last time Niko had the flu, he liked the grape one best," Shane said, studying the cases with his brow furrowed. "But that was over a year ago. And his favorite Gatorade flavor right now is lemon-lime, so I figured it'd be safer just to get a variety pack—"

Ilya stood beside him and watched him unload the cases. There were times—many times—when Ilya's feeling of endearment toward Shane was so overwhelming, so consuming, that the only way he could describe it was that he wanted to crawl inside his skin and live there.

He settled for stepping in closer and pressing a kiss to Shane's temple instead.

"Hopefully we will find something he likes," Ilya says solemnly. "I don't think you bought enough."

Shane chose to ignore him.

That night, Shane noticed Mila was off during her bath. He noticed because normally she spent the entire duration trying to get as much water onto the tile as physically possible, and tonight she was just sitting there, her little rubber duck held loosely in one hand, not really doing anything with it.

"Close your eyes, baby," he said gently, lathering her hair. She obeyed immediately, squeezing them tight the way she always did, both hands coming up to cover her face for good measure. He rinsed the shampoo out carefully, tipping her head back.

His hand lingered in her hair after. Warm. He frowned slightly after he stopped rinsing.

"You feeling okay?"

She nodded, making her duck splash once in the water. Halfheartedly.

Shane filed it away but didn't push. He lifted her out, wrapped her in her towel, and sat her on the bathmat. He was focused—getting her dry, working through the routine, her hair, her face, her arms—moving on autopilot the way you did after years of doing the same thing every night. He was reaching for her pajamas when he heard it.

"Dada."

He didn't get a chance to react. One awful, gut-wrenching heave, and she threw up on him. All over him. His shirt soaked through instantly, the smell hitting him immediately after.

He went rigid for one second.

Then Mila's startled cry broke through it, and he moved without thinking, gathering her in against him, wiping her mouth gently with the corner of the towel. "Oh," he said, keeping his voice steady even though his heart was hammering. "Oh, sweetheart, it's okay. You're okay."

She was already crying in that full-body way she had, her whole chest shaking with it.

"Ilya!"

Ilya appeared in the doorway a few seconds later. He took in the scene and winced. "Ah." He crossed the bathroom and crouched down beside them. "Another one down for the count."

Shane looked at him over the top of Mila's head helplessly.

Ilya's expression softened immediately. He reached out and rubbed slow circles on Mila's back. "Poor *malyshka*," he murmured. "Papa will get you all cleaned up, yes? Then lots of cuddles, lots of kisses. Doctor's orders."

He took Mila from Shane carefully, wrinkling his nose at the state of both of them. "Go shower," he said, already tucking Mila's head into the curve of his neck. "I've got her."

Shane nodded and went.

The rest of the night was a blur. Shane showered and threw everything into the wash—their clothes, the towels, the bathmat. While he was doing that, Mila threw up again in the tub while Ilya was giving her a second bath, which meant a *third* bath. Shane came in and took over at the tub while Ilya dealt with cleanup. They moved around each other without needing to talk about it, passing things back and forth, filling in whatever the other needed.

By the time Mila was finally clean and in fresh pajamas, she was barely keeping her eyes open, her head drooping against Shane's shoulder as he carried her to their room. He gently laid her down in the middle of the bed, and she didn't stir when he pulled the blanket over her.

Their bed that night was cramped. Mila was wedged between them, warm as a furnace, restless in a way where she couldn't get comfortable but couldn't wake up enough to do anything about it. She woke every hour or so to whimper or cry out, and one of them would murmur to her until she settled back down, and then they'd lie there in the dark waiting to do it again.

Shane was finally, finally drifting off—probably around two in the morning, based on the last time he'd looked at the clock—when a sound from the doorway pulled him back.

He opened his eyes.

Max was standing in the doorway, one hand on the frame, the other arm wrapped around his stomach. His face was pale and miserable in the dim light, his hair sticking up on one side.

"I threw up," he said weakly.

Shane was already sitting up.

"Okay," he said quietly, keeping his voice low so he didn't wake Mila and Ilya. He pushed back the covers and got to his feet, crossing the room to where Max was still standing in the doorway. Shane put a hand on the back of his neck—warm, but not burning yet—and steered him gently toward the bathroom.

