

i know the end

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by [hollanov_1410](#)

Summary

Shane was still trying to settle Max, cupping the back of his head, pressing him back against his chest. Body warmth, familiar scent—that was supposed to be enough. That was supposed to be some innate thing, some animalistic pull newborns had toward their parents, hardwired in them from the beginning. Shane had read that. He was pretty sure he had read that.

It was probably really bad that his baby didn't have it toward him.

Or,

Shane is not bonding with his new baby.

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). but in this fic, niko is 3, and max is a newborn :)
- 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](#)

You were supposed to get better at something the more you did it. That was the rule.

Well, that was the rule Shane had always lived by at least.

Shane got better at hockey the more he played it. He got better at Russian the more he practiced. He got better at expressing his love for Ilya the more he opened himself up to it.

So after already being a father for the past three years, Shane should be feeling good. Really good. Or, at a minimum, *better*. He had one baby. The next should be easier, he had told himself.

But as he stood in the nursery before sunrise, rocking his inconsolable 6-week-old son, he had never felt worse.

His inconsolable 6-week-old son who happened to hate him.

"Shh," he whispered, bouncing Max in his arms.

The nightlight cast a dim glow over the room. Over the crib, over the baby blue walls he and Ilya had spent entirely too long deliberating over when Shane was pregnant. They'd had fun with this room. *Where the Wild Things Are* prints on the walls, the matching throw blanket draped over the glider, Niko's drawings for "baby Max" framed carefully above the bookshelf.

So much time and energy put into making this room perfect. Only for Shane to now be in the middle of it at whatever godforsaken hour this was, holding his baby who couldn't stand his presence.

He was getting worse at parenting by the day.

And Max knew it.

Max was hiccuping on Shane's shoulder as Shane patted his back, walking into a methodical circle in the nursery. Shane had gone through the logical list—he had changed him. Fed him. Burped him. Kissed him, over and over. But nothing worked.

Shane was chewing on the back of Max's pacifier as he held it in his mouth. He had tried offering it to Max a few minutes ago—Niko *always* calmed down with his pacifier, Shane and Ilya had figured that very early on with him—but Max didn't budge. Only cried louder.

"Relax," Shane said, louder as Max's wails picked up. He gnawed harder on the back of the pacifier, exhaling through his nose. "*Please*. It's okay. Shh. It's okay."

Max responded, as any baby who hated their father would, by squirming a bit in Shane's arms and, unsurprisingly, still crying. Shane exhaled through his nose, grinding harder on the rubber in his mouth, rubbing Max's back in firmer circles.

Maybe Max needed that. Pressure. Maybe they were alike that way, him and this little baby. Maybe Shane could find out what Max liked, like he had with pacifiers with Niko, and how Niko always liked to be angled a certain way during feedings, and how he never slept well swaddled.

He would find out what Max liked, maybe. What Max needed.

Or he would die trying.

Max let out another piercing scream—how the *fuck* was he able to reach a decibel that high when he was this small—and Shane closed his eyes. Was Niko also this loud? Was Shane just forgetting? Either way, it was making his head feel split in half, throbbing, and he inhaled a shaky breath.

"I know. I know, baby," he murmured, stopping in the room to bounce in place.

Except, he didn't. He didn't know anything his baby needed, apparently.

It was different with a toddler in the house now, too. When Niko was a newborn, Shane used to carry him around the house in the early mornings, narrating whatever room they walked through in his hushed, monotone voice. It always worked for Niko. But Shane couldn't do that now, not without risking waking Niko up at the end of the hall and creating a second problem on top of the first.

He kept his eyes shut and tried to breathe through the noise inside and outside his head. The crying had turned hiccupy, *wailing*, Max's weight shifting on his shoulder, squirming like he was actively trying to get away from Shane.

He probably *was* trying to get away.

There was a ringing starting behind his ears. Narrowing in on him. That had been happening a lot more lately, Shane was beginning to realize.

Shane opened his eyes as it got louder. "Okay," he said. "Okay. Maybe we just need some fresh air." Whether that was for Max's benefit or his own, he wasn't completely sure.

He grabbed Max's blanket from the glider with his free hand and made his way to the back door as quietly as he could. He eased it shut behind him and sank into one of the chairs on the back patio, Max still against his chest.

The cool air hit them both immediately. Max's crying did settle, just a little. From screeching to maybe just screaming now. Still loud enough to startle a few birds from the trees, though.

Shane wrapped the blanket around him, shushing softly as he tucked it in, and laid his head back against his shoulder. He took the pacifier he'd been absently chewing on out of his own mouth and put it in his pocket. Then he pressed his lips to the top of Max's head—the wispy blonde hair already starting to curl at the ends—and just kept kissing him, slow and steady, until his own breathing started to even out.

Shane kept rubbing his back, staring at a patch of grass absently. The sounds of his cries weren't anything new, Max was frequently inconsolable, and Shane was sure he had heard him cry more hours of the day than he hadn't. That's what it was feeling like, at least.

At first, Shane was adamant that something was wrong. Niko wasn't this fussy. He learned to calm down Niko pretty early on.

He was so adamant that he'd insisted to Ilya that they bring Max in to see the pediatrician at ten days old. Who had, of course, told them everything was perfectly normal. Healthy. Every baby had a different temperament. It would get better.

But Shane couldn't cling to that logic anymore, because Max was six weeks old now, and it *wasn't* better. It was worse. And Shane wasn't sleeping. At all.

He was going to have to get used to it, he thought distantly. Either learn to function without it or learn to sleep straight through the screaming, since he was apparently incapable of ever actually calming him down.

The screams blurred at the edges as he looked up at the sky, bouncing his leg, patting Max's back on autopilot. He was probably still shushing him out loud. He assumed he was. He couldn't feel himself doing it.

The sky was still dark, the stars out. Before Max was born, Shane couldn't remember the last time he'd been up early enough to just stare up at the night sky. Now it was just part of the night—early morning, whatever the difference was anymore.

He stared up at it and let the crying blur into the ringing in his ears and told himself he just had to get used to this. That this was what nights were now, indefinitely, and there was no point fighting it.

Sometimes it felt like the sky was just going to split open and swallow him whole, without warning. Nothing he could do to stop it. He might not even realize it was happening until it already had.

He closed his eyes. The darkness stayed.

"Shane."

The voice was soft, distant. Shane groaned and blinked, disoriented by the light and the cool air before he remembered where he was.

And then—oh fuck.

He shot upright, inhaling sharply, hands flying to his shoulder where Max had been resting. Not there. Oh fu—

"Wait—"

Ilya crouched down to Shane's eye level, one hand coming to rest on his knee. And—oh. There was Max. Sound asleep in Ilya's arms, tucked against his chest.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Ilya murmured, his fingers moving in slow circles on Shane's knee. He was smiling despite the bags under his eyes, which had been a constant since Max arrived. Unsurprisingly.

Shane blinked, looking at Max. His pouty lips were parted slightly slack against Ilya's chest, completely dead to the world. So peaceful it almost hurt to look at.

"I fell asleep holding him," Shane said. He ran a hand back through his hair, which was a disaster. "That's—really bad."

Ilya shook his head and reached up to pull Shane's hand down from his hair, holding onto it instead. "Is not bad. You needed sleep. Max too, clearly." He looked at Shane steadily. "Everything is fine."

"I can't fall asleep outside with him," Shane said, more frantic now that he was fully awake and registering it. "He could have rolled out of my arms. Or I could have rolled on top of him."

Ilya looked like he definitely wanted to counter that. But he swallowed, not leaving Shane's gaze, and nodded a little. "You don't need to worry," he said instead. "He is safe, see?" He tilted so Shane could get a better look at Max's sleeping face.

Shane did look at him. He was so cute, his rosy chubby cheeks, his little button nose. Shane couldn't quite believe it.

So peaceful, with Ilya.

Max liked Ilya. He *loved* Ilya. He was safe with Ilya. Ilya always knew how to protect him, what he needed. Like needing to not be in the arms of your dad who falls asleep with you outside and risks dropping you on your head.

"What time is it?" Shane asked, running a hand down his face.

"A little past 6:30."

Fuck. "I need to feed him soon."

Ilya rubbed Max's back slowly. "I can do it. How about you go lay down inside and some more rest?"

Shane shook his head. It wouldn't work even if tried, anyway. He'd just be staring at the ceiling, unable to dial anything out. Besides, he needed to do everything he could to build Max's trust. To make him *like* him. Or, at the very least, tolerate him.

