

still the best (still an asshole)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/75653646) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/75653646>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander & Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander , Troy Barrett , Zane Boodram , Brandon Wiebe , Evan Dykstra , Luca Haas , Ottawa Centaurs Team Ensemble (Game Changers)
Additional Tags:	Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov , Homophobia , Fluff and Hurt/Comfort , Fluff , Fluff and Humor , Tooth-Rotting Fluff , Domestic Fluff
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-12 Completed: 2025-12-20 Words: 18,287 Chapters: 5/5

still the best (still an asshole)

by [pucksandpower](#)

Summary

Four times Ilya Rozanov reminded everyone exactly who the fuck they were dealing with (spoiler: still an asshole, still elite, still not going anywhere), and one time he didn't have to be anything except soft.

Or being out didn't make him nicer. Being married didn't make him softer. Being older didn't make him weaker. And being a father? Well. That's when things get complicated.

(He's really good at that last part. Don't tell anyone.)

Chapter 1: the face-off

The puck hasn't even dropped yet, and Ilya can already tell this is going to be one of those games.

Toronto's new center — Ilya doesn't know his name, doesn't care to know his name — is chirping before they've even lined up for the face-off. Some generic bullshit about the Centaurs' last loss, about Ilya's plus-minus, about his age. Amateur hour stuff. Ilya's heard it all before, heard it better, and he's not impressed.

"You done?" Ilya asks, settling into his stance. His Russian accent is thick, deliberately so. He knows it pisses people off when he leans into it.

The Toronto center — number 19, brown hair escaping from under his helmet, can't be older than twenty-three — grins. It's not a friendly grin. "Just getting started, old man."

"Old man," Ilya repeats, shaking his head. "Is that best you have?"

The referee holds the puck above them, waiting. Around them, the other players are locked in position, sticks ready. The crowd noise is a constant rumble, a mix of boos and cheers depending on which end of the ice you're looking at.

"That's not all I got," the kid says, and there's something in his voice now, something sharp and mean. "How's it feel being the league's biggest faggo—"

Ilya doesn't let him finish.

The gloves are off before he's even consciously decided to drop them, and he's got the kid by the jersey before the referee can blow the whistle. The puck clatters to the ice, forgotten.

"What did you say?" Ilya's voice is deadly quiet, but in the sudden hush that's fallen over their immediate vicinity, it carries. "Say again. I want to hear."

The kid's eyes go wide — he wasn't expecting this, wasn't expecting Ilya to actually do anything about it — but he's committed now, and stupid enough to double down. "You heard me, you—"

Ilya's first punch catches him square in the jaw.

The thing about Ilya Rozanov is that people forget — they see him now, see the softness he allows himself off the ice with Shane, see the Instagram posts and the charity work and the Pride tape on his stick, and they think he's gone soft everywhere. They think coming out has somehow filed down his edges, made him safe, made him nice.

Those people are fucking idiots.

Ilya is, and has always been, an asshole. A talented asshole, a successful asshole, an asshole who's going to the Hall of Fame someday — but an asshole nonetheless. And the only person who gets the non-asshole version of him is Shane, and maybe Shane's parents if they're lucky, and occasionally his own teammates when he's in a good mood.

Everyone else? They get this.

The second punch is harder than the first. The kid tries to get his arms up, tries to defend himself, but Ilya's been doing this since before this kid learned to skate. He's fought Zdeno Chara in his prime, fought guys five inches taller and fifty pounds heavier, and he's still here. Still standing. Still winning.

The kid's helmet comes off. Ilya doesn't care.

"You want to say it again?" Ilya snarls, landing another punch. The kid's nose is bleeding now, blood bright against his white jersey. "Come on. Say it to my face."

"Rozanov!" That's the referee, finally skating in, but Ilya's not done. Not even close.

"Say it!" Another punch. The crowd is roaring now, but Ilya can't tell if they're cheering or jeering and he doesn't care. "You think because I suck dick, I won't beat your ass? You think is making me weak?"

The kid is trying to turtle now, trying to cover his face, but Ilya hauls him back up. There's a sick satisfaction in it, in feeling the kid's jersey crumple in his fist, in watching his cocky smirk disappear under a spray of blood and panic.

"Rozanov! That's enough!" Multiple officials now, and someone's grabbed Ilya from behind — one of his teammates, probably, trying to pull him off.

"Is enough when I say is enough!" Ilya shouts, but he lets himself be pulled back, lets the referees step between him and the kid. His knuckles are screaming, split open and bleeding, and there's blood on his jersey — not all of it the kid's — and his heart is hammering in his chest like he's just finished a marathon.

The kid is being helped off the ice by his teammates. He's not getting up on his own. Good.

The referee is in Ilya's face now, shouting penalties — five-minute major for fighting, two minutes for instigating, game misconduct — and Ilya just nods along, breathing hard. His brain is still buzzing with adrenaline, with rage, with the sheer audacity of that little shit thinking he could say that and get away with it.

"You're done, Rozanov," the ref says, pointing toward the tunnel. "Game over."

"Da, da, I know," Ilya says, and he can feel his mouth curving into a smile. A sharp, mean, satisfied smile. "I know the rules."

The ref skates away to sort out the mess at center ice, and Ilya starts toward the penalty box, even though he knows he's about to be ejected entirely. The Ottawa crowd is on their feet, and the noise is deafening.

Ilya stops halfway to the box.

He turns to face the crowd, the home crowd, his crowd, and raises both hands above his head. The gesture is clear. Louder. Cheer louder for me. Love me for this.

And they do. Oh, they do.

The roar that goes up is thunderous, a wall of sound that rattles the glass and makes the ice itself seem to vibrate. People are on their feet, arms raised, jerseys waving, voices hoarse from screaming. Signs bob in the air — “OUR FUCKING CAPTAIN” and “ILYA THE GREAT” and one that just says “FUCK YEAH” in four-foot letters.

Ilya’s smile widens into a full grin, cocky and unrepentant. He waves at them, soaking it in, and the crowd loves it. They love him. They love that he’s still the same vicious, uncompromising bastard he’s always been, that coming out didn’t change the fundamental truth of who Ilya Rozanov is on the ice.

He blows a kiss to the crowd, because why not, and the roar somehow gets even louder.

“Rozanov!” The ref again, less patient this time. “Let’s go!”

Ilya shrugs, unconcerned, and skates the rest of the way to the tunnel. He passes the Toronto bench on the way, and he makes sure to catch the eye of their coach, makes sure his smirk is firmly in place.

The coach looks like he wants to jump the boards and strangle him. Ilya winks.

As he disappears down the tunnel, he can still hear the crowd chanting his name. “ROZANOV! ROZANOV! ROZANOV!”

Yeah. He’s not fucking soft.

The locker-room is empty when Ilya gets there, everyone still on the bench or on the ice. He strips off his gloves — carefully, because his right hand is already swelling — and sits down heavily on the bench in front of his stall.

His phone is in his jacket pocket, charging. He should probably leave it alone, should wait until after he’s showered and iced his hand and dealt with whatever media shitstorm is about to descend, but-

He pulls it out.

Twelve text messages already. Five from Shane, two from his agent, one from Yuna (how does she always know), and one from an unknown number that he immediately deletes without reading.

Shane’s messages are a progression.

Jane: Holy shit

Jane: ILYA

Jane: Are you okay?

Jane: That was insane

Jane: Call me when you can

Ilya huffs out a laugh and types back: I'm fine. He deserved it.

The response is immediate: I'm not saying he didn't. Are you HURT?

Lily: My hand is fine. My face is fine. I won.

Jane: Jesus Christ. I'm watching the replay now. You destroyed him.

Lily: Yes. I know.

There's a pause, and then: I know you probably don't want to hear this right now, but you're going to get a call from the league.

Ilya rolls his eyes: Let them call. I don't care.

Jane: Baby.

It's just one word, but Ilya can hear Shane's tone in it — exasperated and fond and worried all at once. Shane's good at that, at packing a thousand emotions into a single word.

He called me a slur, Ilya types. What I was supposed to do? Smile? Say thank you?

Jane: No. You're supposed to do exactly what you did. I'm not mad. I'm just worried about you.

Ilya's anger, which has been simmering at a low boil since the face-off, softens slightly. Just slightly.

I'm okay, he types. Promise.

Jane: Okay. Call me later?

Lily: After I deal with the media circus. Love you.

Jane: Love you too. Even when you're being an asshole.

Lily: Especially when I'm being an asshole.

Jane: Yeah, okay, you're right. Especially then.

Ilya's grinning at his phone like an idiot when the door to the locker room bangs open and his teammates pour in.

“ROZANOV!” That’s Luca, practically vibrating with excitement. “Holy shit, man, that was incredible! You fucking destroyed him!”

“Did you see his face?” Zane is laughing. “He looked like he was going to cry!”

“Pretty sure he was crying,” another voice chimes in.

Ilya looks up to see half the team crowding around him, all talking at once, all grinning like they just won the Stanley Cup.

“Guys, guys.” That’s Coach Wiebe, pushing through the crowd. He’s not smiling. “Give him some space.”

The room quiets down, but only slightly. Everyone’s still buzzing with adrenaline, still riding the high of watching their star player beat the shit out of someone who deserved it.

Coach Wiebe crouches down in front of Ilya. “Let me see your hand.”

Ilya holds it out. It’s definitely swelling now, the knuckles already turning purple.

“Ice,” Coach Wiebe says. “Now. And you probably need X-rays.”

“Is fine.”

“It’s not fine, it’s fucked. Come on.” Coach Wiebe stands and jerks his head toward the training room. “Medical staff wants to see you anyway.”

Ilya sighs but follows. The rest of the team parts to let them through, and he can feel their eyes on him — some admiring, some concerned, all of them aware that this is going to be a thing.

The training room is small and sterile and smells like disinfectant. The team doctor, Dr. Terry, is already waiting, arms crossed.

“Rozanov,” he says, and his tone is the particular brand of disappointed that only medical professionals can really achieve. “What did we say about protecting your hands?”

“Is not my fault,” Ilya protests. “He was asking for it.”

“I’m sure he was. Sit.”

Ilya sits. Dr. Terry takes his hand and examines it with the kind of clinical efficiency that comes from dealing with hockey players’ various acts of stupidity for way too long.

“You’re lucky,” he says after a moment. “Nothing’s broken, but you’ve got some lovely contusions and you definitely sprained something. Ice, elevation, anti-inflammatories. And you’re not playing tomorrow.”

“What? No, we have game-”

“Not playing,” he repeats firmly. “You’ve been ejected from this one anyway, and your hand needs time to heal. Coach will agree with me.”

Ilya scowls but doesn’t argue further. There’s no point, Dr. Terry is immovable when he’s made up his mind.

Troy is leaning against the wall, watching. When Dr. Terry steps away to get ice and bandages, he speaks.

“Shane texted me,” he says quietly. “Asked me to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine.”

“Yeah, I can see that. Still the same Ilya.”

There’s something in Troy’s voice — not quite approval, not quite disapproval. Just observation.

“You think I should be different now?” Ilya asks, and there’s an edge to it. “Because I’m with Shane? Because I’m out?”

“No.” Troy’s answer is immediate. “I think you should be exactly who you are. But other people are going to expect you to be different. Softer. More ... palatable.”

“Fuck palatable.”

Troy laughs. “Yeah, that’s what I figured you’d say.” He pushes off the wall. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad you’re not changing. The league needs more people who won’t take that shit. Even if your methods are, uh, aggressive.”

“Only language some people understand.”

“True.” Troy heads for the door, then pauses. “You should probably prepare a statement, though. Media’s going to be all over this.”

Ilya groans. “I know.”

The media scrum is exactly as bad as Ilya expected.

He’s showered, changed into his suit, got his hand wrapped and iced, and now he’s sitting in front of a wall of cameras and microphones and reporters who all want to know the same thing: why did he snap?

Ilya keeps his expression neutral, bored even, as the questions come.

“Ilya, can you walk us through what happened out there?”

“He said something. I responded.”

“Can you tell us what he said?”

“No.”

“Was it related to your recent coming out?”

Ilya’s jaw tightens. “Next question.”