"Let's get you sorted," Shane murmured.

Max didn't say anything. He just let Shane guide him, which told Shane everything about how bad he felt.

Shane got him cleaned up—rinsed his mouth out, wet a washcloth and pressed it to the back of his neck, got him into a fresh t-shirt. He sat with him on the bathroom floor after, back against the tub, while Max dry heaved again over the toilet, one hand braced on the seat. Shane kept his hand moving in slow circles on his back.

When it passed, Max sat back against Shane's side, knees pulled to his chest, breathing carefully through his nose. Shane put his arm around him. They stayed like that for a while, the bathroom quiet around them, the house dark.

"Come on," Shane said when Max started to droop. "You're coming with us tonight."

Max looked up at him, too tired to argue. "There's no room."

"We'll make room."

There wasn't, really. But they managed it anyway—Mila in between Shane and Ilya, Max on the other side of Shane. Everyone shifted and rearranged until it worked well enough. Ilya, who had woken up the moment they'd come in without making a thing of it, reached across in the dark and put his hand on Max's back.

"Go to sleep," Ilya said quietly.

Max was out within minutes.

The following day, Shane was very hesitant to leave Ilya at home with three sick kids, who were already dramatic enough when they *weren't* sick. He had stood in the doorway that morning with his keys in his hand, doing the mental math.

Ilya had pointed at the door. "Go. I have won games with broken ribs. I have had my teeth knocked out. I have had three concussions—"

"That's not reassuring—"

"Go, Shane."

He went.

By mid-afternoon, Ilya was reconsidering his confidence.

The chicken soup he was making had boiled over twice. He'd gotten it back under control both times, but only barely, and only because whatever crisis had pulled him away from the stove had resolved itself just quickly enough. He was working with a narrow margin.

Mila had reached a level of clinginess that Ilya could only describe as structural. She was on his hip. She was always on his hip. Every time he set her down—gently, carefully, with full warning—she lasted approximately forty-five seconds before the crying started. Not dramatic crying. Genuinely miserable, exhausted, *I-feel-terrible-and-I-need-you-right-this-second* crying, which was infinitely harder to do anything about. So she stayed on his hip. He stirred the soup one-handed. He answered the phone one-handed. He reminisced on his entire previous life, before children, when he had use of both arms at all times.

Niko was on the couch, which was fine. Niko sick was quiet and still and mostly self-sufficient at this stage, the worst of his symptoms gone. He'd set himself up with his blanket and a pillow and had barely moved in two hours except to occasionally emerge from his cocoon to ask for water or to retrieve his blanket from the floor where it had migrated again.

Sick Max was a different situation entirely.

Max was not quiet. Max was not still. Max felt terrible and wanted everyone in a five-foot radius to be aware of it at all times. He'd migrated from his room to the couch approximately an hour ago, after a stretch of not vomiting that had lasted long enough for Ilya to cautiously hope the worst was over. Which meant he and Niko were now sharing the couch. Which meant there had already been two arguments about blanket distribution, one about the TV volume—despite the fact that neither of them were actually watching whatever was playing—and one about Max breathing too loud.

"Papa," Max called from the end of the couch.

Ilya looked up from the soup he was stirring. "Yes?"

"Can you refill my water?"

Ilya turned the heat down on the burner, shifted Mila higher on his hip—she made a small protesting sound but didn't lift her head—and walked into the living room. He took Max's water bottle from his outstretched hand, went to the kitchen, refilled it with cold water from the filter, and brought it back.

Max took it and immediately took several large gulps.

Too large. Too fast.

Ilya saw it happen in real time. Max's face changed. He went pale, then paler, that grayish-green color that meant they had about five seconds. Ilya was already moving, already reaching for the trash bin they'd been keeping next to the couch, already getting it up under Max's chin before Max had fully registered what was happening.

Max grabbed the sides of the bin with both hands and threw the water back up, his whole body shaking with the effort. It was mostly liquid, which was better than earlier, but Max was gasping by the time it was over.