"No. I'll do it."



Shane was in the glider in Max's nursery, looking down at Max as he nursed. Patting his back gently as he rocked him.

His dark brown eyes were fluttering open, looking up at Shane with an unfocused gaze. Still some leftover tears from this morning. All thanks to Shane.

"There we go," Shane said, his voice hushed as he listened to Max's hungry little grunts. "Good job."

He was so cute, Shane thought as he watched Max, his little fingers pressed against Shane's chest. He was such a perfect baby, down to his soft skin and how good he was at nursing.

To think Shane was ever worried about getting unexpectedly pregnant with him, all these months ago now.

It wasn't like Shane and Ilya didn't want another kid after Niko. They did. But Shane had wanted to wait a few more years—he had only just gotten back to playing after recovering from Niko's pregnancy, and he wasn't ready to go through the whole process again so soon. Ilya had, of course, been perfectly happy to go along with that. No rush for him.

But the night Shane won the Cup, there may have been champagne involved, and a condom may have been forgotten that night. And, as it turned out, that could result in a pregnancy. Even just the one time.

It wasn't like they were teenagers. They were more than equipped to have another kid. But when Shane took the test and saw those two lines, his first thought wasn't the overwhelming joy he'd initially felt with Niko's test.

It was...*fuck*.

Max must've known. He must have sensed Shane's anxiety from the very beginning—known that this didn't fit into the plan Shane had mapped out for his next year. That Shane would unexpectedly have to take off an entire season after just getting off the high of being captain again and winning a Cup.

That was why Max hated Shane. Since the second he was conceived, he must have felt it; Shane anxious and complaining more than he had during Niko's pregnancy, yearning to get back to playing. There was no other explanation. Shane could feel it in how distant he felt from this beautiful baby who was eating so sleepily against his chest.

This wasn't how parents were supposed to feel. Something was wrong and he needed to fix it.

He could fix this if he just kept trying, maybe. Following the rules of bonding.

One of those rules being that you were supposed to look at your baby while they nursed. Make eye contact, let them stare back. Maybe blink slowly at them the way you would a cat you were trying to win over.

So he was blinking down at Max's half-mast eyes. Hoping Max couldn't smell the desperation seeping out of him.

These moments needed to count. Max was already more attached to Ilya—Shane could feel it, could see it in the way Max quieted differently when Ilya held him. Shane couldn't read his signals yet the way Ilya seemed to, couldn't always tell the difference between his hungry cry and his tired cry, they all just sounded miserable.

And with each week, it was just getting worse. Let alone the milestones he was tracking. Shane knew, for example, that the real, responsive smile starts at 6 weeks. Niko had first smiled at Shane at just past 7 weeks.

Maxim *did* have his first social smile.

At Ilya.

Shane saw it happen. Ilya grinned so big as he changed him, cooing up to his face, and Max flashed a little gummy smile right back. Ilya had lit up, kissing his chin, his nose, earning another smile.

But Shane hadn't seen it with himself. And even if he *thought* he saw a ghost of one, it was probably just his mind playing tricks on him.

And as Max nursed right now, he still showed no signs of smiling.

But nonetheless, Shane kept looking at him. Following his rule. Trying to ignore how he was so exhausted his eyes were burning, and his chest ached, and his chin still throbbed where Max had head-butted him earlier, and wondering why—*why*—looking into his son's eyes while he nursed was somehow overwhelming.

This was supposed to be easy.

It had been easy with Niko.

Shane had never had a sibling.

But he had read everything there was to know about having them.

And he had read that, apparently, siblings bathed together as kids. A cute, bonding experience. Time-saving for the parents. A normal sibling thing to do.

Shane read that early on into his pregnancy with Max. So now, as Ilya finished up the never-ending pile of laundry that seemed to multiply overnight with a newborn and a toddler who spilled half their food on themselves at every meal, Shane was going to witness this normal sibling activity firsthand. Build it. Help them form their bond.

Niko had adjusted to having a new baby in the house...*okay*. He wasn't thrilled about splitting his time with Shane and Ilya, which was fair. Shane had read that was normal too. He had been clingier lately, fussier, his "no" phase—which he'd been in the trenches of for months—exacerbated ten-fold since Max came home.

But Shane could work on that. One bath at a time. This was something he could definitely control, something that could have a visible result. Maybe it would give him something to hold onto, something that wasn't just the constant low hum of dread he'd been living inside of. Watching his kids build something real between them, something that would outlast all of this.

Even if he would never have that with Max.

Max was in his little infant tub at one end, Niko at the other. Bubbles floated in the space between them. Niko was poking at them with one finger, watching them pop.

"Daddy," Niko said.

Shane looked at him. *God*, he felt so delayed lately. Like his brain was packed with cotton, everything arriving half a beat too late.

"Daddy, watch," Niko demanded, smiling big.

"I'm watching, baby," Shane said, keeping a hand on Max's soft stomach.

Niko filled his blue plastic cup under the water—his favorite bath toy, which Shane and Ilya had discovered only after spending an embarrassing amount of money on *actual* bath toys—and then lifted it high. He poured it directly over his own head.

Niko burst into laughter. His black hair went flat and soaked against his temples immediately.

"Did you see, Daddy?"

Shane laughed. But it was like the other laughs he's had recently. A small one, not really reach anywhere deep or meaningful. Which made him feel terrible, if he mulled it over for too long. He couldn't manage a genuine laugh for his toddler?

He reached over to brush the water off his forehead. "I did. Silly guy."

Max gurgled from his spot at the other end of the tub, feet kicking. Shane looked down at him, tucking the washcloth a little higher and starting to clean the folds on his thighs.

"Daddy." It ended in a little whine.

Shane looked up again. "Yes?"

Niko scooted closer to Max's side of the tub. He leaned in, hands on Max's thighs.

This is it, Shane thought. This is the bonding. This is the *sibling* bonding. This is what he read about. They moved toward each other, they learned to share the same space, they started

building the foundation of a relationship that would outlast Shane and Ilya entirely.

Niko yanked the washcloth off Max's stomach and pressed it to his own chest. "This one's *mine*."

Max immediately startled. His face began its slow, unmistakable crumple.

"*Niko*." Shane grabbed the washcloth back and placed it on Max again.

Niko immediately screeched in protest. He lunged for it and Shane put his hand out, blocking him from getting any closer.

"Niko, stop," Shane said, sharper now. "No. That's not nice. You have your own washcloth."

"No."

"Yes. And if you'd like me to get it, you need to ask."

"*That* one's mine," Niko said, voice rising, slapping both palms against the water. It splashed onto Shane's shirt. "I wan' it."

God. Shane felt like whenever he managed to move forward, he took two steps back.

But maybe this was just part of sibling learning to share. Siblings got jealous. Niko had definitely been jealous in the six weeks since Max came home—that much was obvious.

It would get better, probably. The more they practiced. Although, they were practicing right now, and it wasn't getting better, and Shane's skin was prickling, and his chest felt tight in that way it had been feeling a lot lately, and Niko kept slapping his hands in the water, frowning so seriously.

"Niko," Shane said, rubbing Max's stomach while holding Niko's gaze. "Can you show me your water cup trick again?"

Niko glared at him. "No."

Great.

"Okay," Shane sighed. "That's fine."

He went back to cleaning under Max's chin. Max, mercifully, hadn't completely melted down over the washcloth incident and was sitting somewhere between unhappy and neutral. Maybe Shane could actually turn it around. Maybe this was the moment to make Max like him.

He worked carefully along Max's cheek. "There we go. Nice and clean."

Niko frowned and scooted closer. "Daddy. Daddy. *Daddy*."

Shane's jaw tightened, and then immediately he hated himself for it. For being even slightly irritated by his three-year-old, who just wanted his attention and instead had a dad who

couldn't manage a real laugh anymore. Maybe he never could be able to again.

He looked at Niko and smiled. "Yes?"

"Watch."

He dunked the cup—because of course he would, thirty seconds after telling Shane no—then brought it back up.

Then poured it directly onto Max.

Max startled violently. Then started crying immediately, cutting straight through the bathroom.

"Hey," Shane yelled. He yanked the cup out of Niko's hand and threw it behind him without thinking. It clattered across the tile. Niko went completely still, eyes wide, suddenly very quiet.

Then Shane scooped Max out of the tub with both hands and pulled him to his chest, dripping and wailing.

Max was rigid against him, mouth pressed hard into Shane's neck, screaming into his ear. Shane exhaled and looked back at Niko.

