Personne Sait Comment On Fait Des Papas

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Personne Sait Comment On Fait Des Papas

by kindofhaunted

Summary

“Alexei, I fucking told you to never call me again, you fucking piece of—”

“Am I speaking with Ilya Grigorievich Rozanov?”

Ilya went silent immediately. That was not his brother’s voice. Nor was it Katia’s, his sister-in-law. It was an aristocratic, cold voice. He went completely still.

“Yes.”

“I’m calling from the Child Services Department, Ilya Grigorievich,” the woman continued, and Ilya frowned deeply. “Your brother Alexei Rozanov and his wife died yesterday in a car accident.”

Twice in his life, Ilya had felt like this. The ice around his heart melted just enough for the numbness to vanish and give way to a sharp, stinging pain. It lasted only two seconds before he managed to compose himself. He didn’t want to feel anything for Alexei, so even if Katia’s death carried a trace of sadness—she was a mess, but she always tried to smile at him and cook warm meals for him when he visited Russia—, he dismissed the feeling entirely.

“So what?”

“You are the only living family member of their daughter. Your brother named you as her legal guardian, Ilya Grigorievich.”

Notes

clarifications:

1. english is not my first language, but this is well-written because of my effort and my betas' help. artificial intelligence was not involved, and if you still think it was, then you can go fuck yourself.

2. italic means either russian or french. i tried to smoothly integrate the clarifications for this. when something is written in its original language, it will be immediately translated in the next paragraph. i know this is not the most polished way, but it's the most convenient for readers since you won't need to scroll down til the end of the chapter notes and then go back

up. i also think this is more accessible for people using text-to-speech readers. if i can improve the accessibility of the story, let me know (kindly please).

3. infinite thanks to my beta, bibi. i love you so much and you make my stories and days better.
also thanks to sasha, who is my russian language and culture consultant. you're the best. thank you for explaining everything to me with so much patience. shane's character is heavily based on you. я тебя люблю.
finally, thanks to sophie for correcting french and canada-related stuff. ly.

4. my knowledge of 4-year-old children is 0. my knowledge of hockey is 0. my knowledge of ottawa is 0. so stop being mean to me about it. i try very hard to be accurate, but i'm not a professional who dedicates professionally to this. i have a life.

RELEVANT WORDS THAT I WON'T BE TRANSLATING ALONG THE FIC (this may get updated):
- solnyshko: sunshine/sweetheart
- ya tebya lyublyu/je t'aime: i love you
- blyat': shit/fuck
- da/oui: yes
- monsieur: will be used as "teacher" (means sir)
- ma chérie: my sweetheart/my darling

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

so, um, merry cottage eve?
xo.

Ilya remembered the day it all changed in excruciating detail. Life had always been lonely and quiet for him, at least since his mother, Irina, died when he was twelve. Not that his father and brother, Grigori and Alexei, were quiet or calm people. They were a mess of hurtful words and strict scoldings. But Ilya had learned to tune out their shouting matches well enough. Mostly.

When he was drafted into the MLH, it became even easier. Not because things got better—they never did, but because he was far away. He could choose not to pick up the phone, and as long as he provided money (for Alexei) and honor (for his father) his family behaved as if he didn't even exist. Which was better than being acknowledged. Really.

He repeated this to his patched-up heart, still craving attention and love.

He was just four years into his career when it all happened.

Grigori died, and Ilya felt like shit. He knew it wasn't fair. His father had never been a good father anyway, not even a good person to begin with, but Ilya couldn't help the deep, festering hole it left in his chest. He felt… helpless. Completely empty and alone.

Six months later, Alexei died in a car accident.

The call was unexpected and devastating. Ilya had been brushing off Marlow's jokes about his "girl" while smiling down at his phone. Svetlana had just told him she was in town and wanted to hang out. Ilya never said no to her. She was the only constant in his life, the only person who loved him without expecting him to fix her. Deep down, Ilya knew that even if their love wasn't exactly like that, they would probably marry someday and stay together for good. Sharing his life with Svetlana didn't sound bad at all. He could be loyal to her. Cherish her. It wouldn't even be difficult.

He wasn't the only one who thought so.

"That girl of yours deserves a ring, Rozanov," Cliff said, elbowing him and raising his brows when Ilya rolled his eyes. "Come on, man. The wives are dying to have her at team dinners."

"I kind of am too," Kane, a defenseman, murmured at his side, and Ilya shot him a condescending look. "I'm just saying. She's cute to look at."

She was. Ilya could give him that.

He was about to answer Svetlana's message when his screen was taken over by an incoming call. He tensed automatically when he recognized a Russian number.

His first thought was that maybe Alexei was trying to contact him again. He had been very clear with his brother: he had left him an apartment and a generous amount of money in his name, on the condition that he would never contact him again. But Alexei had always been a troublemaker, so Ilya wouldn't have been surprised if he had managed to spend all that money in half a year and was now calling him from another number.

And even though he had asked him to never appear in his life again, Ilya couldn't help but answer. Because he always did. He made sure to step a little farther away from his teammates, because even if they didn't understand Russian, he hated looking upset in front of them. He was the funny, carefree captain. He had built that image with meticulous care.

"Alexei, I fucking told you to never call me again, you fucking piece of—"

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"So what?"

"You are the only living family member of their daughter. Your brother named you as her legal guardian, Ilya Grigorievich."

Ilya's mind began firing off desperate questions in that very instant.

First: he had a *niece*? Since when? The mere idea of his brother and Katia (the most unstable, toxic, irresponsible people he knew) deciding that bringing a child into the world was a good idea threw him completely off balance. It had to have been a miscalculation on Alexei's part. His brother had never been paternal. He could barely be called a family man at all.

Second: why the hell had Alexei named *him* the girl's legal guardian? They could barely stand each other. Alexei hadn't even had the decency to tell him he was an uncle. So why count on him on his deathbed?

You are the only living family member of their daughter.

Ilya felt a flicker of sadness for the little girl. Just a flicker. But it wasn't his problem… was it?

"How can I refuse custody?"

A short silence took over the line. Ilya knew exactly what the professional on the other end must be thinking, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

That child wouldn't grow up well with him. If he was being honest, Ilya had many of the same problems as his brother. He may not be a violent addict, but he was still an unstable man, eaten alive by depression and held together only by his unhealthy obsession with hockey. He was not good guardian material. Much less… father material.

"Ilya Grigorievich," the woman finally said, her voice gentler now, "I understand this news is unexpected. But you should know that while you're not legally obligated to take responsibility for the child, she would be far better off with family than in an orphanage. Not all children are adopted. Please keep that in mind before making your decision."

Ilya leaned back against the cold hallway wall and thought about it.

He thought about it seriously. Maybe too seriously.

He thought about all the times he had felt alone as a child. All the times he'd wished for a mother to hold him, or a father who tried to understand him. Inevitably, hazy fragments of his early childhood surfaced: when his family had been a little less broken, when celebrating New Year's Eve and birthdays had meant something, when he'd known what happiness felt like.

He imagined his niece growing up alone in cold, unforgiving Russia, surrounded by children without homes and stern teachers who would dismiss her feelings, scare away her tears with harsh, repressive words. What if she… was like him? What if she had to hide? Grow up afraid and ashamed of who she was?

He thought about his brother, too. His brother, who had never relied on him for anything. Who had always looked down on him, treated him as if he'd killed their mother. As if he'd caused their father's illness. As if Ilya were to blame for every misery that had followed their family.

He thought of Alexei (rigid, unyielding, always deffensive) and how he had been the one to take care of Grigori while Ilya lived his dream in the United States, far away as their father slowly deteriorated. And he thought about that single, impossible moment of trust: Alexei saying his name before he died, when they asked who to contact about his daughter.

He felt responsible. He felt like he owed him.

Ilya dragged his hands through his freshly washed hair and let out a long breath.

"What's her name?"

“Irina.”

So Alexei had taken their dead mother’s name. He couldn’t blame him for that. But he could resent him because he immediately accepted meeting the child before taking any decision. He couldn’t just ignore her after knowing her name.

Little Irina was only four months old. She had been in the car crash too.

When Ilya met her two days after that call, she had an ugly scar on her cheek, shiny blond curls, and two enormous hazel-blueish eyes. She looked at him with pure curiosity, lifting her chubby little hands to touch his face, as if she already knew him.

She was beautiful. Small. And completely alone.

Ilya held her close to his chest, and it felt as if his eyes were seeing the world for the first time. As if his existence, scattered and dull until then, was finally gathering meaning. As if everything he was, everything he had endured, had been leading him to this exact moment: holding her, protecting her.

Ilya loved her immediately.

He could never leave her in an orphanage.

He could never give her up.

The paperwork was slow and exhausting. Being her blood relative sped things up slightly, but Ilya still had to prove he was fit to take care of Irina in a thousand different administrative offices. First in Russia, then in the United States.

The latter was far more complicated.

Ilya was an elite athlete with a rapidly rising career and brutal professional demands: weekly games, daily practices, constant road trips. Irina was just a baby. She needed full attention, steady care. He couldn’t simply leave her in Boston with a nanny and disappear half the season.

But risking his job would doom them both. Without a contract, he wouldn’t even have residency. And so, the idea of marriage crept back into his mind.

This time, Svetlana’s response was completely different.

“She’s beautiful.” Ilya had never heard her speak with such tenderness. She held Irina in her arms with meticulous care, rocking her gently. Svetlana had never struck him as particularly maternal—she was more of a free spirit, but seeing her cradle a baby, green eyes shining and lips curved into a soft smile, stirred something warm in Ilya’s chest. It wasn’t the ideal situation, but… he could imagine himself getting used to it. *Eventually*. “Look at her, Ilya. She’s so sweet.”

“She is,” he murmured, equally captivated by the sight of his niece—*daughter*—making nonsensical little sounds against Svetlana’s chest, tiny hands exploring the fabric of her shirt.

“So… what do you say, Sveta? She could use a mother.”

Svetlana glanced at him briefly, as if she couldn’t quite tear her eyes away from Irina. Ilya understood. He’d been like that for the past two weeks: attached to the baby, terrified of making a mistake or looking away for too long and letting something awful happen. Even when he trained and Milena (her new nanny) watched Irina on the stands, where he could see them both, there was a crushing pressure in his chest.

It was the most terrifying feeling in the world. And he knew he would only trust Svetlana to stay home with her. She was the only person in his entire circle to whom he could entrust the fragile life of his daughter..

“Ilyusha…” Svetlana said his name with a tone that was almost apologetic. She gently handed Irina back to him, and Ilya took her, swallowing the tight knot in his throat. “You know I love you, but this… I can’t. I don’t hate the idea of being with you, you know that, and even though I always thought it might happen someday, I believed we’d do it for, you know… convenience. Not because there’s a child involved.”

“Isn’t it the same thing?” Ilya murmured. He wasn’t trying to convince her. He was just asking, genuinely. He understood Svetlana’s point, at least in part. He had expected this, even. “Having her now or having kids in the future? She’d be ours either way.”

Svetlana cupped his cheek with a gentle hand and shook her head.

“You know it’s not the same, Ilya,” she said softly. “I don’t even know if I want to be a mother. It wouldn’t be fair for Irochka to grow up with a mom who didn’t choose her. I love her already, but not like that. Do you understand?”

Ilya didn’t just understand her—he saw himself in her words.

He didn’t know, with any certainty, whether fatherhood was meant for him either. Until the day he got that call, he would have answered without hesitation that it wasn’t. But after meeting Irina, after having her with him for two weeks, after listening to her babble nonsense sounds and noticing, day by day, that she started to smile when he spoke to her… Ilya thought he may love her that way. Irina seemed to recognize him. Maybe she was starting to like him, just a little. Maybe she could love him that way someday. Be proud of him. Call him *dad*. Just as Ilya thought about her as his daughter.

Ilya had no idea how a baby’s mind worked. But he hoped Irina wouldn’t remember her real parents. That she wasn’t wondering where they were, or why they had suddenly disappeared. He hoped she was content with his clumsy attempts at entertaining her and feeding her. That she liked her new bear-shaped pajamas and her plush rattle.

Deep in his heart, Ilya wanted to be everything she needed. And he understood that *that* was a choice Svetlana wasn’t ready to make, and maybe it was for the best.

So even though Irina wouldn’t have a mother, she would have a present, cool aunt that would teach her about fashion, boys and sports cars, according to Svetlana. Ilya didn’t doubt her. Her daughter was going to be the most spoiled girl in the world.

And he was certain that somehow, he would manage to raise her on his own. It didn't matter that he felt completely lost. It didn't matter that the fear of his sadness one day distancing him from her gnawed at him day and night. That there was a possibility of depression being so heavy and unbearable that he would just… leave her all alone. Like his mother did to him.

Ilya forced himself to abandon those thoughts, to block them entirely, to focus only on learning how to change diapers, how to do little pony tails and give all his money subscribing to the best Russian children's channel for his TV.

And for years, it worked. Until it just… *didn't*.

***

Irina was frighteningly similar to him. While the physical resemblance made sense (they were, after all, direct family) Ilya couldn't help but be amazed as, year after year, she picked up more of his traits. First, it was the teasing way she twisted her mouth into exaggerated faces. Then came the haughty eye rolls, the way she acted as if his scoldings meant absolutely *nothing*. As her speech improved, Irina even started to sound as sharp as him, always finding a way to poke at people and get under their skin.

Svetlana used to say Ilya was a bad influence. That she was just coping his behavior on the rink.

She might have been right, but he'd grown a little fond of his daughter's attitude. Even it was a fucking nightmare some times.

"Ira, come back here," Ilya ordered, watching as a sulking four-year-old Irina stomped down the hallway toward her bedroom, her steps clumsy and full of attitude. She just huffed at him, completely ignoring him. "Irina!"

He followed her, already bracing himself for the verbal battle he knew was coming. This time, she had bitten a boy at school and gotten suspended. Last week, it had been because she'd cut a chunk of another girl's hair. Both days he had to leave practice because she refused to go with Patricia (her new nanny since they moved to Canada) nor Harris (the marketing manager of the Centaurs who was an absolute sunshine and always tried to help them). She cried for him until he picked her up.

Yeah. She was a complicated child.

Ilya knew something had been bothering her for weeks, because Irina had never been violent. Not even *mean*. She was stubborn, which maybe was his fault, and being the only child of a

millionaire had definitely turned her into a little spoiled, demanding menace at times. But she had never, ever hurt anyone. Not until now.

"Ira," he insisted, stepping into the enormous princess-themed bedroom Svetlana had taken great care to design when Irina asked for it a year earlier. Ilya had long since stopped living in his practical, elegant downtown penthouses, trading them for a much quieter, family-friendly neighborhood instead. The change had come at the end of his Boston contract, when he'd let it expire and signed with the Centaurs as a free agent. He moved from Boston to Ottawa. From fast-paced, youthful Massachusetts to… *boring* Canada, full of museums and natural parks.

But it was safer. Calmer for a little girl. And the Centaurs were a good team. Not on the ice, but they had a good heart. And they didn't seem bothered by Irina's presence at all. Ilya loved Boston, but his teammates and management were not entirely content with his new father responsibilities.

He didn't give a fuck. Irina was first, second and third on his priority list. So he'd left.

"Sweetheart, what have we said you should do when you're upset?" Ilya asked gently, gathering every ounce of patience he had and crouching in front of his daughter. The bed was a little higher than necessary, so Irina's feet dangled above the soft satin covers. Ilya looked at her seriously, his heart tightening when the little girl turned her face away, crossed her arms, and tried to hide her teary eyes. Her cheek scar was on display now. *"Ira…"*

"Talk," she murmured in her small voice. Her Russian was still a bit clumsy, like any child growing up in a bilingual city with a foreign parent. Learning English, Russian and French was not easy, but Ilya was stubborn about it. It wasn't that he felt a deep attachment to his culture as a whole, but the language was the one thing he refused to let go from his origins. It was the language his mother had sung lullabies in to put him to sleep, the language he knew how to express himself in best, the language he and Svetlana had spoken their entire lives. He wanted Irina to have that piece of him. Of their family.

"W-when something bothers me," she continued softly, *"I tell Papa, and we try to fix it together."*

Ilya nodded, caressing his little cheek, avoiding the scar he knew she hated with all her heart.

"Exactly. Do you want to tell Papa why you're upset?"

Irina looked at him hesitantly for a few seconds. Ilya knew that pause well. Just like him, Irina was an extremely perceptive child. For a four-year-old, she noticed things other kids her age completely missed. Ilya knew she was anxious, and it hurt to think she might have inherited some… traits from her grandmother. From his family. He didn't want his daughter's mind to torment her from such a young age.

The cruelty of some classmates wasn't helping.

"Dylan said I don't have a mom," Irina finally whispered, her voice barely holding together, *"because no mom would ever want me. That I am ugly and stupid."*

Ilya felt, in that moment, like he could kill this Dylan kid. He didn't care that he was probably four years old.

He forced his face into its best neutral expression, but his heart cracked a little when Irina's eyes finally spilled over and a couple of heavy tears rolled down her cheeks. Ilya pulled her into him automatically, and she let out a tiny, startled gasp as her face pressed against his chest.

This was the worst part of it all.

Every time Irina had cried at night as a baby because of an unexplained fever, Ilya had felt like his soul was dying from the inside out. Every time she fell while learning how to walk, he'd had the absurd urge to cover the entire house in thick cushions so she could never get hurt again. Every time she wrinkled her nose at a meal, he'd wanted to feed her nothing but cake if it meant she'd be happy.

But Ilya *knew* that all of those things were part of growing up. Irina had to fall. She had to get back up. She had to get angry, to learn, to be hurt sometimes. He couldn't protect her from everything, no matter how desperately he wanted to.

His job was to prepare her for the things that would hurt her.

Because as much as he wished he could, and he wished it so much, he couldn't put her in a glass box and carry her around in his pocket. Irina had to live. And Ilya was doing everything he could to teach her how.

"Hey. Look at me, solnyshko," he said softly, pulling back just enough to lift his daughter's chin with two fingers.

Irina looked at him with a red nose and watery eyes.

"First of all," he continued gently, *"you are not stupid, okay? You're very, very smart, Ira. You know that."*

"B-but my French is bad, Papa," she sniffled, her voice small and shaky.

"Yes, because you're learning three languages at the same time," he reminded her, lifting his eyebrows. *"How many languages are your classmates learning?"*

She thought for a second, then raised two little fingers.

"Exactly," Ilya said, nodding. *"That makes you smarter than them, love."*

A tiny smile tugged at her lips.

"And second," he added, brushing his thumb under her eye to wipe away a tear, *"you are not ugly. You are the most beautiful girl in the world."*

This time, Irina shook her head stubbornly.

“My face—”

“Your face is just fine, Ira,” Ilya interrupted automatically, his voice firm but warm. *“A scar doesn’t make you ugly. Papa has lots of scars, remember? And some of my teeth are fake, and sometimes I get bruises all over my body. Do you think I am ugly?”*

He watched her carefully, waiting for her answer.

Finally, Irina shook her head, slowly, as if the thought needed time to settle.

“No, Papa.”

Ilya felt a little offended by how long it took her to answer, but he didn’t say anything. Irina spoke before he could.

“Then why don’t I have a mama?”

It wasn’t the first time the question had come up. More or less.

The first time had been two years earlier, though it hadn’t really been a conversation. Irina had simply called Svetlana mom, and Svetlana—careful, gentle, full of love—had explained that she wasn’t her mother. That she was just her aunt, and that she loved her with her whole heart. Irina had never called her that again.

Ilya had panicked that day.

He’d known this conversation would come sooner or later. He wasn’t exactly an anonymous person. Much less now, playing for the local team, with half the city seemingly invested in his existence. In Boston, he’d still managed to enjoy moments of anonymity. In Ottawa, even the spiders in the corners seemed to recognize him.

A shame, really. Ilya wasn’t doing the team any favors. Everyone had thought his arrival would mark the beginning of a new era, but the Centaurs still sucked on the rink. And Ilya wasn’t at his best, either.

The point was, everyone knew Irina was adopted. It was only a matter of time before other kids started using it against her. A small, hopeful part of him had wished it wouldn’t happen, that maybe they’d get lucky.

But of course, they hadn’t.

So the moment was now.

Ilya straightened up and walked over to the tallest dresser in his daughter’s room. It was one she still couldn’t reach, one whose top drawer held the few photographs he had kept of his deceased family.

Pulling those envelopes out made his chest feel heavy, overwhelmed, but he forced himself to hold onto them firmly before sitting down on the floor, right in front of Irina.

She looked at him with quiet expectation.

“You don’t have a mom who lives with us, like other kids do,” Ilya explained gently, handing her one of the photographs with care. Irina’s small hands took it, studying the old image of a young, handsome Alexei beside Katia, smiling wide, her hair cut short. It was an old picture, taken long before their wedding, back when Ilya himself was barely a teenager. *“But that doesn’t mean you didn't have parents that loved you deeply, Ira.”*

He paused, letting her look.

“This is your mom. Her name was Ekaterina. And this,” he added softly, pointing to the man beside her, *“is my brother, Alexei. They’re the ones who had you.”*

Ilya had expected Irina to be confused, sad, maybe even *angry*. He thought she might cry, ask him if that meant he wasn’t really her dad, if he didn’t want her anymore.

But she didn’t.

She just blinked slowly, staring at the picture, her mouth forming a small pout.

“Papa… where are they?” she asked softly. *“Why they never come see me?”*

Ilya sighed and gently brushed her curls away from her face. Svetlana had helped him practice this moment many times—what words to use, which ones to avoid, how to explain it without scaring her. He took a breath.

“When you were a tiny baby,” he began slowly, choosing each word with care, *“very, very small… your mother and father were in a car.”*

Irina frowned.