“Do you think your response was proportionate?”

“Yes.”

“The league is likely going to review this incident. Are you worried about supplemental discipline?”

“No.”

A younger reporter, someone Ilya doesn’t recognize, raises her hand. “Ilya, some people have suggested that your relationship with Shane Hollander has made you more of a target for homophobic comments. Do you think that’s fair?”

Finally, an interesting question.

Ilya leans forward slightly. “I think,” he says slowly, “that people who say homophobic things are assholes. I think they have always been assholes, and they will always be assholes, no matter who I date. And I think if they say these things to my face, they should be ready for consequences.”

“So you don’t regret the fight?”

“Only that I didn’t hit him harder.”

There’s a ripple of laughter, quickly stifled. The team’s PR person, Nicole, looks like she’s developing a migraine in real-time.

“What do you say to critics who think you should be setting a better example, especially for young LGBTQ fans?”

Ilya’s expression hardens. “I say that I am not a role model. I am hockey player. I play hard, I play to win, and I don’t let anyone disrespect me. If that is not good enough example, then they can look somewhere else.”

“But don’t you think-”

“No,” Ilya interrupts. “I don’t think I should be soft because I’m bi. I don’t think I should smile and say thank you when someone calls me slur. I don’t think I owe anyone niceness when they give me hate. You want role model? Find someone else. I’m just me.”

Nicole steps forward. “I think we have time for one more question.”

The last reporter is older, someone who's been covering the league since before Ilya got drafted. "Ilya, do you have any message for the player you fought?"

Ilya smiles, slow and dangerous. "Yes. Next time, keep your mouth shut."

The video is everywhere by the time Ilya gets home.

Not just the fight — that's on every sports network, replayed from six different angles, analyzed and dissected and debated. But also the aftermath. Him raising his hands to the crowd. The cocky smirk. The kiss he blew. The sound of seventeen thousand people chanting his name.

Twitter is losing its mind.

@HockeyFan2951: Rozanov is UNHINGED and I'm HERE FOR IT

@SportsCenter: Ilya Rozanov drops the gloves and drops a Guardian in one of the most vicious fights we've seen this season

@QueerSportsNews: This is what happens when you fuck around and find out. Rozanov isn't your soft bi rep and he doesn't have to be.

@TorontoFan67: Absolutely disgusting behavior from Rozanov. Suspend him for the season.

@CentaursFanatic: THAT'S MY CAPTAIN

Ilya scrolls through it all, half-amused and half-exhausted. His hand is throbbing despite the painkillers, and he's got a headache forming behind his eyes.

His phone rings. Shane.

"Hi," Ilya says, sinking onto the couch.

"Hi yourself." Shane's voice is warm, familiar, home. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired. Annoyed. Hand hurts."

"I bet. I saw the press conference."

"And?"

"And you were perfect. An asshole, but perfect."

Ilya huffs out a laugh. "This is why I love you."

"Because I appreciate your asshole tendencies?"

"Da."

There's a pause, comfortable and easy. Then Shane says, "I'm proud of you, you know."

Ilya blinks. “For beating up a homophobic?”

“For not letting anyone tell you who you have to be now. For staying yourself.”

Something tight in Ilya’s chest loosens. “You know I never change for anyone. Except maybe you.”

“You don’t change for me either. You just ... let me see the parts you hide from everyone else.”

“Is same thing.”

“No, it’s not. But we can argue about it when I see you next week.”

Next week. Montreal plays in Ottawa next week, which means Shane will be in town. They’ve gotten good at this — the long distance, the scheduling conflicts, the constant juggling of careers and lives and media attention.

“Cannot wait,” Ilya says, and means it.

“Me neither. Get some rest, okay? Ice your hand. Take the painkillers. Be nice to your teammates.”

“I’m always nice to my teammates.”

Shane laughs, bright and disbelieving. “Sure you are. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

After they hang up, Ilya sits in the quiet of his apartment for a long moment. The city lights are twinkling outside his window, and somewhere below, life is happening — people going about their evenings, unaware of or uncaring about hockey fights and media circuses and the strange, complicated reality of being exactly who you are in a world that constantly wants you to be something else.

His phone buzzes again. A DM from a faceless account.

Against his better judgment, he opens it.

You’re a disgrace to the sport. Hope you’re happy with yourself, fag.

Ilya deletes it without responding and blocks the number. Then he deletes the next one, and the next one. There are always more. There will always be more.

But there are also the other messages. The ones from fans saying thank you. The ones from kids saying he’s their hero, even if he insists he’s not. The ones from other players — some out, some not — saying they saw what happened and they’re glad he didn’t back down.

Those matter more.

Ilya gets up, goes to the kitchen, and pours himself a vodka. Just one. He's still got morning skate tomorrow — even though he's restricted from playing, which is bullshit — but one drink won't hurt.

He takes his glass back to the couch and pulls up the video one more time. Watches himself drop the gloves. Watches the fight. Watches the aftermath.

The cocky smirk is still there. The raised hands. The crowd going wild.

“Still me,” he mutters to the empty apartment. “Still fucking me.”

His phone buzzes.

Evan: Drinks tomorrow? You're buying since you're not playing.

Ilya grins and types back: Fine. But you're getting cheap beer.

Evan: Deal. And good job today. Someone needed to do it.

Ilya: I know.

Evan: Modest as always.

Ilya: It's not modest if it's true.

Evan sends back a middle finger emoji, and Ilya laughs, alone in his apartment, hand throbbing, heart lighter than it's been all day.

He's not soft. He's not nice. He's not anyone's idea of a perfect role model.

But he's Ilya Rozanov, and that's never going to change. Not for the league, not for the media, not for anyone who thinks coming out means he owes them a different version of himself.

The only person who gets that is Shane, and Shane already has it.

Everyone else can deal with this version: sharp edges, split knuckles, cocky smirk and all.

Chapter 2: the slump that wasn't

The locker room smells like sweat and disappointment, which is funny because they won. Not by much — a single goal in overtime, courtesy of one of the rookies — but a win is a win, even if Ilya didn't factor into it.

Three games now. Three games without a point. Three games of hitting posts and missing passes and watching shots sail just wide of the net. His shoulder is screaming every time he raises his stick above his head, but he's not about to tell the media that. Let them think what they want.

Except apparently what they want to think is that he's washed up at thirty-one.

Ilya is sitting in his stall, still in most of his gear, when the reporters swarm in. They always do this — give the team just enough time to catch their breath before descending like vultures. He can see them clustering around the guys who scored, the rookie who got the overtime winner, but there's a group heading his way too.

Great.

"Ilya, can we get a few words?"

He looks up. It's Johnston from the Ottawa Sun, flanked by three others Ilya doesn't recognize. Johnston's been covering the team for years, and he's usually not an idiot, but the look on his face today suggests he's about to ask something stupid.

"Sure," Ilya says, leaning back. His shoulder twinges. He ignores it. "Few words."

"Three games without a point," Johnston starts, and yeah, here it comes. "Are you concerned you're in a slump?"

Ilya raises an eyebrow. "Three games is not slump. Three games is Tuesday."

One of the other reporters — young guy, probably new — jumps in. "But for a player of your caliber, going three games without contributing offensively is unusual, isn't it?"

"Da, is unusual. Because I'm very good." Ilya says it flatly, matter-of-fact. "But sometimes puck doesn't go in. Is hockey."

"Do you think there's any particular reason for the dry spell?" This from a woman Ilya's never seen before. She's got her phone out, recording. "Any distractions in your personal life that might be affecting your game?"

Oh. Oh.

Ilya's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "What kind of distractions?"

“Well,” the woman continues, and she has the audacity to look sympathetic, “this is your first season playing on the same team as your husband. Shane Hollander signed with the Centaurs over the summer, and while that’s wonderful for you both personally, some people are wondering if having him in the same locker room might be ... distracting.”

The locker room has gone very, very quiet.

Ilya can see Shane across the room, frozen in the middle of unlacing his skates. Zane is next to him, and both of them are staring in Ilya’s direction with identical expressions of dawning horror.

Ilya laughs.

It’s not a nice laugh. It’s the laugh he gives when he’s about two seconds away from dropping gloves, the laugh that makes rookies nervous and opposing players back up a step. It’s sharp and cold and carries across the suddenly silent room.

“Distracting,” he repeats. “You think Shane is distracting me.”

“I’m not saying that’s definitely the case,” the woman backpedals, “but it’s been noted that your production has dropped since he joined the team-”

“My production has dropped,” Ilya interrupts, his voice deadly quiet, “because four games ago, against the Scouts, I took a hit that fucked up my shoulder. Temporarily,” he adds, because he can see Dr. Terry hovering at the edge of his vision and he looks ready to intervene. “Is fine, will be fine, I’m still playing. But raising my stick? Hurts like bitch. Kind of makes shooting harder.”

The reporters are scribbling frantically. Johnston looks uncomfortable now.

“But you’re still playing through the injury,” another reporter says. “Doesn’t that suggest-”

“Suggests I’m tough,” Ilya snaps. “Suggests I don’t quit on my team because of little pain. What you want me to do? Sit out? Let them play without me?”

“No, of course not, but-”

“But nothing.” Ilya stands up, and even though he’s still missing his chest protector and skates, he’s imposing enough that the cluster of reporters takes a collective step back. “You want to know if I’m in slump? Fine. I tell you. Three games without point is not slump. You know what three games is? Is statistical blip. Is noise. Every player in this league — every single one — goes through stretches where puck doesn’t bounce right. But because I’m Ilya Rozanov, because I’m one of best players in the world, suddenly three games is crisis.”

He’s on a roll now, and some distant part of his brain knows he should probably stop, should let Nicole step in and do damage control, but fuck it. He’s tired, his shoulder hurts, and these idiots think Shane is the problem.

“You want to talk about distractions?” Ilya continues. “Fine. Let’s talk. Shane signed with Centaurs in July. Since then, training camp, preseason, fourteen regular season games. In

those fourteen games, before shoulder injury, I have nine goals and seven assists. Sixteen points in fourteen games. That's more than point per game. That's elite production. But sure, yes, Shane is very distracting." The sarcasm is thick enough to cut. "So distracting that I was leading team in scoring until I got hurt."

Johnston tries to get a word in. "Ilya, I don't think anyone is suggesting-"

"You are suggesting exactly that," Ilya says. "You are standing here, in front of my teammates, asking if my husband — who is one of best players in NHL, who just played twenty-eight minutes of ice time tonight, who had two assists in this game we just won — is making me play worse. You think I'm worse player because I'm married to Shane Hollander?"

"That's not what I said-"

"Is what you meant."

Shane is standing now, and Ilya can see him starting to move toward them, but Zane grabs his arm. Smart. This is Ilya's fight, and Shane jumping in will only make it worse.

"I'll tell you what," Ilya says, and his smile is sharp and mean and absolutely not friendly. "I make you a bet. All of you. I bet that I finish this season with most goals in the league. Not just on this team. In entire NHL. Most goals."

The young reporter who spoke earlier frowns. "That's a bold claim considering-"

"Considering what? Considering I'm thirty-one? Considering I'm bisexual? Considering I have husband?" Ilya's voice is rising now. "I am Ilya Rozanov. I have scored fifty goals in a season six times. I have won Rocket Richard Trophy twice. I have been to All-Star Game eleven times. I am future Hall of Famer. And you think three games without point means I'm done?"

He laughs again, and it's somehow even less pleasant than the first time.

"I have more skill in my injured shoulder than most players have in their entire body," Ilya says. "I will score more goals this season than anyone else in the league, and I will do it while playing on same team as my husband, and when I do, I want every single one of you to remember this conversation. Remember that you thought Shane was distraction. Remember that you thought three games meant I was finished."

"Ilya," Nicole says, finally stepping in, "I think that's probably-"

"I'm not done," Ilya says, not taking his eyes off the reporters. "You want to know about slumps? Real slumps? Look at the rest of league. Look at players who go ten, fifteen, twenty games without points. Happens all the time. Is normal for them, because they are not as good as me. They are not held to same standard because they cannot reach same standard."

