

The Rookie Season

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/73624386) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/73624386>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid , Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov
Additional Tags:	Post-Canon , Post-Book 6: The Long Game (Game Changers) , Established Relationship , Married Life , Kid Fic , Tooth-Rotting Fluff
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Ilya x Shane x Archie (post-canon)
Stats:	Published: 2025-11-03 Words: 3,444 Chapters: 1/1

The Rookie Season

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Summary

Cameras flashed, charity banners waved, the stands were overflowing with fans. Today, none of it mattered. It was only the three of them now, carrying their son onto the ice for the first time.

“To the ice, let’s go!” Ilya said softly.

Notes

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

The per-game locker room felt different today.

Usually, it hummed with the low sounds of blades being sharpened, the quiet talks of teammates tying their laces, and the sharp smell of cologne and anticipation in the air. What was normally the belly of a hockey arena had turned into something wild, like a birthday party that had gone out of control long before the candles were blown out and the cake was cut.

The room was full of kids, their high-pitched, excited voices ringing in every corner. Tiny toddlers waddled across the rubber floor in jerseys that flapped like capes on superheroes. One tiny girl, no taller than a hockey stick, wrestled her dad's massive helmet onto her head, leaving a trail of drool and great determination behind her little self.

A pair of older boys, who were clearly veterans of those sorts of events, had claimed the space near the laundry bins as their end zone, slapping foam pucks back and forth. Every accidental bump into the wall sent waves of laughter, followed by the inevitable chorus of their parents shouting warnings: "*Watch the sticks! Not near the benches! Hey, be careful around your sister!*"

Today was the NHL's annual Family Skate. A charity event, a one-day season highlight when players brought their families onto the ice for pretend games to raise money for children's hospitals. Cameras flashed everywhere. The rink was surrounded with photographers, reporters, and proud family members all capturing the gentle, hidden side of the game's sternest stars.

It was chaotic and a bit obnoxious, and Ilya Rozanov absolutely thrived in the middle of it.

He knelt in front of their son, Archie, who at only two and a half years old, was beaming with the level of confidence only a wild toddler of a Russian forward could inherit.

"Hold on still, *malysh*," Ilya said, tugging at a helmet strap. "You look like a real player now! Fierce and strong. Ready for battle on the ice!"

Archie grinned through the helmet cage. "I'm *weady* to fight!"

Near him stood Shane Hollander, a sleeve of coffee cups in one hand and a diaper bag over his shoulder. He gave a loud, weary sigh. "Can we not teach him that part yet?"

As Ilya glanced at his husband, his face twisted with mock hurt. "Why not? Hockey is war!"

"I'm FIERCE!" Archie shouted, wobbling with the grace of a chubby penguin. His giant jersey was wrapped around him like a cozy blanket.

Shane leaned down with a playful smile. "Ooh, super fierce! You look like a brave little marshmallow. He can barely stand straight, Ilya."

"He stands like a champion!" Ilya countered, fixing one of Archie's elbow pads. "Balance of the Russian tiger. He got it from me."

“Russian tiger?” Shane repeated. “Pretty sure tigers don’t skate. They prefer jungle, not slippery ice.”

Ilya gave him a look that screamed he was missing the point. “You Canadians are boring and have no imagination.”

Across the room, their teammates were laughing as they were lacing their kids into gear. Someone’s baby was gnawing on a mouth guard; the reporters circled them with cameras, trying to catch every coo and stumble. Today the NHL’s giants were just dads wrestling small hurricanes, and it was a beautiful disaster.

Shane sipped his coffee, eyes gentle even as he teased. His fingers drummed the cup while his gaze kept flicking to the shiny blades on Archie’s feet. “Are we sure about the stick? Maybe he should just scoot. Or crawl. Crawling is safe.”

Ilya waved him off. “He was born ready. My son skated before he walked.”

Archie teetered like a tipsy teapot, clutching Ilya’s knee with both mittened paws. Shane snickered, coffee steam curling into tiny hearts. “Ah yes, Olympic balance already.”

But Archie just giggled, parroting Ilya’s accent with the carefree joy only toddlers had. “We *cwush* them!”

A ripple of laughter rolled through the locker room. Ilya practically gleamed with pride. “See? He already has a winning spirit!”

Shane knelt to tug Archie’s laces tighter, still not convinced they’d survive a single glide. He muttered under his breath, “God help the league if he turns out to be anything like you.”

Ilya drifted closer until his breath brushed the shell of Shane’s ear. He whispered low and velvety. “You say it like it’s a bad thing. Who are you fooling, Hollander?”

Sudden heat flared between Shane’s ribs, hot as a match. Their gazes locked, a heartbeat too long, the noise of the room fading to a hush. Archie’s stick cracked against Shane’s skate with a sharp scratch. “Daddy! *WEADY!*”

Ilya jumped up and, smiling from ear to ear, scooped up their little son into his arms like he was a tiny champion. “*Poyekhali, malysh!* Let’s raise some money, and try not to break bones, yes?”