“In a car?”

“Yes,” he nodded. *“And there was an accident. A big one.”*

Her eyes widened a little.

“Like in movies?” she asked, stretching the word.

He gave her a faint smile.

“Yes, solnyshko. Like in movies.” She nodded, thinking hard, then looked back at the picture. Ilya continued. *“You were there too, so you got a little hurt. But your father, my brother, was very brave. He loved you so, so much. He kept you safe.”*

Irina’s brows pulled together.

“Are they… gone?”

Ilya swallowed, nodding.

“Yes, Ira. They were hurt really badly, so they couldn’t stay. It wasn’t their choice, and they didn’t leave because they didn’t want you. They loved you… and I do too. Do you understand?”

At that moment, after those words, Irina seemed to let go of all the fear she had been holding in, and a small sob escaped her lips. Ilya hugged her tightly, letting her tiny arms barely wrap around him, feeling a knot in his stomach at the sound of her quiet, stifled cries. He knew it was hard. It was too much information for Irina, and no matter how receptive she was, it would take her time to process it.

Ilya had discovered that he was far more patient than he’d imagined. Much more… gentle. Irina brought that side of him out.

“I want a my mama, Papa,” she whispered.

“I know,” he murmured into her hair. *“It’s okay to want that. You can always miss her. You can always talk to me about it. I’ll listen, and it will help you feel better.”*

She sniffled. *“You won’t go away?”*

“Never,” he said without hesitation. *“I’m here. I’m your Papa. I’m not going anywhere.”*

She relaxed against his chest. Ilya knew she was sad, and she probably would be forever, because losing a parent was something that always hurt. At least, it was for Ilya. But he hoped that Irina felt safe enough with him to let it all go.

After a pause, she muttered, sleepy and grumpy, *“Dylan is mean.”*

Ilya let out a quiet breath that almost sounded like a laugh. Almost.

“*Yes,”* he agreed softly. *“He is.”*

That night, Irina went to bed with a new picture frame on her nightstand. Next to the photo Svetlana had taken on her third birthday (Irina smiling on display, Ilya kissing her cheek and hugging her from the side, both of them behind a huge birthday cake), this time sat the photo of Alexei and Katia, smiling at the camera.

Ilya wasn’t sure if they had truly loved her or cared for her as much as he had told his daughter, but that didn’t matter anymore. She would never get to know. Nor get to suffer if they didn’t.

Either way, Irina was going to be okay, and they would just be a beautiful framed photo in her room. A beautiful idealization of a sweet child. And maybe it was better that way.

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Things got better after that conversation. Ilya noticed that Irina sometimes drifted into her thoughts, and that she started asking more specific questions about her parents. She asked for their names again and again before finally learning them, copying the way Ilya pronounced them. She asked what they did for work, what they liked to do. If her *Otets* played hockey like Ilya *(no, he preferred soccer)*, if her *Mama* wore pretty makeup like Aunt Svetlana, or if she had chosen her name when she was born…

Ilya didn't know the answers to some of those questions, and others were far too complicated to explain to a four-year-old, so he avoided the most delicate topics and softened the rest, dressing them up just enough to make them safe.

Irina also seemed to look at herself differently. When Ilya sat her on the bathroom counter in the mornings to brush her hair, she would stare at her scar with new eyes. She used to ignore it. Now she seemed almost… fond of that thick, pale line.

Ilya didn't ask about it. He waited for her to bring it up on her own.

"Papa, Dylan was mean again yesterday," she said casually.

Ilya kept braiding her hair, just like Svetlana had taught him, carefully crossing the three strands. It wasn't the best braid in the world, but he was learning. He glanced at her briefly through the mirror.

"You fought? Patricia didn't tell me any—"

"No fight," Irina cut in. She had that natural little pout on her lips, the one that always made her look unfairly cute. *"Teacher Shane told Dylan to stop bothering me. Then he said I was pretty. And that my scar means I am— U*h… brave."

Ilya's hands stilled for just a second before he resumed braiding, something warm and tight settling in his chest.

"Smelaya," Ilya pronounced the word in Russian, slowly, so she could catch it. Irina nodded, repeating it and frowning her brows like she was recording the word in her little brain. *"I don't know any Teacher Shane. Is he new?"*

"Da!" Irina almost bounced in place, a big smile spreading across her face. *"He's the best, Papa. He helps me with French when I get stuck, and he knows a lot about hockey. Like you! And he has little dots on his face,"* she added, touching her own cheek, *"and I like him."*

Teacher Shane became a recurring topic from that day on.

Irina loved telling him about her days. Ilya felt guilty for not being the one who took her to school in the mornings or picked her up from her extracurriculars, but he knew that showing up late to practice every day wasn't an option—even if Coach Wiebe insisted it would be fine. He was the captain. He had to set the tone, on and off the ice.

Besides, almost all of his teammates had kids. And all of them were capable of letting go of their little ones for a few hours each day. So Ilya had very little contact with Irina's teachers beyond the handful of annual meetings the school organized. He had made sure, at least, that she was enrolled in a good school.

As the days grew colder and winter slowly crept in, Ilya had to leave for a week-long road trip. A western swing: Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver. Too many flights, too many hotels that smelled like detergent and gave him instant exhaustion, too many nights falling asleep with his phone in his hand after FaceTiming Irina from a different time zone.

The night before he left, he tucked her into bed himself, kneeling beside her as she clutched her stuffed bear under her chin.

"You're gonna be gone a loooong time, Papa" she said, stretching the word dramatically.

"Only a few sleeps," Ilya replied, brushing a curl away from her forehead. *"Patricia will be here. Aunt Sveta will come by tomorrow and she'll stay the week. And I'll call you every day. Deal?"*

Irina considered this very seriously, then nodded. *"Deal."*

She hesitated, then added, casually, like it wasn't important at all, *"Teacher Shane told me today that it is okay that I miss you so much. That crying is normal, because it makes me really sad."*

Ilya stilled for half a second. Irina was crying because of him leaving? His heart hurt.

"I'm sorry it makes you sad, Ira. I wish I could stay with you too."

"Uh-huh. But he says when you miss someone, it's because your heart is doing a hug from far away." She frowned, clearly trying to remember the exact wording. Trying to put her thoughts in Russian *"A… long hug."*

Something warm and strange settled in Ilya's chest. *"That's nice of him. You seem to like him a lot."*

Irina had never talked so much about a teacher. Of course, she had a favourite one every year, usually the ones who taught her arts and crafts, but this seemed different. She was… *enchanted* with this Teacher Shane.

"He's nice," Irina confirmed, already half-asleep. *"He smells like flowers. And paper."*

Ilya let out a snort, surprised. The idea of his little girl casually smelling people was funny. *"Okay. Now go to sleep, solnyshko."*

On the road, everything felt louder without her. The arenas, the locker rooms, the buses. He played well—solid minutes, a couple of goals, one assist in Vancouver that got replayed on Sportsnet—but every quiet moment in between belonged to Irina. To her small voice through a crackling video call. To her questions.

“Papa, did you win?”

“Papa, is this new city cold?”

“Papa, Teacher Shane says hockey players are like knights but on ice. Is that true?”

On their third night, after a loss in Edmonton, Irina appeared on the screen in her pajamas, sitting cross-legged on her bed. Svetlana’s voice started to drift slowly, asking her gently to put her socks on while she made dinner.

“Papa,” she said suddenly, very serious.

“Yes, Ira?”

“Teacher Shane has— freckles. *Like… tiny dots.”* She leaned closer to the camera, pointing at her own cheek for emphasis. *“Right here. And here.”*

“You told me,” Ilya said carefully.

“And I want some too. But Aunt Sveta says that she can’t put makeup on me without your permission” she frowned. *“So give me permission, please?”*

Ilya let out a weak laugh. He was absolutely exhausted. The team was not doing well, as usual—two losses so far, and the third game was shaping up to be another disaster. The only thing keeping the margin from being truly humiliating was Wyatt Hayes, who was a hell of a good goalie. Without him, they'd be making fools of themselves out there, losing by double digits without even breaking a sweat.

“Okay, she can put freckles on you,” Ilya said, earning a small giggle. She brightened.

“Thanks, Papa! I hope Teacher Shane likes them on me, too.”

Of course he will, if he knows what’s good for him, Ilya thought, and then immediately shook the thought away. If this Shane was so good with his daughter that he had her talking day and night about him for weeks, he would certainly appreciate Irina’s effort to resemble him. Ilya felt a little bit jealous, because this unknown man was getting all his baby’s attention while he was far away, tired and losing all his games. It was silly, but Ilya was losing his passion for hockey, and he did not like it. At all.

When Ilya came back to Ottawa a week later, exhausted and aching and more than ready to sleep for a full day, Irina ran into his arms so hard he almost dropped his bag.

“You’re back!” she exclaimed, muffled against his chest.

“I’m back,” he said, holding her tight.

As they walked home, her hand tucked securely into his, she chattered nonstop about school, about snow, about a drawing she’d made—

—and, inevitably, about Teacher Shane. Svetlana gave him a knowing glance when the name slipped Irina's mouth. So she had noticed too. The way Irina talked and talked about him. Interesting.

"He asked if you were winning," Irina added proudly. *"I said yes. Even when you don't."*

Ilya smiled at her. He was a failure, but he had Irina.

That was more than enough.

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After more than a week away from home, the stars seemed to align, and suddenly Ilya had four days off.

One mandatory rest day, one optional practice that he was absolutely going to skip to stay with Irina (this time, he didn't care about his captain responsibilities) and an entire weekend without games.

It was an almost scandalous coincidence at this point of the season, nearly obscene, but he wasn't about to complain.

He woke up on Thursday with more energy than he'd felt in a long time, which wasn't much. He showered quickly, hot water hitting his still-sore back, ignored the familiar morning discomfort between his legs, and started making a mental list of everything he wanted to do at home that weekend. Buy groceries that didn't come wrapped in plastic. Take Irina to the park, even if it was cold. Sleep without alarms. Watch a whole movie without dozing off halfway through.

Some needs inevitably drifted to the bottom of the list.

Ilya was human. He was twenty-six. Of course his body still protested sometimes about his lack of… company.

The last time he had sex had been almost two months ago, during another Centaurs road trip. In another phase of his life, that would've been unthinkable. Back then, Ilya partied, drank, disappeared into unfamiliar cities, and found company with an ease that bordered on recklessness. It had been part of his reputation. Part of *the* persona.

Not anymore.

First, because his energy levels weren't what they used to be.

Second, and more importantly, because everything revolved around Irina now.

He might still be a menace on the ice, loud-mouthed, infamous for getting under every rival's skin until they snapped. But off the rink, Ilya no longer wanted to be that man. He didn't want Irina growing up thinking her father was someone fleeting, someone who drifted in and out of other people's lives without care.

So he'd become… boring.

His sex life was boring. He could admit that much. Especially since Svetlana had drawn very clear boundaries, gentle but firm. She didn't want to confuse Irina any further. She didn't want their affection to become too obvious to her, to give her hopes that were going to be inevitably shattered. Svetlana loved being an auntie, but motherhood was an entire different matter.

Ilya respected that.

And most of the time, the celibacy didn't bother him. Only sometimes.

When the house was too quiet and he thought about it, *maybe*. When exhaustion failed to shut his mind off, too. When he remembered that, besides being a father, he was still a young man, with a body that occasionally asked for *things*.

He sighed and turned off the water.

It didn't matter.

Getting Irina up wasn't easy. While Patricia packed the little girl's backpack (Ilya had fallen asleep before he could tell her he'd take over today, so the nanny just came in for her regular shift) and made breakfast, Ilya wrestled with his small, sleepy threat of a daughter full of droopy eyes and pouty lips.

"Ira, you're going to be late—"

"Let me stay with you today, Papa. Pleeeease," she whined, her voice dragging out the syllables.

"No. School is mandatory in this country. You want the government to find out and kick us out? In Russia it's colder, and there are more bears who could eat us, Ira. Do you want that?"

Irina gave him a look that clearly said she knew he was teasing, rolled her eyes, and climbed out of bed anyway.

"Bears don't scare me, Papa! I could defend us from them!"

Ilya grinned.

"Of course, solnyshko"

He helped her get dressed, did her hair and helped her to pick a beautiful coat for today. Svetlana used to say that Ilya's fashion sense was broken, because apparently, he was easily

convinced by Irina, and she thought that a periwinkle tutu-like skirt looked amazing with red thermal stockings and a green puffy coat. She looked like a little princess straight out from a Disney movie.

If she wanted to dress in mismatched clothes, he would let her. Just to see her smile.

She was bouncing with bursting energy by the time they reached the kitchen.

"The bears don't scare me." Irina sung, going directly to pick on Patricia's very European breakfast. The nanny pinched her hand playfully, making her laugh.

Ilya leaned against the kitchen counter while Patricia zipped the last of Irina's lunch bag. The aroma of fresh croissants and sizzling eggs filled the house, and he couldn't help but inhale deeply.

"You're late," she said, tossing him an amused glance. "Not that I mind. I like watching you try to function before coffee."

"I said, bears don't scare meeee," Irina insisted, practically running in circles around Patricia.

"Clearly," Patricia chuckled, shaking her head. She didn't understand an inch of Russian, so she was just pretending for Irina. She left a cup of coffee in front of his nose. "You're running on four hours of sleep, Rozanov. Don't tell me you're planning on taking care of her like this, again. She will kill you."

Ilya rolled his eyes, smirking. "I can handle it. She is small."

"Small?" Patricia laughed, lifting a spatula like a wand. "She's a tornado wrapped in a tutu. And you, *monsieur*, are the lucky target."

Irina giggled. Patricia winked at her.

"Coucou, ma petite! Have you packed your drawing? And your snack? Don't forget to eat, or Papa here will have to carry you through school."

Ilya raised an eyebrow.

"I can manage carrying her, thank you very much."

Patricia shook her head, laughing, and set a plate of scrambled eggs in front of Ilya.

"Eat. You'll need energy for the little hurricane."

Ilya glanced at the plate and then at Patricia.

"You are too good. Seriously, how do you do this every day?"

She leaned against the counter, arms crossed, smirking.

“Magic, patience, and a love for chaos. Also, you pay sooo well, *monsieur* Rozanov.”

Irina clambered onto a stool (Ilya lifted her), swinging her legs.

“Patricia, can we speak in French today? Just a little?”

Patricia’s eyes lit up. *“Mais oui, ma chérie!* Let’s practice. *Bonjour, Irina!”*

“Bonjour, Patricia!” Irina squealed, her accent adorable and halting.

Ilya watched them interact, feeling the familiar pang of relief that someone as wonderful as Patricia was part of his daughter’s world. She wasn’t just a nanny. She was a mentor, a friend, a little extra sunshine in the chaos that was their lives.

Patricia caught his gaze and raised an eyebrow.

“You know, you should try this every morning. Eggs, conversation, a little French. It might just soften that grumpy captain attitude of yours.”

Ilya laughed. “I will consider eggs and conversation, but don’t tell anyone—it will ruin my reputation. French, on the other hand… never in my life, Patricia. Don’t insult me like that.”

Patricia leaned closer, rolling her eyes and dropping her voice conspiratorially.

“I’ll keep your secret… if you promise not to fall asleep on the floor again while she’s eating.”

Ilya shook his head, smiling. That had never happened. It was on the *couch*, not the *floor*.

“Deal. But no promises if she starts talking about bears again.”

Irina jumped from her stool, pointing at him.

“Bears don’t scare me, Papa!”

Patricia laughed, shaking her head as she returned to the stove. Ilya just smiled, feeling a quiet warmth settle in his chest. Between Patricia’s laughter, Irina’s energy, and the aroma of breakfast, he realized that these mornings (chaotic, funny, and full of little quirks) were exactly what he had been missing.

It scared him how much the idea of getting this every day settled right with him. He couldn’t retire this early, right? He wasn’t even thirty. He wanted to do much more. Win another cup —no, a handful of them with the Centaurs, be a star, love hockey again…

He just didn’t know how to conceal that life with fatherhood. How to find balance.

By the time they left the house, Irina was fully awake and buzzing with energy. She clutched her backpack straps tightly, bouncing on her heels as they walked towards the car. Ilya followed behind, juggling his keys and a travel mug of coffee, still groggy but completely attentive. Four days off meant he could finally be present without guilt, or travel stress.

The drive to her school was short, the streets quiet in the early morning. Irina chattered about small things: a new drawing she'd made, the movie she would like to watch tonight, and most importantly, her teacher, Shane.

"I hope Teacher Shane gives me a sticker today, Papa," she said, wriggling in her seat so she could look at him properly. "He does it when I'm good. And when I say things okay in French, too. So he gives me star stickers."

"That's pretty great, love. You like him more than Miss Dubois, don't you?"

"Miss Dubois was boring," Irina declared, without hesitation.

Ilya couldn't help but laugh. Yeah. Irina's former teacher, Miss Dubois, had been a sharp-edged woman with a permanently pinched expression and a haircut so unfortunate it made her look like a fairy-tale witch, the kind his mother used to read to him about when he was little. Ilya had never liked her much, and he was fairly certain the feeling was mutual. Apparently, the fact that he was a single father made her… *uneasy*. At least, that was what she'd implied to Svetlana at the beginning of the school year, when she picked Irina up and the woman had remarked—far too cheerfully—that the girl would really benefit from having a *real* mother around.

Ilya had argued with her. He didn't regret it.

So yes, he was glad she was gone, and that this Shane person had taken her place.

Irina didn't just seem more comfortable. She seemed lighter. Happier. From the things she'd told him and the way she'd told them, Ilya could *assure* that the new teacher paid closer attention to her—to what she actually needed. He stepped in when other kids were cruel. He helped her with French, with feelings she didn't yet have words for, with the questions that had started sitting heavy on her small chest. He was gentle with her.

Ilya wouldn't deny it: he was dying to meet him.

The morning air was sharp and clean, winter already settling into Ottawa's bones. Parents clustered near the school entrance, bundled in coats, coffees steaming in their hands while children darted around them like restless birds. It was chaotic, and it was making Ilya's head hurt. He needed to come drop his child more, because he seemed completely out of place.

Ilya slowed when Irina squeezed his fingers.

"Papa, he's there," she said, pointing with her chin this time, proud.

By the doors stood a man greeting each child as they arrived. He knelt to zip jackets, fixed crooked hats, murmured reminders in a calm, steady voice. When he smiled, Ilya noticed it immediately: he seemed *soft* and *sweet*. And then, as the man straightened slightly, the freckles came into focus, scattered across his nose and cheeks like someone had painted them there on purpose.

Teacher Shane, without a doubt. He was exactly as Ilya had imagined him.

His hair was glossy black, neatly kept, his eyes a warm brown, and his expression was all care and softness. He looked like the teacher from that *Matilda* movie, only with shorter hair and Asian features. He looked approachable. Kind. Safe. He was even wearing a cute overall full of pins with a colourful sweater underneath.

Ilya found himself completely mesmerized.

“Irina,” the teacher said when he spotted her, his voice brightening just a little. It sounded almost musical. *“Bonjour.”*

She practically lit up under his gaze. Ilya glanced down at her, surprised.

“Bonjour, Monsieur Shane,” she replied cheerfully.

She tugged at Ilya’s hand, pulling him forward as if she were introducing him to someone very important. Teacher Shane *was* very important to her.

“This is my Papa. Papa, he’s my Teacher Shane. He’s cool, not boring like you said Madame Dubois was.”

Ilya felt a rush of shame when Shane covered his mouth to hide a laugh. Of course Irina would say whatever came to her mind, fully exposing him in front of her very pretty new teacher. He ignored the embarrassment, clearing his throat as Shane looked at him with openly amused eyes.

Shane straightened and offered him his hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rozanov,” he said politely. “I’m Shane. I’ve been teaching Irina’s class for some weeks. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Ilya shook his hand, firm out of habit and automatically assessing, then immediately relaxing after touching the soft skin. His hands were calloused, but Shane’s were like porcelain.

“Same.”

He sounded like a dumb idiot.

“She talks about you a lot,” Shane added, glancing down at Irina with an easy smile. “Mostly about hockey. She says you’re the best player in the league.”

Irina scoffed loudly. “He is!”

He wasn’t. Maybe he used to be. If Shane knew that, he didn’t comment on it.

“I know he is, Irina,” Shane said gently, crouching down to her height. “You’ve told me.” The way he spoke to her made Ilya pause. No baby voice. No exaggerated cheer. Just quiet respect, like Irina was someone worth listening to. “Why don’t you go with your classmates? You’re a little late. Leave your coat in your cubby, okay?”

She nodded immediately, transforming into the picture of a well-behaved, polite little girl. Ilya almost snorted. What a performer his small menace of a daughter was. Look at her, acting like that in front of his little platonic teacher crush.

Ilya smiled. He would've done exactly the same.

She turned to him, lifting her arms so he could pick her up for a brief hug and kiss her goodbye.

"Ya tebya lyublyú, Papa."

"I love you too, love," he murmured against her curly blond hair. *"I'll pick you up later, okay?"*

She nodded, kissed his cheek, and then ran toward the doors without looking back.

"She's a remarkable kid," Shane said, straightening as he looked back at Ilya. "Very observant. Very thoughtful. And more intelligent than she realizes."

Ilya swallowed, something warm settling low in his chest.

"Thank you," he said, meaning far more than the words themselves. "She— Um. She's doing better, yes? I know she's had some problems with her classmates. There's a kid, Dylan—"

"I've already spoken with his parents, Mr. Rozanov," Shane replied calmly. "They understood, and Dylan hasn't been unkind to her since. That's why I didn't call you about it —but I will if it becomes an issue again. I promise." He must have noticed the tension still lingering in Ilya's shoulders, because he added gently, "I don't tolerate bullying in my classroom. I know Irina is a sensitive child who tends to keep her feelings to herself so she doesn't upset others. I'll be keeping a close eye on her."