When he finally stopped, he sat back against the couch cushions, eyes watering, looking completely wrecked. "I hate this," he whispered.

"I know, *malysh*." Ilya set the bin down carefully and smoothed Max's sweat-damp curls back from his forehead. "I know. I'm sorry."

He needed to take the bin to the bathroom, dump it, rinse it out. But the moment he tried to set Mila down on the floor to free up his hands, she reached for him with both arms, her face already crumpling.

"Up," she insisted, her voice wobbling.

"Mila, Papa needs to—"

"Up, Papa. Up."

Her bottom lip was trembling now. She was going to cry. She was definitely going to cry.

Ilya looked at her. Looked at the bin full of regurgitated water. Looked back at her.

The only thing more unreasonable than a three-year-old was a sick three-year-old. A sick three-year-old who was half Rozanov.

He sighed and hoisted her back onto his hip with one arm, where she immediately melted back into him. He carried her and the bin to the bathroom, somehow managed to dump and rinse it one-handed while she clung to him, and brought it back to the living room. He checked on Niko, who had fallen asleep with his mouth open, blanket half on the floor. He pulled it back up. Checked Max's forehead again and stood there for a moment looking at his two boys, both of them finally still, finally quiet, Mila a dead weight on his shoulder.

The house settled around him. The soup was on low. Everyone was accounted for.

Ilya sat down carefully on the arm of the couch, just for a second, and exhaled slowly.

When Shane got home, the house was quiet in a way that immediately made him slow down.

The kids were all piled on the couch, asleep now—a tangle of blankets and limbs. Niko was curled up on one end, Max sprawled across the middle, Mila tucked against Max's side. All three of them out cold.

Shane set his bag down quietly and went looking for Ilya.

He found him in Niko's room, shirtless and in shorts despite the frigid weather, stripping the bed. The fitted sheet was half off the mattress, bunched in Ilya's hands.

Ilya had his back to the door, moving with that careful, deliberate slowness that Shane recognized immediately. The kind of movement that came from trying very hard to appear normal when you felt like shit. There was a thin sheen of sweat across his shoulders, visible even from here. His posture was too rigid, like he was holding himself together through sheer force of will.

"Ilya?"

He startled. Turned around too fast, then had to grip the bedpost to steady himself.

Shane took one look at his face—flushed, eyes glassy, hair damp at the temples. "You're sick."

"No," Ilya said, turning back to the fitted sheet bunched in his hands. He tried to get one corner on the mattress, his movements clumsy and uncoordinated. Got it on. Reached for the second corner and missed it entirely, his hand finding nothing but air. Cursed under his breath in Russian.

Shane crossed the room and put his hand on Ilya's bare shoulder and felt the heat radiating off him. "You're burning up."

"Is just warm in here." Ilya tried to shake Shane's hand off, but the movement made him sway. He gripped the bedpost harder.

Shane gently took the fitted sheet out of Ilya's hands. "I'll finish the sheets." Shane guided Ilya to sit on the edge of the bare mattress. Ilya went without protest, which was more alarming than anything else. "You need to lie down."

"Kids need—"

"The kids are asleep. And I'm home now." Shane crouched down so he was eye-level with Ilya, hands on his knees. Ilya's skin was clammy. "How long have you been pushing through this?"

Ilya shrugged weakly. "Hard to say. Had feverish barnacle attached to me all day. Thought the warmth was just from her."

Shane exhaled through his nose. "I knew I should've just stayed home today."

Ilya shook his head. "It is fine, Shane."

"It's not fine, but we can argue about it later." Shane wrapped an arm around Ilya's waist, guiding him back up. "Come on. Bedroom."

He led Ilya down the hall to their room, keeping a firm grip on him when Ilya swayed halfway there. Got him sitting on the edge of the bed, then carefully stripped him out of his sweaty shorts and got him situated under the sheets. Ilya's eyes were already starting to close by the time his head hit the pillow.

Shane pulled the covers up to his shoulders, then turned to go.

Ilya's arm shot out, his hand making a grabby motion. "Am missing the most important medicine," he mumbled, his accent thick with exhaustion.