"No." Shane's voice was too loud and he knew it the moment it came out. "You *cannot* do that, Niko. Ever." He couldn't stop himself. Max was screeching and he could barely hear his own voice and all he could think was, *God*, what if the water went down his throat, what if it the water had been too hot, what if it had been so much worse.

Niko's lower lip trembled. "Sorry, Daddy."

Max was still screaming. And Shane registered, somewhere through the noise, that he'd pulled a naked soaking wet newborn out of the bath and was now just standing there holding him. He should probably do something about that, get him a towel, warm him up. Like a good parent would.

He apparently didn't have to figure it out, because footsteps came down the hall fast. Ilya was in the doorway a moment later, looking frazzled, eyes scanning the room. "What happened?"

Niko started crying too, loud over Max's screams. "Daddy's mad."

"I'm not mad," Shane said over the noise.

Ilya looked between them all, eyes wide. He reached tentatively for the baby towel waiting on the vanity and brought it over, gently wrapping it around Max. "Hey," he said, over the screaming. "I will handle this." He moved to take Max from Shane's arms, but Shane's grip tightened.

"I've got it." He couldn't look at Ilya, but he did see his hands still hovering anyway.

He looked at Niko instead. Sitting in the tub, fists pressed into his eyes, hiccuping miserably.

Oh God. Shane had done that.

He reached out toward him, still bouncing Max. "Honey. I'm not mad at you."

Niko just cried harder and stood up in the tub, arms reaching out. "*Papa.*"

Ilya was already grabbing a towel, kneeling beside the tub. "Hey, hey. It's okay, *malysh.*"

Both of his kids were screaming, the sound bouncing off every tiled wall and compressing into something Shane couldn't think through. He kept bouncing Max, kept rubbing his back, told himself to move or do something or at minimum get out of the room, but he couldn't quite make his feet cooperate. He just stood there, bouncing in place, while the room closed in around him.

He watched, from somewhere slightly outside himself, as Ilya lifted Niko out of the tub and pulled him into his lap. Wrapped the towel around him, pressed kiss after kiss into his wet hair, murmured something low that made Niko nod and tuck his face into Ilya's neck. The crying softened. Then quieted.

Ilya was so good at this. Parenting. He had always been good at it, but he was getting better every single day, the way you were supposed to. You practice, you get better.

And as the ringing started in his ears, Max's screams pitched high enough to rattle his skull, it couldn't have been more obvious that Shane was not.

There were some things that had always helped to regulate Shane and clear his mind.

Working out had always been one of those things.

And after his recent six-week checkup, he had been cleared for more intense physical activity. Which was great. He already had a training plan mapped out with this physical trainer, who he'd be meeting with next week, but had been approved to start the at-home workouts in the meantime. Now he could finally do something besides walk on the treadmill or yoga.

He'd had a much harder time keeping up with his fitness during the pregnancy with Max. With Niko, he'd managed to stay pretty consistent until his third trimester, when even taking a full breath started feeling like a laborious task. But with Max, maybe it was chasing a toddler around the house, maybe it was just being three years older than he was the first time around, but he had been exhausted. Constantly. He couldn't keep up with training the way he wanted to. Couldn't keep up with much of anything, honestly.

Which he had been, admittedly, frustrated about. And Max probably knew that, too, on some level. He could probably sense it on Shane.

That was probably another reason nothing was getting better between them. No parent should be frustrated about not being able to stay active while carrying their child. No parent should be consumed with making sure he'd be cleared to play the next season while his 6-week-old baby still hadn't even smiled at him.

He tried, unsuccessfully, to shove those thoughts down as he moved through his stretches. He put his headphones on and turned the music up. The thoughts kept coming anyway, steady underneath the noise, and he was beginning to think he might just have to accept that this was his brain now.

As he wrapped up his stretches, he heard the gym door open. He barely had a chance to look over before he heard little footsteps racing toward him, and then Niko's body collided with his legs. "Daddy!"

Shane looked down and smiled as Niko grinned up at him, squeezing tight. He popped one headphone out and cupped Niko's cheek. "Hi, honey."

"Nikolai." Ilya's hiss came from upstairs, followed by heavy footsteps, then the door swinging open. He had Max asleep on his shoulder and a burp cloth in hand, though the spit-up stain already on the front of his shirt suggested Max had missed at some point. "Not okay. Daddy is busy."

Niko whined a little, saying a muffled *no* while burying his face into Shane's leg. Shane met eyes with Ilya and shook his head. "It's okay, he can stay."

Ilya raised his eyebrows. "You can have 30 minutes to yourself, Shane. Nikolai, come on—"

"Want Daddy," Niko whimpered.

Shane bent forward to kiss the top of his black hair. "It's alright. You can stay, bud."

Ilya still didn't look too convinced. But he knew Shane would not budge. So he sighed a little, bouncing Max in his arms. "Okay. But if I hear even one scream, I will be coming down at getting him."

"Deal."

Ilya looked between them one more time before turning back, kissing Max on the head, and leaving them be.

Shane looked down at Niko, who was grinning at him so big that one dimple on his cheek was popping out.

"You want to do some movement time with me?"

Niko nodded. "Just you and me, Daddy."

Shane smiled a little. Niko had never been a particularly clingy kid, but since Max came home it had been happening more. Shane had read that was normal. He was trying to hold onto that—and honestly, he was just glad Niko hadn't completely written him off after the bathroom incident yesterday. That he still wanted to be near him at all. Maybe Niko still saw something worth holding onto in him, even if Shane couldn't find it himself.

Even if Max definitely couldn't.

“Just you and me,” he confirmed, straightening back up.

“Why are you doin’ movement time, Daddy?”

"Just trying to get strong again."

Niko scrunched his nose. "You're already strong. You pick me up. And open the jars."

Shane smiled at that. Niko was genuinely impressed every time Shane uncapped his water bottle for him. He didn't feel it though—not even close. Comparing himself now to how he'd felt after Niko, he felt weaker, more easily wiped out, like his body was running on something well below empty.

With Niko, he'd had more room to train. More free time, more ability to just hand Niko off to Ilya for an hour and actually get through a session without interruption. But now, with a very clingy toddler also in the mix, it wasn't that simple anymore.

Not that he was complaining. He loved Niko with his whole heart, loved that they now had two kids. But...change.

Just a lot of change.

"Well, I guess I'm trying to get strong-*er*," Shane amended, kissing Niko's chubby cheek. Niko smiled instantly.

He got through his workout as best he could with a toddler nearby. During his planks, Niko dutifully dropped down beside him and copied every movement, watching Shane with intense, unblinking focus. When he moved on to deadlifts—taking so many breaks between reps, the whole time overthinking how the hell he was going to feel strong enough to play again—he redirected Niko to the jump rope, far away from the weights. Niko took to it happily, very clumsy and extremely serious about it all at once.

So much stamina.

He was comparing himself to his 3-year-old's endurance, Shane realized. That was where he was at.

He made it about 15 minutes into the workout before he had to take another long break. He was completely drenched in sweat, breathing heavy. He pulled his t-shirt off, overheated, and looked in the mirror.

He looked at himself for a long moment. He had been doing that a lot lately.

His stomach had shrunk since Max was born, but it was still soft and rounded, still carrying the shape of the last few months. Honestly, he still looked a couple months pregnant. New stretch marks ran along the lower curve of his stomach and along the tops of his hips, silver and faint, peeking out above the waistband of his athletic shorts.

It wasn't...*bad*. He knew that. Stretch marks definitely weren't new to him, he'd had them long before he ever got pregnant. And his body would feel like his own again—it had after Niko, and that first season back he'd felt stronger than he ever had before. Knowing he'd carried Niko for nine months and then trained himself all the way back to the ice had made him feel like he could do anything.

And he *could* do anything. He had proved it. New dad, helped his team win the Cup, and fell even deeper in love with Ilya somewhere in the middle of all of it.

But he was so tired of the transition. Of waking up in a body he didn't quite recognize and spending months coaxing it back toward something familiar. After a lifetime of knowing exactly what his body could do, of building it and conditioning it and understanding it inside out, it now felt like someone else's. Again.

And he was running low on patience for it.

He felt little arms wrap around his legs and looked down to find Niko hugging him, gazing up at their reflection in the mirror.

"Daddy," he said, pointing a chubby finger at the mirror.

Shane put a hand on his head. "Mhmm. And Niko." He pointed at Niko's reflection.

Niko grinned. His arms came up to wrap around Shane's stomach. "No more baby?"