Ilya studied him for a few seconds.

He didn't know this man beyond his daughter's scattered anecdotes, but there was something about him—an aura of trust and warmth that Ilya hadn't felt from anyone in a very long time. An energy that reminded him, strangely and painfully, of his mother. The only person who had ever made him feel this safe.

Ilya was an anxious man. He worried too much. He was probably exaggerating.

Still, it was the first time since Irina had come into his life that he felt he could fully trust someone who wasn't Svetlana or Patricia to take care of her.

Something told him Shane would keep his word.

"Thanks for taking care of her," he said quietly.

Shane shrugged lightly. His nose scrunched just a bit, and once again his freckles shifted softly with his skin. Ilya felt his stomach flip at the sight.

He really was… *charming*.

“It’s easy to care for her,” Shane said. “You’re doing an amazing job, Mr. Rozanov.”

And maybe those words, coming from a complete stranger, shouldn’t have filled him with so much satisfaction, but they did.

Later, after doing grocery shopping, cleaning Irina’s room, and taking a long shower, Ilya stretched out on the couch to wait until it was time to pick her up. Doing nothing for an entire morning felt good.

He may or may not have fallen asleep for a couple of hours.

And he may or may not have dreamed of brown eyes, soft words in French, and freckles.

A lot of freckles.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> tw: forced coming out, homophobia and bullying. it is not heavily described, but is mentioned.
>
> this have inaccuracies regarding ottawa and ottawa-typical local activities. i apologize for it. you can pretend this is a fictional city :)
>
> translations are added down the original lines.

His interactions with Teacher Shane were short and polite that Thursday afternoon. Ilya made a real effort to be on time the next day, hoping he could talk to him a little longer (about Irina), but he ended up with even less time than usual. The line to enter the classroom was absurdly long (it was the normal length), and every parent seemed completely enchanted with the teacher. They all had things to say to the teacher, apparently.

Ilya couldn't help but pull a face when Shane greeted him and Irina with a small nod and a warm smile. He was just about to speak when another mother, one who seemed to be leaving just when she started talking again, even though her child was already inside the classroom.

Three minutes passed. The woman kept yapping, switching between English and French, and Ilya was close to sighing out loud. He was the last one in line, and she was exhausting. And, most importantly, she was stealing *his time* with the teacher.

"…so I was hoping you could change her seat. She's more comfortable in the back, and she says that you—"

Ilya rolled his eyes. Of course. The woman was complaining about her daughter's place in class, and he could see exactly what was going on. The girl just wanted to sit with her friends, and she probably was throwing a tantrum about it, and Shane clearly knew it.

He was far more patient than Ilya would ever be. And far sweeter, too.

"I understand, Mrs. Hendriks," Shane said calmly, voice steady and kind, "but Ellie has been having trouble concentrating. When she sat in the back, she talked a lot with her friends. I wouldn't change her seat if it wasn't for her own good, okay?" He reached for the woman's hand in a reassuring gesture, smiling gently.

Ilya couldn't stop the grin that spread across his face, and he was almost sure Shane caught it out of the corner of his eye.

“You’ll see, her grades will improve this way…” Shane switched to French then, and Ilya lost track of the conversation entirely.

When the woman finally left, Ilya’s impatient leg stopped bouncing, and a wide smile took over Irina’s face. Ilya watched her light up completely, and he let go of her hand so she could run ahead and greet her favorite teacher.

He wanted to feel jealous, but he couldn’t. Not when Shane’s expression softened immediately and his eyes seemed to shine at the sight of Irina. Today he was wearing a simple green sweater with a pair of black trousers, and Ilya checked him out with—hopefully—slyness.

Shane’s eyes looked at him for a second, then they fixated again on Irina.

“Bon matin, Irina,” He tilted his head slightly, amusedly looking at Ilya. *“Et regarde ça… aujourd’hui, vous êtes à l’heure.”*

Good morning Irina. And look at this… today, you’re on time.

Irina straightened up, clearly proud.

“Oui!” she said quickly, *“J’ai pas fait des problèmes pour Papa aujourd’hui.”*

Yes! I didn’t cause problems for Papa today.

Ilya frowned faintly, offended without understanding a single word apart from ‘Papa’. Were they talking about him? What was Irina telling Shane? She was a menace. For a moment, Ilya thought about trying to learn French, but just the idea gave him a headache. English was a nightmare and he had been learning the language for years. French would just melt his brain.

“Je vois ça. Tu as l’air très fière de toi.” Shane crouched down in front of his daughter, smiling.

I see that. You look very proud of yourself.

Irina nodded hard, then added, with a show off face that Ilya knew well:

“J’étais très bonne ce matin.”

I was very good this morning.

Shane didn’t interrupt right away. He nodded once, thoughtful.

“Très sage, Irina,” he corrected gently. “*Bonne*, is for things. *Sage*, is for children. *D’accord?”*

Very well-behaved, Irina. Good is for things. Well-behaved is for children. Okay?

Irina frowned for a second, then repeated carefully:

“Très sage. J’étais très sage ce matin.”

Very well-behaved. I was well-behaved this morning.

“Voilà,” Shane said warmly. *“C’est ça.* Why don’t you go inside? Class will start soon.”

There. That’s it.

Irina didn’t need to be told twice. She turned toward Ilya and wrapped her arms around him in a quick, warm hug that still managed to squeeze his heart. Her voice dropped to a tiny whisper as she asked if he was going to pick her up later.

“Yes,” he said, for some reason answering in his thick, accented English. “After your extra French class,” he promised.

Her eyes lit up instantly. “And we go skate later?”

“Yes. We’ll go skating,” he said, smiling. “Okay?”

“Da!” She practically bounced in place. She loved hockey. She loved the ice, loved clinging to his hands with her small pink skates, wobbling and laughing while he guided her, or screaming while trying to score him a goal. Winter was awful according to her, she preferred summer, but it was worth it. Irina *loved* skating. “Love you, Papa!”

She disappeared inside without waiting for his answer, as if going faster might make the day end sooner. Ilya stayed still for a few seconds, watching the doors swallow her up.

Then his gaze drifted.

Shane was still looking at Irina.

There was something unmistakably soft in his expression. It was fond, almost unguarded. He seemed to catch himself a moment later, straightening slightly before turning back to Ilya.

He cleared his throat.

“Good morning, Mr. Rozanov.”

Ilya smiled easily. “Just Ilya. Mister sounds old. I’m young.”

Shane’s lips curved just a little. “Ilya, then.” He hesitated, then added politely, “This is unexpected. Are you on vacation?”

The question stung more than it should have.

Ilya knew Shane was only making conversation, acknowledging a change in a routine that would probably end today. Still, the idea that his daughter’s teacher found his presence surprising unsettled him. He wanted to be here more. Every day, if he could. To stand in the stupid line with Irina’s hand in his, to endure the concerned parents and pointless chatter (worried just as much as they did, after all). To talk with Shane daily.

About Irina. *Obviously*.

He shrugged lightly. “A few days off. Rare thing in hockey. But I am not complaining.”

Shane nodded, thoughtful. “She seems happy you’re here.”

Ilya followed his gaze back to the school doors.

“I am happy to be here too.”

And the way Shane smiled at that, so sincere and approving, made something warm settle deep in Ilya’s chest. They held each other’s gaze for a few long seconds. It was probably strange, standing there in the cold, saying nothing at all, but Ilya didn’t feel awkward. He felt comfortable. Like the silence itself was gentle.

Shane spoke first.

“I should probably go inside—”

“Of course.”

Ilya was about to turn and leave.

“Mr— *Ilya.”*

The hesitation caught him. He turned back, curious, noticing how his name sounded in Shane’s accent. He had never liked the way stupid Americans and boring Canadians said it. Too flat. Too careless. But Shane’s voice was warm, deliberate, almost sweet. It was an exception.

“I know it’s not really my place,” Shane continued, his tone softer now, a little shy. His cheeks even blushed a little, and his freckles seemed more distracting that way, “but Irina knows you love her. And she knows you have an important job. She doesn’t resent you for not being here every day”

Ilya stilled.

“She’s proud of you,” Shane added, meeting his eyes steadily. “You’re her hero.”

For a moment, Ilya couldn’t speak. His throat tightened unexpectedly, emotion pressing low and heavy in his chest. He probably should be ashamed of this insecurity, of needing a teacher to tell him that basically his child didn’t hate him for being a shitty father. But he wasn’t.

“Thank you,” he managed at last, meaning far more than gratitude for the reassurance.

Shane nodded once, then turned toward the doors.

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Whenever Ilya said he was going to take a day off during optional practice, all his teammates tended to roll their eyes.

First, because he always said it with an apologetic tone, as if he were committing some kind of crime for needing a day to rest and spend time with his daughter. All of them thought he was being ridiculous about it. They had told him countless times that it was fine to miss a practice, that no one minded, that everyone understood.

The second reason was this: even when Ilya skipped practice, he always found some absurd excuse to stop by the rink anyway. It didn't matter if he had to look like an idiot. There was the time he deliberately "forgot" his underwear just so he'd have to come back the next day to retrieve it. Or the many times he would casually FaceTime Harris, pretending it was just to say hi, while clearly hoping the marketing manager would turn the camera around and show him how practice was going. All the while, Ilya kept one eye on Irina and the other glued to the screen.

This time, Ilya didn't need any excuse, because Irina was dying to go skating at the rink, and her French extracurricular class ended exactly when practice started.

He wasn't surprised to see that only her and a couple of other kids came out with Teacher Shane when he went to pick her up. What did surprise him, however, was the fact that Shane was also teaching extracurriculars. Ilya couldn't help but wonder if the man ever slept, or if he simply lived at the school.

When it was finally their turn to talk. This time, the other two parents were quick and mercifully brief.

Ilya couldn't resist teasing, Irina already smiling brightly in his arms.

"Teacher Shane," he said, mock-serious, adjusting Irina on his hip. "Do you leave this building, or should I bring you food and blankets?"

Irina was completely ignoring them, murmuring a song in Russian to herself while she played with Ilya's hair. He let her ruin his half-hearted attempt at a slicked-back style. His curls always found their way into his face anyway. It was a lost battle.

Shane blinked, clearly caught off guard by the joke, but then a small laugh slipped past his lips. He shook his head softly, cheeks tinting pink all over again. Ilya was starting to notice that Shane blushed easily, and that he liked it far more than he probably should, because it made his freckles stand out even more. They were doing dangerous things to him.

"I promise you I do have a home, Ilya," Shane said, still smiling.

That caught Irina's attention immediately. "Really?!"

Shane looked at her with fond amusement. *"Oui!* But I only use it after I make sure all the kids speak French and behave properly. Did you think I could sleep on your tiny nap-time mattress, Irina?"

She considered this seriously, brows knitting together as if the idea simply didn't compute in her head. Ilya leaned in and kissed her cheek, warmth swelling suddenly in his chest at her sweetness and her childish logic.

"Papa," she announced solemnly, *"Teacher Shane has a house."*

"He does, yes," Ilya agreed.

"I want to visit." Irina had said it in English because she wanted Shane to understand, and because she meant it. Both men looked at each other.

And somehow, with that simple declaration, the air felt heavier, charged with something warm and tense. Maybe Ilya should've told Irina that visiting her teacher's home was not proper, but he stayed silent. Waiting for an answer. Shane took a second before talking.

"Maybe," he murmured, soft and low. The warmth in Ilya's chest spread all at once, sudden and overwhelming. He swallowed. Shane noticed (he *must* have) because he bit his lip briefly before smiling again. "But not today, Irina," Shane added. "Today you have a skating date with your Papa, right?"

That did it. Irina forgot about everything else instantly. She nodded enthusiastically, bouncing a little in Ilya's arms, already talking about the ice and her pink skates.

Ilya, meanwhile, tried to pull himself together.

He failed.

Shane was smiling wide and bright, talking with his child about hockey sticks and scoring goals, cherishing her little mispronounced words without a hint of boredness or hurry. Ilya didn't even know if Shane had other responsibilities, if he needed to clean the classroom, gather his things, lock up the building, go home. But he certainly wasn't rushing them, and he looked genuinely eager to keep talking to Irina.

Then, an idea hit him like a sudden bolt of lightning.

"…That sounds like so much fun, Irina," Shane said warmly.

"It is! Papa, can we go now? It's late!" she insisted.

Ilya blinked, turning his attention back to his daughter. "Of course," he said automatically.

Shane and Ilya looked at each other again.

"See you on Monday?" Shane asked.

Ilya shook his head. "Morning practice."

“Oh.” Shane looked disappointed just for a second, but then nodded in understanding. “See you soon, then. Enjoy the weekend, Ilya.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

They lingered there a moment longer than necessary. Irina was already tugging at Ilya’s jacket, eager to leave, and Shane had half-turned back toward the building, as if the moment was naturally coming to an end.

And it should have ended there.

But Ilya didn’t move.

The thought had been sitting at the back of his mind since the moment he’d seen Shane standing there in the cold, his nose red from the air, his sleeves rolled just a little too high, his shoulders tense in an attempt to keep his body warm. It was a stupid thought. An impulsive one. One of those ideas that appears fully formed and immediately makes your chest tighten. Ilya had never thought he would be brave enough to voice it, but the look on Shane’s face when Irina had casually suggested going to his place had been the small, decisive push he needed.

Don’t. It’s weird. He’ll say no.

Why would he want to?

Ilya shifted Irina’s weight on his hip. Cleared his throat. Opened his mouth—

—and closed it again.

Shane glanced back at him, brows knitting slightly in quiet curiosity.

“Everything okay?”

“You—” He stopped, tried again. “You don’t have to, obviously. And I know you must be tired and you have things to do and—” He gave a short, self-deprecating huff. *Idiot*. “This is stupid, forget I said anything.”

Shane tilted his head slightly. “Ilya.” The way he said his name made him look up again. “What is it?”

Ilya hesitated. Then, quietly: “Would you like to come with us? To the rink?”

The words hung there between them, fragile and exposed.

Shane blinked once. Twice.

“Oh,” he said, surprised. He didn’t seem uncomfortable, just genuinely caught off guard. “I— You mean, Centaurs’ arena? With you?”

Irina gasped like she’d just been given the most important mission of her life.

“Da!” she cut in immediately, sliding out of Ilya’s arms and planting herself right in front of Shane. “Please, Teacher Shane. You can skate with us! Papa is very good, but he goes too fast and then he laughs at me.”

“I do not do that,” Ilya protested automatically. *This girl!* Shane must think he was a horrible person. She was actively badmouthing her dad. Traitor.

“Sh-sh-sh, Papa! Sometimes you do,” she said, pointing at him. Then she turned back to Shane, eyes wide and hopeful. “You can help me. You’re nice. *S’il vous plaîîît, Monsieur Shane.”*

Ilya knew what his daughter was doing. She was extremely good on skates, she knew how to perfectly use a stick, how to score a goal, how to dodge him and control the puck like a professional. She was lying, making herself look defenseless and small to convince Shane.

A little menace. Ilya was so proud.

Shane looked down at her, something visibly softening in his face. He hesitated, glancing toward the building behind him, then back at them.

“I don’t have my skates here,” he said gently.

Ilya shrugged. “We can get you some.”

Shane met his gaze again, uncertain. “I don’t know if I should—”

“Please,” Irina interrupted, taking the teacher’s hand with an exaggerated pout, her eyes bright and pleading. Pure manipulation. Judging by the way Shane looked momentarily stunned, Ilya was sure his daughter was about to win.

But then Shane knelt in front of her, offering an apologetic smile as he cupped her cheek with his free hand.

“Let’s do this, Irina,” he said gently. “Next time you go skating with your Papa, I’ll make sure I have the afternoon free so I can come with you. Alright?”

Irina shook her head. Ilya felt his heart sink just a little. So it was a no.

“But—”

“Ira,” he cut in softly. His daughter looked up at him, crestfallen, but Ilya shook his head with a quiet firmness. “Shane can’t come with us today. Don’t insist, *solnyshko.”*

Irina nodded, finally giving up. She looked so genuinely crushed that Shane let out a small, helpless sound, and, much to Ilya’s surprise, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her gently against his chest.

Ilya’s heart stuttered at the sight.

Shane was always kind to her, always attentive, but he usually kept a careful, professional distance, like all teachers did. Ilya knew that. He knew this was probably crossing an invisible line. And maybe he should have felt awkward about a teacher hugging his daughter.

But he didn't. Not for a second.

Not when Irina closed her eyes and melted into him, hugging him back without hesitation, her tiny arms circling his neck, her small fingers bunching into the soft green fabric of Shane's sweater like she needed him there. Like she trusted him completely.

Something sharp twisted in Ilya's chest. Disappointment, yes, but also something painful and heavier. He had wanted this. He'd wanted Shane there, beside them, wanted to see him on the ice with Irina, wanted—

He cut the thought short, swallowing hard.

"I'm really sorry I can't come with you, honey," Shane murmured into her hair. His gaze lifted briefly, meeting Ilya's. For one confusing second, Ilya wondered if those words were meant for him too. "I really want to. I really do."

"'Kay," Irina whispered, subdued now. Then, hopeful again, she added, "Next time… pinky promise?"

They pulled apart, and Shane smiled fully, warmth flooding his face as he nodded. "Pinky promise."

They hooked their little fingers together. Irina's one was impossibly small against Shane's, but it sealed the promise with solemn seriousness. Then she returned to Ilya's side, calmer, reassured.

"Have fun, you both," Shane said softly.

Ilya nodded, his voice a little rougher than he intended.

"Thank you, Shane."

"Merci, Monsieur Shane!"

"À lundi, ma chérie."

Thanks, Teacher Shane.

See you on Monday, my love

***

The Centaurs loved Irina.

They were in the middle of practice, running warm-up laps around the rink, blades carving clean lines into the ice, pucks clattering softly as players passed in pairs to loosen their wrists. A couple of lines were rotating through shooting drills at the far end: quick passes from the boards, one-timers from the slot, rebounds fought for in front of the net while Wyatt Hayes (the goaltender) tracked the puck with sharp, efficient movements. Others were practicing breakouts near center ice, sticks tapping, voices calling short, sharp instructions over the hum of the arena.

That was when Irina came running into the area, her pink skates slightly crooked, helmet a bit too big, shouting happily as she went.

Hayes was the first to notice her. He abandoned his position in front of the net without a second thought, skating over with a grin that split his face in half.

“Little Rozy!” He lifted her effortlessly, helping her over the small boards and settling her against his chest. Irina let out a delighted laugh. “Oh no! She’s got the pink skates on! Guys, we’re doomed. Little Rozy’s here to show us how it’s really done!”

The team gathered almost immediately, several of them pulling off their helmets, smiles spreading at the sight of her. Someone tapped their stick on the ice in greeting. Another ruffled her hair carefully, as if she were made of glass.

Ilya felt his chest loosen. They didn’t even greet him, too enchanted with Irina’s presence.

Back in Boston, his teammates had never been particularly close to Irina. Cliff Marlow adored her. Ilya and him had been close friends for a long time, so even if they’d distanced from each other, he still sent her gifts for her birthday and asked for her the few times Ilya visited Boston for a play.

But the others never really stopped practice for her. Not even when it was optional. No one had the patience, or the time, to pause a drill just to entertain a two-year-old.

In Ottawa, everything felt simpler.

Maybe he was losing more games than he liked. Maybe it had been two years since anyone had mentioned him in the same sentence as the All-Stars. But standing there, watching his daughter laugh while Zane Boodram helped her skate, with all the guys cherishing her and Hayes taking position in front of the net (he was going to let her score, for sure), it didn’t matter.

Not much, anyway.

“I thought you were taking today off,” Brandon Wiebe commented beside him. He was tall and broad, built from past years of elite hockey. He could have some grey hairs, but he was still handsome and full of life.

Ilya slid his hands into his pockets and shrugged.

“Irina wanted to skate.”

“She’s welcome anytime, Roz. You know that.” The coach clapped him on the back with a smile. “Sit with me? There are a few things I want to talk about before the game against Toronto.”

Ilya nodded, his eyes still fixed on Irina as Hayes carefully avoided the puck, letting her score with exaggerated ease. The Centaurs went absolutely feral, celebrating Irina’s goal like it was the final point in a Stanley Cup Game Seven: sticks banging against the ice, cheers echoing through the rink, someone even dropping dramatically to their knees.

And for the first time in a long while, the rink didn’t feel like pressure.

It felt like home.

Practice ended earlier than usual. Ilya hadn’t even had time to lace up his skates before the entire marketing team—Harris, Judith, and Rita, and their phones in hand—had gathered in the stands alongside a few members of management, watching Irina’s attempt to “play” with the rest of the Centaurs. Coach Wiebe didn’t seem to mind at all that his attempt at a serious practice had been thoroughly derailed. He was just as mesmerized as everyone else by the sight of Luca Haas (the team’s baby golden rookie) lifting Irina up after assisting her on a pass that somehow made it cleanly past Hayes without anyone having to pretend.

Ilya smiled.

Luca skated slow circles around the rink with Irina in his arms, no gloves, no helmet, proudly presenting her to the stands as if she were a trophy. She laughed freely, her cheek pressed against the platinum-blond hair of the Swiss player, completely unafraid, completely happy.

And Ilya watched from the sidelines, heart dangerously full, knowing that the team, too, was part of their family.

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The ByWard Market was busy in that comfortable, winter-in-Ottawa kind of way. Even if it was Saturday, it wasn’t crowded enough to feel suffocating, not quiet enough to feel lonely. Just people bundled in coats, breath fogging the air, music drifting from somewhere between a bakery and a Christmas tree shop. Ilya hadn’t had a Christmas tree growing up, so he took the matter seriously when it came to Irina’s holidays.