Archie nodded with great seriousness, and Ilya’s heart swelled. He grinned like he just scored in overtime. Shane sighed, mumbling something about needing an insurance waiver.

The doors to the rink were wide open. Light spilled in, and the sound of music, skates and happy cries rang out. Ilya stepped into the tunnel first, little Archie clutched tight against his chest.

And for a moment, everything slowed down.

Shane watched his family pushing through the crowd of players and kids, greeting and smiling at everyone on their way with faces full of joy. Archie let out a happy squeal when someone in the crowd blew him a kiss. Shane's chest felt almost too full. Sometimes he couldn't believe how blessed he was to have them in his life.

Cameras flashed, charity banners waved, the stands were overflowing with fans. Today, none of it mattered. It was only the three of them now, carrying their son onto the ice for the first time.

"To the ice, let's go!" Ilya said softly.

Shane skated out first, demonstrating perfect balance. Ilya followed him right after, holding Archie high in the sky. Families and guests roared with delight; reporters lined the boards, cameras were on and running to catch the real action: two NHL's biggest stars chasing after their wild toddler.

"Look, they're here!" someone called, and a few of their teammates clapped and whistled. Ilya waved them off, he was focused on his little boy only.

Archie's eyes went wide at all the noise. He ducked his helmeted head and wrapped both arms around Ilya's neck like a koala, clinging to his broad shoulders for his dear life.

Ilya knelt at once and set him gently on the ice. "What's this, my brave boy already hiding?"

Archie mumbled, "Too many people, Papa."

Shane bent too, placing his steady hand on Archie's shoulder blades and rubbing them in soothing circles. "They are just here to watch you skate, buddy. And maybe to see Papa fall on his bum."

The comment made Archie burst into giggles. Ilya narrowed his eyes in utter shock. "I never fall, I glide with style."

"You glide into boards," Shane muttered, grinning.

Archie laughed again, and the tension seemed to disappear from his petite body. He grabbed both Ilya and Shane by their hands. "Can we go now? Please?"

"Okay, *malysh*," Archie wiggled until Ilya set him down on the ice between himself and Shane. Archie's tiny skates wobbled, legs splayed like a newborn fawn. Ilya steadied his waist. "Knees bent, weight on the edges. No fear, yes?"

"No fear!" Archie confirmed, nodding seriously.

Shane's heart was about to explode. God help him, he had gone so soft.

Ilya pushed off gently, holding Archie's hands as they glided with slow and careful strokes. Archie squealed behind his helmet. "I skate, Papa! I skate!"

"You fly!" Ilya laughed, his smile bright enough to light the entire arena.

A few more wobbly steps, and Archie tipped forward, first landing on his padded knees and then on his butt. For a split second, there was silence, and Shane was about to sprint in their direction, but then Archie started to laugh, a full-chested giggle escaped him, so loud he actually snorted.

Ilya lifted him, pressed a kiss to the helmet crown, and set him upright. “That’s my boy. Real hockey players always stand back up.”

“You two are going to give me a heart attack,” Shane exhaled.

Ilya grinned at him over Archie’s head. “Worth it.”

Shane skated close to him, close enough to lean in and leave a chaste kiss on Ilya’s cheek. “You are so good with him, you know that?”

“Of course,” Ilya tilted his head for another kiss, surprised. “I’m good with everything.”

“See,” Shane snorted. “That was almost sweet until you opened your mouth.”

Ilya smirked, but there was no bite in it, only a spark of softness, something very tender hidden behind a famous wolfish grin he loved to wear in public. He hooked a finger into the collar of Shane’s jersey and pulled him to his chest for another quick kiss. It was clumsy and tasted like coffee, vanilla creamer and sugar, and both of them laughed while Archie squirmed between their skates.

“Papa! Daddy! Watch me shoot!” Archie’s little plastic stick shook in his hands, the blade barely skimming the ice as he waved it back and forth like a knight with a sword too big for his arm.

“You must scare the puck!” Ilya declared, crouching low enough to meet Archie’s eyes. “Show it who’s boss here!”

“Yeah, Arch,” Shane added, adopting his best coach voice. “No mercy for the puck. You stare it down, then—wham!” He mimed a slapshot, overdramatic and off-balance, sending Ilya into a muffled laugh.

Archie took this advice with the solemnity of a soldier about to march into battle. He adjusted his stance, or what he thought was one, knees bent at impossible angles, skates splayed outward. He swung.

The foam puck zipped heroically three feet before flopping lazily toward the net. Both Shane and Ilya erupted into cheers so wild and exaggerated that the sound bounced off the plexiglass, catching everyone’s attention.