He looked at Niko in the mirror. Squeezing at Shane's softer stomach, his chubby cheek smushed into it, looking extremely pleased with himself.

He kind of wanted Niko to let go. There was something about watching the skin bunch up in his son's hands, the give of it, that was hard to sit with. Maybe it was more of a sensory thing, the force of Niko's grip. Or maybe it was more the reminder, once again, that he had such a long way to go before feeling like himself again. Or maybe he had to get used to that this *was* himself now.

But then again, that felt like a shitty fucking thing to think about your three-year-old. *Sorry, stop hugging your dad, even though your whole world flipped upside down six weeks ago.*

"No more baby, bud," Shane finally confirmed, putting his fingers through Niko's thick hair. "Baby Max is out of my tummy."

Niko nodded seriously at that. "It's soft, Daddy," he said, pressing his lips into his stomach. "Like a pillow."

"Hm. It is soft." And Niko *had* been using it like a pillow. Which Shane did actually love. He always loved when Niko fell asleep on him.

Niko squeezed his eyes shut and let out an exaggerated fake snore. "Look, Daddy," he whispered. "I'm sleepin'. Like Maxie was inside."

Shane looked down and laughed a little. He brushed some of Niko's dark hair out of his eyes. "My sleepy, sleepy kid."

"Now Max sleeps at this home," Niko narrated, matter-of-factly. "Not your tummy home anymore."

Shane looked back at the mirror.

"You're right."

Shane was endlessly grateful for their support system. Since Max was born, help had come from every direction without them even having to ask. His parents were over constantly. The freezer was stacked with homemade meals. Svetlana had already come for a weekend, Rose just a few weeks after that, both of them arriving with an overabundance of gifts and toys and seemingly endless patience for the chaos the house had become.

Today, Hayden was over for the afternoon. Which Niko was thrilled with. He was obsessed with Hayden, maybe to a concerning degree. Which drove Ilya a little insane. Some cosmic joke on the world, having Ilya's child be obsessed with Hayden.

Shane was on the couch with Hayden and the boys, watching as Hayden bounced Max in his arms, grinning down at him.

"*Hello*, handsome guy," Hayden said, in that upturned baby talk voice.

Maybe Shane should be talking in baby talk, he thought to himself. He had tried being a little more singsong at times. But Max didn't seem to respond to it either way, so what was the point.

"Uncle Hayden," Niko said, standing on the couch. He leaned on Haydens' shoulder, bouncing in place.

"What's up, kiddo?"

"Can I show you how to feed Maxie?" Niko asked excitedly.

Hayden looked silently at Shane, who nodded. Hayden then grinned big at Niko. "Absolutely. Thank you, Niko. I'd love that. I need the practice."

"You joke, but you really do," Ilya said as he walked towards the kitchen. "I know Jackie carried ninety percent of the brunt of keeping your children alive."

Hayden looked up at Ilya, scoffing. "That's not true."

"It is true," Ilya said. "Shane told me."

Shane hadn't exactly told Ilya that. What had actually happened was that Ilya, sleep-deprived and restless in those early weeks with Niko, had started asking Shane relentlessly how Hayden had handled things when Jackie gave birth. Shane, equally sleep-deprived and not paying close enough attention to where the conversation was going, said he didn't really know. Ilya had pressed further—did Hayden help with the feedings? The night shifts? Shane had absentmindedly said that Jackie had handled most of those, from what he remembered. That was apparently all Ilya had needed.

Hayden side-eyed Shane. "What else are you telling him?"

Shane smiled a little and helped hand Niko the bottle. "I plead the fifth."

Shane gingerly took Max and carefully placed him on Niko's lap. Niko was holding the back of his head so carefully. He had gotten so good at that.

Ilya handed Shane a warmed up bottle a few moments later, then got back to the kitchen to finish the dishes form lunch. Shane helped adjust the bottle in Niko's hands. "Remember to tilt it up, okay?"

Niko nodded seriously. He looked up at Hayden. "Uncle Hayden, you hafta hold it *up*."

"Ahh. Show me how you do it, kiddo. Let's see it."

Niko did, impressively well. He was so serious about it, when he wanted to be. Other times, he'd be furious at Max mid-feeding and try to physically shove him off Shane's lap. It was a whole ordeal. Shane never knew which version of Niko he was getting until he was already in it.

Shane watched Max hungrily drink away. Niko was leaning in, looking down at him with that wide, unblinking awe he got sometimes. Shane was grateful for it—Niko was in one of his infatuation phases today, which wasn't always a guarantee. It really did floor Shane at times. Seeing how much Niko instantly could love this baby, who he couldn't even really conceptualize just a few months ago.

Shane noticed when Niko started to shift the bottle a little higher, probably without even realizing it.

"Niko," Shane said. "Hold it lower, honey."

Niko frowned. "I am."

"No, you're not, bud. He's going to choke," Shane said, a little more sharply. He reached to readjust the bottle, but Niko instantly whined and yanked it back towards himself.

"Daddy, *stop*."

"Hey, hey," Hayden said, rubbing Niko's back and glancing up at Shane. "Your dad's just trying to help, bud."

"Don't need help."

"I'll take it away if you can't be safe, Niko," Shane said, taking the bottle from him and readjusting it. Which instantly made Niko glower at him, so *pissed*.

"No, Daddy! I'm showing Uncle Hayden." His voice was rising.

"Here, here," Hayden said, putting his hands around Niko's and guiding him to properly hold the bottle. "Hold it with me, okay? Look at your brother. He's so happy when you're being safe with him, right?"

Niko looked down at Max, still scowling. But it softened, the way it always did, as Max blinked up at him. Niko's whole face broke into a grin. "Look! He's eating."

"Mhmm," Hayden said. "Big brother Niko to the rescue."

Shane felt stupid now. Even Hayden was better with his own kids than Shane was right now.

He must have been staring too long, because Hayden looked up over Niko's head and raised an eyebrow. "Shane. You good?"

Shane met his eyes. Hayden's brow was furrowed.

"Yes," he said. "Yeah. Just tired."

Hayden nodded, still looking at him. "I'll bet. You need to let me and Jackie take Niko for the weekend. Or at least for the day. I'll even take Ilya off your hands if you need it. Though no promises he'll come back in one piece."

Shane smiled a little at that and sighed. He shook his head. "It's okay."

Shane looked down at Max, who had slowed almost to a stop on the bottle, eyes heavy. He watched him for a moment. Then, before he could think better of it—

"Did you..." He stopped himself just as quickly as the words started coming out.

"What?" Hayden asked. "You can tell me."

Shane chewed on his lip. He couldn't really tell Hayden how he was feeling.

"Does it feel normal again?" Shane finally asked, keeping his voice low. He was glad Niko was deep in his own world now, babbling at Max, impeccably good at tuning everything else out when he got like that.

"I can't remember. After we had Niko. When it started to feel normal again."

Hayden looked at Shane. "Sure it will," he said, confidently. "It'll just feel like a...new normal. It'll take some time. And then you'll forget what life was even like before two kids."

Shane nodded. "Yeah."

Hayden looked at Shane. "It's a lot to have a whole new baby, Shane."

Shane nodded again but couldn't bring himself to say anything.

"You know you can always talk to me, right?" Hayden said softly. "Especially with this whole kids thing. I know it can be a lot."

Shane met his eyes and immediately wished he could take it back. He could still salvage it—convince Hayden it was nothing, that he was fine, that he'd just been tired and talking. "Yeah. Yeah, I know. Thank you."

He felt insane. There was no way Hayden had ever felt what Shane was feeling. No way he'd ever sat across from his own newborn and felt like a stranger to him. That wasn't something that happened to good fathers. That wasn't normal.

"What helped me and Jackie after the twins," Hayden continued, "was getting out of the house. Even just an hour or two. Dinner, a walk, whatever. It's so easy to get cooped up and not even realize how suffocating it's getting." He shrugged. "Maybe you and Ilya could do that. We're serious about taking the kids."

Shane thought about it. It sounded nice, in theory. But as he watched Max slow down on the bottle, eyes going heavy, he felt that familiar unease settle in his chest. He couldn't really imagine leaving him with someone else yet, even just for a few hours. He was worried it would only make things worse—Max waking up without him there, and deciding this was proof that Shane was neglectful. That it mean Shane didn't want to be there.

"Yeah," Shane said finally, brushing the hair back from Niko's forehead as he kept up his steady stream of babbling at Max. "Yeah. That's a good idea."