He wanted her to be happy.

He knew this year was going to be hard.

Usually, Svetlana made the effort to spend Christmas with them, but this year she needed to be in Russia. Ilya was painfully aware that Irina was going to feel lonely. That no matter how much effort he put into making things magical and warm for her, it wouldn't fully make up for what was missing. His job would steal more time than he wished it did, and the three scarce days off he had during the holidays wouldn't be enough. Not really.

To make things worse, Patricia would be going back to her hometown, as she always did, to spend the holidays with her family. That meant Ilya still needed to find someone to take care of Irina during the first days of January because this time he'll be all alone, and the whole situation was giving him a headache. He simply didn't trust anyone enough.

And the thought of leaving Irina with the wrong person, of her feeling abandoned even for a moment, made his chest tighten in a way he couldn't quite shake.

He had less than a month to figure something out.

Irina was holding Ilya's hand with both of hers, swinging their arms as she walked, boots hitting the pavement with exaggerated determination. Snow was cleared out the streets, but the air was icy and the sunlight was almost grey.

"Papa," she said, tugging him closer to a stall overflowing with pastries. *"Look. Those ones look like bears."*

"They're croissants," Ilya corrected automatically, almost robotically, then sighed. *"But yes. Bear-shaped croissants. Terrifying."*

She giggled.

Ilya was tired. He knew exactly why, and he hated days like *this*. Days when sadness seemed to eat him from the inside out, when even getting out of bed felt like an exhausting task.

He had promised Irina they would go to the market for breakfast. Have hot chocolate, maybe a slice of cake if she behaved long enough to earn it, and then a slow walk through the stalls before heading home with a brand-new, natural Christmas tree. No rink. No hockey talk. Just a normal day. Just the two of them, spending quiet father–daughter time.

But Ilya didn't feel normal today. The weight of the holidays pressed heavily on his shoulders, and the thoughts about how poorly he was doing as a father were louder than usual, relentless.

He wanted to go home.

He was in the middle of paying for two steaming cups of chocolate when Irina suddenly slipped from his side.

His heart slammed against his ribs.

“Irina!” He left the change on the counter and rushed after her. She stopped so abruptly that Ilya nearly collided with her, hot chocolate sloshing dangerously close to the lid.

“Shane,” she whispered, eyes huge. Then, louder. “Teacher Shane!”

And she ran again.

Ilya barely had time to register Shane standing near one of the coffee stalls before Irina was already there, her pink coat bobbing as she launched herself forward with all the reckless enthusiasm of a four-year-old who had just spotted something precious in the wild.

Shane turned at the sound of his name.

The surprise on his face bloomed instantly into a brighter expression.

“Irina?” he said, voice lifting, disbelief and warmth tangled together. *“Oh—bonjour, Irina.”*

He bent automatically, arms opening just in time to catch her as she wrapped herself around his waist. She squeezed hard, cheek pressed into his coat.

Ilya slowed his steps, watching. Only then did he notice the other man.

He stood a little too far from Shane’s side, hands shoved into his pockets, posture stiff, a fake smile glued to his face. He glanced between Shane and Irina with visible confusion, like this was not a situation he had been warned about.

“You’re here!” Irina announced happily, as if Shane had planned this as a surprise just for her.

Shane laughed, soft and breathy. “I am. Are you here alone or—?”

Then he looked up, meeting Ilya’s eyes.

Ilya swallowed and approached, the unknown man never quite leaving the edge of his vision.

“Hello, Shane.”

“Oh, hi,” Shane replied. Something unreadable flickered across his face before he smoothed it away. “Good morning, Ilya.”

“Good morning,” Ilya said, adjusting his grip on the cups. “Sorry. She has excellent radar. And very bad self-preservation instincts. *What have I told you about running away from me, Ira?”*

Irina pouted, batting her lashes under Ilya’s stern look. *“Prosti, Papa.”*

The other man cleared his throat.

“So,” he said, shifting his weight and checking his expensive watch. Ilya studied him more closely. He’d barely acknowledged Irina, the annoyance flickering across his face. He was tall, but not handsome. Forgettable. Painfully *dull* compared to Shane’s exuberant beauty.

Shane deserved so much more than a boring guy with a stick up his ass. And terrible hair. Ugh.

“Uh. Shane?” the man continued. “I just remembered I told my sister I’d help her with… something this morning.”

Shane blinked. Once. Twice.

“Oh,” he said, apparently unbothered. “Okay.”

“Yeah. My bad.” The man offered a tight, polite smile. “It was nice meeting you, though.”

“You too,” Shane replied, just as polite. Ilya caught a slight flick of humiliation in his eyes.

The man nodded and disappeared into the flow of the market without looking back.

A small pocket of silence followed. Irina broke it immediately.

“Who was that, Teacher Shane?” she asked, pulling a dramatic face. “He didn’t say hello to me. He was—um. *Impolie!”*

Shane huffed out a quiet laugh, something bittersweet behind it. “Yes. He was.”

Ilya shifted, suddenly aware of the cold tint to Shane’s nose, the way his hands were empty. He stepped closer and offered him the larger cup of hot chocolate. Irina took the smaller one without hesitation, immediately distracted.

“Were you… in the middle of something?” Ilya asked silently, trying to sound casual. He didn’t want Shane to feel uncomfortable.

Shane hesitated—just a second—then shrugged, accepting the cup.

“Not anymore.”

That was when Irina looked up again. Her eyes lit up with mischief, and Ilya knew immediately that she was plotting something.

“Teacher Shane,” she said, sweet as sugar and twice as dangerous, “you’re not busy now, right?”

Shane froze.

“I— Well—”

“Because,” she continued, tightening her grip on her chocolate, “Papa promised cake. And a Christmas tree. I want a big one, but Papa is bad at picking trees, so...”

She tilted her head, eyes impossibly wide. Ilya had to keep his face straight and his mouth closed. This girl! He got it, okay? He wanted Shane’s company too (for some reason he was not going to analyze just yet), but was it really necessary to make him look like a fool to get

it? She could convince him with sweet words about her father, but she preferred more wicked ways.

“Come with us, please?”

Ilya closed his eyes for half a second. Extortion. Pure and simple. Shane laughed, helpless, glancing at Ilya for support, and he looked back at him with an apologetic smile, but didn’t dismiss his daughter's idea at all. He waited for an answer.

Shane snorted.

“This is something she learned from you, right?”

Ilya tilted his head, lips twitching. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I am a very honest man.”

Shane laughed, cheeks coloring, freckles standing out more clearly against the pink. Ilya noticed them, of course. Always noticed them.

“Mm hm,” Shane murmured. “Sure.”

Irina beamed, waiting for an answer. Shane looked at her, sighed, and nodded defeated but smiling.

“All right,” he said softly. “Cake. And a Christmas tree.”

Ilya’s chest felt lighter for the first time that morning.

“Papa, he said yes!” Irina jumped, and the chocolate spilled a little. Ilya took it from her hands softly, preventing her from making a total mess. Shane looked at her with concern (the chocolate was hot) and pure admiration. Curiosity, too, because he sure wasn't understanding Irina’s clumsy Russian.

“He did say yes, solnyshko. Good choice,” he addressed Shane, quietly. “We are the most funny people you will have the pleasure to be with.” *Not like that moron you were with before,* he wanted to add. But he didn't.

Shane glanced at them, eyes warm.

“I can see that.”

“Let’s go, Teacher Shane! We need to find the best cake so Papa can’t say no to eat,” Irina said, already taking Shane’s hand and tugging him down the path with determined little steps.

Shane laughed softly, completely charmed, letting himself be pulled along without resistance. Ilya caught up with them in a few long strides.

“He can’t resist sweets,” she added. “Even if Terry says they’re bad for him.”

“Terry is the team doctor,” he explained to Shane, then turned his attention to his daughter, mock-offended. “You’re evil, Ira. You know I’m not supposed to eat cake, and you still want to torture me? Ouch.”

Irina frowned at him deeply, like this was the most unreasonable thing he’d said all day.

“One time it’s okay, Papa! You can buy us some good toys, too! Teacher Shane, you want toys, yes?”

“Now I am a wallet with legs.”

Shane’s smile widened at that, a beautiful laugh leaving him, eyes warm as he looked down at Irina, and Ilya couldn’t help but think briefly—unwillingly—that he looked… so right beside her.

Irina was holding his hand with complete confidence, smiling wide as she told him about her afternoon at the rink the day before. About how Uncle Wyatt had struggled to stop her goals, how Uncle Bood had sworn she’d be their captain one day when she was old enough, how Coach Wiebe said she was the best player on the team.

Shane didn’t interrupt her. Not once. He didn’t look annoyed by her endless chatter, didn’t rush her along or glance away. He simply listened, nodding, asking small questions at the right moments.

Irina was a high-energy child who felt lonely more often than she should. A child who, because of Ilya’s fault, had learned too early what it meant to have no one to talk to, no one who understood her completely, without the barrier of embarrassment or language, without having to stop and translate her thoughts before speaking.

Ilya wished his English were better. He knew it was something that separated him from his daughter. He couldn’t fully express himself in English, and she couldn’t fully express herself in Russian. There were things that got lost between them, softened, simplified, left unsaid.

But with Shane…

Watching her talk, and talk, and talk, using all those words so effortlessly, without hesitation, without pausing to search for translations in her small head had Ilya almost *crying*.

They ended up at a small pastry shop a few stalls down the street. While they were ordering, Irina somehow found herself behind the counter next to the young woman working there, asking endless questions about how cakes were made and what she needed to become a pastry chef in the future. Ilya tried to stop it, but both the young woman and the shop chef, who got out of the kitchen just to say hi to Irina, seemed utterly charmed by her.

“Do you want to come see the kitchen?” the young woman asked cheerfully, a strong accent on her words. “I think we have an extra hat for you, mini chef.”

Irina’s eyes lit up instantly, while Ilya’s filled with pure panic. His daughter turned toward him without hesitation.

“Papa—”

“I don’t think that’s a good—”

“Oh my God, Marie! You can’t just invite customers’ children like that. That’s weird!” Shane protested with an indignant gasp. Ilya looked at him, surprised. The teacher’s cheeks were lightly flushed, his expression apologetic, almost embarrassed. “Sorry, Ilya,” Shane added quickly. “Marie is… very trusting—”

“You said you had a date today! I thought he knew that we were—”

At Shane’s alarmed look, Marie snapped her mouth shut, her lips pressing into a line that looked like a mix between trying not to laugh and sudden embarrassment.

“Oh,” she said, eyes widening slightly, “he’s not your date today.”

Shane let out a dramatic sigh, shaking his head.

“No.”

“Pardon, Shane. I really thought you came here because things were going well and— Forget it. I’m dumb.”

“No dumb!” Irina interrupted sharply, crossing her little arms over her chest. She looked exactly like Ilya when he got upset at her for saying unkind things about herself. Whenever Irina said she wasn’t pretty, or that she was stupid, Ilya would look at her like that: serious, almost offended on her behalf. “Dumb people don’t make yummy sweets!”

Ilya smiled, pride blooming in his chest.

Marie made an exaggerated pout, looking first at Shane, then at Ilya. “Well. I suppose I’ve been scolded.”

She crouched slightly, eye level with Irina, then straightened again, turning her attention back to the men.

“Can I steal this little princess, *monsieur…?”*

“Ilya,” Ilya supplied automatically. Marie raised his brows, looking at Shane with a smile. Ilya watched him make her a scolding face. She smiled politely, even if her eyes were shining with interest.

“Monsieur Ilya. Shane and I have been friends for many years. His mother used to come here when this was my grandpa’s pastry shop,” she explained gently. “So, you can be sure I’ll take good care of your little girl while I show her the kitchen.”

“Please, Papa!”

Ilya didn’t answer right away.

He looked at Marie, at the way she stood beside Irina—familiar and affectionate without being invasive. Then his gaze shifted, almost involuntarily, to Shane.

He didn't say anything either. But he met Ilya's eyes, steady and open, and there was something there. A quiet reassurance, a softness that felt honest. He was not insisting, nor rushing him to say yes. It was like he understood exactly what Ilya was weighing in his head, and if he was just waiting for him to make his mind around it. Shane had no intention of convincing him, nor taking offense if Ilya decided not to let his daughter in his friend's hands.

And that exactly was what made him trust him. And Marie, by extension.

Ilya exhaled slowly.

"Okay," he said at last, nodding once. "But she's allergic to coconut. And—" he looked down at Irina, who was vibrating with excitement, "—you stay where Marie can see you, Ira."

"I will!" Irina promised immediately, solemn as a vow.

Marie beamed. "I take full responsibility," she said, placing a hand over her heart with theatrical seriousness. "Come on, mini chef!"

Irina squealed, grabbing Marie's hand without a second thought. She looked back only once, just long enough to wave dramatically at Ilya.

Ilya laughed under his breath, lifting his hand in return. "Behave, solnyshko."

The door to the back swung shut behind them, and suddenly—

It was quiet. Marie's colleague was taking care of another customer (the only one left in the place) who soon walked out with a takeaway bag and a hot coffee in hand.

Ilya shifted on his feet, suddenly very aware of the empty space where Irina had been, and of Shane standing just beside him. Close enough that he could feel his warmth through the layers of winter clothing.

Shane cleared his throat softly.

"You don't need to worry," he said, a small smile tugging at his lips. "I've known Marie since she was born. She has two nieces, and she's finishing her degree in elementary education, so she really knows how to take care of children."

That helped. A little.

They headed to a small table by the window, two slices of cake balanced carefully on their plates. One was clearly meant for Irina. The other for Ilya. Shane hadn't ordered anything for himself, but when they sat down, Ilya grabbed three forks and slid one toward Shane with a quiet, wordless suggestion.

They could share.

“Does all your circle have that in common?” Ilya asked, glancing at the extra fork. “You all love kids?”

Shane laughed softly as he took off his scarf and coat. Ilya followed suit, shrugging out of his jacket and draping it over the chair.

“Probably, yes,” Shane admitted. “My best friend has four kids, and most of my friends are either teachers or married with children. So… yeah. You could say that’s a pattern.”

“Four kids,” Ilya murmured, visibly horrified.

Shane laughed out loud at that. “I know.”

“One is already huge responsibility,” Ilya added, shaking his head. “I would be a disaster with three more.”

Shane looked at him then. *Really* looked at him. His expression grew more serious—thoughtful—as if he were weighing something carefully before deciding whether to say it out loud.

Ilya cut a small piece of cake, bringing it to his mouth slowly, acutely aware of the teacher’s gaze on him.

“You seem like a pretty good father, Ilya,” Shane said at last.

Ilya smiled crookedly, but he knew it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“I am not completely terrible, considering I did everything on the fly, right?”

“I didn’t mean—”

“It’s not a secret,” Ilya interrupted gently, shaking his head. “You can talk about it. I don’t mind.”

Shane nodded slowly, brown eyes cautious but sincere.

“I like hockey,” he admitted, “but I didn’t know the details until my mother told me. She’s a huge Montréal Metros fan, so let’s just say that your name came up a lot when you moved to Ottawa.” A small, fond smile curved his lips. “I still don’t know if she was terrified you’d raise the bar too high, or excited to have a player like you on a Canadian team.”

A small spark of pride flared in Ilya’s chest, but it burned out almost immediately, smothered by the familiar voice in his head that liked to remind him he’d spent the last two seasons being a disappointment. An absolute failure.

He shifted uncomfortably, masking it with a practiced, self-deprecating smirk.

“She must be disappointed.”

“Absolutely not,” Shane said at once, almost offended. “Ottawa has never been a remarkable team, but since you arrived…” He hesitated, choosing his words carefully. “You might not win, but the losses aren’t as humiliating as they used to be.”

Ilya huffed out a quiet laugh. “I don’t know if that’s supposed to comfort me, *Teacher Shane.”*

He said it in a low murmur meant to sound playful—teasing, even—but it still managed to make Shane’s cheeks warm with colour. Shane looked away for a moment, collecting himself.

“Well,” he said lightly, clearing his throat, “Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

Ilya didn’t say anything for a few seconds.

They just looked at each other, the air thickening again with that… *thing*. Heavy. Dense. The same feeling he’d noticed the day before outside the school, when he’d picked Irina up and the suggestion—half-formed, impulsive—of inviting Shane along had slipped into the space between them.

He had never felt like this before.

It was a pressure. An energy. Something pulling him toward Shane without logic or effort, like a reflex. Like they were tuned to the same frequency.

“Irina said you know a lot about hockey,” Ilya said at last.

Shane didn’t comment on the sudden change of subject. He just shrugged lightly, reaching his fork toward the half-eaten slice of Ilya’s cake. He cut a tiny piece, almost absentmindedly, as if he needed something to do with his hands. He nudged it around the plate before answering.

“A bit,” he murmured. “I—uh. I played in high school. I liked it.” A pause. “I was… decent, I guess.”

“Decent enough to go pro?”

The question was light. Casual. Genuine curiosity, nothing more.

But Shane looked up, and something in his expression shifted.

His eyes darkened, not sharply, but with a sadness so immediate and quiet that it hit Ilya harder than he expected. It was the kind of look that lingered too long, the kind that came from a place you didn’t visit unless you had to. The kind that reminded Ilya, unpleasantly, of the way he felt when some memories crept in his thoughts too tight.

Shane exhaled slowly.

“I was playing at a junior level,” he explained. “Nothing huge. Local leagues. Scouts came sometimes. Not often, but… enough to give me hope.” He smiled faintly, without humour. “I thought, *maybe*. If I kept going. If I worked hard…”

Ilya stayed quiet.

“Then,” Shane continued, voice steady but softer, “someone outed me. Publicly. Right before graduation. An… intimate video. So, no way of denying it.”

His fork stopped moving.

“It wasn’t subtle,” he added. “The locker room became a nightmare. The rink was hell. Jokes, laughter. Slurs written on my stall. Someone thought it would be funny to print frames of that video and wrap the entire school with them.” He swallowed. “By the next week, no one wanted to share a line with me. Or a seat at the cafeteria. Coaches stopped looking at me the same way and scouts stopped showing up.”

Ilya felt something cold settle in his chest. Cold and sharp anger. His hands became fists.

“I didn’t wait for them to say it out loud,” Shane said. “I knew. No one was going to want me on a team. Not like that.” He shrugged again, but it didn’t quite work this time. “So I quit. I moved to Montréal, did a degree, and disappeared completely from the hockey scene.”

The word landed heavy between them.

“I loved hockey,” Shane added after some seconds. “But I wanted to love myself more.”

Ilya looked at him for a long moment, jaw tight, heart doing something strange and uncomfortable in his ribcage.

“I am sorry,” he said finally. It wasn’t loud. It didn’t try to fix anything. “I—I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

Shane gave him a sweet smile, shaking his head.

“Don’t be. The hockey world is like that. I wasn’t the one with the power to change it. Not in this life, at least.”

Silence settled between them again for a few long seconds. Ilya felt his chest grow heavy and tight, words piling up at the base of his throat, desperate to be spoken. But he didn’t want to sound ungrateful. He didn’t want to admit certain things out loud.

Still, the image wouldn’t let him go.

Thinking about a teenage Shane (bright-eyed, freckles scattered across his adorable cheeks) having to endure the mockery and pain of becoming the laughingstock of a group of idiot teammates made anger flare in Ilya’s chest, immediate and visceral.

Homophobic slurs flew just as easily on the rink as they did in MHL locker rooms. They were part of the background noise. The careless jokes. The laughter passed off as harmless, as tradition, as nothing worth stopping. Ilya had heard them more times than he could count. He had learned to tune them out, to let them slide past him. He could even use those slurs to make other players uncomfortable. Every time he was called a ‘faggot’, he would say

something sexually charged to make them feel uncomfortable. But that was a problem itself. Players shouldn't be uncomfortable with the idea of queer people in the rink. But they were.

Also, there was a difference between hearing them from inside the closet, like a distant poison without a clear target, with the privilege of being a bisexual man who could simply shut that other part of himself. Be a ladies' man to the world—just what hockey fans loved—and invite male partners to the privacy of his room. Ilya was lucky. Others were not. *Shane* hadn't been.

Imagining those same words hurled directly at him (closeted and scared and small) with intent, with his name attached, with the purpose of breaking him…

He would have lost his mind.

Ilya clenched his jaw.

And his father would have killed him, probably—if he hadn't killed himself first.

The thought twisted painfully in his stomach. His father had never been flexible, never understanding, never willing to accept a world that didn't fit neatly into his expectations. Ilya had grown up knowing exactly which things were praised and which were punished. He could picture the outcome clearly: silence, shame, maybe violence. At the very least, a clean and permanent emotional exile.

He looked back at Shane.

He was still there. Whole. Calm on the surface. There was something old and tired resting in his eyes, but also a steady quiet that Ilya hadn't known how to read at first. He didn't look broken.

And somehow, that made it hurt even more.

"Hockey isn't worth that," he said suddenly.

The words surprised even him.

Shane blinked, looking up.

"I mean it," Ilya went on, voice rougher now. "It is… complicated, yes? It is loud and cruel and most days it takes more than it gives." He huffed out a short, humourless laugh. "People think it's glory. They think the money and the fame is worth it. But mostly it is just pressure and being tired all the fucking time."

He stared down at his hands, big and scarred, resting uselessly on the table.

"Does it really feel like that to you, Ilya?" Shane asked softly. Ilya was obsessed with his voice. It was just so… *velvety*, and sweet. He could totally get why his child, and probably the rest of the children in Irina's classroom, were completely enchanted by Shane. He was, too. Maybe too much.

“Sometimes,” he admitted, “I feel like I’m failing at everything at once. I’m not home enough,” Ilya continued. “I miss mornings, pick-ups, school things. I miss… Irina.” His throat tightened. “And when I am there, I’m exhausted. Or my head is still at the rink.”