Shane turned back, his expression softening. "Ilya, I have to go check on the kids—"

Ilya whined. Actually whined. "Five minutes. Please. Do not make me beg."

Shane felt his resolve crumble immediately. "You're ridiculous."

"Five minutes," Ilya repeated, his eyes still closed, hand still reaching.

Shane sighed, but he was already climbing onto the bed beside him. "Fine. Five minutes."

The moment Shane was horizontal, Ilya curled into him. He threw his leg over Shane's, buried his face in Shane's neck, and let out a long, satisfied sigh.

Shane's arms came around him automatically. He pressed his lips to Ilya's damp hair. Ilya was a furnace against him, radiating heat through his t-shirt, but Shane didn't move. Just held him and felt Ilya's breathing start to even out almost immediately.

"Big baby."

The rest of the week felt less like seven days and more like a month-long siege, but they all survived. Somehow. By Friday, the worst of the symptoms had passed for everyone—no more fevers spiking in the middle of the night, no more desperate runs to the bathroom, no more that particular grey pallor. What remained was a house full of irritable, recovering humans.

Which was considerably better than vomiting, feverish, irritable humans.

Ilya woke early Saturday morning to the sudden absence of warmth beside him and the sound of Shane's feet hitting the floor hard. Then rapid footsteps toward the bathroom. Then the unmistakable sound of Shane dropping to his knees on the tile floor, followed immediately by violent retching.

Fuck.

He lay there for a second, staring at the ceiling. He should have seen this coming. Shane had been running himself absolutely ragged taking care of everyone. Barely sleeping. Just moving from kid to kid with water and medicine and cool washcloths and that particular brand of stubborn competence he always had in a crisis.

Shane's immune system was, by any reasonable measure, unfairly good. There had been countless times over the years where something swept through the whole house and Shane just—didn't get it. Walked through completely untouched while everyone else suffered. Ilya had his theories. Perfect genetics, probably. Or possibly the unreasonable amount of ginger ale the man consumed on a daily basis. Wasn't that supposed to help with nausea? Is that why Shane never got stomachaches? Either way, Ilya had given him genuine grief about it on more than one occasion.

But of course, it would end now, after a week of no sleep and running on fumes.

Another round of retching echoed from the bathroom, harsh and wet.

Ilya winced and dragged himself out of bed.

Shane was on the floor, kneeling in front of the toilet, forehead resting against the porcelain and one arm draped over the seat. His shoulders were rising and falling slowly, catching his breath. He didn't look up when Ilya came in, which meant he either hadn't heard him or didn't have the energy to acknowledge it. Probably both.

"Shane," Ilya said tenderly. He crouched down beside him, and put his hand between Shane's shoulder blades.

Shane exhaled slowly. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

Shane wasn't entirely sure. His body was on fire, his head was swimming, and he wasn't entirely convinced he wasn't about to hurl up another round of bile right now. He squeezed his eyes shut, breathing in through his nose until he pushed some of the nausea down.

Ilya gingerly rubbed his hand up and down his back.

Shane made a faint sound that might have been an acknowledgment or might have just been exhaustion. Ilya stayed where he was, hand on his back, and waited.

Shane heaved again and emptied his stomach a few moments later, and Ilya continued to rub circles on his back.

After a few minutes passed where Shane didn't dry heave, Ilya spoke up softly. "I'll get some water. And maybe some tea?"

Shane nodded. Ilya gets up and leaves the room. Shane groans and gets up, washes his hands and quickly rinses his mouth, then drags himself back into bed. The room was spinning.

Ilya returned a few minutes later with a glass of water in one hand and a mug of tea in the other. He set the water on the nightstand and handed Shane the tea carefully, watching to make sure his hands were steady enough to hold it.

Shane took it with both hands wrapped around the warm ceramic, bringing it to his lips and taking small, careful sips. The heat felt good on his raw throat, even if swallowing still hurt.

While Shane drank, Ilya grabbed the washcloth from the bowl of cool water he'd brought up earlier, wrung it out, and pressed it gently to Shane's forehead. The cold was immediate and relieving against his feverish skin. Ilya's free hand came up to Shane's temple, knuckles tracing slow, soothing circles there.