Johnston is starting to look genuinely distressed now. "I think there's been a misunderstanding-"

“No misunderstanding,” Ilya says. “Is very clear. You think because I’m out now, because I’m married to man, I’m somehow different player. Softer. Weaker. More distracted. You are wrong. I am same player I have always been. Better, even, because I’m not hiding anymore. Not wasting energy on pretending.”

One of the reporters — an older guy who’s been quiet until now — speaks up. “No one is questioning your talent, Ilya. But you have to admit, playing with your spouse on the same team is an unusual situation. It’s natural to wonder if it affects the dynamic-”

“Dynamic is fine,” Ilya interrupts. “Dynamic is better than fine. You know why? Because Shane makes everyone around him better. Is what he does. Is what he’s always done. Look at Montreat — he turned them into contenders. Look at Team Canada — he makes them win. Now he’s here, and we are better team because of him.”

He can see Shane’s face now, and Shane looks like he’s somewhere between mortified and touched and possibly about to cry, which is typical Shane emotional response to things.

“Shane Hollander,” Ilya continues, because apparently he’s not done embarrassing his husband in front of the entire team and half the media, “is best two-way forward in the game. He’s smart, he’s fast, he makes plays that other players don’t even see. He won three Stanley Cups. He won Olympic gold. He has won every major trophy except Hart, and only reason he hasn’t won Hart is because voters are cowards who don’t appreciate defense.”

“Ilya,” Shane says weakly from across the room.

Ilya ignores him. “So yes, Shane is on my team now. Yes, we are married. Yes, we live together and practice together and play together. And you know what effect this has on my game? Makes it better. Because I get to play with someone who understands hockey the way I do. Someone who sees the ice the way I do. Someone who pushes me to be better every single day.”

He pauses, lets that sink in.

“But sure,” he says, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Let’s pretend three games without point — because of injury, which I already told you about — means I’m distracted by my husband. Let’s pretend that makes sense. Let’s pretend you’re not just looking for story, for way to make my sexuality and my marriage into problem.”

“That’s not fair,” the woman who started this whole thing protests. “We’re just asking questions-”

“You’re asking stupid questions,” Ilya says bluntly. “You’re asking questions that you would never ask straight player. If I was married to woman, if Shane was Jane, you think you would ask if she was distracting me? No. You would ask about injury, about recovery time, about when I expect to be back to full strength. But because Shane is man, because we are together, suddenly everything is about our relationship. Suddenly we are distracting each other.”

Johnston tries again. “I think what we’re trying to understand is-”

“I tell you what you need to understand,” Ilya cuts him off. “You need to understand that I am best goal scorer in this league. Maybe not fastest anymore, maybe not youngest, but best. Most skilled. Most dangerous. And three games with injured shoulder does not change that. By end of season, I will have most goals. I guarantee it. And every one of those goals, I’m going to dedicate to Shane, because he makes me better player and better person and if you can’t see that, is because you’re not looking.”

The silence that follows is profound. Even the other players, who had been making noise in the background — the usual locker room sounds of gear being removed and showers running — have gone quiet.

Ilya turns to Johnston specifically. “How much money you make? You and your colleagues here. Combined. What’s your yearly salary?”

Johnston blinks. “I—what?”

“Answer the question. Roughly. All of you together, what do you make?”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant-”

“Humor me.”

Johnston exchanges glances with the other reporters. “I don’t know. Maybe ... half a million? Combined?”

“Half a million,” Ilya repeats. “Okay. I bet you that amount. Right now. Half a million dollars that I finish season with most goals in NHL. You want to take that bet?”

“Ilya, you can’t just-” That’s Nicole again, sounding panicked.

“Why not?” Ilya asks. “They want to say I’m in slump. They want to say Shane is distraction. Put money where mouth is. Half a million says I’m still best goal scorer in league.”

The reporters look at each other. None of them say anything.

“No?” Ilya raises his eyebrows. “No one wants to bet? Interesting. Maybe you don’t actually believe what you’re saying. Maybe you’re just asking because you think it makes good story.”

“It’s not about-” the young reporter starts.

“Is exactly about that,” Ilya says. “Is always about that. You want drama. You want story. ‘Ilya Rozanov in slump because he’s married to man.’ ‘Ilya Rozanov can’t perform because husband is distraction.’ Is bullshit, but is entertaining bullshit, so you ask anyway.”

He sits back down, winces as his shoulder protests. “I’m done talking now. You have your quotes. You have your story. I’m sure you’ll write whatever you want anyway. But remember — when I win Rocket Richard Trophy again this year, when I prove you all wrong, I told you so.”

Nicole steps forward, shepherding the reporters toward the door. “Alright, that’s it for today. Thank you all for coming. Ilya needs to get treatment on his shoulder-”

“Which I already mentioned,” Ilya calls after them. “The shoulder injury. That I told you about. The reason for three games without points. Just want to make sure you didn’t forget.”

The reporters file out, most of them looking shell-shocked. Johnston lingers at the door, opens his mouth like he wants to say something, then thinks better of it and leaves.

The door closes.

For a moment, nobody moves. Then Wyatt starts clapping, slow and deliberate, and within seconds half the locker room has joined in.

“Holy shit, Rozanov,” Zane says, grinning. “You just destroyed them.”

“They deserved it,” someone else adds.

Ilya waves them off, suddenly exhausted. His shoulder is throbbing, his head hurts, and he can feel Shane’s eyes on him from across the room.

“Alright, show’s over,” Evan announces. “Let’s give them some space.”

The team takes the hint, filing out toward the showers or the training room. Soon it’s just Ilya and Shane, sitting in their respective stalls, the width of the locker room between them.

“So,” Shane says eventually.

“So.”

“That was something.”

“Da.”

Shane stands and walks over, settling onto the bench next to Ilya. He’s careful not to jostle Ilya’s shoulder.

“You didn’t have to defend me like that,” Shane says quietly.

Ilya turns to look at him. Shane’s hair is still damp with sweat, his face flushed from the game, and he’s looking at Ilya with that expression he gets sometimes — the one that’s soft and vulnerable and makes Ilya want to either kiss him or hide him away from the world.

“Yes, I did,” Ilya says. “They were being idiots.”

“They were doing their job.”

“Their job is asking stupid questions? Is bad job.”

Shane huffs out a laugh. “You can’t just offer to bet half a million dollars every time someone questions your performance.”

“Why not? I have money. And I’m right.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Is exactly the point.” Ilya reaches out with his good arm and takes Shane’s hand. “They think you’re distraction. They think because we’re together, I’m worse player. Is insulting to both of us.”

“I know,” Shane says. “But you don’t have to fight every battle.”

“This one I do.” Ilya squeezes Shane’s hand. “You make me better, Shane. On ice, off ice, everywhere. And if people can’t see that, if they want to make up stories about distractions and slumps, then fuck them. I will prove them wrong.”

Shane is quiet for a moment. Then he says, “You really think you’re going to lead the league in goals?”

“Da.”

“Even with the shoulder?”

“Will just make it more impressive.”

Shane shakes his head, smiling. “You’re impossible.”

“You love me anyway.”

“Yeah,” Shane says softly. “I really do.”

They sit there for a moment, hands clasped, and Ilya thinks about the reporters and their stupid questions and their inability to understand that love isn’t a distraction, it’s fuel.

“Hey,” Shane says. “For what it’s worth, I think you’re going to lead the league in goals too.”

“Of course you do. You’re smart man.”

“And you’re so humble.”

Ilya grins. “I’m very humble. Most humble player in NHL.”

“Right up there with your other notable qualities. Like modesty and self-effacement.”

“Exactly.”

Dr. Terry appears in the doorway, looking stern. “Rozanov. Treatment room. Now.”

Ilya sighs but stands. Shane stands with him.

“I’ll wait,” Shane says.

“You don’t have to-”

“I’ll wait.”

Ilya looks at him for a moment, then nods. “Okay.”

As he follows Dr. Terry to the treatment room, he can feel the adrenaline starting to fade, leaving behind the familiar ache of his shoulder and the new, sharper pain of knowing that this conversation — this press conference disaster — is going to be everywhere by tomorrow morning.

But he meant what he said. Every word of it.

He’s going to lead the league in goals. He’s going to prove every single one of them wrong.

And Shane is going to be there with him, every step of the way. Not as a distraction, but as a partner. As a teammate. As the person who makes everything better just by existing.

Three games without a point?

Please.

He’s Ilya fucking Rozanov.

He’s just getting started.

The video goes viral by midnight.

Sports networks play it on loop. Twitter explodes. Reddit dissects every word. TikTok makes edits with dramatic music. The clip of Ilya saying “I have more skill in my injured shoulder than most players have in their entire body” becomes an instant meme.

Ilya watches it once, on Shane’s phone while they’re lying in bed, and then refuses to watch it again.

“I sound angry,” he observes.

“You were angry,” Shane points out.

“I sound very angry.”

“You were very angry.”

Ilya huffs. “They deserved it.”

“They absolutely deserved it.” Shane scrolls through the comments. “Oh, this is fun. Someone made a compilation of every time you said ‘Shane makes me better’ set to romantic music.”

“No.”

“Yes. It’s got three million views.”

“Shane.”

“I’m sending it to you.”

“Don’t you dare.”

Shane sends it anyway. Ilya opens it despite himself and immediately regrets it. There he is, on loop, saying “Shane makes everyone around him better” and “Shane is best two-way forward in the game” and “he makes me better player and better person” while a piano version of some love song plays in the background.

“I hate this,” Ilya says.

“You love it.”

“I hate that I love it.”

Shane laughs and kisses his shoulder — the good one. “How’s the shoulder, really?”

“Hurts. But is getting better. Will be fine in week or two.”

“You should take it easy-”

“I’m taking it easy. I’m in bed with my husband instead of at bar with teammates. Is very easy.”

Shane smiles. “You know what I mean.”

“I know. But I can’t sit out, Shane. Team needs me.”

“The team needs you healthy.”

“I am healthy. Just little sore.”

Shane gives him a look — the look that says he knows Ilya is downplaying things but also knows there’s no point in arguing because Ilya is going to do what Ilya wants to do.

“Fine,” Shane says. “But if it gets worse-”

“I will tell Dr. Terry. I promise.”

“Okay.” Shane is quiet for a moment, then says, “Thank you. For what you said today. About me.”

Ilya turns to look at him. “You don’t need to thank me. I was just telling truth.”

“Still. It was ...” Shane trails off, searching for words. “It meant a lot. Hearing you say those things.”

“I say them all the time.”

“Not in front of the entire media. Not on the record.”

“Should do it more often, then. Maybe every press conference, I tell them how amazing you are. Make it tradition.”

Shane laughs. “Please don’t. One of us needs to maintain a professional relationship with the press.”

“Why? They’re idiots.”

“Not all of them.”

“Mostly all of them.”

“Fair enough.”

They lapse into comfortable silence. Outside, Ottawa is dark and cold, but in here it’s warm, and Ilya has Shane pressed against his side, and his shoulder hurts but his heart doesn’t, and that’s all that matters really.

“Ilya?” Shane says after a while.

“Mm?”

“You really think you’re going to score more goals than anyone else in the league?”

“Da.”

“Even McDavid?”

“Even McDavid.”

“Even Auston Matthews?”

“Especially Auston Matthews.”

Shane grins. “Okay. Then I believe you.”

“Good. You should always believe me.”

“I’ll believe you when you’re right. Which is, admittedly, most of the time.”

“All the time,” Ilya corrects.

“Sure, baby. All the time.”

Ilya is about to respond when his phone buzzes. He reaches for it, expecting another text from Zane or maybe his agent, but instead it’s a number he doesn’t recognize.

He opens it anyway.

This is Johnston from the Sun. I wanted to apologize for today. You were right, we were asking the wrong questions for the wrong reasons. For what it's worth, I hope you win the Richard Trophy again. You deserve it.

Ilya stares at the message for a long moment. Then he shows it to Shane.

"Huh," Shane says. "That's ... unexpected."

"Da."

"Are you going to respond?"

Ilya thinks about it. Then he types: *Apology accepted. See you at practice tomorrow. Try to ask better questions.*

He hits send before he can overthink it.