“What a rocket!” Shane yelled. “Did you all see that release? Unreal flex!”

“Perfect follow-through,” Ilya added, pounding his stick against the ice. “Scouts will call us any minute!”

Archie spun around, eyes bright with triumph, chest puffed up with miniaturized pride. “Did I do good?!” he asked, practically vibrating in his skates.

Shane bent down beside him, resting one knee on the ice, the pads creaking as he steadied their wobbly boy by the elbows. “You did awesome,” he said, voice softening, but the pride sat there, just as rich and full as the cheers in the stands. He gave Archie a gentle nudge toward Ilya. “Papa better watch out—you’re coming for his job next season.”

The next couple of hours they took turns guiding Archie up and down the ice, and every few strides, Ilya would let go of him to “*test the balance*”, but Shane would be right there to catch him before he went down.

Shane still remembered the first time he played against Ilya—the temper, the impossible speed. Back then, Ilya was all fury, storm, and rivalry. Now, the same storm was bent low and redirected into teaching their son to stand tall. Life was funny like that sometimes, right?

Ilya looked up and caught Shane staring. His smile turned soft. “You love me, yes?” he asked, as if it were the simplest fact in the world.

Shane’s laugh came out giggly and helpless. “Yes,” he admitted, shaking his head, “but you’ve gotta stop teaching him slapshots before he can spell his name.”

“Impossible,” Ilya declared, chin exaggeratingly high. “He has excellent genes. Must use them early.” His accent curled around the words like smoke. Shane snorted, knowing there’d be no winning in this argument.

Before he could reply, a small ball of energy darted toward him. Archie let go of both hands, shuffled three brave steps, and spun to face Ilya. Cheeks flushed pink, eyes gleaming with mischief, he raised his plastic stick and delivered a whack to Ilya’s shin pad.

The sound was more comical than painful, but Ilya played along, gasping in mock outrage. “Betrayal! My own flesh and blood!”

Archie’s eyes went wide, lower lip wobbling. “Papa owie?” he asked, voice full of concern.

“Big owie,” Ilya groaned, stumbling back a step with hand over his heart.

Shane’s laughter rang out, rolling through the arena. Archie yelped and skated—well, shuffled—toward his other father for reassurance.

“Just kidding. Papa is strong.” Ilya flexed an arm, making the sleeve of his jersey comically bulge.

“Strong and ridiculous,” Shane added, skating up behind them.

“Strong, ridiculous, and very happy,” Ilya shot back, pointing a finger toward Shane. “Best line in the league. We keep it forever, yes?”

Another chuckle that escaped Shane’s lips softened into something gentler. He didn’t need to say it out loud; he lifted his hands and signed, but the twinkle in his eyes said more than words ever could. There was a silent language between them that existed even in the loudest moments—a look, a smile, a tilt of the head—and it thrived here, in their small, chaotic universe of unconditional love.

Shane tucked this moment away as if it was a photograph in his pocket. One day, when the arena was dark and the house was quiet, he would pull it out and feel the cold air on his cheeks again.

“Alright,” he said, clapping his hands crisp against the cold air. “Snack break before Archie the Rookie takes us both out.”

Archie whined, small arms flailing. “Nooo, Daddy! We’re winning!”

Ilya opened his arms in theatrical despair. “But the champion needs energy! Even the best skaters must feast!”

He picked Archie up, the boy giggling as they spun together, blades scraping gently over ice. Archie’s laughter rose above everything else, pure and unrestrained, filling up the rink until it melted into the soft hum of the overhead lights.

By the time they reached the bench, both father and son were slightly breathless. Ilya plopped down with exaggerated exhaustion, setting Archie on his lap. The boy’s cheeks were rosy, eyes sparkling like polished marbles. “I’m *numba one*!” he declared proudly, thumping his chest.

“You sure are,” Ilya teased in his thick, affectionate accent, ruffling Archie’s hair. “Now we gotta feast on the victory goldfish and applesauce.”

“Yum!” Archie’s grin was so wide it nearly split his face.

From the edge of the rink, Shane shook his head, unfastening his gloves. “You two,” he said, voice carrying just enough to reach the pair, “are certified disaster.”

Archie nodded so hard he almost fell off Ilya’s knees. “Again, Papa! The spinny part!”

Shane snorted, pushing off the boards. “Spinny part’s what got you the near face-plant, bud.” He skated over in two easy strides, knees loose, and ruffled Archie’s hair until the helmet sat straight again.

Ilya’s smirk flashed white and crooked, the same one that often got him a penalty. “Chaos has its best form.” He leaned down, lips brushing Archie’s warm forehead. “Like I said before: strong, ridiculous, happy,” his voice dropped, and he winked. “Perfect combo, yes?”