After a few more swallows, Shane's hands started to tremble slightly from the effort of holding the mug. He handed it back to Ilya, who took it without comment and set it on the nightstand beside the water.

"Better?" Ilya asked quietly, adjusting the washcloth.

"Yes," Shane rasps. "Thank you."

"Do you want to try to shower?" Ilya asked, sitting on the edge of the bed carefully so he wouldn't jostle Shane. "Or just rest more?"

"Rest."

Ilya nodded, his hand finding Shane's calf under the blanket, thumb moving in a slow absent stroke.

They were interrupted by commotion from down the hall. A high-pitched whine, the unmistakable patter of small feet moving fast, and then the door swung open, and Mila

appeared, face blotchy and crumpled.

"Max—Max stole *Scoops,*" she announced, her voice pitched at a frequency that went straight through Shane's skull. Even though she was holding said stuffed dog.

"NO I DIDN'T," Max hollered from somewhere down the hall.

"He TOUCHED him," Mila sobbed, escalating immediately.

Ilya was already on his feet. He crossed the room in a few strides and picked her up before she could get any louder, turning her gently away from the bed. "Mila," he said, low and even. "We need to use our *quiet* voice today, okay? Daddy is sick."

Mila hiccuped. She peered over Ilya's shoulder at Shane, at the blankets pulled up, at his pale face—and her expression crumpled all over again. She reached both arms out toward him. "Want Daddy."

"Daddy needs to rest, *malyshka*—"

"It's okay." Shane's voice came out rough at the edges, but he was already pushing himself up against the pillows, already reaching for her. "Hand her over."

Ilya looked at him. The pale face, the sheen of sweat, the careful way he was holding himself upright. "Shane."

But Shane kept his arms outstretched, not leaving room for argument. Ilya knew better than to fight it.

He exhaled and deposited her carefully into Shane's arms. "Be *very* gentle, Mila."

She didn't need to be told twice. The second she was in his arms, she went completely still, all the urgency draining out of her at once. She tucked her face into the side of Shane's neck and stayed there, one small fist curled in his sweatshirt.

"Shh," Shane murmured, his hand already moving in slow circles on her back. "What's going on, huh?"

"He stole Scoops," she blubbered into his neck.

"You're holding him right now, sweetheart," Shane gently reminded her, shifting her in his arms so her knees weren't digging directly into his still-queasy stomach.

She sniffled hard, tightened her death grip on the stuffed dog, and mumbled something completely unintelligible into his collar.

Ilya settled back onto the edge of the bed with a quiet sigh and readjusted the blanket so it covered both of them properly. "You are absolutely sure you're okay with her here? You need to rest."

Shane nodded, rhythmically patting Mila's back. "Yeah. She's fine. I'm fine."

Ilya brushed Mila's messy hair back from her tear-stained face, smoothing it down, then leaned over and pressed a lingering kiss to Shane's temple. "I'll start on breakfast. You need anything else right now?"

Shane shook his head.

Ilya kissed him softly on the lips, then pressed another kiss to the top of Mila's head where she was still nestled against Shane's chest. He got up and pulled the door almost closed behind him, leaving just a crack so he could hear if Shane called.

For a while, Mila just laid there on Shane's chest, her warm breath puffing against his neck, still sniffling occasionally as she wound down from her tears. Shane felt like complete shit—his head throbbing with every heartbeat, his stomach in knots, his whole body aching like he'd been hit by a truck. But the solid weight of her small body on his chest was doing something. Cutting through the fog a little. Giving him something else to focus on besides how miserable he felt.

After a few minutes, Mila readjusted herself, pushing up slightly on his chest so she could look at his face. She blinked down at him with those big blue eyes, still a little wet at the corners, her cheeks still pink from crying.

Shane smiled despite himself. She was so ridiculously cute it was almost unfair.

"You're sick, Daddy?"

"I am," he confirmed. "But I'll be okay."

She frowned, her little eyebrows pulling together in concern. "What kinda sick?"

"Tummy sick," Shane said. "And my head hurts. Just like what you had last week, remember?"