Johnston responds almost immediately: *Will do. And for the record, I'd take that bet if I had the money. My wife is a big fan. She says you're going to destroy the competition.*

Ilya smiles. *Your wife is a smart woman. You should listen to her more.*

Johnston: *I'll keep that in mind. Good night, Ilya.*

Ilya: *Good night.*

Ilya puts his phone down. Shane is watching him with an amused expression.

"What?" Ilya asks.

"Nothing. Just ... you're softer than you pretend to be."

"Am not."

"You just accepted an apology from a reporter and wished him good night."

"Was polite thing to do."

"Exactly. Soft."

Ilya scowls. "Tell anyone and I'll deny it."

"Your secret is safe with me." Shane kisses him, soft and sweet. "Come on. We should sleep. You've got practice tomorrow and I have a feeling you're going to push yourself too hard."

"Is not too hard if I can do it."

"That's not how bodies work, but okay."

They turn off the lights and settle into sleep, and Ilya's last conscious thought is that tomorrow he's going to score a goal. Maybe two. Maybe three. And every single one is going to be a middle finger to everyone who thought three games meant he was done.

Three games.

As if Ilya Rozanov could ever be done after three games.

He's going to win that bet. He's going to lead the league in goals.

And he's going to do it with Shane by his side, exactly where he belongs.

Chapter 3: the folly of youth

The All-Star weekend is always a circus, but this year it's different. This year, Ilya and Shane are on the same team — representing Ottawa together, wearing matching jerseys, doing joint media appearances. It's everything Ilya never thought he'd have, and he's not about to let anyone ruin it.

Especially not some cocky rookie who thinks he's hot shit.

They're lined up for the Accuracy Shooting competition, waiting their turn, and the kid — Drew something, Dallas first-round pick from three years ago, twenty-one and thinks he's God's gift to hockey — is running his mouth.

"Can't wait to show these old guys what real speed looks like," he's saying, loud enough that half the line can hear him. He's grinning at his teammate, some other young hotshot whose name Ilya also doesn't care about. "Gonna dust Rozanov and Hollander both. Time for the new generation, you know?"

Shane, standing next to Ilya, tenses slightly. "We're thirty-one," he mutters. "Not exactly retirement age."

"He's trying to get in our heads," Ilya says calmly. He's watching the kid, watching the way he's posturing, chest puffed out, all bravado and no substance yet. "Is not working."

"You sure? Because you've got that look."

"What look?"

"The look that says you're about to end someone's whole career."

Ilya grins, sharp and dangerous. "Maybe little bit."

The kid is still talking. "I mean, respect to what they've done, but this is a young man's game now. Those guys are past their prime. Rozanov's probably got, what, two years left? Three if he's lucky?"

That does it.

Ilya turns fully toward the kid, and his smile is all teeth. "You know what's funny?"

Drew looks over, and for a second — just a second — there's uncertainty in his eyes. Good.

"What's that?" Drew asks, trying to sound casual.

"You think you're young and fast and new," Ilya says. "But you know what I am? Better. Always have been. Always will be."

"We'll see about that, old man."

“Yes,” Ilya agrees. “We will see.”

Shane makes a small noise that might be a laugh or might be arousal or might be both. Ilya knows that noise. He’s been hearing it for years.

“You’re going to destroy him, aren’t you?” Shane asks quietly.

“Da. Completely.”

“God, you’re hot when you’re like this.”

Ilya glances at him. Shane’s pupils are slightly dilated, his breath a little faster than normal. Ilya knows that look too — has memorized every variation of it over the years.

“Later,” Ilya promises, low and intent. “After I make him cry.”

Shane shifts his weight. “Yeah. Okay. Later.”

The competition starts. The first few shooters are decent — some hit all five targets in under twenty seconds, others struggle. The crowd cheers for everyone because it’s All-Star weekend and everyone’s here to have fun, but Ilya can see the other players watching, calculating, competitive despite the exhibition nature of it all.

Drew is up fifth. He skates to the center, cocky smile still in place, and waits for the signal.

When it comes, he’s fast. Ilya has to give him that — the kid can shoot. He hits the first target clean, then the second, adjusting quickly for the third. The fourth takes him two tries, and the fifth goes in smooth.

Fifteen point four seconds.

It’s good. Really good. Better than most of the shooters before him.

Drew skates back to the line, high-fiving his teammate, and makes sure to catch Ilya’s eye. “Beat that, grandpa.”

Ilya just smiles.

Three more shooters go. One of them — a defenseman from Vancouver — comes close at sixteen point two seconds. The crowd is getting into it, cheering louder with each attempt.

Then it’s Ilya’s turn.

He skates to center ice, and the noise level rises. The crowd knows who he is, knows what he can do. The announcer is hyping him up — “Seven-time Maurice Richard Trophy winner, eleven-time All-Star, one of the greatest goal scorers of this generation” — and Ilya lets it wash over him.

He looks up at the screen, at the record time displayed there. Shane set it seven years ago: ten point one seconds. It’s stood ever since, untouchable.

Until now.

Ilya catches Shane's eye from where he's standing with the other competitors. Shane raises an eyebrow. *You really going to do this?*

Ilya winks.

The signal comes.

Ilya doesn't think. Thinking is for people who aren't sure. He acts on pure instinct, muscle memory built from twelve years of professional hockey, from ten thousand practices, from a hundred thousand shots.

First target. Ping. Done.

Second target. Ping. No hesitation.

Third target. Center mass. Ping.

Fourth target. The tricky one, upper corner. Ilya adjusts his angle, lets the puck go. Ping.

Fifth target. He releases-

Ping.

The buzzer sounds. The crowd erupts.

Ilya looks up at the screen.

Nine point seven seconds.

New record.

The arena loses its collective mind. Even the other players are cheering, because okay, that was legitimately impressive. That was the kind of shooting display that reminds everyone why Ilya Rozanov is a future Hall of Famer.

Ilya skates back to the line, and as he passes Drew, he makes sure to catch the kid's eye.

"What was that about old men?" Ilya asks sweetly.

Drew's face is red. "Lucky shot."

"Five lucky shots in less than ten seconds?" Ilya shakes his head. "Is not luck, kid. Is skill. Maybe you learn difference someday."

He continues past, and the other players part to let him through. Someone claps him on the back — Leon Draisaitl, grinning — and someone else whistles appreciatively.

Shane is waiting, and the look on his face is pure heat.

“Show-off,” Shane says.

“You love it.”

“I really do.”

“You’re up next,” Ilya observes. “Think you can beat it?”

Shane laughs. “Your time? No. But I can sure as hell beat his.”

And he does.

Shane’s turn comes, and he’s smooth and efficient in a way that’s different from Ilya’s aggressive precision. Where Ilya is fire, Shane is ice — calculated, controlled, devastatingly effective.

Ten point nine seconds.

Not a new record, but still faster than Drew by more than a second and a half. Still in the top two of the competition. Still proof that “old men” can skate circles around cocky rookies.

The crowd loves it. They’re chanting “ROZANOV! HOLLANDER!” like it’s a regular season game, and Ilya feels something warm and possessive settle in his chest.

That’s his husband out there. His partner. His equal.

Shane skates back, and he makes a point of stopping right in front of Drew.

“Looks like us old guys still have some gas in the tank,” Shane says pleasantly. “But hey, good effort. I’m sure you’ll get better with time. You know. When you’re not so young and inexperienced.”

Drew looks like he wants to punch something. “This is bullshit.”

“No,” Ilya says, appearing at Shane’s shoulder. “This is skill. This is what happens when you play NHL hockey for twelve years and become one of best players in world. You should try it sometime.”

“I’m going to-”

“You’re going to what?” Ilya’s smile is sharp. “You’re going to work hard and maybe, maybe, in ten years you’ll be half as good as me on my worst day? Good plan. I support this.”

Draisaitl is openly laughing now, not even trying to hide it. A few of the other players are grinning, enjoying the show.

Drew storms off, and his teammate follows, both of them muttering.

“That was mean,” Shane observes.

“He started it.”

“You finished it.”

“Da. Is what I do.” Ilya turns to Shane fully, and the heat from earlier is still there, simmering under his skin. “You shot very well.”

“Thanks. You shot better.”

“Always.” Ilya lets his gaze drag down Shane’s body, deliberate and obvious. “You look good in this jersey.”

Shane’s breath catches. “Ilya.”

“Yes?”

“We’re in public.”

“I know.”

“There are cameras.”

“I know.”

“We have three more events before we’re done for the day.”

“I know that too.” Ilya leans in slightly, just enough that his words are for Shane alone. “But I also know that training room is just down that hallway. And I know that we have maybe twenty minutes before anyone notices we’re gone.”

Shane’s pupils dilate further. “That’s—we can’t-”

“We can. We will.” Ilya’s voice drops lower. “Unless you want to spend rest of day hard and uncomfortable in your jock, in front of all these people, all these cameras.”

Shane closes his eyes briefly. When he opens them, there’s resignation and want in equal measure. “You’re a terrible influence.”

“You love me anyway.”

“God help me, I do.”

They slip away during the chaos of the next event starting — some relay race that nobody’s paying attention to them for — and Ilya guides Shane down the hallway with a hand on the small of his back. He’s been in this arena before, knows the layout, knows where the unused rooms are.

The training room is small and sterile and empty, and Ilya locks the door behind them.

For a moment they just look at each other. The noise from the arena is muted here, distant, and it’s just them and the sound of their breathing.

“Twenty minutes,” Shane says.

“Is plenty of time.”

“For what you’re thinking? We’d need-”

Ilya kisses him, hard and claiming, and Shane melts into it immediately. This is what they are together — fire and heat and need that hasn’t diminished even slightly in all their years together. If anything, it’s gotten stronger, more intense, because now they don’t have to hide. Now they can have this whenever they want, however they want.

“Prep?” Shane gasps when Ilya pulls back to mouth at his jaw.

“We do it fast.” Ilya’s hands are already working at Shane’s drawstring. “You can take it.”

“Fuck.” Shane’s head drops back. “Yeah. Okay. Fast.”

They strip efficiently — years of practice in locker rooms translating to this, to shedding layers while maintaining contact, while keeping their mouths connected. Shane’s jersey hits the floor, then Ilya’s, then pads and pants and everything else until they’re skin to skin.

Ilya backs Shane against the training table, lifting him easily. Shane wraps his legs around Ilya’s waist, and the pressure is perfect, is exactly what they both need.

“Tell me you brought-” Shane starts.

Ilya produces a small bottle of lube from his discarded pants pocket.

Shane stares. “You planned this.”

“I plan for all possibilities.”

“That’s-” Shane laughs, breathless. “That’s actually kind of hot.”

“Everything I do is hot.”

“Your humility is really your best quality.”

Ilya grins and kisses him again, swallowing whatever else Shane was going to say. His hand slides down Shane’s back, between his legs, and he can feel Shane shudder.

The prep is quick — probably too quick, but Shane wasn’t lying when he said they don’t have time, and Shane’s done this enough times to know his limits. Ilya works him open with slick fingers, feeling Shane clench around him, hearing the small sounds Shane makes when he’s trying to stay quiet.

“Ready?” Ilya asks.

“God, yes. Please.”

Ilya lines himself up, and the slide in is smooth and perfect and makes them both groan. Shane's heat surrounding him, Shane's legs tight around his waist, Shane's hands clutching at his shoulders — this is everything. This is what he thinks about during games when he needs motivation, what he comes home to after losses, what makes every victory sweeter.

“Move,” Shane demands. “We don't have time for, oh, fuck-”

Ilya moves.

There's nothing gentle about it. This isn't their bed at home where they can take their time, where Ilya can work Shane up slowly until he's begging. This is fast and hard and desperate, is the physical manifestation of everything they felt watching each other shoot, watching each other compete, watching each other be brilliant and talented and theirs.

The training table creaks with each thrust. Shane is biting his lip, trying to keep quiet, but small sounds escape anyway — gasps and moans and Ilya's name in a tone that's half prayer, half curse.

“So good,” Ilya mutters against Shane's neck. “Always so good for me.”