Shane took Hayden's advice and went to one of their favorite restaurants later that week. They even got their corner booth, the one beside the abstract painting that Niko always liked to point at and narrate.

Max was swaddled against Shane's chest, cheek smushed into him, breathing soft and even. Asleep, thank God. Though the credit belonged entirely to Ilya, who had somehow transferred him from the car seat to the wrap without waking him.

"Daddy," Niko piped up from beside him, on his knees on the booth seat. One hand was gripping Shane's sleeve, the other clutching a crayon over his kids menu. "*Daddy*."

Shane blinked down at him and smiled. "Yes, honey?"

"Apple juice?"

"You can have apple juice," Shane agreed. "But you need real food, too, okay?."

He nodded, still clinging to Shane's sleeve. He wrapped his arms around Shane's arm. "I wanna feed Maxie. I wanna give him apple juice."

"You can feed him his bottle when we get home," Ilya promised from across the table, leaning over to cup Niko's cheek. "No apple juice for little babies. Only for big, big kids."

Niko preened. "*I'm* a big, big kid."

"You are," Ilya grinned. "Biggest I've ever seen."

For the next half hour, things went pretty smoothly. Sure, Shane was constantly checking on Max against his chest, making sure he hadn't turned his face and blocked his airway, and yes, answering Niko's relentless questions on barely twenty-minute increments of sleep a night for the past two months was its own particular kind of exhausting—but he could make this work. It would start to feel normal. Like Hayden said.

Ilya had been playing footsie with him under the table the whole time. This was good. This was fine.

Then the food came, and Niko decided it would be a good idea to eat his mac and cheese with his hands.

Shane redirected him to his fork. Niko shrieked no. Loudly. Enough for a few heads to turn.

"Nikolai," Ilya said, voice dropping low. "What happened to being a big, big kid, hm? Big kids use their fork. Can you show Papa and Daddy how nicely you can use it?"

"No," Niko shouted, shoving the fork away.

Ilya picked it up without missing a beat, loaded it with mac and cheese, and held it to Niko's mouth. "Then Papa will help. Come on. Big bite."

Niko glared at it. Then shoved the fork clean out of Ilya's hand. It clattered across the table, leaving a smear of cheese behind.

Shane closed his eyes.

And Max, right on cue, began to stir. Making angry little grunts against Shane's chest, then blearily opening his eyes.

"Shh," Shane whispered desperately, patting his back through the mesh in steady rhythmic circles. "Go back to sleep."

Max didn't. He was blinking awake now, little face scrunched up. The whimpers started.

Ilya slid a napkin across the table toward Niko, even as Niko was kicking his short legs against the booth. "Nikolai," Ilya said sternly. "Clean up your mess, please."

"No," Niko snapped back, and more people turned.

Shane felt the heat crawl up his neck. His petulant toddler on one side, his infant starting to fuss on the other, and everyone in this restaurant could probably see it—could probably sense that Max didn't like him, that Shane was faking his way through this, forcing something that wasn't there and wasn't ever going to be there.

Ilya exhaled and got up to go to Niko's side. Niko wailed as he came nearby, moving closer to Shane. "*Daddy*."

Shane was still trying to settle Max, cupping the back of his head, pressing him back against his chest. Body warmth, familiar scent—that was supposed to be enough. That was supposed to be some innate thing, some animalistic pull newborns had toward their parents, hardwired in them from the beginning. Shane had read that. He was pretty sure he had read that.

It was probably really bad that his baby didn't have it toward him.

"Hold on, Niko," he said, keeping his voice as even as he could, hoping maybe at least one of his sons would take the cue. "Give me one second to settle your brother."

Ilya was already beside Niko, hands on his waist, trying to redirect him back into his seat. Niko shrieked the second Ilya touched him and hugged Shane's arm tighter. "*Daddy*."

"Niko," Ilya warned, low and steady. "If you cannot sit down by the time I count to three, we are taking a break outside."

Niko glared at Ilya with his whole face. Shane could feel the iron grip of his fingers on his arm while Max squirmed against his chest, little mouth opening up, the first sounds working their way out of him. Shane fished in his pocket for the pacifier. Maybe today would be the day that finally worked on him.

"One," Ilya began.

God, it was so fucking loud in here. Shane's heart was pounding against his chest. They were never going to have a normal outing again, not once—and even when the kids were older, less tantrum-prone, they would still hate him because Shane was never going to feel normal again. They would remember that Shane broke somewhere around Max being two months old and never really came back.

Everything was getting louder. Blood rushing in his ears, the room narrowing at the edges.

Oh God. He knew what this was—

"Two."

—The sounds started going muffled, tunneling inward. And he was in public. Max strapped to him, Niko attached to his arm. This could not be happening right now—

“Three.”

Niko screamed as Ilya pried him off. It went straight through Shane's skull.

His heart was slamming so hard he could feel it in his throat. And then, for a second, he thought—maybe this wasn't a panic attack. Maybe this was a heart attack. From the sleep deprivation, maybe. That could happen. He knew that was possible.

He was breathing laboriously, the corners of his vision going in and out. His hand felt clammy as he kept patting Max's back.

"Shane?" Ilya's voice, somewhere distant, over the noise. He thought he heard Niko too, actually.

Oh fuck, he was probably scaring Niko. This was going to be one of Niko's first real memories. His dad falling apart in the middle of a restaurant. Thinking his dad was dying.

He might not even have to think it. Maybe Shane *is* dying.

He tried to breathe slow. He knew that was what you were supposed to do. It wasn't working. Probably because this was a heart attack.

Max wouldn't remember this, at least. He wouldn't have a memory of his dad dying. But it would stick anyway, somehow, as he got older. Settle into him somewhere deep and shape him in ways Shane would never be able to trace back to this moment.

He started undoing Max's sling, trying not to focus on how badly his fingers were shaking. The tunnel vision was closing in, narrowing everything down to a small dim circle. He could barely make out Max's face as he fumbled with the clasp, the fabric feeling so heavy and tight against his chest.

"Shane, sweetheart," he heard Ilya say, his voice sounding strangely far away. Like it was coming through water. Shane couldn't look up to find his face, He couldn't look at anything.

"Get him off," Shane managed, though he wasn't entirely certain the words had actually come out or if they'd only happened somewhere in his head. He swallowed, felt how tight and constricted his throat was. "I'm going—pass—pass out. Going to hurt him."

Ilya said something else, but Shane didn't register what. It was muffled, drowned out by the ringing and the sound of his own heart pounding. He did feel Ilya reach over and gently tug at the sling until he had Max.

Shane felt the weight of Max off of him, heard distantly Ilya readjust him in his own arms.

Ilya pressed his hand to Shane's thigh under the table, squeezing hard enough that Shane couldn't tune it out. "Shane," he said quietly. "You are not going to pass out. I promise. Do you want to get some air?"

Shane tried to focus on the pressure of Ilya's grip. The weight of it. The way he could almost feel Ilya's fingernails through the fabric of his pants.

Ilya always knew to do that. Without ever being told, or taught. He was so good at knowing what Shane needed, what their sons needed, reading everyone in a room and adjusting so easily.

And Shane was sitting here being reminded, again, that he couldn't figure out what Max needed no matter how many times he tried. No matter how many times he adjusted the pressure of his circles on his back, or tried rocking him against his shoulder instead of his chest, or worked slow little massages into his stomach after feeding. None of it landed. Not by any pattern Shane could find.

He wasn't good at this anymore. He wasn't good at parenting anymore.

Shane squeezed his eyes shut. He heard Niko's squeaky little voice say *Daddy*.

He got up from the table without thinking. All of it—the clatter of silverware around the restaurant, the hum of voices around them growing loud—was pressing in on him from every direction.

"I'll be—back," he stammered out.

He walked to the bathroom on autopilot, not entirely sure how his legs were moving. Ilya had called ahead to see if they had a family restroom, for when Max would inevitably need a change. He pushed inside, fingers fumbling as he locked the door behind him.

The lights were brutal. He squeezed his eyes shut and felt along the wall for the switch, flicked it off. Just the thin glow from under the door now.

He gripped the sink. Tried to breathe. It kept catching halfway, stuttering out before it reached the bottom of his lungs. His hands were slick against the porcelain, clammy enough that he had to grip harder just to stay anchored.

He turned on the faucet and splashed cold water on his face. It hit him, sharp and immediate. He did it again. And again. His heart was pounding so hard he could feel it in his teeth. Even the sound of the water felt wrong—too loud, too close, like it was coming from inside his skull.