Shane and Ilya exchanged a look—tired, proud, helplessly in love with each other and the small tyrant between them. Shane squeezed the little hand. “Who wants hot chocolate? With

the tiny marshmallows of course. You earned them, Arch.”

The rink was mostly empty now. The event was over, and the reporters were packing up their equipment. Ilya had just finished a quick interview and was now heading back to the locker room.

Shane was changed into a soft gray hoodie, sleeves pushed up. His jeans were warm from the bench heater. Archie sat on his lap, short legs dangling. The boy’s tiny jersey was dusted with goldfish crumbs. A smear of applesauce stuck to the hem. He waved both arms, mittens half-on, half-off.

“I scored a BIG goal!” he shouted. “It went whoosh! Right in the net!”

Ilya should have been focused on unlacing his skates and getting himself ready to leave, but his hands stayed frozen on the knots. All the years of roaring crowds, brutal games, flashing cameras—none of it compared to this: Shane Hollander laughing softly, running a hand through Archie’s damp curls sticky from juice and sweat.

Family.

Unapologetically his.

Archie kept talking. “And Papa fell down—splat!—but I helped him up! I’m strong!”

It was simple.

It was perfect.

Ilya must have been staring too long because Shane suddenly glanced up, a teasing grin curling at the corner of his mouth. “What are you staring at, Rozanov?” he called out.

Ilya shrugged, heat creeping up his neck, warm under the collar. “You’re nice to look at,” he said.

Shane snorted. “Flattery won’t clean up this mess.” He brushed a cracker off Archie’s sleeve, but his eyes said come closer so I can kiss your stupid face.

Ilya finally got rid of his heavy gear and walked to his family, “No, but it helps,” he sat next to Archie and smiled at him. “You did great today, malysh. We are so proud of you.”

“I *cwushed* them!” Archie said, fists in the air.

“Yes,” Ilya answered, soft. “You crushed them.”

“And he fell five times,” Shane added.

“Falling is the first step to flying.”

Shane hummed, eyes half-lidded as he allowed himself to rest his head on Ilya’s shoulder. Ilya studied his face—the calm line of his jaw, the tiny scar above his eyebrow. Years ago he had mistaken his silent strength for caution. Turned out that was what had held them together all these years.

“I really want him to love it,” Ilya admitted quietly. “The ice, the cheers, the feeling of it all. But mostly, I want him to love being here. With us.”

Shane said nothing right away. He nodded, bumping a knee against Ilya’s. “He already loves it,” he finally said, smiling. “Look at him. He’s having the time of his life. Probably already plotting how to beat me next week.”

Archie yawned and sagged against Ilya’s chest. Shane reached over and zipped his little jacket higher. His fingers brushed Ilya’s—just a second, warm skin on warm skin.

A camera flash popped. Both men blinked, startled, then chuckled under their breath. Archie didn’t stir. It was the very last shot for charity recap, and neither of them bothered to look up. They let them take the photo, let them see what their family looked like beyond hockey.

Ilya pressed a kiss to Archie’s temple first. Then he turned slightly and found Shane’s mouth in a brief, simple kiss that carried more home than any house could ever hold. “Time for a team nap,” he murmured, his voice roughened by way too much talking he had done today.

Shane’s answer came muffled against the collar of Ilya’s jacket. “Best win we’ll ever have.”

He shifted the diaper bag strap higher up his arm. He said it like a joke, but the warmth in his voice meant a quiet gratitude that tonight’s trophy wasn’t another medal or newspaper headline, but the soft, snoring boy between them.

The arena lights were being turned off one by one. Ilya shifted snoring Archie against his chest, his hand automatically patting the boy’s back in an absent pattern only years of unreleased love could produce.

As they walked out together, Shane’s free hand found Ilya’s, their fingers lacing with an ease that said *this is us*, no more performance, no more pretending.

When they reached the doors, Ilya paused and turned back one last time. The rink lay silent behind them with thousands of skate marks across the surface. In those lines, he saw the day itself: the mock matches, the catch-ups with old teammates, the cheers when Archie toddled across the player’s bench, waving his tiny hand at the crowd, or the moment a big and mighty Shane Hollander spilled hot chocolate all over himself but made it into a show worthy of applause and internet jokes.

For the first time today, Ilya felt something settle in his chest that wasn't adrenaline—it was peace. He thought about the drive home, about the house with the fireplace, blankets and cartoons on the TV. Team nap, indeed.

Ilya let the sight of the rink fade behind him, and as the heavy doors swung shut, he realized that the real arena—the one that truly mattered—was right beside him, clinging to his jacket, smiling through exhaustion, holding his hand.

The lines on the ice would melt by morning, but the lines of their life together were carved far deeper, impossible to erase.

End Notes

russian words: malysh - buddy/baby; poyekhali, malysh - let's go, buddy/baby

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