“Harder,” Shane breathes. “Come on, we don't have-”

Ilya adjusts his angle and drives in harder, and Shane's back arches, his mouth falling open on a silent cry. Found it.

He hits that spot again and again, relentless, and Shane is shaking now, clutching at Ilya like he's the only solid thing in the world. Ilya can feel his own orgasm building, that familiar heat low in his spine, but he's not going over without Shane.

He gets a hand between them, wraps around Shane's cock, and strokes in time with his thrusts.

“Ilya-” Shane's voice breaks. “I'm-”

“I know. Let me see you.”

Shane comes with Ilya's name on his lips, spilling over Ilya's hand, and the feeling of him clenching down is enough to drag Ilya over the edge too. He buries his face in Shane's shoulder to muffle his own sounds, riding out the waves of pleasure until they both collapse against each other, breathing hard.

For a moment there's just the sound of their breathing and the distant roar of the crowd from the arena.

“We definitely don't have twenty minutes anymore,” Shane says eventually.

“Probably not.”

“We need to clean up and get back before someone realizes we're gone.”

“Da.”

Neither of them moves.

“Ilya.”

“Mm?”

“I love you, but we really need to go.”

Ilya pulls back reluctantly, and they separate with a mutual groan. The cleanup is quick and efficient — paper towels and hand sanitizer and trying to make themselves presentable — but there’s no hiding the flush in Shane’s cheeks or the slight unsteadiness in his legs.

“You okay?” Ilya asks, steadying Shane with a hand on his hip.

“I’m going to be walking funny for the rest of the day.”

“Is hot.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one who has to explain why he’s limping during the skills competition.”

“Tell them you pulled muscle.”

“What muscle, exactly?”

Ilya’s grin is filthy. “Internal muscle.”

Shane groans. “I hate you.”

“You love me.”

“That too.”

They get dressed, checking each other for obvious signs — hickeys, rumpled clothes, sex hair. Shane’s jersey is slightly wrinkled, but hopefully nobody will notice. Ilya’s hair is beyond help, but that’s not unusual.

“Ready?” Ilya asks.

Shane takes a breath. “Yeah. Let’s go pretend we didn’t just have sex in a training room.”

“Best All-Star weekend ever.”

They slip back into the arena separately — Shane first, then Ilya two minutes later. Nobody seems to have noticed their absence, too caught up in whatever event is happening on the ice.

Except Draisaitl, who takes one look at them and grins knowingly.

“Have a nice break?” He asks innocently.

“Very nice,” Ilya says without shame.

“I’m sure.” Draisaitl’s grin widens. “For what it’s worth, that kid is still sulking about the accuracy shooting. You really got under his skin.”

“Good. He deserved it.”

“Oh, absolutely. The old man comments were bullshit.” Draisaitl pauses. “Though technically you guys are only like a year older than me, so if you’re old ...”

“You’re distinguished,” Shane supplies. “That’s how it works.”

“I’ll remember that.”

The rest of the All-Star events pass in a blur. Ilya competes in the fastest skater competition — doesn’t win, but places respectably — and Shane does the passing challenge. They both participate in the actual game the next day, which is less a hockey game and more organized chaos with no one playing defense.

Ilya scores twice. Shane gets two assists and a goal. They win, not that anyone’s really keeping track in a meaningful way.

But the best part, the part Ilya will remember long after the weekend is over, is the way Shane limps slightly every time he skates, and the way he glares at Ilya every time someone asks if he’s okay, and the way he whispers “I’m going to get you back for this” when they’re finally alone in their hotel room that night.

Ilya can’t wait.

The media coverage of the All-Star weekend is predictably excessive.

Every sports network runs highlights of Ilya’s record-breaking accuracy shooting. Twitter makes memes of Drew’s face after Ilya’s run. Someone makes a compilation of every time Ilya and Shane looked at each other during the weekend, set to romantic music, and it gets ten million views in twenty-four hours.

But Ilya’s favorite article comes from Johnston, of all people.

Old Men and New Records: Why Experience Still Matters in the NHL

By James Johnston, Ottawa Sun

The narrative surrounding aging players in the NHL is often one of decline — as if crossing the threshold of thirty means an automatic decrease in skill, speed, and relevance. This weekend’s All-Star festivities served as a reminder that this narrative is, to put it bluntly, nonsense.

Ilya Rozanov, at 31, didn’t just compete in the accuracy shooting competition. He demolished the existing record, shaving four tenths of a second off a mark that has stood for eleven years.

His time of 9.7 seconds is the kind of performance that would be impressive for any player at any age — but it's especially noteworthy coming from someone who, according to some observers, should be past his prime.

Shane Hollander, also 31, followed with his own impressive showing, further proving that age is less a limitation and more a measure of experience. These aren't players clinging to past glory, they're athletes at the peak of their abilities, combining the physical skills of their youth with the hockey IQ that only comes with years of elite-level play.

When a young Dallas forward (who shall remain nameless, though his comments are well-documented) suggested that "old men" like Rozanov and Hollander were past their prime, he betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of how athletic longevity works. Yes, pure speed may decline slightly with age. But vision, positioning, shot selection, mental preparation — these things improve. And in a sport as complex as hockey, experience is often the deciding factor.

Rozanov's response — both on the ice and in his characteristically blunt post-event comments — was perfect. Not because it was polite or diplomatic, but because it was honest. "Is not luck," he told the young player. "Is skill."

And he's right.

Ilya reads the article twice, then sends it to Shane, who left to go to the bathroom a few minutes ago.

Lily: Look. Johnston wrote something good.

Shane responds immediately: I saw! Character development for Johnston.

Lily: Maybe I'm a good influence on him.

Jane: Yeah, that's definitely it. Your sparkling personality and diplomatic communication style.

Lily: Exactly. I'm very diplomatic.

Jane: You threatened to bet half a million dollars and called the entire media idiots.

Lily: That was different.

Jane: I love you so much.

Lily: I know. Is because I'm young and in my prime.

Jane: You're such an ass.

Lily: You also know this.

Ilya is grinning at his phone when Zane drops into the now-empty seat next to him. They're on the plane back to Ottawa, and most of the team is dozing or watching movies or otherwise

occupying themselves for the three-hour flight.

“You look pleased with yourself,” Zane observes.

“I’m always pleased with myself.”

“Fair. Did you see the video of that Drew kid?”

Ilya looks up. “What video?”

Zane pulls out his phone and navigates to YouTube. “This one. It’s from his post-All-Star press conference.”

He hits play, and Ilya watches as Drew, looking significantly less cocky than he did before the accuracy shooting, fields questions from reporters.

“Drew, your thoughts on Rozanov’s record-breaking performance?”

Drew’s jaw is tight. “It was ... impressive. He’s obviously still got it.”

“Do you regret the comments you made about older players?”

“I was just ... I was talking trash. It’s hockey. Everybody does it.”

“But Rozanov and Hollander both outperformed you significantly-”

“Look,” Drew interrupts, and he looks genuinely uncomfortable now. “I made comments I shouldn’t have made. I let my mouth run before my brain engaged. Rozanov’s one of the best to ever play the game, and Hollander too. I was out of line. That’s all I’m going to say about it.”

The video ends.

Ilya is quiet for a moment. Then he says, “Huh.”

“Right?” Zane grins. “Kid learned his lesson.”

“Good. Maybe now he focuses on playing hockey instead of talking shit.”

“You feeling nice enough to accept his apology?”

Ilya considers. “If I see him again, maybe I don’t destroy him completely. Maybe just little bit.”

“That’s very generous of you.”

“I’m generous person.”

Zane laughs and heads back to his seat, leaving Ilya alone with his phone and his thoughts.

The truth is, Ilya doesn't actually hate the kid. Drew's young and stupid and said things he didn't mean because he was trying to look tough. Ilya understands that — he was young and stupid once too, though he'd never admit it.

But the principle remains: you don't get to disrespect Ilya Rozanov without consequences. You don't get to suggest he's washed up, that he's past his prime, that his relationship with Shane is somehow making him weaker.

Ilya proved his point. That's what matters.

His phone buzzes. Shane again.

Jane: Your limping victim wants you to know that he's taking a very long bath when we get home and you're not invited.

Ilya grins: That's fine. I'll join anyway.

Jane: It's not joining if you're not invited. That's called intruding.

Lily: It's called marriage.

Jane: It's called being a pest.

Lily: You love when I'm a pest.

Jane: ... Okay yes. But I'm still mad about the limping.

Lily: You didn't complain at the time.

Jane: I was busy having my brains fucked out. Didn't have time to complain.

Lily: Exactly. See? I'm very considerate.

Jane: You're the opposite of considerate. You're inconsiderate. That's literally the word for it.

Lily: But you love me.

Jane: So much it's actually embarrassing.

Ilya looks out the window at the clouds passing below, at the vast expanse of sky, and feels something settle in his chest. Contentment, maybe. Or satisfaction. Or just the simple pleasure of knowing exactly where he stands in the world — at the top of his game, with the love of his life by his side, proving every single doubter wrong one record-breaking performance at a time.

Thirty-one isn't old.

Thirty-one is experienced. Skilled. Dangerous.

And Ilya Rozanov is just getting started.

Chapter 4: what matters most

The game against the Sockeye is in the third period when the tweets start appearing.

Ilya isn't playing. Neither is Shane. They're in a hospital room at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario watching their daughter sleep in Shane's arms for the first time.

She's tiny. Impossibly tiny. Four months old and barely ten pounds, with wispy dark hair and Ilya's mother's name. Irina Rozanova-Hollander, born in Arkhangelsk, Russia, and flown to Ottawa just six hours ago with a nurse escort and more medical documentation than Ilya's ever seen in his life.

She has a congenital heart defect. Ventricular septal defect, the doctors call it — a hole between the lower chambers of her heart. She needs surgery. Soon. But first she needs to be stabilized, needs to adjust to the time change and the new environment and the two men who are now legally her fathers.

"She's so small," Shane whispers. He hasn't stopped staring at her since the nurses placed her in his arms twenty minutes ago. "God, Ilya, look at her."

"I am looking." Ilya is sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, one hand on Shane's knee, the other hovering near Irina like he's afraid to touch her and break something. "She's perfect."

"She's sick."

"She's perfect," Ilya repeats firmly. "And she will get better. Doctors say surgery has very high success rate."

Shane nods, but his eyes are shiny. "I know. I just—what if something goes wrong? What if—"

"Nothing will go wrong." Ilya moves closer, wraps an arm around Shane's shoulders. "We have best doctors. We have best hospital. She is strong, like her papa and daddy."

Shane laughs wetly. "We really need to figure out what she's going to call us."

"Is easy. I'm Papa, you're Daddy."

"You can't just decide that unilaterally."

"I just did."

Irina makes a small sound in her sleep — not quite a cry, more like a sigh — and they both freeze, watching her. She settles again, one tiny fist curled against Shane's chest.

"I can't believe she's really here," Shane says softly. "After two years of paperwork and waiting and—"

"She's here." Ilya kisses Shane's temple. "She's ours. Nothing else matters."

There's a knock on the door, and Dr. Burnes enters, clipboard in hand. She's the pediatric cardiologist who'll be managing Irina's care, and she's already spent an hour explaining the surgery, the recovery process, the long-term prognosis.

"How's she doing?" Dr. Burnes asks quietly.

"Sleeping," Shane says. "Is that normal? Should she be awake more?"

"After the journey she's had, sleep is exactly what she needs." Dr. Burnes checks the monitors that Irina's hooked up to. "Her vitals look good. Oxygen saturation is where we want it. We'll keep her overnight for observation, and if everything stays stable, we can schedule the surgery for next week."

"Next week," Ilya repeats. His stomach clenches. "Is so soon."

"The sooner we repair the defect, the better her chances for normal development. But I understand it's frightening." Dr. Burnes's smile is kind. "You're doing the right thing. Both of you. She's lucky to have you."

After Dr. Burnes leaves, they sit in silence, just watching Irina breathe. The rise and fall of her chest is mesmerizing, terrifying, the most important thing Ilya's ever witnessed.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. Then again. And again.

"You should check that," Shane says. "Might be important."