Mila was quiet for a moment, studying his face with intense concentration, like she was trying to diagnose him herself. Her small hand came up to pat his cheek gently, then moved to his forehead like she'd seen Shane and Ilya do a hundred times when checking for fevers.

Then, apparently having reached some kind of conclusion, she pushed herself more upright on his chest and looked down at his stomach with purpose.

"Tummy hurt?"

"Mhmm."

Without warning or further explanation, Mila wiggled carefully out of his loose embrace and scooted down his body. Before Shane could process what was happening, she had lifted the hem of his sweatshirt and climbed underneath it like it was a tent.

"Mila—"

She ignored him completely. He felt her settle herself, her head coming to rest directly on his bare stomach, both of her small arms wrapping around his sides as best she could reach.

Shane looked down at the Mila-shaped lump under his sweatshirt, bemused. "What are you doing, baby?"

"Kissin' the boo boo away," Mila said simply, her voice muffled. Then she pressed a big, loud, deliberate kiss right above his navel.

Shane's stomach muscles jerked involuntarily. He had to bite down hard on a surprised laugh that wanted to escape, which absolutely did not help his pounding head.

Then, apparently deciding one kiss wasn't sufficient to heal an upset stomach, Mila did it again. And again. Working her way across his stomach, each kiss accompanied by an exaggerated *mwah*.

Shane dropped his head back against the pillow. He was genuinely smiling now. He brought his hands up and laid them gently over the lump under his sweatshirt, feeling around until he found approximately where her head was. Her hair was soft under the fabric. He rested his palm there, feeling her shift slightly as she continued her very important medical treatment.

"Well," he said softly. "That's very sweet of you, Mils."

She tap-tap-tapped her small hands against the sides of his stomach in response, then pressed a few more sloppy, deliberate kisses into his skin. Gentle in a way she didn't always remember to be.

Shane rubbed her back through the sweatshirt fabric, feeling her settle more fully against him, her breathing getting deeper as the minutes passed by. The room was quiet around them. Faint sounds drifted up from downstairs—Ilya moving around in the kitchen, the low murmur of the boys' voices carrying up through the floor, the particular sounds of their house in the morning.

Shane closed his eyes and listened to all of it, Mila's slow breathing against his stomach, and let himself just be still for a while.

He must have fallen asleep after that. He didn't remember deciding to.

He just remembered waking up to the sound of hushed voices somewhere close by.

"Max." Niko's voice, low and urgent. "You don't need to put it on his forehead, just hover it."

"I am hovering it."

"You're not, you're touching him—"

Shane opened his eyes.

Both of his sons were leaned over him, close enough that he could see the concentration on their faces before they realized he was awake. Max had the thermometer extended toward his

forehead, tongue pressed to the corner of his mouth, the expression of someone attempting a very delicate operation. Niko was hovering just behind him, supervising with his arms crossed.

Niko's eyes went wide the second Shane's opened. He turned immediately to Max. "You woke him up."

"*You* woke him up."

Shane was trying to reorient himself. He blinked a few times, groaned, and pushed himself up slightly against the pillows. He felt the warm, solid weight of Mila still tucked under his sweatshirt and had a half-second of genuine confusion before his brain caught up. He rested his hand over her automatically, patting once, and she stirred faintly but didn't wake.

He looked back at Max and Niko. "Wh're you guys doing?" he croaked out, rubbing his face.

Max looked at the thermometer. His brow furrowed. "32."

Niko took it from him immediately. "He's not 32 degrees, Max, he'd be dead." He turned back to Shane, who was still blinking slowly against the light, and held it carefully to his forehead. They both waited until it beeped.

Niko looked at it. "38."

Max leaned in to look. "Is that bad?"

"It's better than him being hypothermic," Niko said.

"I'm fine," Shane said, which came out considerably less convincing than he intended. Partly because his body felt like lead and partly because he still had a toddler, completely deadweight, laying on him.

"You don't look fine," Max said bluntly.

"Thanks."

Niko picked up the thermometer and set it on the nightstand, then reached over and handed Shane the glass of water. "You need water, Dad."