His heart felt like it was going to explode through his chest. He was going to die in here. Heart attack, alone in a dark bathroom, and his kids would grow up without him.

Okay. It won't explode. It won't, this is just a panic attack, obviously. He's had these before.

But maybe.

He inhaled again shakily and leaned over the sink, bending his head down.

He thought he heard his phone buzz. Ilya, probably. Fuck, he was probably out there trying to juggle two fussy children by himself, because Shane was barely functioning in a dark bathroom.

But Shane couldn't bring himself to look at it. He felt like he might float away, come apart entirely, if he focused on anything besides his own breathing.

He sank down slowly until he was squatting and dropped his head forward. He gripped the back of his neck with both hands and squeezed his eyes shut as hard as he could.

Focusing on the darkness.

Shane did not want to talk to Ilya about the panic attack.

He knew what Ilya was going to say.

He was in bed now, hours after they got home, his hair still damp from his shower—the one that Ilya told him to take, even when Shane insisted he didn't need to. But Ilya already got it going for him before he could argue too long.

Shane was nursing Max now, propped up on some pillows. Looking down at him.

Ilya came in a little while later and quietly settled beside Shane on the bed. He smiled, tilting his head to look at Max, and put his hand on the back of his head, his thumb brushing his wispy hair. Max's eyes went wide, mouth going still.

"Don't get distracted, *solnyshko*," Ilya murmured. "Eat your dinner."

Shane knew it was stupid to read into it. Obviously Max couldn't understand him yet. Obviously it was just coincidence.

But Max did listen and immediately went right back to nursing.

Of course.

Shane kept his eyes on Max. Bonding time. This was important. He needed to stay present, keep doing this. And having Ilya right beside him was just giving Max more opportunity to confirm what Shane already suspected—that Ilya was his favorite, and the better parent, and that this had been established at six weeks old.

He felt Ilya's hand settle on his thigh, rubbing slow and steady. Then he reached past Shane to the nightstand and brought the straw of his water bottle up to his lips. Shane took a few pulls and grimaced slightly.

"I can get ice," Ilya said softly.

Of course he knew what Shane was thinking. His mindreader. Just like with their kids.

When Niko was born, Shane had felt nothing but grateful watching Ilya be so good with him. The way it came so naturally, like some language Ilya had always spoken without knowing it. Now, Shane didn't know whether to feel grateful or bitter about how naturally it came to him, and the fact that he was sitting here feeling both made him feel worse.

"It's alright," Shane said, still watching Max's dark eyes going heavy. He brushed his finger over the soft curve of his cheek. "Thank you, though."

They stayed quiet for a few minutes. Just Max's snuffled breathing, and the soft sound of fabric as Ilya rubbed his thigh, filling the room.

"How are you feeling?" Ilya eventually asked.

Max's eyes fluttered open once again at Ilya's voice. His eyes tracked in Ilya's direction, still drinking in little huffs.

Shane felt himself bristle. "Fine."

Max didn't look back at Shane when he spoke. He frowned. He cupped the back of Max's head and gently steered it closer to his chest, and then, Max did look at him. Blinking slowly.

Ilya kept brushing his thumb along Shane's thigh. He chewed at the inside of his cheek, eyes dropping to Max before Shane felt them shift back to him. "Shane," he said steadily. He didn't say anything after, and Shane didn't try to fill it. He could already hear the concern in the way Ilya said his name. He knew where this was going. "I know you must be so tired. You have not been sleeping lately."

Shane felt his jaw tick. *Here we go.*

"We have a newborn and a toddler," Shane said bitterly. "Of course I'm not sleeping."

Though that wasn't entirely fair, because Ilya did handle so many of the night feedings and diaper changes specifically so Shane could sleep.

But even when Ilya got up with Max, Shane was still awake. Staring at the ceiling. He would close his eyes and try to make it convincing, try to let Ilya think he was out. He didn't need Ilya worrying.

Even though he guessed he already was.

"I know," Ilya said. "But I don't think you have been getting *any* sleep. That must not feel good."

He really wasn't sleeping. There was a permanent headache behind his eyes, his vision blurry at the edges no matter how many times he blinked. This was a different kind of tired than anything he'd felt before. The kind that didn't feel sustainable.

It wasn't, actually. Chronic insufficient sleep came with a 50% increased risk of heart disease.

And a 12% increased risk of death. Up to 29%, actually.

He'd learned that one of the nights he'd spent staring at the ceiling at 3am, phone in hand, telling himself that if he knew the numbers he could scare himself into sleeping. Will his body into fixing itself.

But it didn't work. He has a 12—no, 29%—increased risk of dying and leaving his beautiful kids without their dad. And for what fucking reason? He couldn't sleep?

"Well, if you find a solution, let me know."

Ilya's brow furrowed deeper. He kept rubbing Shane's thigh. His thighs that had once been able to squat over 200 pounds without thinking twice, and that Shane had been painfully reminded of today in his training session, were still working their way back to squatting without any weight at all.

"You have been doing such a good job, Shane," Ilya said quietly, and Shane instantly felt the sting the back of his eyes just with Ilya saying that. *God*.

"But I am worried about you, sweetheart."

Shane swallowed thickly. Now he supposed it might be a good time to maybe tell him how he had been feeling. Ilya sure was making it easy for him to do so.

But what the fuck was he supposed to say? That he was worried he would never bond with their baby? That their son would grow up resenting Shane? That Max had known, somehow, from the very beginning—had felt Shane's anxiety through the whole pregnancy, sensed that this hadn't been part of the plan, that Shane had spent more time worrying about getting back on the ice than being present for the baby growing inside him? And that it was only a matter of time before Niko caught on, felt the same way too, felt Shane get worse and worse as a parent as he got older, no longer able to read his cues that he once knew so well?

"You don't need to worry," Shane said. "I know I had a panic attack. You don't need to hover. I was just overwhelmed, all the noise and," he waved a hand vaguely at Max.

Ilya pressed his lips together. "Is not nothing, Shane," he said gently. "You have not had one in so long. And you just gave birth, that is huge adjustment. I want to help you however I can."

Good luck with that, Shane thought bitterly. "I'm just...really exhausted. Think the lack of sleep got to me today."

Ilya nodded slowly. "How about I do all of tonight's feedings? Maybe you can even sleep downstairs in the guest room, cancel out his cries."

"I didn't pump enough."

"I will supplement with formula."

Shane worked his jaw, mulling it over. He should just say yes, obviously.

Max's eyes sleepily drifted to Ilya again, even as he fed. His mouth twitched in a little smile around his latch.

Ilya smiled back, big and warm, his eyebrows shooting up, right back at him. Like a natural, good father.

Ilya really *had* been getting better at the parenting thing, the more they did it. Not that Ilya was ever bad at it, that is. But lately, he was managing their toddler and infant like a pro, with ease.

Max kept his eyes on Ilya, still smiling. Just using Shane as his nutrient source, not giving him a smile of any sort.

He was bonding more with Ilya, again, proven. Shane felt his eyes burn again, and he wasn't sure it was from the exhaustion this time. He cupped Max's head and turned him away from Ilya.

"Can you stop."

Ilya's smiled immediately dropped. He looked at Shane, worried. "Stop what?"

Shane felt heat rise to his face. "Nothing. Nevermind. Sorry."

Ilya looked at him, eyes scanning over his face. He reached out and gently cupped Shane's cheek, thumb pressing right under his eyes where Shane felt tears threatening to spill over. "Shane. *Moya lyubov*. What do you need right now? Do you need some space? Is that it?"

Shane hated how Ilya just touching him like this made him instantly feel like letting the floodgates open. He kept looking at Max.

"No." Maybe. He didn't know. *God*. "I'm just...I'm just trying to connect with him."

Ilya was looking over Shane, worried. He squeezed his arm, but Shane squirmed away.

"What do you mean, sweetheart?" Ilya asked gently. "You are already connected. So connected. He loves you, you are his father."

Ilya didn't get it. Because why would he. *Shane* didn't even get it.

But he knew it was true.

"It's not working," Shane said. "I can't calm him down. I never know what he needs. He doesn't like me, Ilya."

Saying it out loud made the few tears in his eyes threaten to spill. He hastily brushed his eyes and refocused on Max, who was starting to doze off as he finished his last few pulls.

Ilya's fingers stopped rubbing his cheek. He dropped his hand to Shane's thigh again, squeezing, and got closer so Shane could better see Ilya's face. "Shane," he said softly. "He loves you. He—"

Shane just shook his head, the tears starting to fall this time. "He doesn't, Ilya. He cries so much with me." He took a shaky breath. "He won't even smile at me."