Ilya pulls out his phone reluctantly, and his screen is full of notifications. Twitter mentions, mostly. Dozens of them.

He opens the app.

@HockeyFan1834: @ilyarozanovofficial @shanehollanderhockeyplayer thanks for fucking my parlay. Lost \$200 because you assholes we're scratched last minute.

@CentaursFan27: @ilyarozanovofficial Seriously? A healthy scratch? What the fuck is wrong with you? Cost me my fantasy week.

@BettingOnHockey: @ilyarozanovofficial @shanehollanderhockeyplayer Would've been nice to know you weren't playing BEFORE I put money on the game. Some of us have bills to pay.

@OttawaSuperfan: @ilyarozanovofficial @shanehollanderhockeyplayer Selfish pricks. Hope whatever you were doing was worth screwing over your fans.

There are more. So many more. His mentions are flooded with them — angry fans, upset bettors, fantasy players who lost their matchups because their star players didn't show up.

"What is it?" Shane asks.

Ilya shows him the phone.

Shane's expression darkens. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"They don't know," Ilya says, though his own anger is rising. "They don't know why we weren't there."

"So they just assume we skipped out for fun? That we just decided not to play?"

"People are stupid." Ilya locks his phone and puts it away. "Is not important right now."

But it bothers him. It bothers him more than it should, maybe, but he and Shane made the hardest decision of their lives today — choosing between their team and their daughter — and these people think they did it casually? Think they cost them fantasy points on purpose?

Fuck that.

It's nearly midnight when Irina is finally settled in the NICU for the night. The nurses assure them they'll call if anything changes, that they should go home and rest, that she's in good hands.

Ilya doesn't want to leave. Neither does Shane. But Dr. Burnes is firm: they need sleep, need to be rested for the days ahead, need to trust that the hospital staff knows what they're doing.

So they go home, to the house that's been frantically baby-proofed over the last week, to the nursery that's ready and waiting, to the quiet that feels wrong without the sounds of their daughter breathing.

Shane goes straight to bed, exhausted from emotion and stress. Ilya should follow. Should sleep. Should not do what he's thinking about doing.

He does it anyway.

He opens Twitter, scrolls through his mentions until he finds the worst offenders, and starts typing.

@HockeyFan1834: @ilyarozanovofficial @shanehollanderhockeyplayer thanks for fucking my parlay. Lost \$200 because you assholes werenscratched last minute.

Ilya hits reply.

@ilyarozanovofficial: @HockeyFan1834 I'm very sorry that @shanehollanderhockeyplayer and I were too busy meeting our newly adopted daughter at hospital, where she is being treated for a serious heart condition, to think about your \$200 parlay. Truly, your betting losses were our top priority. Here is your money back.

He opens Venmo, finds @HockeyFan1834's account, and sends \$200 with the note: For your devastating loss. Maybe bet less money you can't afford to lose.

Next tweet.

@CentaursFan27: @ilyarozanovofficial Seriously? A healthy scratch? What the fuck is wrong with you? Cost me my fantasy week.

@ilyarozanovofficial: @CentaursFan27 You're right, it was very healthy. So healthy we were at the children's hospital watching our four-month-old daughter sleep with a oxygen monitor because her heart has a hole in it. But your fantasy team is clearly more important. What's your Venmo?

@CentaursFan27 replies almost immediately: Holy shit I didn't know man I'm sorry you don't have to

@ilyarozanovofficial: @CentaursFan27 Too late. Tell me how much you "lost" and I'll send it. Since apparently I owe you something for having family emergency.

@CentaursFan27: Seriously I'm sorry I was being an asshole you don't owe me anything

@ilyarozanovofficial: @CentaursFan27 \$50? \$100? More? Come on, tell me how much your fantasy pride is worth. I have money. It's just sitting here. Not being used to save my daughter's life or anything.

There's no response to that one.

Ilya moves on.

@BettingOnHockey: @ilyarozanovofficial @shanehollanderhockeyplayer Would've been nice to know you weren't playing BEFORE I put money on the game. Some of us have bills to pay.

@ilyarozanovofficial: @BettingOnHockey You're right. Next time we get an emergency call that our adopted infant daughter is arriving from Russia and needs immediate medical attention, we will definitely make sure to announce it publicly first so you can adjust your bets accordingly. How much did you lose?

@BettingOnHockey: \$150

@ilyarozanovofficial: @BettingOnHockey Sending now. In the future, maybe don't bet money you need for bills on hockey games. Here's the link for a gambling addiction resource hotline if you need it.

He sends \$150 with the note: For your bills. You're welcome.

The next one is worse.

@OttawaSuperfan: @ilyarozanovofficial @shanehollanderhockeyplayer Selfish pricks. Hope whatever you were doing was worth screwing over your fans.

Ilya stares at that one for a long moment. Selfish. They're selfish for choosing their daughter.

His hands are shaking when he types the response.

@ilyarozanovofficial: @OttawaSuperfan Yes, meeting our sick infant daughter who we have been waiting two years to adopt was absolutely worth “screwing over” fans who think their \$15 bets are more important than a child’s life. It was worth missing a game. It was worth missing a hundred games. You know what wasn’t worth it? Reading your tweet and realizing that some people are so self-absorbed they can’t imagine that hockey players have lives, have families, have priorities beyond skating in circles for your entertainment. Here’s your money. Choke on it.

He sends \$100 — more than the guy probably lost, but Ilya doesn’t care — with the note: Since you think we owe you something. We don’t. But here.

He goes through a dozen more tweets. Some people apologize when they realize what happened. Others double down, insisting that professional athletes have obligations, that they should have notified people sooner, that their personal lives shouldn’t interfere with their careers.

To every single one, Ilya sends money. Twenty dollars. Fifty dollars. Three hundred dollars to one guy who claims he lost a “huge” bet. Ilya doesn’t even blink at the amounts — what’s a few thousand dollars compared to their contracts? Compared to what they’re spending on Irina’s private medical care? What’s money compared to what matters?

By the time he’s done, he’s sent almost four thousand dollars to angry strangers on the internet, and his mentions are exploding with new tweets — some supportive, some still angry, most just shocked that he actually responded.

His fingers hover over the keyboard. He should stop. Should put the phone down. Should go to bed.

Instead, he opens Instagram.

The photo is from earlier tonight, taken by one of the nurses. Shane is in the hospital bed, Irina cradled in his arms, and Ilya is sitting next to them with his arm around Shane’s shoulders. They’re both looking at Irina with expressions of pure love and terror and awe.

Ilya uploads it.

For the caption, he types:

This is Irina Rozanova-Hollander. She is four months old. She was born in Russia and arrived in Ottawa today. She has a heart defect that will require surgery next week. She is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

@shanehollanderhockeyplayer and I missed tonight’s game because we were at the hospital meeting our daughter for the first time. We missed the game because we wanted to be there when she arrived in a new country, with new people, scared and sick and needing us.

We missed the game because she is more important than hockey. More important than your fantasy teams, your bets, your parlays, your entertainment.

Some of you were upset about this. Some of you sent angry tweets. I have sent you your money back. Not because I owe it to you. I don't. I owe you nothing. But because I want you to understand that the amount of money you lost betting on me is less than I spend on coffee. It's pocket change. It's meaningless.

You know what's not meaningless? This little girl. Her life. Her health. Her future.

So if you want to be angry that I wasn't on the ice tonight, be angry. If you want to complain that I cost you money, complain. But understand that I will choose her over hockey every single time. @shanehollanderhockeyplayer will choose her over hockey every single time. We will always choose our family.

She is named after my mother, who died when I was young. She would have loved to meet her granddaughter. I think about this every day.

He pauses, reading what he's written. It's honest. Vulnerable. The kind of thing he usually avoids posting because he doesn't like showing weakness to strangers.

But then he thinks about those tweets, about people calling him selfish, and his fingers move across the keyboard again.

Also, just so we're clear: I am still going to lead the league in goals this season. Even missing games for my daughter. Even at 33 years old. Because I am Ilya Rozanov and I am very, very good at hockey. So everyone who said I was past my prime, who said being a father would slow me down, who said I should retire — you can all kindly go fuck yourselves. I will prove you wrong, just like I always do.

P.S. She is very cute. Obviously. She gets it from me.

He hits post before he can second-guess it.

The response is immediate and overwhelming. Comments flood in — thousands of them in the first minute alone. His phone can't keep up with the notifications.

He puts it on silent and goes to bed.

Shane is awake when Ilya slides under the covers.

"I saw the Instagram," Shane says quietly. "And the tweets."

"Was too much?"

"No. It was perfect." Shane rolls over to face him. "Though the part about leading the league in goals while being a dad was very you."

"Is true."

"I know. Doesn't make it less cocky."

“You love when I’m cocky.”

“I really do.” Shane’s smile is tired but genuine. “People are losing their minds, you know. The photo’s been shared like a million times already. Everyone from the team is commenting. Your agent is probably having a heart attack.”

“Let him. I don’t care.”

“I know. That’s what I love about it.” Shane reaches out, takes Ilya’s hand. “Thank you. That was—I don’t know. It felt like you were defending her. Defending us.”

“Of course I defend us. Anyone who thinks their fantasy team is more important than our daughter is idiot who deserves to be called idiot.”

“You didn’t just call them idiots. You paid them.”

“And made them feel like shit in the process. Was very effective.”

Shane laughs, soft and warm in the darkness. “You’re something else, you know that?”

“I know. Is why you married me.”

“One of many reasons.”

They lie there in silence for a while, hands clasped between them, and Ilya thinks about Irina sleeping in her NICU bassinet, hooked up to monitors, surrounded by nurses who are not her parents but who are keeping her safe.

“I’m scared,” Shane admits. “About the surgery.”

“Me too.”

“What if-”

“Don’t.” Ilya squeezes his hand. “Don’t think about what if. Think about what is. She is here. She is ours. She is strong. The surgery will work, and she will grow up healthy and probably very spoiled because we will give her everything.”

“Everything,” Shane agrees. “God, we’re going to be such pushovers.”

“Speak for yourself. I will be strict Russian father.”

“You couldn’t be strict if you tried. You’re going to let her get away with murder.”

“Maybe small murders. Not big ones.”

Shane’s laugh is watery. “I can’t believe we’re parents.”

“Better believe it. We have eighteen years minimum of this.”

“Longer than that. Parents are forever.”

“Good,” Ilya says. “I want forever with her. With you. With our family.”

His phone buzzes on the nightstand — once, twice, a dozen times in rapid succession. Ilya ignores it.

“You should probably check that,” Shane says. “Might be the hospital.”

Ilya grabs the phone and his heart stops for a second before he sees they’re not calls, just notifications. He opens them anyway.

The Instagram post has over two million likes. Two million. The comments are a mix of support, congratulations, and people apologizing for their earlier tweets.

@HockeyFan1834: I’m the guy who complained about my parlay. I’m sorry. I was way out of line. Your daughter is beautiful and I hope the surgery goes well. Also please keep the \$200, donate it to the hospital or something.

@CentaursFan27: That photo made me cry. I’m sorry for being an asshole. Congratulations on your daughter.

@BettingOnHockey: Keep the money. Donate it. I’m an idiot. She’s lucky to have you two as dads.

Even @CentaursSuperfan: I’m sorry. I said something awful and you didn’t deserve that. Your daughter is beautiful. Wishing you all the best.

There are others too. Players commenting with heart emojis and congratulations. Crosby: She’s perfect. Congrats guys. Ovechkin: Is amazing! So happy for you both ❤️👊🍼

Luca’s comment is the longest: I’m crying. You’re both going to be incredible fathers. Irina is so lucky. Also that last paragraph was peak Ilya and I love it. Never change.

Even Johnston from the Ottawa Sun: Congratulations. This is wonderful news. For what it’s worth, I think you made exactly the right choice tonight. Family first. Always.

Ilya shows Shane the phone.

“People can be good sometimes,” Shane observes.

“Sometimes. When they’re not being idiots.”

“Even the idiots apologized.”

“Because I shamed them with my superior logic and devastating wit.”

“And your credit card.”

“That too.”

Shane takes the phone and scrolls through more comments. “Farah texted. Three times. She wants you to call her.”