He shook his head, sourness filling his words.

“They tell you it is temporary, that you sacrifice now so your family can be comfortable later.” He scoffed. “But Irina doesn’t need money. She needs me, and sometimes I don’t know how to be both. A good player and a good father. I think I am not either of them.”

That one hurt to say.

Shane reached out before Ilya even realized it. Suddenly, he had a warm hand above his. Steady, soft and gentle. He had rested it smoothly over Ilya’s, thumb brushing the side of his knuckles in a way that felt instinctive, unthinking. It was pure comfort.

Ilya froze for half a second.

Then, he didn’t pull away.

“Ilya,” Shane said softly. “You’re so mistaken.”

Ilya swallowed.

“You try every single day. You worry about her. You listen to her. You choose her.” His grip tightened. “You have no idea how much that matters.”

He took a quiet breath before continuing.

“When I was—outed, my parents didn’t know. And I was so scared of losing them that I genuinely thought I might die if they didn’t accept me. Because they didn’t get to choose who I was. And I kept thinking… maybe I was failing them just by existing.”

His voice didn’t break, but it softened, weighed down by memory.

“But Irina?” Shane went on, eyes never leaving Ilya’s. “She knows, from a very young age, that you choose her. Every day. She talks about you constantly, about how much she loves you, how cool her *Papa* is, how strong you are. She tells everyone how she wants to be like you when she grows up.”

Something warm and painful bloomed in Ilya’s chest.

“So don’t doubt yourself,” Shane said gently. “Please. You’re doing an amazing job.”

Ilya let his eyes close.

For a moment, it felt like too much. Like if he opened them again, something that he didn't know how to contain would spill over. He never cried. Not when he was with other people, at least. Not even Svetlana had seen him cry. But he might do it in front of Shane. Shane, who was his child’s teacher. Who didn’t know him at all. Sweet Shane Hollander (he’d looked for

his name in the school's moodle), and whatever magical thing he was doing with his eyes and hand right now.

"I'm scared," he confessed. "All the time. Scared that one day she will resent me. That she will remember my empty spot and late nights more than how much I love her. She will grow up and it will stop being enough, yes?"

Shane leaned closer, his torso above the table. Ilya got to see more clearly his beautiful face, flecked cheeks and plump lips.

"It won't," he said with certainty. "You are her safe place. There's nothing in the world that can change that."

Ilya laughed under his breath, wet and shaky.

"You say that like you're sure."

"I am," Shane replied, a wide smile and raised brows. "She tells me every day, *Mr. Rozanov.* I know what I'm talking about."

Their eyes met. Something passed between them then. Something unspoken, heavy, tender. Shane's thumb brushed his skin once more, slow and grounding.

"You are a good father," he repeated. "Not despite the mess, but because of how hard you try anyway."

Ilya felt it then. The weight. The warmth. The *ache*.

His chest tightened, emotions crashing into each other. Gratitude, longing, fear, something dangerously close to *hope*.

He didn't know when his life had become this fragile thing, balanced between a four-year-old girl and a man with kind words and freckles and hands that felt like an anchor to the world.

A strange urge to lean in and maybe… hug him, or just touch his cheek, hit Ilya with dangerous intensity. His hands tingled with need, and for a brief, reckless moment, he thought he might actually be capable of doing it.

Until—

"Papa, Papa! The kitchen is amazing!"

Irina's voice shattered the moment completely.

Ilya went cold as Shane's hand left his just as quickly as it had found it, and they both shifted in their seats, suddenly awkward, too aware of themselves. Ilya redirected his attention to his daughter after a quick, embarrassed glance at Marie.

Shane was equally flushed red, both of them smiling when they saw Irina.

She was wearing an apron that looked more like a bathrobe on her small frame, and a chef's hat perched precariously on her head, held in place by a flimsy elastic band at the back.

Marie followed close behind her, wearing a smile that might have been a little too knowing, holding an enormous pink milkshake in her hands.

"I hope you don't mind, Monsieur Ilya," she said lightly. "This little chef here insisted on making you a milkshake. Isn't that right, Irina?"

"Da!" Irina climbed onto Ilya with practiced ease until she was settled on his lap, staring at the cakes on the table with shining eyes. "Papa, it's strawberry. Your favorite. You can share it with Teacher Shane."

Sure enough, the milkshake came with two elegant glass straws.

Ilya watched Shane flush even deeper as Marie placed it right in the middle of the table, throwing her friend an exaggerated wink.

Ilya cleared his throat.

"How much do I owe you, Marie?"

"Mon Dieu! It's on the house," she waved him off. "Anyone who brings me such delightful company as Irina deserves free sweets, don't you think?"

Ilya smiled at her, grateful. Marie winked at him too. Um.

"And besides," she added cheerfully, "if Shane likes you, then I like you as well."

Ilya raised an eyebrow, turning to Shane. The teacher opened his mouth to protest, but all that came out was an annoyed huff.

So. It was true.

"Good to know," Ilya said lightly.

Irina interrupted them, asking thoughtfully with her mouth full of cake. "Can I be a hockey player and a sweets chef at the same time, Papa?"

Ilya laughed. He looked for Shane's eyes, but they were fixated on Irina. There was warmth and affection in them. So much affection.

"Of course, *solnyshko*. You can be whatever you want."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> tw: anxiety attack (there's a detailed description) and mention of bullying. also, self-destructive thoughts.

A week passed from that morning at the ByWard Market until another call interrupted Ilya's practice, two days before an important game against the Montréal Metros.

He had just finished celebrating a clean assist with Luca when Coach Wiebe's whistle cut sharply through the rink. The entire team turned at once, their eyes landing on Harris. He was standing still, phone in hand, worry written plainly across his face.

Ilya knew immediately. His skates moved on their own.

"It's Patricia," Harris said softly, passing him the phone, pity heavy in his eyes.

Ilya shut everything else out, focusing only on the nanny's voice as she explained what had happened. He didn't even need to ask—Wiebe was already looking at him with quiet understanding.

"Go, Roz. We'll manage without you."

And even though it made him feel like absolute shit, Ilya didn't argue.

Half an hour later, he was standing at the kindergarten entrance, hair still damp, cold seeping into his bones. His hand kept moving in a nervous tic, his body screaming for a cigarette. The janitor opened the door for him this time (it was the main entrance, not the side door by Irina's classroom) and guided him inside. He asked Ilya to sit in the main lobby, and told him the teacher in charge would come speak to him shortly. That the other parent involved was already meeting with the principal.

Ilya didn't answer. He barely heard a word.

His head was a mess of guilt and self-reproach. He shouldn't have talked to Irina so soon. He should've waited for Svetlana to tell her herself, because clearly Ilya wasn't made for this, because he wasn't capable of holding his four-year-old together on his own.

It was his fault. His fault—

"Ilya—Mr. Rozanov," Shane's voice cut through his thoughts' spiral.

Ilya stood up automatically, meeting the teacher's serious gaze. Under different circumstances, he would've taken him in properly, would've noticed the way his clothes fit, would've lingered on his freckles for more than a second. But anxiety wouldn't let him. Still, in a brief truce, he registered the thin, elegant rectangular glasses resting on the bridge of Shane's nose.

"I'm sorry I insisted on calling you," Shane continued, a hint of tension in his voice. "Patricia told me you were busy, but—"

"Is Irina okay?" Ilya cut in. He didn't care that Shane had insisted. If he had, it meant something was wrong, and Ilya trusted his judgment completely. Shane knew enough about his job, and about Irina, to understand how busy he was. "Where is she?"

Shane took a deep breath.

"Come with me."

Following Shane felt like a walk of shame. Ilya's heart was lodged somewhere in his throat, pounding so hard he thought he might actually start hyperventilating. He didn't care about explanations. He didn't care about rules, or protocols, or what Irina might have done. He just —just wanted to *see her.* To know she was okay. To take her away from this place and hide her somewhere safe, somewhere where nothing and no one could hurt her anymore.

Even if what was hurting her was *him*.

He couldn't stop thinking about her face the night before, small and tense when he'd told her that Svetlana wouldn't be with them this Christmas. Irina had gone so quiet it had scared him. She'd looked… *abandoned*. She'd asked if Aunt Sveta had someone more important now. If she didn't love her anymore. If she was going to leave too, *like her parents had.*

Ilya had tried to explain, carefully, that Svetlana had her own parents, her own family far away, that they missed her and wanted to spend the holidays together. That it didn't mean she loved Irina any less. But the words hadn't landed right. They never did. His English failed him when it mattered most, and Irina's Russian was still clumsy and incomplete.

He'd only made it worse. Like always.

Ilya had always known he wasn't made for this. That loving his daughter, no matter how fiercely, might not be enough.

He barely registered when Shane stopped in front of a door. Ilya almost walked into him. He blinked, disoriented, looking at the teacher as if he was waking up from a bad dream. Shane looked troubled, his eyes soft but uneasy. He had noticed.

A gentle hand settled on Ilya's shoulder.

"She's okay, Ilya, I promise" Shane said quietly, almost a whisper.

"Okay."

“Are you okay?”

Ilya looked at him with a knot in his throat and nodded. *Lie*.

Shane didn’t push any further. The ghost of his hand lingered heavy on Ilya’s shoulder for a second too long, but Ilya ignored it. He followed him through the door, only to find Patricia sitting behind a small desk, Irina beside her, staring down at the floor in complete silence.

Ilya crossed the room as if his life depended on it.

“Ira,” he called, crouching in front of her. Irina finally looked up at him. *“What happened —?”*

But Irina turned her face away.

She looked at Shane instead, eyes glossy and red, pointedly ignoring Ilya at her side. The gesture was small, almost nothing, but it hit him like a blow. Like something vital had been ripped straight out of his chest.

“Irochka,” he tried again, softer this time. *“Solnyshko?”*

Nothing.

Her fingers twisted in the fabric of her sleeve. Her lip trembled. Still, she wouldn’t look at him.

“Je veux aller à la maison, Monsieur Shane,” her small voice said, looking at Shane, talking in French because she was smart, and she knew that *Ilya wouldn’t understand.*

I want to go home, Teacher Shane.

She was shutting him out. She—she didn’t want to talk to him.

Ilya swallowed hard, his chest tightening painfully. He’d never felt this particular kind of pain before. Not from an injury, not from a bad day back in Russia, not even the day he found his mother dead. This was different. This was a fear capable of destroying him.

Patricia shifted in her chair, clearly uncomfortable, her eyes full of sympathy. Shane looked at him before answering.

“I know, Irina. But first we need to talk with your dad, okay?”

Ilya stayed there, on his knees, waiting.

“Okay.”

Patricia stood up, giving him a sympathetic smile. “I will wait outside.”

Ilya took her place on autopilot. His limbs felt numb. His heart felt like an open void in his chest. Irina wouldn’t look at him. Shane sat at the other side of the table.

“Irina had a fight with her classmate Dylan again, Mr. Rozanov,” Shane began to explain, and Ilya tried to focus his gaze on him. He tried. “Irina, can you tell your dad what your classmate said to you?”

Irina pressed her lips into a thin line, furrowing her brows, as if trying to hold back tears. Ilya had the reflex to pull her into his arms, but the fear of being rejected stopped him.

“That my Christmas card wasn’t real,” she mumbled, staring straight ahead, her voice trembling, “because his mom says a family without a mom isn’t a real family… and I don’t have a family.”

Ilya felt rage rising inside him. He looked at Shane, who stayed silent, before turning back to Irina.

“Ira, you know that’s not true—“

“It is true, Papa!” she shouted, her cheeks flushed from crying, her eyes brimming with pain. She was so upset that she didn't even try to speak in Russian. “Not even my Aunt… It’s just you and me! It’s always just you and me, and—Why does no one want to be with us, Papa? I don’t understand. All my classmates have two parents, and grandparents, and cousins… and I’m alone.”

The words escaped Ilya as if he had lost the ability to speak.

Ilya opened his mouth.

Nothing came out.

The words crowded his throat all at once—Russian, broken English, thoughts tangled with guilt—and none of them found a way through. His chest felt tight, his hands numb at his sides. He wanted to tell her she was wrong. That she wasn’t alone. That he loved her more than anything in the world. But all of it stayed trapped inside him, heavy and useless.

How could he affirm that to her? How would he dare, if he was always fucking *away*. She felt alone because of him. It was all his fault.

Irina noticed his silence. Of course she did. It was painfully *loud*. Noisy.

Her face crumpled further when Ilya didn’t answer, and she hugged herself, shoulders shaking.

Shane moved. He went around the table until he was in front of them, then crouched down in front of Irina until he was at her eye level. He didn’t touch her at first. Just stayed there.

“Irina,” he said softly, in a sweet, French accent, so gentle and private it almost felt like a little melody. *“Regarde-moi, d’accord?”*

Look at me, okay?

She hesitated, but eventually lifted her eyes to him.

“What Dylan said wasn’t true,” Shane continued, calm and steady. “Families don’t all look the same. Some have a mom and a dad. Some have two dads, or two moms. Some have grandparents, or aunts, or uncles.” He paused, choosing his words with care. “And some families are just a dad and his daughter. That doesn’t make them less real.”

Irina sniffed. “But… he said—”

“I know,” Shane interrupted softly. “And he was wrong. Very wrong.” His voice didn’t rise, but there was something firm in it now. He looked at Ilya. “And he is getting suspended for one week, and the principal is having a serious conversation with his parents, so this never happens again.”

Ilya nodded at the reassuring words. Shane looked at Irina again, this time running his thumbs on her cheeks, taking away the tears. He smiled at her, sweet and calm.

“A family is having someone by your side, someone who takes care of you, who loves you and worries about you. That’s what makes a family, Irina.”

Irina glanced briefly at Ilya, just long enough for him to break completely. He felt the tears down his face when she looked away, eyes fixated on Shane again.

“Your dad loves you,” Shane said. “He loves you so much, and you’re a little family. You don’t need anyone apart from him, Irina.”

Irina’s lips trembled. She looked at Ilya again, searching his face.

Ilya still couldn’t speak.

But he nodded. Once. Then twice.

“Okay,” Irina murmured. “I love Papa too.”

“I know,” Shane smiled at her. He gently brushed a hand through her blond hair, and it was then that he noticed Ilya was completely still, tears running down his chin, his hands trembling at his sides.

He felt like he couldn’t even breathe.

“Irina,” Shane continued softly, “why don’t you go with Patricia? She’ll help you wash your face, so you can go home with your dad. Hmm?”

Irina nodded, calmer now.

“Okay, Teacher Shane.”

By the time Irina left the room, Ilya could only hear a piercing ringing in his ears. He blinked, letting more tears slip past his lashes, and focused all his energy on trying to control his breathing.

He failed.

His hand pressed instinctively against the center of his chest, trying to force the pressure to ease, trying to make his lungs remember how to work and finally draw in a proper breath.

llya didn't know what was happening at first. His mind was a tangled spiral of painful thoughts, so at first he didn't feel the touch against his body, nor did he hear the quiet footsteps approaching him. Then, suddenly, Shane's face entered his field of vision, kneeling in front of him, just as he had done with Irina seconds earlier.

His voice was low but firm. An order, clear and loud.

"Ilya, I need you to breathe."

Ilya couldn't. His vision was completely blurred and he didn't know if it was from the tears or from the fact that the air seemed to refuse to enter his lungs. His fingers tangled in the thick fabric of his own jacket, while Shane's hand on his shoulder tightened slightly, trying to ground him.

Ilya felt completely useless. As if all his will had drained out of him.

"Ilya, everything is okay," Shane said again. "You're okay. Irina is okay. It was just a fight with a classmate, alright? You need to calm down so you can go back to your daughter."

Then Ilya lifted his hand and reached for him. It was a desperate movement, a little rough. His fingers closed around Shane's forearm, clinging to it as if it were the only solid thing in the room. Shane didn't pull away. He stayed there, warm and steady beneath his grip.

"Breathe with me," Shane asked, his calm almost unreal. It made Ilya jealous. He wanted calm too. "Just follow me, okay?"

He inhaled slowly, deliberately exaggerating it so Ilya could hear it, so he could copy it if he managed to. And he tried.

"In," Shane counted quietly.

Ilya opened his mouth, dragging air into his lungs. It burned.

"Good. Now out."

The exhale was messy, uneven. Shane didn't comment. He simply repeated the motion, this time bringing his other hand to the back of Ilya's neck. His fingers slid to the base of his hair, threading gently through it, and somehow that made him feel lighter. The next inhale didn't feel like acid burning his lungs.

"Just like that, Ilya. Again."

Ilya followed Shane's soft, steady instructions. He didn't know how long they stayed like that, but his vision stopped being completely blurred, and his chest no longer felt like the core of a star about to explode. Shane's closeness kept him anchored, and he held onto that until his breathing fully steadied and the tears on his cheeks dried.

His fingers twitched against the soft fabric of Shane's sweater.

They looked at each other.

"Better?"

And then the shame came.

It hit him all at once, heavy and sharp. Ilya let go of Shane's forearm as if he'd been burned, dropping his gaze. His chest still rose and fell slowly now, but his face felt hot.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, his voice broken. Did he say that in English, or Russian? His mind felt dizzy. Tired. Clouded by the sorrow of seeing his daughter having a hard time. By the fact that he couldn't do *anything* about it.

Shane stood up immediately, ending up between Ilya's open legs. Ilya thought he would instinctively pull away, but he didn't. The teacher's gentle hand stayed at the back of his neck, guiding him softly forward until his head rested against Shane's stomach.

The movement was so intimate and unexpected that Ilya's breath caught for a few seconds, and he thought—truly thought—that this time he might choke. But then his body reacted on its own. His arms wrapped around Shane's waist, clinging there without permission. His forehead pressed into the fabric of Shane's dark sweater, his eyes falling shut as a calm he hadn't felt in years washed over him.

"Blyat'," Ilya muttered, the cursing slipping out before he could stop it. It sounded weak and tired. *"What the fuck is wrong with me? I'm pathetic. I'm stupid—"*

"Whatever you're saying, don't," Shane interrupted gently. "You're allowed to fall apart sometimes."

"Not in front of my daughter's teacher—"

"Yes. Even then, if *the teacher* wants to help you," Shane replied, strict this time. "So stop."

Ilya looked up. God. He didn't know what this man was doing to him, but no one had ever managed it before. Shane met his gaze with a neutral expression, but there was undeniable care in the way his hand moved through Ilya's damp hair, brushing it away from his face. Ilya let his chin rest against Shane's stomach, unwilling to move. From down here, Shane's freckles looked impossibly cute, and the glasses—*those glasses*—were doing truly terrible things to his mind. To the void in his chest. To *his heart.*

"I'm glad you are the teacher now," Ilya murmured, the corner of his mouth slightly lifting. "This would be *very weird* with Madame Dubois."

Shane snorted a quiet laugh, rolling his eyes. His hand didn't stop moving, and for a moment Ilya wanted (wished) that Shane could always be there, whenever Irina needed someone who knew the right words in English. No one had ever calmed his daughter so effectively. Much less him.

Shane had handled *both of them* perfectly.

“Thank you,” Ilya said at last. “I would’ve fallen apart in front of her if it weren’t for you.”

Shane smiled softly. Fuck. *Why did he have to be so soft?*

“It wouldn’t have been the end of the world,” Shane said, distracted, unaware of the storm in Ilya’s head, and *thank God* for that. “But I know you’re not ready for her to see you like this. I don’t think she’s ready, either. She needs you strong.”

Ilya shouldn’t be feeling this way. Not about his daughter’s teacher. Not about a man he’d spoken to barely three times, even if they’d been the most honest conversations he’d had in four years. Not about someone who was just trying to help.

“Still,” Shane added, “you should probably ask—her aunt?”

“Svetlana,” Ilya nodded. “My best friend.”

“Svetlana,” Shane repeated, with perfect pronunciation. For a brief, absurd moment, Ilya imagined him speaking Russian. He could probably learn it in a week, flawless, no accent. He would love to listen to him for hours. “You should ask Svetlana to talk to Irina. She’s small, and she needs the people she loves to say how they feel about her, again and again. And, um… maybe taking her to a child psychologist wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

Ilya knew. He just—he was in denial.

“My mother… she was sad,” the words slipped out of him. Shane was carefully playing with a loose lock of his hair. “I am sad, sometimes. Maybe my brother Alexei was sad too. I don’t know, because we were bad at talking to each other. So maybe Irina is sad. I don’t—I don’t know how to control it. My sadness. Hers, either.”

A long silence filled the room. It wasn’t uncomfortable, but it made Ilya painfully aware of himself. Of what he had just said. Maybe it was the first time he had ever admitted it out loud.

Admitting it to Shane felt… strange. *Was he being strange?*

Of course he was. Ilya suddenly felt the urge to pull away and run, to put distance between them before he said something else he couldn’t take back, but Shane’s voice stopped him.

“Okay, Ilya. That’s okay,” he said gently. “Depression is something a lot of people go through. It doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with you. I think you both should see a therapist. I can help with Irina’s, but I really think you should find one for yourself too. Someone who speaks Russian, so you can actually express yourself fully. Does that sound right?”

It did. It sounded… okay.

Ilya wasn’t an idiot. He had thought about it before, more than once. But the idea had always felt terrifying. Heavy. Like admitting that something was wrong. Saying it out loud to a

stranger. Exposing Irina to a world he didn't fully trust yet, places full of judgment, of misunderstandings, of people who might not see her the way he did. He didn't want her to think that something was off with her.

But ignoring the fact that they both felt lonely and sad was worse. Way worse. She was smart, but not enough to understand that it was normal, and Ilya wasn't good at talking, and he didn't really have the proper ways to help her either, so they needed help.