Ilya's eyes were watering too. He got closer to Shane and tried to meet his eyes. "He has, sweetheart. I have seen him smile at you. Just this morning, when you were changing him."

"That wasn't a smile." Gas, probably. Or just a figment of his imagination.

Ilya opened his mouth, probably to protest. But closed it instead and just kept rubbing Shane's thigh.

Shane kept his eyes on Max, who had stopped suckling entirely, that milk-drunk glaze settling over his eyes. At least that was one look Shane could read. He pressed his finger gently to break the latch, and Max smacked his lips together and settled back into the crook of his arm.

"There is nothing wrong with you, Shane. Sometimes the brain can make you think things that aren't true after having a baby," Ilya said softly. "Did you tell your doctor about this? At your last appointment?"

Shane stilled. He shrugged stiffly. *Kind of.*

He had brought up Max's intense crying, how binkies and rocking didn't seem to work. Had answered honestly about how many hours of sleep he was getting when they asked.

And he had filled out the questionnaires honestly. Well, he tried to. Some of the questions made that difficult. Like "how many times in the last month have you worried about the baby." Shane had stared at that one for a while. Weren't good parents supposed to worry? That was the one thing he thought he was actually doing right—worrying about their safety, their wellbeing. So why was it framed like something to flag. What was a normal amount?

Clearly not his, he had found out.

"And what did they say?"

Shane's jaw worked.

"They made a referral," Shane said curtly. "To see a therapist."

A therapist who would probably take one look at him and know immediately something was irreparably wrong with him. Worst patient they'd ever had. Hopeless, lost cause. Everything Shane had ever relied on—the idea that if you worked hard enough at something, you got better at it—had stopped applying somewhere in the last six weeks. So what was the guarantee that therapy would be any different.

Ilya nodded. Shane looked at him, hesitantly. He looked a little relieved, actually—probably had been gearing up to suggest it himself and was glad he didn't have to be the one to say it, Shane thought.

"I think that would be very good for you, Shane."

Shane looked back at Max.

"There is nothing wrong with you, sweetheart. You just had a baby. That is huge." Ilya reached for his hand. "I will take over whatever you need me to. And therapy will help this all feel less overwhelming. I promise."

Shane brushed Max's soft cheek. "I need to connect with him." He paused. "And Niko, Ilya. We're supposed to be taking him on more one-on-one outings. He needs that individualized attention or he'll start to resent Max. We haven't been doing enough of that lately. That's probably why he was so clingy today, why the tantrum happened at lunch. It starts this early, you know. Sibling resentment." He couldn't stop. "We need to be more intentional about it. It's important."

Ilya just nodded along, keeping his hand on Shane's thigh. "Okay. Okay, we can do that, sweetheart. He will not resent Max, I promise. But I can take him on a solo date tomorrow, okay? Can take him to the zoo."

Shane nodded. "He'll want to see the prairie dogs first."

Ilya smiled. "He will. We will probably come home with three new prairie dog stuffed animals from the gift shop. So speak now if you have any objections."

Shane smiled a little. "I'd expect that."

They sat like that in silence for a bit. Shane kept looking down as Max slept, breathing noisily.

"You can also take him, and I can stay with Max, if you prefer," Ilya said softly.

Shane shook his head.

"No. I'll stay."

The next day, Shane still had no sleep. But Ilya did take Niko to the zoo. And Niko had been *so* excited.

Which left Shane alone with Max. Bonding time.

Too bad Shane had spent the last hour trying to console a screeching Max.

Shane had been carrying this sense of impending doom since those first few days after Max was born. Constant, sitting heavy in his chest at all times, like his heart had dropped into the pit of his stomach and never come back up. Like he was always one wrong breath, one piercing cry away from the ground splitting open and dragging him down.

He tried to take a deep breath, through his stomach, his diaphragm—he knew that was supposed to help. But every muscle in his body was wound so tight that the inhale felt half-complete, stuttering out before it got anywhere. Which sent another break of sweat across his skin as he shakily exhaled.

Sometimes he was scared he'd never be able to take a full breath again. Scared to even really try. Because if he couldn't even take a deep breath, if his body really was this broken and there really was something wrong with him, what was he going to do. How was he supposed to live like this. Was he just going to have to accept this as his new reality? Feeling disconnected from his own body, with a baby he couldn't reach and a toddler he kept losing his patience with and was probably traumatizing?

"Max," Shane said, cupping the back of his head and trying to bring it down to his shoulder. But all that happened was Max's screams pitching up a decibel. "C'mon, baby. It's okay. Let's figure this out."

Max inhaled sharply, whole body jerking with the force of it, and screamed again. Loud enough that Shane felt it in his chest, in his teeth.

This was bad. This was really bad. Shane was genuinely concerned something was actually wrong with him, that maybe Max was actually hurt—oh fuck, *had* Shane hurt him? Was there a moment, some foggy stretch he couldn't account for, where he'd dropped him or knocked his head or done something he couldn't remember doing?

Fuck, he needed to get his sleep schedule sorted out, he couldn't be this out of it, it wasn't safe, his baby was screaming and Shane couldn't even be certain it wasn't his fault—

But if he took him to the emergency room, they'd question him. They'd want to know what happened, and Shane would have to admit he didn't know, that he'd been so foggy he couldn't be sure, and they'd be able to tell something was wrong with him. They'd see it immediately. Maybe they'd take Max away, or lock Shane up in jail or something, for child endangerment.

Maybe that wasn't the worst thing. Maybe Max was better off. Clearly Shane was failing him. Clearly he was incapable of this in some fundamental way that wasn't getting better, wasn't *going* to get better, and maybe the kindest thing he could do for his son was admit that. If he couldn't bond with him as a newborn, how was he supposed to bond with him when he was older? There was supposed to be some deeply rooted, primal thing in new parents—knowing their baby's cries, feeling how much they depended on you, feeling it returned. Shane didn't have it. He'd been waiting for it since the day Max came home and it still hadn't come.

He didn't really remember sinking to the floor. One moment he was standing by the crib, bouncing Max, and then he was on the floor with his back against the wall.

Max was wailing, squirming in his arms, face red and wet. Shane looked down at him and rocked him frantically, wiped the tears from his cheeks, tried to clear off that red blotchy face, but it did nothing. Max just kept going.

"What do you want," Shane asked, his voice breaking. "Max, what's wrong? What's *wrong*?"

Max was red in the face, his cry so hoarse and desperate, his whole body wound tight.

This was supposed to be their time. Shane was supposed to be building something with him, closing whatever gap had opened up between them, and instead it was ending exactly like every other day: Max inconsolable, wanting nothing to do with him.

"*Max*," Shane said again, louder, his voice breaking. "What? What's wrong? What the fuck is wrong?"

Shane really couldn't breathe right. Couldn't focus on anything outside of the screaming and how tight every muscle in his body had gone and the creeping, suffocating certainty that this was just his life now. That he had done something to this kid. Ruined something before it even had a chance to start.

His own cries started breaking through before he could stop them, hiccuping out of him in the same helpless rhythm as Max's. He could barely swallow one down before the next one came.

"Please," Shane choked out, looking down at Max and rocking him furiously. "*Please*, just tell me what you need."

Max was still screaming. Shane kept shaking, kept rocking him, kept asking him over and over what was wrong. He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes as tears ran down his face.

"What the fuck is wrong," he sobbed out, breath hitching. He couldn't bring himself to look at Max.

This was never going to end. He couldn't believe he'd brought Max into the world only for him to be this miserable with Shane. He'd ruined this kid's life. Ruined his own, Niko's, Ilya's. Everything was broken, and two months ago he hadn't even known to be grateful for how easy it all was, how good, and now he couldn't even remember what that felt like.

"Shane?"

Ilya's voice sounded so alarmed. Shane could tell even over the cries. He doesn't remember hearing the door open.

Shane became aware of him kneeling in front of him, one hand on his leg, the other reaching out. "Are you hurt? Is Maxim hurt?"

Shane just kind of shook his head.

Ilya scanned them both quickly, then reached for Max. This time Shane didn't protest at all. Ilya maneuvered him carefully onto one shoulder, shushing him, rubbing his back, and Shane just curled in on himself. Tucked his head in between his knees.

"Something's wrong," he gasped out.

Max was still crying. Ilya adjusted him to his shoulder, carrying him with one arm and shushing him gently as he knelt down directly in front of Shane. He put his other arm around Shane, bringing his face close to Shane's ear.