“Is middle of night.”

“It’s one AM and she’s in Vancouver this week. It’s only ten there.”

Ilya groans but takes the phone back. He calls his agent, who answers on the first ring.

“Ilya! Finally. Do you have any idea-”

“Hello, Farah. How are you? I’m fine, thanks for asking. My daughter is beautiful and in hospital and I’m tired and don’t want to deal with this right now.”

There’s a pause. “Right. Sorry. Congratulations, by the way. The photo is beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“But we need to talk about the tweets. And the Venmo payments. And the Instagram caption.”

“Why? Was perfect.”

“It was ... a lot. The ending especially. The ‘go fuck yourselves’ part.”

“They deserved it.”

“Maybe, but-”

“Farah.” Ilya’s voice is firm. “I don’t care. I don’t care if sponsors are upset. I don’t care if league is upset. I don’t care if entire world is upset. I said what I needed to say, and I meant it. My daughter is more important than anything else. End of discussion.”

Another pause. Then Farah sighs. “Okay. You’re right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—just congratulations. Really. I’m happy for you and Shane.”

“Thank you. Now I’m going to sleep. Call me tomorrow if you need something.”

“Wait, one more thing. The Venmo payments. Did you really send money to everyone who complained?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because the total was almost four thousand dollars and-”

“And I have millions of dollars and they have hurt feelings. Who cares?”

“The team cares. The league cares. It looks like you’re admitting fault, like you owe fans something for missing a game.”

“I owe them nothing. I gave them money because I wanted them to feel stupid for complaining. Was very effective. Read the apologies on Instagram.”

Farah is quiet for a long moment. “You know what? You’re right. Fuck it. You’re Ilya Rozanov. You can do whatever you want.”

“Finally, you understand.”

“Get some sleep. Give Shane my best. And congratulations again. She’s lucky to have you.”

After they hang up, Ilya puts the phone away — actually turns it off this time — and curls around Shane in the darkness.

“Everything okay?” Shane asks.

“Is fine. Farah wanted to yell at me for tweets.”

“And?”

“I told her I don’t care. Because I don’t.”

“What if there are consequences? What if the league-”

“Let them try. I dare them to punish me for choosing my daughter over game. Media would destroy them.”

Shane is quiet. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right.”

“I know. I’m always right.”

“Most of the time,” Shane corrects. “Like ninety percent.”

“Ninety-five.”

“We’re not negotiating your correctness percentage at one in the morning.”

“Fine. But is at least ninety-five.”

Shane’s laugh is soft and fond, and Ilya closes his eyes, breathing in the familiar scent of his husband, thinking about the tiny girl sleeping in the hospital who is now, impossibly, theirs.

Tomorrow they’ll go back. They’ll sit with her, hold her, learn her sounds and her patterns. They’ll meet with more doctors, discuss more details about the surgery, sign more paperwork.

But tonight, right now, Ilya lets himself feel the full weight of what just happened: they’re parents. They have a daughter. Their family is complete.

And if anyone tries to tell him that hockey should have come first, that he should have played tonight, that his responsibility to strangers and their bets matters more than his responsibility to Irina?

Well. They can read his tweets.

And then they can fuck right off.

The next morning, Ilya's phone is full of missed calls and texts. The team, the league, various media outlets, family and friends. He ignores most of them and goes straight to the hospital.

Irina is awake when they arrive, dark eyes wide and alert, and when Ilya picks her up for the first time — carefully, so carefully — she doesn't cry. Just looks at him with an expression that might be curiosity or might be confusion or might just be the look of a four-month-old who has no idea what's happening.

"Hi, malyshka," Ilya whispers. "I'm your papa. That's your daddy. We're going to take such good care of you."

Shane is recording on his phone, tears streaming down his face, and Ilya knows this video will end up on Instagram too. Probably with another caption that's half emotional and half cocky because that's who Ilya is, even now, even in this moment that should be completely pure and sincere.

Irina makes a small cooing sound, and Ilya's heart breaks open in the best possible way.

"Yeah," he says softly. "You're going to be okay. We're all going to be okay."

And somewhere out there, people are still arguing on Twitter, still debating whether he should have played, still having opinions about his choices.

Ilya doesn't care.

Let them talk.

He's got more important things to focus on.

Chapter 5: soft when it matters

Ilya is cooking dinner when he hears the front door slam, followed by the unmistakable sound of hockey equipment being thrown in the general direction of the mudroom.

“I scored three goals!” Irina’s voice carries through the house, loud and triumphant. “Dad! Papa! Did you hear me? THREE GOALS!”

“We heard you, Irinushka!” Ilya calls back. “Whole neighborhood heard you!”

Shane appears in the kitchen doorway, Irina’s hockey bag over his shoulder, grinning. Their daughter barrels past him, still in her practice jersey, her dark hair escaping from its braid.

“Papa, I scored on a breakaway! Coach said it was perfect form!” She’s bouncing on her toes, eyes bright. At almost nine, she’s all energy and elbows and her father’s competitive fire.

Ilya crouches down and she launches herself at him, nearly knocking him over. “Tell me everything,” he says seriously. “Every detail.”

“Okay so first I stole the puck from this kid who thinks he’s so good but he’s not, and then I-”

“Rina, go wash your hands first,” Shane interrupts gently. “Then you can give Papa the full game analysis over dinner.”

She groans but complies, racing toward the bathroom. Shane drops the hockey bag and crosses to Ilya, pressing a kiss to his temple.

“She’s going to be better than both of us,” Shane says.

“She already is. Has my shot and your hockey sense. Is unfair to other children.”

“They’ll survive.” Shane steals a piece of pepper from the cutting board. “Where’s Denis?”

“Upstairs. Has been quiet since you left.”

“Too quiet?”

“Maybe. Go check?”

Shane heads upstairs while Ilya finishes dinner — nothing fancy, just pasta and chicken because they have two kids now and fancy cooking is a distant memory. He can hear Irina in the bathroom, still narrating her practice to herself, and it makes him smile.

Nine years. Nine years since that terrifying night in the hospital, since Irina arrived small and sick and needing them. Now she’s healthy and loud and completely fearless, and Ilya’s heart aches with how much he loves her.

They adopted Denis two years after Irina — another Russian adoption, another medical situation, though his was less severe. A cleft palate, repaired in three surgeries before he was two. Now he's six and perfect and quieter than his sister, more thoughtful, with Shane's eyes and Ilya's stubborn streak.

Footsteps on the stairs. Shane reappears, Denis trailing behind him with his hand clutched in Shane's. Their son is wearing his practice jersey too, and his expression is uncertain.

"Hey, Danya," Ilya says, turning from the stove. "How was practice?"

Denis shrugs.

"Just shrug? No details? Your sister gave me three goals worth of details and she's not even finished."

Another shrug.

Ilya exchanges a glance with Shane, who shakes his head slightly. I don't know what's wrong.

"Okay," Ilya says carefully. "You want to help with dinner? Can stir sauce?"

Denis nods and comes over, and Ilya lifts him up to reach the counter, hands him the wooden spoon. They stand there in silence for a moment, Denis stirring methodically while Ilya monitors the chicken.

"Papa?" Denis says quietly.

"Yes, Danya?"

"Can I ... can we talk after dinner? You and Dad and me?"

Ilya's stomach clenches. That's never a good opening. "Of course. Is everything okay?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Denis keeps stirring, not meeting Ilya's eyes. "I just ... I need to tell you something."

"You can tell us anything. You know this, yes?"

"I know. But after dinner. Okay?"

"Okay."

Dinner is chaotic in the way it always is with two kids — Irina talks nonstop about practice, about her teammates, about how she wants to try out for the more competitive league next year. Denis is quiet, pushing pasta around his plate, occasionally answering questions with single words.

Shane keeps catching Ilya's eye across the table, concern written all over his face.

Finally, after Irina has been sent to do homework and the dishes are cleared, the three of them settle in the living room. Denis sits between them on the couch, small and nervous, picking at a thread on his jeans.

“Okay, Danya,” Shane says gently. “What did you want to talk about?”

Denis takes a deep breath. Lets it out. Takes another one.

“I don’t want to play hockey anymore,” he says in a rush.

The words hang in the air.

Ilya’s first instinct is to ask why, to problem-solve, to fix whatever is making his son unhappy. But he waits, giving Denis space to continue.

“I mean, I like skating,” Denis adds quickly. “I really like skating. I just don’t like hockey. The drills and the scrimmages and everyone always yelling and pushing. It’s too loud. Too much.”

“Okay,” Shane says slowly. “That’s okay. You don’t have to play hockey if you don’t want to.”

“Really?” Denis looks up, eyes wide. “You’re not mad?”

“Why would we be mad?” Ilya asks.

“Because you’re both hockey players. Famous hockey players. And Rina loves it so much and I thought ...” He trails off, looking down again. “I thought you’d be disappointed.”

Ilya feels something crack in his chest. He pulls Denis onto his lap — their son is getting big for this, will be too big soon — and wraps his arms around him.

“Listen to me, Danya,” Ilya says firmly. “I am not disappointed. Not even little bit. You know why?”

Denis shakes his head against Ilya’s chest.

“Because you are trying something, and you are being honest about what you like and don’t like. That takes courage. Much more courage than just doing what you think we want you to do.”

“But hockey is so important to you.”

“You know what’s more important?” Ilya tilts Denis’s chin up so they’re looking at each other. “You. Your happiness. Your joy. If hockey doesn’t make you happy, then it doesn’t matter. Not even little bit.”

Shane scoots closer, putting a hand on Denis’s back. “What does make you happy? When you’re skating, what do you love about it?”

Denis is quiet for a moment. “The jumps. And the spins. And how you can make patterns on the ice. My coach showed us some figure skaters on video once and it was so pretty. The way they moved and the music and everything. I want to do that.”

“Figure skating,” Shane says.

“Yeah. But I know it’s different from hockey and probably expensive and you guys are already paying for Rina’s league and-”

“Stop,” Ilya interrupts. “Money is not problem. Never worry about money. If you want to figure skate, we find you figure skating coach. We get you proper equipment. We support you one hundred percent.”

“One thousand percent,” Shane adds. “Whatever you need.”

Denis looks between them, eyes shining. “You really mean it?”

“Of course we mean it,” Ilya says. “You think we lie to you?”

“No, but ... I was so scared to tell you. I’ve been thinking about it for weeks and I kept practicing hockey even though I didn’t want to because I thought-”

“Oh, Denny.” Shane pulls both of them into a hug, and they sit there for a moment, the three of them tangled together on the couch. “You never have to be scared to tell us things. Even if it’s something you think we won’t like. We’re your dads. Our job is to love you and support you no matter what.”

“Even if I’m not a hockey player like you?”

“Especially then,” Ilya says. “You know what world needs? More people who do what they love, not what they think they should love. You want to figure skate? You figure skate. You want to play piano? Play piano. You want to be professional cheese taster? We figure that out too.”

Denis giggles wetly. “That’s not a real job.”

“Is absolutely real job. Very important. Someone has to make sure cheese is good.”

“Papa.”

“I’m serious! But point is, you can be whatever you want. Do whatever makes you happy. As long as you’re kind and you work hard and you’re honest, we don’t care what you do.”

Shane kisses the top of Denis’s head. “When did you know? That you wanted to figure skate instead?”

“There’s a kid at my school, Arthur. He figure skates and he showed me videos of this guy named Nathan Chen? And he was doing all these jumps and it looked so cool. Better than hockey. More like ... art?”

“Figure skating is beautiful,” Shane agrees. “It’s athletic and artistic at the same time. Like dancing on ice.”

“Yeah! Exactly!” Denis is getting more animated now, the nervousness fading. “And there’s music and costumes and you can tell stories with it. Hockey is just hitting a puck into a net. Over and over.”

Ilya catches Shane’s eye over Denis’s head and tries not to laugh. “Well, hockey is little more complicated than that-”

“I know, I know, but you know what I mean. It’s not the same.”

“No,” Ilya agrees. “Is not same. And is okay. Different people like different things. Rina loves hockey. You love figure skating. Both are good.”