Maybe it was the time to get some.

"Would you?" Ilya murmured after a moment. He lifted his gaze to Shane. "Help. With her therapist?"

"Of course," Shane said without hesitation. "I know some good ones here, but I could also ask my best friend in Montréal for recommendations. He knows a lot of child psychologists."

Ilya huffed a soft laugh.

"Four kids *and* a child psychologist?" he said dryly. "You made him sound a lot dumber the first time you mentioned him."

Shane laughed at that—properly laughed. Teeth showing, sound loose and unguarded. His hand tapped the back of Ilya's neck, more affectionate than annoyed. Ilya was glad the tension seemed to dissipate so easily. He knew they were talking about serious things, but he needed to breathe. Just for a moment.

"No," Shane corrected, still smiling. "Jackie is the psychologist and Hayden plays hockey. They're a couple and my best friends. I honestly don't even think Hayd knows what a university is."

Hayden. Ilya saved that name for later. He doubted there were a lot of Haydens playing for Montréal.

"Oh," Ilya said, arching a brow. "So hockey players are dumb?"

Shane grinned.

"Mostly, yes. You know. Hits, fights… I'm sure it all does something to your brain eventually."

Ilya shook his head, amused. Charmed, even, by Shane's attempt at being mean to him. Even joking, even calling him dumb, Shane was still impossibly gentle. Without really thinking about it, Ilya tightened his grip around Shane's waist just a little.

"You would've been the smartest hockey player," the words slipped out of him. Shane's cheeks flushed instantly. "You would've made my life hell playing against you."

Shane bit his lip. Ilya followed the movement without meaning to. His mouth went dry.

“You don’t know that,” Shane murmured, clearly flattered. Good. Shane should be flattered. Always blushed and charmed. “Maybe I sucked—”

“Impossible,” Ilya interrupted, and this time his voice wasn’t teasing.

“Okay, I didn't,” Shane admitted. “I was pretty decent.”

“I guessed. But even if you sucked,” he smiled, and it was bittersweet. He wished for a moment that things were different for Shane. That his words weren’t just a fantasy. “You would’ve distracted me all the time. Your freckles. Your face. Way too much for a dumb hockey player to handle.”

This time, Shane bit his lip for a little longer, shaking his head like Ilya had just said the most unreasonable thing in the world.

“I can see where Irina gets all her charm techniques from,” he murmured, giving Ilya’s hair one last soft stroke before stepping back.

The absence of his body was immediate and cold, but Ilya understood, It wasn’t the place, and it wasn’t the moment. Irina was waiting for him, and there were too many things to process. *This* (whatever this was) included.

“I would tell you it’s just a Rozanov thing,” Ilya joked, pulling a face, “but it would be lying. She definitely got it from me.”

Shane leaned his hip against the table, arms crossing loosely over his chest. His warm gaze never left Ilya, and Ilya held it for a second longer than necessary.

“The principal is suspending Irina,” Shane said suddenly. “Three days.”

Ilya had expected it.

“I’m sorry.” Shane added.

“Don’t worry,” Ilya replied quietly.

“And,” Shane turned to pick up a folded piece of cardstock. He handed it to Ilya. “I think you should have this. Despite everything, she made it with a lot of love.”

Ilya looked down at the card in his hands.

On the front, the words *Joyeux Noël* were written in oversized letters, easy to read thanks to the bright, enthusiastic colors Irina had used. There was a slightly crooked Christmas tree underneath, pine-green, decorated with pink, red, and yellow ornaments.

Inside, Ilya found a simple drawing that squeezed his heart.

It was clearly him, made of circles, lines and scribbles, wearing his hockey gear, helmet included. Beside him was Irina, smaller, smiling wide, dressed in a Centaurs uniform. She

had even tried to draw the logo, unsuccessfully. Pink skates were strapped to her stick-thin legs.

Below the drawing, written clumsily in Russian, were the words:

Я тебя люблю, папа.

Irina didn't know how to write in Russian, which meant that Shane had helped her. He had actually looked up the sentence himself and guided her while she wrote it down.

Ilya looked up at Shane, tears filling his eyes all over again.

"She really loves you, Ilya," Shane said softly. "So much."

He couldn't help it.

Still clutching the Christmas card, Ilya closed the small distance between them and pulled Shane into a hug again. This time fully and intentionally. Like he needed to give him back some fraction of the gratitude swelling in his chest.

"Thank you so much, Shane," he nearly sobbed, his nose pressing into the teacher's neck. He smelled like flowers and paper.

Shane hugged him back without hesitation, arms wrapping around his torso, holding him just tight enough for Ilya to feel strong again. It only lasted a few seconds, but Ilya knew he would treasure them for a long, long time.

When they pulled apart, Shane lifted a hand to cup his cheek.

Ilya looked at him, committing everything to memorize the warm brown eyes full of softness, the freckles scattered across his cheeks like they'd been placed there by a skilled artist, the slight difference in height that made Shane tilt his head up just a little to meet his gaze.

Just a little.

If Ilya leaned in, *maybe—*

"It's nothing," Shane said gently. "Now you should go with Irina."

Ilya nodded. Yes, he needed to go get his child.

He looked back at Shane before closing the door. One last look. It was like gaining strength. And it worked.

***

Two days later, Shane was stretched out on his parents' couch, watching the screen with quiet interest while Yuna and David discussed their predictions for the game. His mother was betting on a goal from Ilya, maybe two, with an assist from Luca Haas. Everyone agreed that Wyatt Hayes would play an immaculate game, so Yuna was feeling optimistic when she predicted that Montréal would only score three goals.

Earlier that afternoon, Shane had texted Hayden Pike to wish him luck and reassure him that *yes, it would be a pleasure to have him stay over*, and *no, it wouldn't be a bother,* and *he absolutely didn't need to stay at a hotel.*

Shane had met Hayden years ago through Jackie, back when Shane was starting his degree at university. Jackie was mostly a stay-at-home mom, but she loved studying, so she had gone back to school to pursue a second degree when her classes and Shane's overlapped through a shared course. At the time, Jackie already had two twin girls to take care of, but that hadn't stopped her from graduating again.

Shane admired her deeply. Hayden was a good guy, but Jackie was something else entirely. She had been like the older sister Shane never had, always checking in on him, inviting him over for dinner when she knew he'd be alone, making sure there was ginger ale in her fridge, respecting the strange dietary habits that hockey had imposed on him for so many years that living without them now felt almost impossible.

Shane had always been a disciplined player. Maybe it was something he'd inherited from his mother, who had always cared deeply—too deeply, some might say—about hockey and success within it. Shane never minded. If anything, he appreciated the structure she'd given him.

When he was younger, things had felt clear and simple because of that. He was a good student. He never struggled with math, linguistics, or physics. He excelled at everything he did, and he grew up certain that he could become whatever he wanted, because he had the determination for it. And because he had his parents' support, which mattered just as much.

But there was one thing he loved more than anything else. One thing he craved every day. Something he felt true passion for. Shane had never been particularly sentimental, but *this* made him *feel*.

Hockey was the only thing he could think about with something close to ecstasy. The one thing that made him tremble with excitement, that made his heart race in a way nothing else ever had. His mother used to say he'd been born for it. That he was going to be a star.

It turned out hockey wasn't the only thing capable of making him feel alive.

Shane had his suspicions for a long time. And for just as long, he'd tried to fight them. He was ashamed, scared, deeply convinced that accepting himself would ruin his life, or at least, the life he thought he wanted. So he shut that part of himself down and pretended, for as long as he could.

But things always came back around.

He couldn’t escape who he was.

It had been bad. At the time, he’d felt like he was dying. But now he was okay with it. It wasn’t that bad anymore. Sure, having his dream ripped away from him had been fucked up, and yes, he still carried resentment toward the people who had done it to him. But he was okay. And he genuinely loved his job.

He had always liked the idea of teaching, even if it hadn’t been his strongest skill at first, so he went to college and worked for it. He attended education seminars, completed every internship and placement he could, and trained himself in sexual education and sex positivity for teens and young adults. He decided he wanted to teach. To prevent others from growing up ignorant and harmful, so there wouldn’t be any more Shane Hollanders out there, outed by bullies and ruined by it.

Coming back to Ottawa hadn’t been part of the plan. He knew people still knew him here. That there was a real chance the ones who had hurt him the most were still around. For a long time, he truly believed he wouldn’t be able to face them again.

And yet, he found himself grateful to be back.

He had missed having his parents close. Missed long walks along the Rideau Canal. Missed Saturday breakfasts at Marie’s, some weeks with his mom, others alone. He had missed walking beneath the Christmas lights in late November, the familiar chill in the air, the sweet, unmistakable scent of the city he’d grown up in.

He had missed all of it. And he had decided, a long time ago, that missing things wasn’t worth it.

Shane loved teaching children. He’d been aiming for a secondary school position. He had the qualifications, and the pay was better, but when the opportunity to teach kindergarten came up, just a temporary substitution for the rest of the term, he hadn’t been able to say no. Maybe it was a way to start over.

It was calmer than high school, at least. Small kids were easier. Gentler.

He was so glad he’d taken the job. He couldn’t imagine not knowing those kids. *One* of them, in particular.

“Shane, honey?”

“Mhm?”

“What do you think about Rozanov?”

Shane blinked, completely thrown by the name. He looked at his mother.

“What?”

“They just said he’s not playing today—”

“Why?”

“Family matters,” Yuna continued, clearly puzzled by his sudden interest. “Honey, are you okay? You seem distracted.”

Shane glanced back at the screen. “It’s nothing. Just tired.”

And that was true. About the exhaustion, but also about Ilya not playing today.

Now, though, he was extremely worried. About Ilya. And about Irina.

Shane had truly been a dedicated hockey player. Back when he was in the junior league, his free time had been reduced to watching other teams’ games, analyzing future rivals (or potential teammates) and building strategies for the day he might face them on the ice. At some point, he’d stopped settling for just the American leagues and had started following European hockey as well.

That was how he’d first come across Ilya Rozanov.

It had been in 2008, when he saw him for the first time on YouTube, in a grainy video that looked like it had been recorded inside a microwave. Ilya was playing for the Russian junior national team.

His style had been aggressive. Direct. Completely relentless. Shane could still remember the rush it had sent through him, the electric thought that there was a small chance, however unlikely, that Ilya might someday end up in the NHL. Because he had more than enough skill, if he wanted to. And that maybe, somehow, they might get the chance to play together.

Or against each other.

Shane hadn’t minded either option.

He never made it to the junior world championships. He was outed months before. He quit hockey. He focused on studying. Then he moved to Montréal.

But hockey had never stopped being his passion.

So he followed Rozanov’s career closely, just as he followed others’ careers as well. But Rozanov was different, magnetic, and for some reason, Shane always liked him more than *others*.

He never had the chance to meet him, obviously. Until now.

Shane had recognized Irina’s last name from day one. The principal and the rest of the teaching staff had warned him about her, about who her father was and about why she was considered a “difficult” child. Isolated. Quiet. Sometimes even rude to her classmates and teachers.

Not to Shane. Not once.

Because he had noticed the pattern immediately.

Madame Dubois had never been patient with her, too wrapped up in her own prejudices toward Ilya, which were painfully clear in the notes she kept on every student. The woman seemed deeply uncomfortable with the idea of a young, single Russian man raising a little girl. Far too uncomfortable to actually notice Irina's real needs.

The language barrier didn't help either. Irina didn't have any francophones around her, and learning Russian alongside her father made French significantly harder for her than it was for the other kids.

At first, Shane's closeness to Irina had been purely professional. She was the child who struggled the most in class, which meant she was the one who needed the most support. Irina didn't speak much, but Shane always made a point of approaching her when she didn't understand something. He tried to understand her when she acted out, instead of judging her or blaming her very busy father for her behavior.

She was just a child.

And Ilya was just a young man doing the best he could.

Shane had never doubted that. He knew the Rozanov from the ice. And if he—the most promising prospect of his generation—hadn't hesitated to move to Ottawa for his daughter, to lower the ceiling of his career for her, then it meant only one thing.

He loved her. He was giving everything he had for her.

And now, Shane had confirmed it.

Seeing Ilya so completely broken in front of him had nearly broken Shane's heart.

By then, Shane had dealt with hundreds of parents. Some demanding, others distant, others overly protective. He knew how to navigate most situations that tended to come with a "difficult" child, but nothing had prepared him for a parent like Ilya Rozanov.

Completely lost. Scared. *Alone*.

Of course he'd dealt with single parents before, but being single didn't mean being alone. Parents usually had a support net: parents, siblings, friends. But Ilya seemed to be completely alone in the world, with a nanny and a best friend that didn't even live in the same country.

Shane worried about him more than he should have. Maybe because he felt like he'd known him long before they ever met. Maybe because Irina had stolen his heart without even trying. Or maybe because, in some unsettling way, Ilya was part of the life Shane had never been allowed to have. And meeting him in person had only made that small, harmless interest grow into something bigger.

"That was…" his father commented two hours later, grimacing at the TV screen.

Yuna hummed in agreement.

“That was sad,” she murmured. “They’re nothing without Rozanov.”

That night, Shane was the worst host in the world to Hayden.

His friend practically carried the entire evening on his back, filling every silence with an endless monologue about his kids, Jackie, and how the Metros actually had a real shot at winning the Stanley Cup this year. Shane hummed absentmindedly in agreement, laughed at the right moments, and spent most of the night scrolling through every sports outlet he could find, trying to figure out the real reason why Ilya hadn’t played.

Of course, none of them specified it.

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The following Saturday, when Shane arrived at Marie’s for his usual breakfast (this time with his mother, casually chatting about Christmas preparations) it wasn’t his friend’s voice that greeted him.

“Teacher Shane!”

His heart did a deadly flip in his chest.

Shane tore his gaze away from his mother, searching for the childish voice calling his name. Irina crashed into his legs before he could even spot her, and Shane automatically hugged her back. His eyes lifted, scanning the bakery.

Ilya was standing at the counter, one forearm resting on the surface, with an overly-smiley Marie on the other side. She was leaning in, looking at him like he was the most interesting thing she’d ever seen. Shane might have been annoyed. Marie could be too familiar sometimes, and Ilya was *his*—one of his student’s fathers.

Yes. *That.*

And Marie was Shane’s friend. They were supposed to look professional. Serious. Not whatever Marie was doing with her heart-eyes and her chin propped on her hand like a lovesick teenager.

Ugh.

But Ilya wasn’t looking at her. Not now.

Ilya was looking straight at Shane. At Shane, and at Irina clinging tightly to his legs.

He looked away only after the crooked smile Ilya gave him made his cheeks warm.

“Irina,” he greeted the girl with a small smile, crouching down to her level.

Today, her hair was loose in unruly waves, held back from her face by only two hair clips. Shane reached out and gently brushed a strand aside, the sensation pulling his mind—uninvited—back to how Ilya’s hair had felt between his fingers days ago. He looked into Irina’s eyes, so strikingly similar to her father’s, and decided it was deeply unfair that both of them were this adorable.

“Bon matin,” he said softly. *“Comment ça va?”*

Good morning. How are you?

She beamed.

“Papa wanted to come, Monsieur Shane!” she said brightly. *“I think he likes you a lot, because Papa would never come into a—um—*bakery! *But today he came, because he knew you would be here.”*

Shane lifted his gaze. He knew his mother was understanding absolutely everything beside him, but he didn’t care. Ilya was still looking at him, his brows slightly furrowed, clearly confused by the fact that his daughter was speaking in a language he didn’t understand. Shane bit his lip, holding back a smile.

Irina was exceptionally good at exposing her papa.

“Is that so, Irina?” Shane asked softly. *“You both came here to see me?”*

“Oui!”

“And it’s your dad who told you that?”

“He just asked if I wanted to see you, I said yes.” Irina explained. Her French was clumsy, but she was much more confident speaking it with him than she was in class, and Shane felt quietly proud of her for that. *“I missed you, Monsieur Shane. I—I don’t like school. Mais… j’aime bien vous.”*

Shane smiled softly.

“Almost, Irina,” he corrected gently. *“On dit je vous aime bien, pas j’aime bien vous.”*

You said I like you, not I like you (this doesn’t make sense in English. He’s just correcting bad phrasing).

Irina furrowed her brows, concentrating.

“Je vous aime bien, Monsieur Shane.”

“Voilà,” Shane nodded. *“And I like you too.”*

Irina laughed softly, pleased, her cheeks warm and her lashes fluttering. Shane gave her a fond look, gently brushing his thumb over her scar, then glanced at Ilya for just a second. He was looking back at them, his eyes so soft and fond that they seemed to be melting at the sight.

God. What was happening to them?

“Mm-hm.”

The soft throat-clearing at his side broke Shane out of his spiral. He straightened, turning to his mother with a flicker of embarrassment when he caught her surprised, openly interested look. He rested a hand on Irina’s shoulder.

“Irina, this is my mother,” he said gently. “Mom, this is Irina. One of the star students in my class, right, Irina?”

Irina smiled widely, puffing out her chest and nodding with solemn pride. Yuna looked at her with open fascination, extending an elegant hand that the girl took with shining eyes.

“Irina,” Yuna said warmly. “That’s a beautiful name.”

“It was my grandma’s name! How are you called, lady?”

Yuna almost made an endeared sound, looking at Shane like he was the one to blame for bringing such a cute little girl to her.

“My name is Yuna, sweetie.”

“Yuna,” Irina repeated slowly. “Cool! Teacher Shane, your mom has a cool name. My *mama* was called Ekaterina.”

Something tightened in his throat.

“That’s a beautiful name too, Irina.”

“Da!”

He glanced at Ilya, who finally stepped closer, his approach cautious, almost hesitant.

Shane couldn’t help giving him a quick once-over. As always, he had messy hair the color of deep gold, a thick black jacket, and tired eyes full of colors. There was curiosity in them, and embarrassment, tangled together. Maybe Ilya hadn’t expected Shane to bring his mother this time. Maybe the little ambush he’d arranged—very deliberately—wasn’t turning out to be as private as he’d hoped.

And somehow, that made Shane even more aware of him.

Ilya had come here for him. Irina wanted to see Shane, and Ilya wanted that too, so they had arranged to show up at the one place they both knew Shane would be on a Saturday morning. To see him. To be with him.

“Good morning, Shane.”

Shane felt his mouth go completely dry. That stupid Russian accent was going to be the death of him, and he wasn’t even *complaining*. He swallowed.

“Morning, Ilya,” he answered, trying not to sound obviously charmed. Fuck all of this. Was he really about to make a fool of himself flirting with Ilya Rozanov in front of his mom? *Probably*. “So… you came to see me.”

Ilya smiled with that characteristic slyness. He shrugged, and for a moment Shane thought he was going to deny it, but Ilya had too many guts for that.

“We missed you,” he declared, as if that were the most reasonable explanation in the world, rather than the most wildly unprofessional, bold thing Shane had ever heard. Even so, Ilya’s words sent shivers down his spine, and this time it wasn’t just his cheeks that were red. His whole face was, ears included. Maybe even his eyelashes. “But now that we’ve seen you, this young lady and I will leave you alone with your mother—“

“Oh no, please don’t, Mr. Rozanov!” Yuna interrupted, elbowing Shane so hard he nearly coughed. She stepped forward confidently, extending a hand to Ilya. “I’m Yuna Hollander. Since my son is *rude* and didn’t introduce me—“

“I’m not rude—“

“Please, Mr. Rozanov. No need for you to leave. In fact, Marie and I haven’t seen each other in weeks, so you… do your thing. Yes. I’ll go catch up with her.” Shane closed his eyes, burning with embarrassment at his mother’s unsubtle words. “Oh, and you should know—I’m a big fan. Yes, you’re a very good player, Rozanov. Congratulations.”

“Mom.”

But Ilya just grinned widely, carefully shaking her hand before leaning in to plant a polite kiss on it. Shane held his breath. Did they do that in Europe? Or was this just Ilya being extremely gentlemanly?

Either way, Shane saw the exact moment his mother fell for Ilya’s charm. He couldn’t blame her.

“It’s a pleasure, Mrs. Hollander. Thank you for letting us have your son for a little while. Irina and I will be eternally grateful. Right, *solnyshko?”*

And, to Shane’s horror, Irina looked up at her mother with impossibly big, shiny eyes, nodding with all the innocence in the world. Shane caught the precise moment his mother melted for the little girl.

He squinted. *Manipulation*.

“Oh, please, don’t thank me—Mr. Rozanov—“

“Ilya.”

“Ilya,” his mother smiled. “I’ll leave you to it then, Ilya. Meet us some other time for breakfast. I’ll bring my husband. He loves hockey too, and he’d be thrilled to meet you—“

“Mom!”

Yuna lifted her hands and walked to the counter. Shane shook his head, both embarrassed and oddly excited. Ilya just looked at him, waiting for him to make the first move.

“Papa, can we sit? I want to draw a bit, please!”

This time, Irina sat on one side of the table, pulling out all her crayons and papers from her tiny backpack. Ilya and Shane watched her paint in silence for a few minutes, shoulder to shoulder, waiting for the other to speak. They both knew that Marie and Yuna were probably looking (*gossiping*, because they loved to gossip) so the tension was palpable.

Ilya was the first to break it.

“Sorry if this was intrusive on my part, Shane.”

He lifted his gaze from Irina’s attempt at a Santa Claus. Ilya’s eyes weren’t confident anymore. There was a flicker of fear in them. His brows furrowed in concern, and his lips—with that heart-shaped cupid’s bow—pressed into a thin line. Shane automatically reached out, tucking a rebellious lock of hair behind his ear.