Shane pushed himself up a little more carefully, trying not to jostle whatever was happening under his sweatshirt. He felt Mila stir anyway—a small shift, a tiny sound. He patted the lump once, settling her, then took the glass from Niko and had a small sip. "Thanks, kiddo." He looked between them both. "But you guys don't need to be taking care of me."

"Papa had to pick up more medicine and your gross toothpaste tea," Niko said.

"It's peppermint," Shane muttered.

Then, from somewhere around his midsection, came a small grumble. Then a squirm. Then another.

Max frowned, looking down at Shane's stomach. "What is—" He reached over and lifted the hem of Shane's sweatshirt without any preamble.

Mila blinked out at them from underneath, her hair staticky and sticking up on one side, a sleep crease pressed into her cheek from where it had been smooshed against Shane's stomach. She looked at Max with sleepy confusion. Then at Niko. Then slowly tilted her head back to look up at Shane.

She rubbed her eyes with one fist. "Hi."

Shane laughed weakly and reached out to brush some of the hair away from her face. "Have a good nap using me as your pillow?"

She nodded sleepily, yawning. "You're warm."

Niko reached over and hoisted her up onto his hip in one easy motion. She went willingly, looping her arms around his neck and dropping her head onto his shoulder.

"You're making Dad's fever worse, Millie," Niko said matter-of-factly. As if he had done any research on this topic outside of Googling *how to use a digital thermometer*.

"She's fine," Shane said, though he had to admit the absence of a three-year-old furnace on his stomach did feel slightly better.

Max, who had been suspiciously quiet for approximately thirty seconds, thrust a granola bar directly into Shane's face, nearly hitting him in the nose with it. "You didn't eat breakfast."

Shane leaned back slightly, which was a mistake because the movement sent a wave of nausea rolling through him. He swallowed it down carefully, trying to breathe through his nose. "I'm not hungry, honey. You keep it."

Max's dark eyes widened. He pulled the granola bar back, stared at it, looked back at Shane's face, and then lunged sideways for the small trash bin beside the bed. He shoved it in front of Shane's face with both hands. "Are you gonna barf?"

"Max—"

"Just in case—you look really pale—"

"I'm not going to throw up right now," Shane said, gently pushing the bin away. "Put that down."

Max reluctantly set it back on the floor but kept it positioned within easy reach, his eyes never leaving Shane's face. Clearly not convinced Shane wasn't about to projectile vomit at any second.

"You guys really don't need to check on me" Shane said, trying to inject some firmness into his voice despite how rough it sounded. "I'm fine. Go play, okay? Do something fun."

Niko readjusted his grip on squirmy Mila, shifting her higher on his hip. "Okay."

But none of them moved.

Shane looked between them, waiting. Max was still hovering by the bed, the granola bar clutched in one hand. Niko stood there with Mila, both of them just staring at him with the exact same expression.

Shane raised his eyebrows. "Okay usually means you actually go."

Max glanced at Niko. Then he climbed onto the edge of the bed and sat down, careful not to jostle Shane. "Maybe we can play after Papa gets back from the store," he said, his voice a little too casual. "Just in case you need something before then."

"Just in case," Niko agreed, and then he was sitting down too, settling on Shane's other side with Mila still on his lap.

Shane smiled. "You guys are ridiculous."

Nobody argued with that. Max pulled the blanket up over his own legs and made himself comfortable. Mila held Scoops out toward Shane, an offering, and Shane took him without comment.

When Ilya got home ten minutes later, he was met with Shane fast asleep and all three of their kids still arranged around him.

End Notes

thank you reading!!

it's been brought to my attention that someone posted a link to this series on twitter and it's been gaining some traction, which is insane omg?? i'm not on twitter so i have no idea what people are saying hahaaa, but all i'll say is: i've had this silly little Hollanov dad universe in my head for a while now, and I truly never expected this many people to be following along. thank you so, so, so much for your support! i hope you're having as much fun reading them as i am writing them 🩷🩷 i'm still slowly making my way through responding to comments, but please know how deeply i appreciate every single one!

also, shoutout to harry's new album for helping me finish this fic, which i've had half-finished for like a week now lol 🫶 ok, shutting up now. thank you again for reading!!!

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