“So I can really quit hockey? And start figure skating?”

“Yes. Tomorrow we start looking for coaches. We’ll find best one.”

Denis throws his arms around Ilya’s neck, squeezing tight. “Thank you, Papa. Thank you, Dad. I love you so much.”

“We love you too, Denny,” Shane says, voice thick. “So much.”

They sit there for a while longer, just holding their son, until Irina yells from upstairs that she needs help with her math homework and the moment breaks.

Denis scrambles off the couch, suddenly energized. “Can I tell Rina? That I’m going to figure skate?”

“Of course,” Ilya says. “But maybe wait until after homework? She’ll want to talk about it for long time.”

“Okay!” Denis races upstairs, taking them two at a time.

Shane slumps back against the couch, exhaling slowly. “Jesus. My heart.”

“I know.”

“He was so scared. He thought we’d be mad.”

“Kids are always scared,” Ilya says. “Is their job to be scared. Is our job to make them feel safe.”

“When did you become so wise?”

“I’m always wise. You just don’t always notice.”

Shane laughs and pulls Ilya closer, tucking his head against Ilya’s shoulder. “We’re really going to have a figure skater.”

“Da. Is good. Figure skating is very difficult. He’ll work hard, learn discipline, maybe even compete someday.”

“You know people are going to have opinions. About him choosing figure skating over hockey. About the son of two NHL players doing something different.”

“Fuck people’s opinions.”

“Ilya.”

“What? Is true. Fuck them. Danya wants to figure skate, he figure skates. Anyone who has problem with this can take it up with me.” Ilya pauses. “And you. We’ll both tell them to fuck off.”

“We really need to stop swearing so much before the kids start repeating it at school.”

“Irinushka already knows all the bad words. Learned them in locker room.”

Shane groans. “Of course she did.”

They sit in comfortable silence for a moment, listening to the sounds of their children upstairs — Irina’s voice carrying, Denis’s quieter responses, occasional laughter.

“Remember when we thought we couldn’t have this?” Shane says quietly. “When we thought hockey was all we’d ever have?”

“I remember.” Ilya kisses Shane’s hair. “Was stupid. Hockey is just job. This is life.”

“You’re going to make me cry.”

“You cry at everything.”

“I do not.”

“You cried at commercial last week. About dog food.”

“It was a very emotional commercial! The dog was old and the owner was taking care of him and-” Shane stops, laughs. “Okay, fine. I cry at everything.”

“I love you anyway.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Upstairs, something crashes, followed by Irina’s voice. “IT’S FINE! NOTHING BROKE!”

“Should we check on that?” Shane asks.

“Probably nothing important. If was important, they would yell louder.”

“That’s terrible parenting logic.”

“Has worked so far.”

Shane is about to respond when his phone buzzes. He checks it and groans. “It’s Harris. Asking if we’re coming to the charity thing next week.”

“The one with the dinner and the speeches?”

“That one.”

“Can we skip it?”

“Probably not. We’re on the board.”

Ilya sighs. “Fine. But I’m not making speech.”

“You always say that and you always end up making a speech.”

“This time is different.”

“It’s never different.”

“This time I mean it.”

Shane just pats his chest. “Sure, Ilya. Whatever you say.”

Later that night, after the kids are in bed and the house is finally quiet, Ilya finds himself standing in the doorway of Denis’s room, watching his son sleep.

Denis is sprawled across his bed, one arm flung over his stuffed bear (named Mishka, because Ilya is nothing if not predictable), his face peaceful in a way it wasn’t at dinner.

Shane appears beside him, silent in the way he’s learned to be after years of checking on sick children in hospitals, of sneaking in for one more look before bed.

“He looks happy,” Shane whispers.

“He is happy. Finally.”

“I feel bad that he was scared to tell us.”

“Don’t.” Ilya pulls Shane against his side. “We made him feel safe enough to tell us eventually. That’s what matters.”

“I hope so.”

They watch Denis breathe for another moment, then move to Irina’s room. She’s also asleep, but less peacefully — covers kicked off, hair everywhere, one leg hanging off the bed. Exactly how Ilya sleeps, Shane has pointed out multiple times.

Ilya adjusts her covers and tucks her leg back onto the bed. She doesn't wake, just mumbles something that might be "hat trick" and rolls over.

"She's going to be a problem when she's a teenager," Shane observes.

"She's already problem. Will just be bigger problem."

"And Denis?"

"Denis will be sweet and thoughtful and will probably take care of us when we're old."

"That's a lot of pressure to put on a six-year-old."

"Is not pressure. Is prediction. He has your personality. Very responsible. Very caring."

They retreat to their own bedroom, the one place in the house that's still somewhat adult — no toys on the floor, no hockey equipment in the corners, no drawings taped to the walls. Just their space, earned after years of sharing it with cribs and bassinets and two children who still sometimes crawl into bed with them in the middle of the night.

Ilya is brushing his teeth when Shane speaks from the bedroom.

"Do you think we're doing this right? The parenting thing?"

Ilya spits, rinses. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I wonder if we're too lenient. Or not lenient enough. Or if we should push them harder or not push them at all. Every parent blog says something different."

"Stop reading parent blogs."

"They're helpful!"

"They're making you crazy." Ilya comes back to the bedroom, strips down to his boxers. "We're doing fine. Kids are happy. Kids are healthy. Kids feel safe enough to tell us when they want to quit hockey and do figure skating instead. That's success."

Shane is sitting on the edge of the bed, and Ilya can see the worry in his shoulders, the tension he carries. Even after all these years, Shane still overthinks everything, still worries that he's not doing enough.

Ilya crosses to him, stands between his legs, puts his hands on Shane's shoulders.

"Listen to me. We are good parents. Not perfect — no one is perfect — but good. Our children know they are loved. They know they are safe. They know we will support them no matter what. That's what matters. That's all that matters."

"What if it's not enough?"

“Then we adjust. We learn. We do better.” Ilya tips Shane’s chin up. “But right now, today, we are enough. Danya told us something scary and we handled it well. We made him feel heard and loved and supported. That’s good parenting.”

Shane’s eyes are shiny. “When did you become the emotionally intelligent one?”

“I’m always emotionally intelligent. You just don’t notice because I hide it under being asshole to everyone else.”

That startles a laugh out of Shane. “Fair point.”

“Come to bed. Stop worrying. Tomorrow we find figure skating coach and enroll Danya in lessons and probably spend fortune on new equipment. Tonight we sleep.”

Shane lets himself be pulled into bed, curling automatically into Ilya’s side. They’ve been sleeping like this for years — Shane’s head on Ilya’s chest, Ilya’s arm around Shane’s shoulders, legs tangled together — and it’s as natural as breathing now.

“Ilya?”

“Mm?”

“Thank you. For being so good with him today. With Denis.”

“Don’t need to thank me. Is my son. Is my job to be good with him.”

“Still. You were perfect. The cheese taster thing made him laugh.”

“Was good joke.”

“It was a very good joke.” Shane presses a kiss to Ilya’s chest. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Now sleep. Tomorrow is busy day.”

“Tomorrow’s always a busy day with two kids.”

“Exactly. So sleep now while we can.”

They settle into silence, and Ilya is almost asleep when he hears their bedroom door creak open.

He opens one eye. Denis is standing in the doorway, Mishka clutched to his chest.

“Danya? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I just ...” Denis hesitates. “Can I sleep here tonight?”

Ilya lifts the covers without a word, and Denis scrambles into bed between them, fitting himself into the space like he was always meant to be there.

“Bad dream?” Shane asks, already half-asleep.

“No. I just wanted to be close to you. Is that okay?”

“Is always okay,” Ilya says, wrapping his arm around his son. “Anytime you want.”

“Even when I’m older?”

“Even when you’re older. Even when you’re forty and have your own children. You can always come home.”

Denis snuggles closer, and Ilya can feel him relax, the last tension draining from his small body.

“Papa?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think I’ll be good at figure skating?”

“I think you’ll be amazing at figure skating. Because you’ll work hard and you’ll love it and those are two most important things.”

“What if I’m not? What if I try it and I’m bad?”

“Then you try something else. Life is long, Danya. You have time to try many things. Find what makes you happy. That’s only rule.”

“Okay.” Denis is quiet for a moment. “Papa?”

“Yes?”

“You’re really not disappointed? That I won’t be a hockey player like you and Dad?”

Ilya props himself up on one elbow, looks down at his son in the dim light filtering through the window.

“Danya, listen to me. I am proud of you. Always. No matter what you do. You could be figure skater, or doctor, or teacher, or, yes, professional cheese taster. Doesn’t matter. You are my son. I love you. That will never change based on what sport you play or job you have. Understand?”

Denis nods against the pillow. “I understand.”

“Good. Now sleep. Tomorrow we call figure skating coaches and you start new adventure.”

“Okay. Good night, Papa. Good night, Dad.”

“Good night, sweetheart,” Shane murmurs.

“Good night, Danya,” Ilya says. “We love you.”

“Love you too.”

Within minutes, Denis is asleep, his breathing deep and even. Shane is also asleep, one hand resting on Denis's back. And Ilya lies there, looking at his family — his husband, his son, with his daughter asleep down the hall — and thinks about how far they've come.

Twenty years ago, he was hiding who he was, terrified of being found out, convinced that he could never have this. That being bi meant giving up the possibility of a family, of children, of domestic happiness.

And now here he is, pushing forty, with two kids and a husband and a life so full it sometimes overwhelms him.

He's still an asshole. Still arrogant. Still cocky and competitive and occasionally insufferable.

But he's also a father. A husband. A man who makes pancakes on Sunday mornings and helps with homework and learns about figure skating because his son loves it.

He's both things. Can be both things. The version of Ilya Rozanov that the world sees — sharp and mean and uncompromising — and the version that only his family knows — soft and loving and endlessly devoted.

Tomorrow, he'll probably be an asshole to someone. A reporter, maybe, or an opponent. Someone will say something stupid and Ilya will eviscerate them verbally, because that's what he does.

But tonight, he's just Papa. Just a father holding his son while he sleeps, keeping him safe, promising him without words that he'll always have a place to come home to.

His phone buzzes on the nightstand. He ignores it. It can wait. Everything can wait.

This is what matters.

This is enough.

This is everything.

The next morning, Ilya wakes to find Irina has also migrated to their bed at some point during the night. She's sprawled across the bottom, feet dangerously close to Shane's face, while Denis is still tucked against Ilya's side.

Their bed is not big enough for four people. But somehow they make it work.

Shane wakes next, realizes the situation, and starts laughing quietly.

"This is ridiculous," he whispers. "They have perfectly good beds."

"They like ours better."

"We're going to need a bigger bed."

“Or smaller children.”

“That’s not how children work.”

Ilya shrugs. “Then bigger bed.”

Irina stirs, opens one eye. “Is it morning?”

“Yes, Irinushka. Is morning.”

“Can we have syrniki?”

“Maybe. If you help make them.”

“Deal.” She sits up, hair sticking in every direction. “Papa, I had a dream I scored a hat trick and everyone lifted me on their shoulders.”

“Sounds like good dream.”

“It was the BEST dream.” She notices Denis. “Why is Denis in here?”

“Wanted to sleep with us,” Ilya says simply.

“Can I sleep here tonight too?”

“We’ll see.”

“That’s parent code for probably not.”

“You’re too smart. Is annoying.”

She grins, exactly like Ilya grins, and scrambles out of bed. “I’m gonna go get dressed. Don’t make breakfast without me!”

She thunders out of the room. A moment later, they hear her bathroom door slam.

Denis wakes more slowly, blinking up at them. “Morning.”

“Morning, Denny,” Shane says. “How’d you sleep?”

“Good. Really good.” He sits up, rubbing his eyes. “Are we really calling figure skating coaches today?”

“We really are,” Ilya confirms.

“Can we do it right after breakfast? I’m really excited.”

“Yes. Right after breakfast. I promise.”

Denis throws his arms around Ilya, squeezing tight, and Ilya holds him close, memorizing this moment — his son’s trust, his excitement, his joy.

“Thank you, Papa,” Denis whispers. “For understanding.”

“Always, Danya. Always.”

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