“It’s not,” he murmured. Ilya leaned slightly toward him, his arm casually draped over the back of Shane’s chair. “But now you need to know that my mom is going to force you into breakfast with her and my dad. You did this to yourself, *Mr. Rozanov.”*

Ilya smiled again. Shane wanted to kiss him right there. *Fuckfuckfuck.*

“I would be honored.”

“Really?” The words left Shane’s mouth almost as a whisper. He—he hadn’t been with anyone in a long time. And that had never been serious enough to meet his parents. But Ilya… Ilya seemed perfectly fine with it. And they were *nothing*.

“Of course. They are hockey fans, I am a hockey player. Good combination,” Ilya said again, like it was the simplest thing in the world. “Also, they are your parents. So they must be good and sweet.”

“Do you think that I am good and sweet?” Shane asked, a little surprised.

“I do not think anything, Shane. You are.”

“He’s right, Teacher Shane!” Irina added suddenly, without even looking up from her drawing. “I like sweet Teacher.”

Shane tried to hide his smile. He failed spectacularly. Ilya shrugged, wearing that calm, *what-can-you-do* expression that made everything worse.

“She said it, not me,” he added casually, as if absolving himself of all blame.

Shane shook his head, feeling utterly defeated. How was he supposed to survive these two?

He was already *so screwed.*

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

hola :)
i wanted to clarify a few things because, even though i've been receiving a lot of incredible comments and dms from people telling me how much they've liked the story (and i thank you so much for that. i'm loving writing it too), two people wrote to me yesterday commenting on a touchy topic that i think deserves my attention.

just to clarify it, shane is still an autistic character in this story. no, i have not deliberately removed that part of him, nor has it been my intention at any point for it to be interpreted that he isn't.

now i'm going to speak from my point of view and personal experience as a non-autistic person who has autistic family members and lives with them daily. i think autism doesn't look the same in all people, and that people are noticing such a big change in shane compared to heated rivalry doesn't have to do specifically with me having deliberately removed his autism (which, i repeat, i have NOT done), but rather with the fact that shane's story is drastically different in this fanfiction.

for a moment, really imagine what it would mean for a 16-year-old shane hollander for someone to leak an intimate video of him. it would be the biggest disaster of his life. he would have such a spectacular mental breakdown that i can't imagine even for a moment that he wouldn't get overstimulated and that the situation wouldn't get out of hand. that, somehow, his parents (who love him) wouldn't give him access to therapy of some kind to cope with the trauma.

this is a topic that will come up in upcoming conversations with ilya (his coming out, how he dealt with it, what it meant to have hockey taken away from him, etc).

the point is: the shane in this fic has very different emotional mechanisms because he's had to work on them as a result of being outed. the trauma of being in the closet his entire life, with enormous pressure to be who he is, the fame, the expectations… has nothing to do with the trauma of being outed out of nowhere at 16. both are hard traumas, but the character development is not the same.

also, this shane used all his passion for hockey and his intelligence to educate himself academically. he is a teacher and is specialized in sex positivity for teens and young adults. he is a much freer shane, more self-aware, who has been able to experience more things than the original shane.

does that erase the fact that he's autistic? not in any way. but it does make his emotional coping mechanisms radically different. and that, i want to think, is okay. it's believable and appropriate, at least for this story.

anyway, i wanted to comment on it in case i made anyone think that i had deliberately gotten rid of that part of him. that's not the case. just as i think ilya needs to be much more self-destructive here than in hr, i feel that shane needs exactly the opposite. not because of ilya, but because his personal story has made him stronger.

i always like receiving your good comments, but i also consider it important to address the sensitive topics people call my attention to. as always, my dms are open in twitter @rozanover so you can tell me anything you need. i'm happy to answer you, and also to correct the mistakes i make. just be gentle with me. i'm still a person, i make mistakes and i feel hurt when someone is rude to me.

that said, i hope you can keep enjoying the story, even if many things are completely out of character. in the end, that's what fan fiction is for <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya couldn't stop looking at him.

Shane was an objectively attractive person. Tall, athletic, well-mannered. Everything about him screamed perfection and seriousness, professionalism and care. He was the kind of person who was easy to trust. Upright, understanding, but also strict. The perfect teacher.

But that wasn't what Ilya liked the most about him.

He had watched Shane during the times he had taken Irina to school over the past week (after her expulsion, Irina was more sensitive than usual. She had nightmares, cried often, and didn't want Patricia to take care of her. Ilya was looking for a solution. In the meantime, he was cutting back on his training and his time on the ice. Wiebe hadn't pushed him to return, but he knew management wasn't happy), paying particular attention to the way he treated the other children.

Soft French words, kind smiles, polite waves goodbye. Gently, yes. With a great deal of patience, both with parents and the children. But there was something in Shane's eyes every time Irina approached him. Something bright. Something warm and affectionate that wasn't there with the other children. Something Ilya knew very well.

And he couldn't stop looking at Shane when that *something* took over his expression. It made him look even more beautiful, which—honestly—was *unfair*, and should have been *forbidden*.

Ilya was having a very hard time ignoring Shane's perfect, loving face. Full lips, straight nose, high cheekbones dusted with freckles, and long lashes that brushed them when he squeezed his eyes shut as he laughed at Irina's attempts of making Ilya look like a fool. Apparently, she thought that it was the best way to entertain Shane, and she was kind of right. Ilya let her. Because he loved Shane laughing, and he was more than okay with being the laughing stock if that meant that Shane would look at them like *that*.

Melting at his daughter's words, enchanted gleam in his eyes and fond smile on his lips… It was simply too much.

It had been a long time, perhaps far longer than was healthy, since Ilya had felt this drawn to someone. Lately, the only thing that seemed capable of stirring his heart was Irina. Not even hockey could manage it, but the mere idea of seeing Shane sent an army of murderous butterflies into his stomach and made his whole body itch.

The small gestures he had with them only made that desire *worse*.

"Here," Shane said, holding out a small card. Ilya adjusted Irina more securely on his hip, letting her rest her head against his shoulder. Today she looked tired, thoughtful. Not as smiley or talkative as usual. "I've spoken to several of my contacts, and I think she's the best option. You can call her to set up an appointment, but I explained the situation to her, more or less. I hope I didn't overstep."

Ilya looked at the ridiculously small card between his fingers. *Danielle Wang, child psychologist and educational specialist.*

He lifted his gaze to Shane, feeling warmth wash over him automatically. The kind that settled deep, quiet and sincere.

"Thank you," he murmured. "This—I hope I can repay you somehow."

Shane looked at both of them. He seemed a little worried about Irina's mood, too. She was ignoring them, and that was unusual. So unusual. She loved pick-up-from-school time. She loved talking with Ilya and Shane, making plans for Saturday morning at ByWard Market, even if the only plan was to go to Marie's bakery and sit down to draw.

Ilya and Shane hadn't really talked about anything. Ilya knew they should have. But it was difficult with Irina listening, with her small presence pressed against his side, warm and trusting. He—he didn't want to confuse her. Didn't want to say something careless, something that might make her think Shane was something he wasn't.

At least, he wasn't *yet*.

Because Ilya wanted him to be, whatever that meant. He wanted Shane to be something to him, but to Irina, too. And the thought made his chest tighten, sharp with yearn and fear all at once. He kept wondering if Shane could ever want that, knowing he had a daughter. Knowing there was already a responsibility, a life that came first. Irina was his priority. She always would be. And she was not an easy child, not that Ilya needed her to be, but maybe Shane wouldn't want her that way—

The idea made him feel guilty, almost sick. As if even thinking that way was a betrayal. Irina wasn't an obstacle. She never had been, never would be. She was his heart, the only certainty he had left. And the fact that he could worry, even for a second, that someone might see her as a burden filled him with quiet shame.

Still, the uncertainty lingered. Ilya stayed silent, holding his daughter close, waiting for something he couldn't even know for sure he wanted.

"Actually," Shane said, glancing back at the classroom. It was completely empty. They were the last ones, as always. Ilya was always the last in line, because this way he could have more time with Shane. "I'd really appreciate a hot chocolate, if that's okay. Is it?"

Ilya's heart lurched.

Aside from their only two encounters (one coincidental, the other shamelessly orchestrated on his part, with a little help from his daughter) at the ByWard Market, Shane had never expressed any desire to see them outside school hours. Irina had talked about it every day, taking for granted that it would happen again just because two consecutive weeks had quickly turned it into a pattern for her. Her child's mind worked that way, and her desire to leave the house and do things only fueled her insistence. Ilya let her talk as if it were certain, as if every Saturday from now on would really be the three of them having breakfast at Marie's, but Shane hadn't confirmed it any of the times the subject had come up.

Ilya knew, or at least assumed, that he was trying to keep a professional distance. And because of that, he hadn't expected this. A spontaneous invitation.

"Now?" he asked like a dummy, caught off guard.

"Yes," Shane laughed softly, lifting an eyebrow. Ilya had to force himself to swallow. Those thin metal-framed glasses suited him so well, *fuck.* "If you feel like it, of course."

For a moment, Ilya didn't answer. His first instinct was to look down at Irina, to check her expression, to make sure he wasn't reading too much into it, that he wasn't about to step into something that could later hurt her.

She remained quiet, cheek still pressed against his shoulder, fingers loosely gripping the fabric of his jacket. Then her eyes lit up, just a little.

"Would you like it, solnyshko? Hot chocolate with Shane?"

She nodded, a small smile breaking through.

"And can we watch the Christmas lights too, Papa?"

"Of course, love."

He looked back at Shane. He was watching them with open curiosity, like he was trying to understand every word in Russian. He seemed so *genuinely* interested. *Maybe he…?*

Ilya hated how quickly his mind filled with doubts. How easily joy tangled itself with fear. He didn't want to mistake kindness for interest, didn't want to imagine something Shane might never offer. And yet, the simple fact that Shane had asked—had wanted to extend the moment, to share something as small and ordinary as a hot chocolate—felt intimate in a way that made his chest ache.

“Yes,” Ilya said finally, voice low. “That’s—yeah. That’s okay. We would love to.”

Shane’s smile softened at that. His features looked so young when he did that. Ilya knew they were the same age, but Shane was not a dad. His job was less demanding, and his life was probably calmer. He could go out with friends after work, or just rest alone at home while watching movies and eating popcorn. But he preferred to be outside in the cold, spending time with a tired Ilya and a grumpy Irina.

And Ilya felt it again: that warm, unsettling pull in his chest, sweet and terrifying all at once.

He was falling in love with Shane. *Disastrously. Undeniably.*

Shane invited them to step into the classroom for a moment, to keep them from getting colder. Irina immediately hopped down to the floor, taking his hand with enthusiasm.

“Come see my classroom, Papa!”

It was a wide, bright room, warm in a very specific way that was nothing like Ilya’s school back in Russia when he was a child. He remembered the coldness of his classroom, the dull green desks, the old chalkboards. When he had started school, he’d been almost seven, and he had never had the chance to be in a warm kindergarten classroom that felt more like a second home than a school.

When Ilya had gone to see the kindergarten two years earlier, it had seemed adequate. At the beginning-of-the-year meeting this year, Madame Dubois’s classroom had struck him as… decent. Neat, orderly, colorful thanks to its blue walls and posters about French vowels. It was okay. Average, for a kids classroom.

There was a clear change.

Low tables were scattered with crayons and paper, tiny chairs pushed into uneven lines. It was a little messy, much more than any other time Ilya had visited Dubois’s classroom, but there were drawings everywhere, full of color, with words written in English and French like *Teacher Shane is the best* or *Teacher Shane and I*. Ilya found himself completely mesmerized as Shane carefully picked each one up, slipping them into a folder with deliberate care before placing it into his bag.

More drawings made by the children covered the walls (snowmen, maple leaves, stick-figure characters), clearly the work of four-year-olds. A calendar marked with shapes hung near the door, and by the window there was a reading corner filled with cushions and worn picture books, soft and inviting in the late afternoon light.

And maybe it was Shane’s presence, but the classroom seemed just so *joyful*. Ilya kind of wanted to hang out here too, surrounded by beautiful drawings and the smell of paper and flowers.

“Papa, look!” she said. *“This is my* cubby. *I keep my lunchbox here, and my jacket, and sometimes my crayons. Look—the drawing, I made it!”*

Irina pointed to a kind of pink plastic basket with a drawing on the front that looked like a self-portrait. The last time Ilya had been in the classroom, he remembered the cubbies being marked only with the children's names, written in thick black marker. This time, it seemed Shane had let each of them decorate their own labels.

Ilya looked at Irina with a smile, brushing a hand over her hair, tied into two small pigtails.

"What is that on your face, Ira?" he asked curiously, pointing at the drawing. Irina shrugged, her cheeks flushed.

"Freckles, Papa," she replied. "Freckles like Teacher Shane's, shaped like stars, like the stickers he gives me sometimes. Only when I am good."

Ilya glanced briefly at Shane. He was putting on his scarf, but he was watching them with interest. When he heard Irina, his eyes—free of his glasses, which he seemed to wear only for work—narrowed slightly, and a quiet, almost mysterious smile spread across his face.

"Irina, viens ici," Ilya raised an eyebrow. Oh—so now using French *against him* was something between the two of them. Wonderful. *"Pourquoi on ne mettrait pas quelques autocollants à ton papa, hm?"*

Irina, come here. Why don't we put a few stickers on your dad, hm?

Irina's eyes lit up. Just a few minutes ago she'd looked so exhausted and sad… Ilya felt a wave of relief seeing her regain her sparkle.

"**Oui! Je peux choisir, s'il vous plaît, s'il vous plaît, s'il vous plaît?**"

Yes! Can I choose them, please, please, please?

"Of course, love."

Ilya ignored the soft, fond pet name Shane used with his daughter. He gave him a suspicious look.

"What are you two plotting against me?"

Shane laughed quietly. He walked around his desk, opened one of the drawers, and took something out, turning his back to Ilya while Irina accepted it and examined it with a thoughtful expression. A few seconds later, she spoke up:

"Ça, Monsieur Shane."

"C'est un excellent choix, Irina. Tu veux le mettre toi-même pour ton papa?"

This one, Teacher Shane.

That's an excellent choice, Irina. Do you want to put it on your dad yourself?

Irina shook her head, her lips forming an adorable little pout.

“Je suis trop petite, Monsieur Shane. Papa, il est trop grand. Tu peux faire!”

I can’t reach him, Teacher Shane. You can do it!

Shane looked at him for a moment, hesitating. Ilya had no idea what they were talking about, but when Shane stepped closer, he noticed two stickers stuck to his fingers. They were heart-shaped, purple and pink, and Ilya immediately understood what they were planning. He grinned, shifting his weight against the cubbies shelf.

“Where are you going with those, Teacher Shane?” he teased, trying to sound self-assured, confident. He hated to admit he’d lost much of his flirting skills. Lately, he overthought everything, and for a brief second he imagined a different world.

One where Shane played hockey, debuted the same year as him, got drafted alongside him. Nineteen-year-old Ilya would have been completely doomed, just like he was now. Back then, though, he’d been far more carefree, so he was sure he would’ve gotten Shane eventually. Or Shane would’ve gotten him, *easily*.

Real-life Shane seemed charmed enough, because his cheeks deepened to a perfect shade of red. He stopped right in front of him, close enough that Ilya could feel his warmth.

“Can I?” he asked softly, pointing at Ilya’s face.

Ilya was already nodding before Shane had even finished the question. Shane let out a small, amused huff of laughter.

“Stickers are a privilege, Ilya,” he said lightly, trying to sound serious. His smile failed him. “We only give them to students who behave well and learn French, like Irina.”

Ilya glanced briefly at his daughter over Shane’s shoulder. She had taken the sticker sheet, taking advantage of the fact that no one was watching her, and was busy placing little yellow stars on her cheeks, just like in the drawing on her cubby.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Ilya leaned in slightly toward Shane, as if he were about to share a secret.

“I can’t do French, *teacher*. It goes against my beliefs,” he murmured. Shane looked at him with wide eyes. “But I can say some Russian words to you to earn my sticker. Hm?”

“Yes?” Shane muttered. “Like what?”

Ilya leaned in until he was aligned with Shane’s ear, his nose brushing it softly. He felt him tremble, hold his breath, and that reaction alone pushed him to speak.

“You are so wonderful and sweet, and I love your freckles, I’m simply obsessed with them, you are the most beautiful man I have ever met, and you are so good with my daughter,” he whispered, an ironic laugh slipping from his mouth without meaning to. Shane glanced at him from the corner of his eye, his inner lip caught between his teeth. Ilya found himself lost in the gesture all over again. *“You drive me crazy, Shane, and I am definitely not against that.”*

He pulled back just enough to see his face, finding flushed cheeks, freckles, and eyes darkened by a mix of warmth and longing. For a few seconds, Ilya feared Shane might secretly know Russian and had understood every word. But Shane looked away briefly, murmuring a very quiet curse in French that Ilya didn't catch, before looking back at him.

"I hope those were nice words," he muttered, "because they sounded like it. Too much."

Ilya smiled broadly, giving him back a bit of his personal space. First, because Irina was now watching them with interest. Second, because for the sake of his own emotional integrity, he needed to get away from Shane's freckles. Immediately. He hadn't been joking when he said they drove him insane.

"More than nice, I would say."

Shane made an unconscious pout. His hands rose to Ilya's face, placing a sticker on his cheek. It was small, barely noticeable from afar. Then he placed the other one in the same spot, right on the opposite cheek.

"I think I might learn Russian…"

Ilya caught his wrist at that. He looked at him steadily. Shane held his gaze, something like defiance—competitiveness—in his eyes.

"No."

"Why not?"

Ilya sighed. *Fuck*, just the idea of him—Shane, speaking to him in Russian. Understanding everything that crossed Ilya's mind every time he saw him. Shane, patient and soft and caring, teaching Irina proper Russian grammar, how to write beautifully (because Ilya would bet his life on Shane's calligraphy, even if he'd only seen a glimpse of it on the chalkboard behind Irina), how to read, how to sing traditional Russian songs… He would die dramatically. Instantly. His heart would simply stop working, overloaded with sweetness and love—

"I can't let Irina find out how bad her father speaks every language, Shane. I already embarrass myself with my English. You can't come and steal the only language she thinks I'm the best at," Ilya joked, hoping that his real thoughts weren't written too clearly on his face. The teacher laughed softly, the hardness on his eyes fading until only a subtle gleam remained.

"Just so you know, I'm not *that* good with languages."

"Sure." Ilya rolled his eyes. His thumb brushed over Shane's soft wrist.

"I'm serious!"

"Ira, your dear Monsieur Shane *is a liar. I'm changing your school."*

Irina brought a hand to her mouth, hiding a conspiratorial smile. She had been watching them. Ilya knew it. Irina was smart. It probably wasn't too hard to figure out that her dad was being a little too friendly with her teacher. *Whatever.* Canadian laws didn't forbid it, right? Ilya hoped. He really didn't want to be sent back to Russia just because he fell in love with his child's teacher.

And she seemed happy. Ilya didn't want to think too much about whether it was because she genuinely enjoyed Shane's company, or whether her small mind already understood that her dad was completely alone, and that anyone who made Ilya smile was welcome in their lives. He didn't want to think about that.

He wanted to believe Irina truly felt something for Shane, just like he did.

That he was more than a cool teacher for her, because even if sharing his daughter with someone else was utterly scary, Ilya couldn't think of a better person for them. No one will do, not now that he knew Shane.

"But I like Teacher Shane, Papa!"

I do too, he thought.

"No—what are you two saying? This is unfair. You shouldn't talk about me when I can't understand!" Shane complained, offended.

Ilya couldn't help himself. He tugged lightly at Shane's hand, bringing it to his lips and pressing a kiss to the back of it. Shane's smile vanished, replaced by a surprised expression, but his eyes shined more vibrantly.

"Ilya—"

"Papa, can we go now, please? I want to see the lights!"

Irina ran back to their side, and Ilya let go of Shane's hand slowly. He took one last look at those flushed cheeks decorated with freckles. Then he crouched in front of his daughter, taking in her face now covered in stickers, and couldn't help kissing her nose.

"Okay, let's go, *solnyshko."*

To his surprise, Irina didn't take his hand. She took Shane's instead, with complete confidence, launching into a rapid string of words: requests and loud, unfiltered childish thoughts about Christmas lights, going ice skating, and then eating ice cream. Shane froze for a second, sending a jolt of pure terror through Ilya's body, but eventually he guided Irina out of the classroom with natural ease. He looked good with Irina at his side. *Correct*.

It had been a long, long time since Ilya had felt this full. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his jacket, following them with a smile he couldn't possibly hide.

"… And you can come with us to the arena, Teacher Shane! My papa will buy you new skates. He's rich!"

Shane burst out laughing, locking the classroom with a scandalous bundle of keys that would have easily tested Ilya's patience, though he seemed to know exactly what each one was for. He didn't even need to let go of Irina's hand.

"That won't be necessary, Irina. I have my own skates."

"But Papa can buy you pink ones! That way the three of us would match. *Pleeease."*

Shane looked at him, amused.

"You have pink skates?"

"Of course. To match my daughter's," Ilya said matter-of-factly. "Besides, pink looks great on me."

Shane rolled his eyes.

"Wow, Rozanov. So full of yourself."

Ilya was about to say something clever and flirtatious when a sound caught his attention. Two doors down from theirs, a woman (another teacher) was leaving late as well. She looked surprised, and for a moment Ilya felt a spike of fear, certain she would comment on Shane holding Irina's hand, or on the three of them leaving together.

But she didn't. She glanced at Ilya with curiosity, then at Shane with a polite nod, and waved at Irina with a fond smile.

"Au revoir, Irina!"

"Au revoir, Madame Cynthia!"

That was all. The woman walked away with a small grin. Shane looked back at him.

"Is it—bad if she saw me with you? Will you have… problems?" Shane asked suddenly, panic flickering in his voice.