"Shane." His voice was desperate, low. "Sweetheart. I'm here. Everything is going to be okay."

Shane just shook his head. He dug his nails into his arms as he hugged his knees, feeling the sting of it, trying to focus on something other than Max's crying. The sound was making Shane feel like he was going to fall into that hole again. It was so piercing.

It won't be okay. He'd never felt like this before.

Max was quieting slightly though—Shane could hear it through the fog, the cries losing some of their edge as Ilya rubbed his back. Even now, even like this, Ilya was managing both of them at once.

When Ilya got low enough to be in front of Shane, he shifted Max carefully to one arm and used the other to pull Shane in. Shane's face was still buried in his knees.

Ilya rubbed his back in firm, steady strokes, rocking him gently, bouncing Max at the same time with the arm wrapped around him. "I am so sorry, sweetheart," he whispered. "I'm here. You are safe. Max is safe."

Shane shook his head. "He knows," he choked out. And then saying it out loud broke something open, and a fresh wave built up in his throat before he could stop it.

Ilya tucked his face closer to Shane's. "What do you mean? What—"

"He knows I was—" He couldn't get the words out. He shook his head again, squeezing his eyes shut tight enough to see stars. "He knows I didn't want him."

Fuck. *Fuck*, he shouldn't have said that out loud. Ilya was going to think he'd lost his mind. That he was a disgrace of a father. No amount of therapy would fix the way Ilya would look at him now.

He waited for it—for Ilya's grip to loosen, for him to pull back, to take Max and walk out and get both kids as far away from Shane as possible.

But Ilya didn't pull away. Didn't say anything for a moment, just kept holding him.

"Oh, Shane," Ilya murmured, his lips close to his ear. "That is not true—"

"He *hates* me, Ilya." Shane kept shaking his head, over and over. "He hates me and I don't know how to fix it, and I don't know what's wrong with me, Ilya, but *he* knows something is —"

Ilya shifted Max carefully, getting his arm more securely around him, and then pulled Shane's head to his free shoulder. Shane felt Max's small, warm weight against his arm as Ilya rocked all three of them, slow and steady.

Shane let his face press into Ilya's neck, his whole body shaking with silent crying, lungs stuttering with every breath.

Ilya kept rocking. Kept shushing him softly, lips pressed to the side of his head. He was rubbing firm strokes on his back as he did so, and Shane tried to focus on how it felt, the rhythm on his back, and not on his lungs feeling like they'd collapse in on itself.

"He does not hate you, Shane," Ilya said softly, right into his ear. Shane couldn't say anything except shake his head again into his neck.

"He *does*."

"He does not," Ilya repeated, rubbing his back harder, breathing steady and even against Shane's hair. Shane let the tears fall harder, stopped trying to hold them back.

Shane wanted to shake his head, to immediately try to refute that. This was different, this wasn't the same thing at all. But he didn't have anything left to fight with. So he just cried instead, let Ilya hold him.

They stayed like that for a long time. Shane's crying stayed hiccupy and broken for a while, his whole body shaking with it, and Ilya just held on. Kept rubbing his back, kept rocking them slightly, kept his lips pressed to the side of Shane's head. Not trying to rush it.

Slowly, eventually, the sobs started to lose their edge. Shane's breath evened out in increments, each exhale a little steadier than the last. His grip on Ilya's shirt loosened slightly. The hiccups spaced out. He wiped his face against Ilya's shoulder, not caring, and just breathed.

It took a while. Long enough that the light in the room had shifted slightly by the time Shane could really hear anything outside of his own breathing again.

"It is normal, to be scared when something is unexpected," Ilya eventually murmured. "Do you not remember the meltdowns I had when you were pregnant with Niko?"

Shane did remember. Very vividly. Somewhere in the third trimester, Ilya had started getting these recurring thoughts—that he was going to become his father. That he had no idea how to be a dad when he'd had no example of one. That he was going to mess it up in all the same ways. Shane wished he could show that Ilya what he was like now.

Shane nodded a little. "That...that was different."

"Is not different," Ilya said firmly. "Having a baby is the biggest thing a person can do. It brings up everything, even when it is perfectly planned." He rubbed Shane's back. "You were accepting that this was going to change things. That is not a bad father thing. That is a good father thing. You were making space for Max. Making sacrifices. Ones that he will always know, even if he cannot say it yet."

Shane wasn't sure about that. He *was* sure that Max would grow up and remember this—the panic, the distance, the father who couldn't hold it together.

"You think Hayden was expecting to have twins the first time around?" Ilya asked. "You mean to tell me he did not freak out when he saw two heartbeats on the ultrasound?"

Shane sniffled and shrugged a little. "He was...surprised."

Ilya nodded, pulling back a little to look at Shane's wet eyes. Ilya's eyes were teary too. "And surprised does not mean hate, hm? Does not mean he regrets them, yes?"

Shane shook his head.

Ilya cupped his jaw and kissed him softly. Then pulled back and held his face with one hand, making sure Shane was looking at him.

"I have watched you, Shane," he said quietly. "Every day since Maxim was born. I have watched you hold him and feed him and get up with him in the middle of the night when you do not have to. I have watched you read every book, every article, trying so hard to figure him out." His thumb moved across Shane's cheeks, catching a tear that was still falling there. "He is giving you a run for his money. He is not easy to figure out. I still am too. But your mind is lying to you right now. That is all it is doing. You have never, not for one single day, not wanted him."

Shane's chin wobbled. He opened his mouth, but Ilya kept going, looking him directly in the eyes as his own tears started slipping down.

"He does not hate you," Ilya said firmly. "He has loved you since you built his first heartbeat."

Shane's face crumpled. "I can't calm him down, Ilya."

"He is temperamental baby," Ilya said. "Remember? What the doctor said? So if you want to blame someone for that, blame our colicky baby." A small smile. "Not the father."

"*You* can calm him down."

"I can *sometimes* calm him down," Ilya corrected. "And other times, I am considering putting little bit of whiskey in his mouth to sooth him to sleep."

Shane sniffled and furrowed his brow a bit. "Don't do that."

"I read it online. You are not the only one who does their interent deep dives," Ilya smiled. "Though apparently this method is very outdated. Not sure why."

Shane looked at him. At his glassy eyes, how exhausted he was, the tear tracks still drying on his face—and the way he was looking at Shane like he wasn't broken at all.

Ilya kissed Shane again, then his forehead, then pulled back. "Your mind is lying to you right now, sweetheart," he said softly. "Cloudy. That happens, is not your fault. But we will fix it, okay?"

Shane didn't really understand how something he felt this physically—this deep and consuming, eating away at him from the inside—could be a lie. How something that lived in his chest and his throat and his lungs every hour of every day could just be his brain making things up.

But if there was one thing he knew, it was that he trusted Ilya. Not just with the kids. With Shane too.

Shane sniffled and rubbed roughly at his eyes. He shook his head again. "I'm sorry—"

"Shh," Ilya whispered, kissing his lips softly. "I am so happy you told me."

Shane nodded. His eyes felt numb.

Max had quieted down somewhere in the middle of all of it. He was still propped in Ilya's arm, blotchy-cheeked, a little snot bubble at the corner of his nose. His eyes were so wet, so sad and pitiful. He was still hiccuping—he always did that for a few minutes after a big cry, these pitiful little hitches. Rubbing his sternum seemed to help, Shane thought absently.

Shane reached over and brushed his thumb under Max's eye, catching a stray tear. Max hiccuped and looked up at him with his big brown eyes.

"Such sad puppy dog eyes," Ilya murmured as he watched them. "Just like his daddy. How will I ever say no to those? Bad enough with you."

Shane huffed. "Niko has yours. How do you think I've felt for the past three years saying no to those?"

"I don't know. You seem to be doing just fine with it. Mr. Rules Enforcer."

Shane smiled a little. "Someone has to be."

Then he shot up. "Wait, where is Niko? Is he—"

"In his room," Ilya said calmly. "Watching a show on my iPad with his headphones. Put him there when we came in and heard the crying. He is completely fine."

Okay. Okay, that was good.

Shane looked back down at Max and wiped the tear from his cheek. Max was still blinking up at him, still hiccuping, his whole tiny body jerking with it. Shane shushed him softly and leaned in, brushing his nose against Max's.

Max kept looking at Shane even as he pulled back. He blinked a few times.

Then the corners of his mouth twitched up.

End Notes

little does shane know, max is going to be closest to shane 😊

thank you so much for reading!!

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