For a moment, Ilya didn't understand what he meant. Then it clicked.

The teacher had recognized him, without a doubt. The whole school knew Irina was the daughter of a famous hockey player, who now happened to be leaving with her teacher. The school had to protect Irina's privacy, but Ilya wasn't sure how far that went. Whether it included not commenting on the fact that her father might be interested in another *man*.

Four years ago, the mere idea would have sent him straight into a panic attack. Ilya had carefully built a womanizer reputation, not only to hide his attraction to men, but because he needed to be the star Boston wanted. It wasn't enough to be a good player. The Raiders wanted a celebrity, they wanted the eccentric European flirt who made headlines not just for his scores, but for his mediatic life.

They'd lost that Ilya when Irina came into his life, and his greatest fear had been that no other team would want him without that carefully crafted persona.

Ilya had loved that life, there was no lie in that. He wouldn't be hypocritical enough to deny that going from bed to bed had been his thing for a long time, that he had enjoyed it, exploited it to the fullest. It had been easy, fun.

But he was mature enough now to accept that maybe it had also been a cover. A role he learned to play well, and that kept him distracted from his own problems. A way of selling the world a version of himself that felt safer *for him*, easier to like. The Raiders, and hockey fans, wouldn't like the angry, depressive Ilya under all those parties and girls.

Even less the Ilya that *fucked* men. The Ilya who was—probably—*in love* with a man.

With the Centaurs, Ilya didn't have that fear. He couldn't imagine his current teammates giving him strange looks because of his sexuality. Harris would drag him to his family's farm for dinner with Irina just to make him feel less alone, and would probably gift him three bisexual pride pins, because surely he kept some around the house for emergencies. Wyatt would normalize it instantly, and Bood would complain because *of course Rozanov didn't just settle for girls, he had to take everyone. Selfish motherfucker.* Even Luca Haas, if Ilya's intuition didn't fail him, would eventually seek him out just to ask how he'd known. The boy always looked for him for advice.

Even Wiebe—or Katherine, the management director—wouldn't care. *At all.*

Ilya had been so worried about Shane getting into trouble with the school over this that he hadn't even stopped to think about his own job. Because he knew, with certainty, that he would be fine. Maybe the MLH wouldn't be, but he didn't care. Not if his team had his back. And they *did*.

"No," he answered simply, without elaborating, though it meant far more to him than the word alone could hold. The fact that he had thought it through and reached the conclusion that he would be okay with this specific thing meant the world to him. "Would you be okay with it?"

Shane didn't hesitate.

"More than okay, Ilya."

***

When Ilya asked about it, Shane answered *yes, I have a driver's license, but I take the bus and then the O-Train every day.* When Ilya had asked why, he'd only shrugged.

“It’s cheaper, and much better for the environment.”

That alone had made Ilya smile. Of course Shane cared about the environment. He didn’t comment on it, though the teacher huffed softly at his teasing grin while helping Irina climb into her car seat.

“Teacher Shane, can you sit with me here, please?” Irina asked sweetly, lips pushed into a little pout, batting her eyelashes with shameless precision.

Shane agreed without hesitation.

So the drive became Ilya’s rather miserable attempt to keep his eyes on the road while he kept catching glimpses, in the rearview mirror, of Shane chatting with Irina. Sometimes they spoke in French, leaving him completely out of the conversation, but Ilya didn’t mind it in the slightest. He wasn’t really listening to the words anyway.

It was the highlight ten minutes of his entire week.

By the time they managed to park as close as possible to Confederation Park, Irina was practically bouncing in her seat, pointing excitedly at the lights already visible through the window. If Ilya had to give Canadians credit for anything, it was their dedication during Christmas season. Maybe his memory—crowded with painful scraps of memories—was playing tricks on him, but he remembered Russia as far grayer, far duller around this time of year.

Not that he had any desire to check.

“Ira, first I need to put your gloves on—”

“I’m not cold, Papa!”

“That’s because you’ve been inside the car, sweetheart. But you’ll be outside.”

Irina stayed very still, wearing a pronounced pout. Ilya tried to remain firm, but a smile escaped him anyway. Stubborn. Exactly like him.

Confederation Park in December felt almost unreal.

The park was transformed by Christmas lights strung through bare trees, wrapping branches in warm whites and soft colors that reflected on the snow-dusted paths. Light sculptures rose between the trunks. Arches, stars, and other delicate shapes that shifted gently as people passed. The canal nearby caught fragments of brightness, the ice and dark water mirroring everything in broken reflections.

There were families everywhere. Children bundled up like little astronauts, couples walking slowly with cups of hot chocolate, laughter drifting through the cold air in clouds of breath. Booths stood near the entrance, selling warm drinks and pastries, the smell of cocoa and sugar mixing with the crisp winter cold.

It was festive without being overwhelming. It was cozy, and Ilya admitted (quietly, to himself) that he liked it a lot. Maybe it felt better this year because Irina was almost jumping with excitement, walking between him and Shane, her small hands held firmly in theirs.

They—they looked just like the rest of the families.

Two parents, a child in the middle.

And that had never really mattered to Ilya. All his life, he had considered his mother his only true parent. He believed, sincerely, that a family's only requirements were love and respect, not a specific shape, not a mother and a father, not any of that. That he and Irina alone were already a family.

But he knew she craved this.

She didn't care that Shane was a man. She didn't care about labels or explanations. She only wanted another presence, another steady figure walking beside her. And seeing her like this—happy, secure, glowing under the lights—filled Ilya with warmth and happiness.

He was *so happy* to see her have that.

Ilya watched Irina take it all in with wide, shining eyes, and for a moment the tightness in his chest finally eased. Under the lights, with snow crunching softly beneath their boots and Shane by their side, everything felt right.

"Papa, can I have a BeaverTail? Please, please—"

"Of course, *solnyshko."*

"And hot chocolate with marshmallows?"

"Yes—"

"And what is that?! Can I have it?"

Shane answered her gently. "That's called *tire d'érable*, Irina. And it has far too much sugar for today. You'll have to choose between that or the BeaverTail."

She nodded, understanding right away.

"I want the tail."

"Then let's go get it," Ilya said.

She hugged him tightly.

"Thank you, Papa!"

She let go of him, tugging Shane toward a nearby booth. A young couple was just leaving, and Irina immediately claimed their spot, starting to chat with the vendor as if she'd been

doing it all her life. The man seemed utterly charmed by her, moving to prepare everything she asked for after Shane gave a small, gentle nod when he looked to him for approval.

Ilya watched them from a short distance for a moment. His daughter was glowing, practically radiant, and Shane was, too. The vendor exchanged a few words in French with both of them, making Irina shrug with a hint of shyness as she was handed an enormous piece of fried dough shaped like a beaver's tail (Ilya still thought it was a strange concept, but his daughter adored it) and a cup of hot chocolate that Shane took for her, careful and attentive.

Then Ilya was ready to step closer, reaching for his wallet to pay, but he was stopped.

"Are you Ilya Rozanov? From the Centaurs?"

He turned to his side and found two young girls staring at him with bright, excited eyes. Ilya felt the nerves rise through his body automatically. It wasn't the first time this had happened, but it was always uncomfortable having to refuse photos. He didn't want fans to have pictures of Irina, and he didn't want to pull her away just to give them attention. He didn't want to take his eyes off her in a public place, or hand her over to a stranger while he signed meaningless scraps of paper or smiled for people to whom he was nothing more than a distant idol.

But, this time, he wasn't alone with Irina.

Shane was with her, right there. He looked at Ilya with a knowing expression and gave him a small nod, subtly pointing toward a massive bear sculpture made of bright lights. *We'll be there*, his lips mouthed silently.

Ilya nodded back, watching him take Irina by the hand.

The tension eased a little. Irina was safe. Ilya could give these two girls a few minutes, and nothing would happen. For the first time since becoming a father, Ilya felt—truly *believed*—that maybe he could have both things again. Hockey and his life as a father. That they didn't have to cancel each other out.

Ilya looked at the two small Centaurs fans and offered them a gentle smile.

"Yes," he confirmed. He felt more confident than he had in years. "That's me."

"Cool!" the younger one exclaimed, turning to her sister.

"Can we have a photo, Mr. Rozanov?"

"Yeah, why not?" Ilya replied easily. "Where are your parents? They can take a photo of us together."

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Irina didn't last as long as Ilya had expected. They managed to walk through half the park before her energy began to fade, and once her hot chocolate was gone, she lifted her arms toward him, asking to be picked up, sleepy enough now that walking felt like too much effort.

Half an hour later, Irina was dozing off against his shoulder. Shane, holding a paper cone half full of roasted chestnuts, looked at him with a raised eyebrow and warmth in his eyes.

"You should take her home."

Ilya didn't want to leave, but he nodded. Irina was exhausted. He could feel her small, steady breathing and her cold little nose pressed against his neck.

"Yeah, I should," he murmured.

They reached the car a few minutes later, wrapped in a comfortable, peaceful silence.

"Would you—"

"I can take the bus," Shane said at the same time, and something in Ilya's chest sank. He—he didn't want him to leave yet. Maybe he could ask him to stay a little longer. Maybe that wouldn't sound too needy. Shane seemed to catch the hesitation in his expression. "Or I can go with you?" he added quickly. "Then I can take the bus from your place."

"I can drive you home after," Ilya said at once, too relieved, too pleased by the idea of Shane staying for a bit more. "Patricia is home. She will stay with Irina."

Shane smiled at him. "Okay. That sounds great."

This time, Shane sat in the passenger seat. Ilya made sure Irina was properly buckled in and comfortable before taking his place behind the wheel. After shrugging off his coat, he fastened his seatbelt and paused for a moment, needing a second to process everything that had happened.

"Are you okay?" Shane's soft voice brushed against his ears.

Ilya looked at him. There was concern in those beautiful brown eyes, and he couldn't quite understand how life had brought him here in just a matter of weeks. How he could want so many things with one person, when for years he had refused to let anyone into his life. Into Irina's life. He shouldn't feel this comfortable with someone so quickly, should he? Everything fit too easily.

It terrified him.

"Thank you for suggesting we come," he managed to say, barely. "It's been a long time since I've seen Irina this happy."

“That’s not true,” Shane murmured, his hand settling over Ilya’s on the steering wheel. “She’s happy with you, Ilya. She just has bad days. We all do.”

llya watched Irina for a long moment though the rearview mirror, watching her slowly breathing as sleep pulled her under. The lights reflected softly on her cheeks, the stickers still clinging there, half crooked now. She looked peaceful, but there was something fragile about it that made his chest tighten again.

“She’s four,” Ilya said, tension creeping into his voice. “She shouldn’t have bad days, and she’s been like this all week. Like… rollercoaster, yes? Up and down. I don’t know what to do to help her.”

“That’s actually very normal at her age,” Shane said softly. His thumb brushed over Ilya’s knuckles, over the faint bruises there, the touch grounding him in a way that made him feel like a restless animal being soothed. He hated how much he liked it.

“Kids don’t experience emotions less just because they’re young. They experience the same emotions we do, and because they don’t have the tools yet to understand why they’re sad, or how to put it into words, it can come out in waves. One moment they’re laughing, the next they’re overwhelmed, and both feelings are normal and okay. There’s nothing wrong with it.” He glanced back at Irina, asleep in her seat.

“She doesn’t always know what she’s feeling or why she is feeling it. So sadness can become tiredness, or silence, or clinging. It doesn’t mean she’s unhappy. It means she trusts that she can feel those things safely around you. You’re her safe place.”

Ilya swallowed, his grip tightening just slightly, on Shane’s hand.

“Do you think it will improve with the therapist?” Ilya asked quietly. He was afraid. He knew he needed to take that step (for himself and for Irina) but he also knew it would devastate him if therapy didn’t work for them.

“I’m positive it will,” Shane said, without hesitation. “But you need to give it time. And you need to remember that this kind of process isn’t linear, Ilya. Not for you, and not for her. You can’t expect to walk out of the first session healed.”

His voice stayed calm, steady.

“There’s nothing to cure. Nothing broken that needs fixing. You just need someone who can help you learn how to manage your emotions and that’s something a lot of people need help with for most of their lives.”

Ilya nodded. He knew it. It made him think of his mother. Of the way she had always been sad, and how much she had struggled trying to manage it on her own. Sadness had eaten her alive. It had *killed* her.

He didn’t want that for himself, and he didn’t want it for Irina.

If Ilya needed to go to a psychologist, if he was too depressed and needed medication, if starting therapy so young could prevent Irina from ending up the same way, he would do it all. For as long as it took.

Even if it terrified him.

“Okay.”

Ilya didn’t say anything else, but he kept hold of Shane’s hand. Maybe four years ago it wouldn’t have been possible to use the gear shift as an excuse to touch him, because Ilya remembered driving manual cars at overwhelming speeds, reflexes sharp and constant. Now, with the safest automatic SUV on the market, he could rest Shane’s hand beneath his own and keep it there.

The drive home felt a little longer. Shane gave him a few minutes of grace, letting the weight of the previous conversation settle and dissolve. Ilya let him choose a radio station, soft Christmas songs filling the car at a volume low enough not to wake Irina.

“This weekend I’m traveling to Montréal.”

Ilya glanced at Shane from the corner of his eye. “What have you lost there?”

The teacher huffed a quiet laugh.

“I want to see my nephews. Hayden and Jackie’s kids.”

“Ah, yes. Hayden Pike. Fourteenth best player of the Metros,” Ilya teased lightly. “You could’ve picked a more interesting best friend. Last time we played against the Metros, I don’t even remember seeing him on the ice.”

“That’s not true. Hayden is a good player,” Shane argued, an amused smile tugging at his lips.

“I’d bet my life you’re far better than him.”

“Pf, obviously,” Shane said without a hint of shame. With every passing minute, the professional boundary between them seemed to blur a little more. They weren’t a teacher and a student’s father anymore. Ilya felt him close, like someone he didn’t need to stay on guard around, someone he could just *be* with. “But I think I’m better than most players, so that comparison doesn’t really say much.”

“Even better than me?” Ilya asked, teasing.

Shane raised an eyebrow. His eyes shone, pure competitiveness and determination in them. He would have been a hell of a good player. Ilya was certain.

“Probably. I guess we should test it someday.”

“Whenever you want, Hollander,” Ilya cut in, grinning. “I’ll buy you pink skates and a Centaurs jersey. That way we will be evenly matched.”

“I’m sure Irina would be thrilled.”

“She has no loyalty when it comes to you,” he replied. “She would betray me without hesitation and take your side. She’d probably get mad at me if I didn’t let you win.”

Shane shifted in his seat, turning toward him with indignation. “*Let me* win?”

“Yes. I want to keep my daughter,” Ilya said solemnly. “She will kick me out of our house if I hurt the feelings of her beloved *Monsieur Shane*.”

Shane laughed and let it go, the sound warm and easy. He turned back toward Irina, still asleep in the back seat, and Ilya felt his grip tighten just a little around his hand. Their fingers fit together without effort, like they had always known where to rest.

“She’s an incredible kid,” Shane said quietly.

“Yes,” Ilya answered. “She really is.”

By the time they pulled into the driveway, Irina was fully asleep. Patricia’s car was already there, and the house had its lights on. It wasn’t extremely massive, but it was far more than two people needed. Ilya should get a dog. Maybe.

Patricia opened the door before they even parked, waving at them with a hint of surprise in his eyes when she spotted Shane.

“Hey,” she whispered with a smile. She looked into the car. “Looks like someone had a big night.”

Ilya nodded, opening the car door carefully. “She crashed about twenty minutes ago.”

He bent to unbuckle Irina, instinctively reaching to lift her, but she stirred, frowning softly, arms shifting in search of something familiar.

“Papa…” she murmured, half-asleep.

“I’ve got you, *solnyshko,*” Ilya said, already pulling her close.

But she turned her head, eyes barely opening, and reached instead toward Shane.

“Teacher Shane,” she mumbled. “Can Teacher Shane carry me? Please?”

Ilya froze for half a second, surprised, then looked at Shane. Patricia watched the exchange with gentle curiosity, saying nothing.

Shane didn’t hesitate.

“Of course,” he whispered, stepping closer. He took Irina carefully, as if she were something fragile and precious, one arm under her knees, the other steady at her back. She immediately relaxed against him.

Ilya stayed close, but far enough to watch. Patricia guided Shane quietly through the house until they reached Irina's bedroom.

From the doorframe, with Patricia beside him, he saw Shane murmur soft, reassuring words as he helped her get into bed. French words too low to hear clearly, but the tone was unmistakable: kind, affectionate, *loving*. The kind of voice Ilya used to murmur soft things to her in Russian.

He caught part of the conversation when Irina seemed too tired to keep her French precise.

"Teacher Shane," she called, sleepy but earnest. "Can I call you Shane?"

Shane smiled, brushing a hand gently over her hair. "Yes, Irina. That's perfectly okay."

She sighed contentedly, already drifting back toward sleep.

"Fais de beaux rêves, ma chérie," Shane whispered, leaving a gentle kiss on her forehead.

Sweet dreams, my darling.

Ilya stayed back, chest tight, until Irina suddenly peeked one eye open.

"Papa?" she murmured. *"Spokoynoy nochi."*

That was when he stepped forward, sitting down beside her in bed. He smiled, leaving a kiss exactly where Shane had placed his.

"Good night, love."

As he straightened, he caught Shane's eyes on him. And maybe Ilya was mistaken, but his gaze seemed just as kind, affectionate and loving as it was towards Irina seconds ago.

***

Shane lived in a neighborhood east of Ottawa. The drive there from Ilya's place felt much shorter than expected. For a long while, the car was filled only with the low hum of the music Ilya had chosen. *Bad Bunny*. His teammates had terrible taste, and he needed to expand his playlist with something decent for warm-ups. Not even Wiebe (whom he considered a cool man) had acceptable preferences. It was ridiculous.

So a little bit of reggaeton was perfect for team morale, according to him. Maybe it was *not* perfect in this specific scenario—with a cute guy sitting next to him looking amused by his musical taste—, but it was too late to try to search for a romantic ballad or something similar.

Ilya focused on the beat, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel. At some point, he started humming along without realizing it.

Shane let out an involuntary little laugh, which made Ilya glance at him from the corner of his eye.

“What?”

“Your Spanish.” Shane said, amused.

“Oh, so now you know Spanish too?” Ilya asked, mock-offended, eyes widening theatrically.

Shane shrugged.

“I took a Spanish elective in college—”

“Ah, fucking come on! This is not even funny anymore, Hollander.”

“I like languages!” Shane protested lightly, laughing. “I don’t like Bad Bunny that much, though. I mean, he’s great, but…”

“Okay, get out of my car,” Ilya said. “A French speaker I can tolerate, but a Bad Bunny hater? No. No. Out, Hollander.”

Shane burst out laughing, head tipping back, eyes nearly watering.

“So, what kind of music do you like?” Ilya asked, glancing at him. “Boring French music?”

Shane let out a quiet laugh.

“I get so tired of singing *days of the week* songs every single day that I don’t really listen to much music at home,” he admitted. “You know, the *Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday* ones. Over and over again. Add *The Wheels on the Bus*, *If You’re Happy and You Know It*, and *Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes* to the mix, and by the end of the week my brain is completely fried.”

Ilya smiled. Shane was complaining in the most polite, almost fond way possible. It was ridiculous how cute he was.

“But yeah,” Shane went on, his voice softer now, “I guess I like French stuff. I used to listen to Charles Aznavour a lot in college. Jacques Brel, too.”

“Okay,” Ilya said, amused. “And someone born in this century? No?”

Shane huffed, nudging his arm teasingly. Ilya laughed.

“Shut up, asshole. *We* weren’t born this century.”

“Wow, wow!” Ilya cried out, grinning. “Those are *not* appropriate words for a cute and polite kindergarten teacher, Shane.”

Ilya followed the GPS directions with an easy smile, teasing and laughing with Shane along the way. They pulled over a few minutes later in front of a red-brick building, only two stories tall. He unbuckled and got out of the car without thinking, moving around to open Shane's door for him.

It wasn't about being a gentleman.

Ilya just wanted an excuse to be close again, to steal one last moment of warmth before Shane left, to feel his presence linger for a second longer. He was being egotistic, but he didn't care.

The snow piled along the edges of the street gave Ilya the excuse he needed to take Shane's hand. Shane didn't protest, letting Ilya lace their fingers together as they walked far slower than necessary toward the building's entrance. Then they stopped—and looked at each other.

"I live upstairs," Shane explained, gesturing toward the narrow exterior spiral staircase that led to a door identical to the one below. "It's just one bedroom, but I don't really need more than that when I'm on my own."

Ilya took another look at the building. Compared to the rest of the street, lined with townhouses that looked noticeably larger, it was undeniably modest. But he understood. Shane probably didn't make a fortune, and even if he did, he didn't seem like the kind of person who needed space just for the sake of it.

"So," Ilya asked anyway, because he needed to be sure, even if it was *obvious*, "no partners?"

Shane let out a small huff of a smile and shook his head. His gaze dropped to their tangled hands.

"No. I don't think so," he answered. "Not for a long time. And it was never serious. So, no."

"Great," Ilya murmured.

Shane wet his lip. Ilya had already noticed the habit. How, whenever Shane was nervous, his attention gravitated to his mouth. Biting, licking, worrying at his lips without realizing it. Some unconscious fixation that Ilya found himself paying far too much attention to.

"Me neither," Ilya added, a beat later.

The comment was unnecessary, maybe even stupid, but it earned him a small laugh from Shane. Ilya felt heat creep up to his ears.

"I'm sorry I can't go with you tomorrow for breakfast," Shane said then, his expression turning slightly concerned.

"It is no problem," Ilya replied softly. "Svetlana will stay with us this week. You know, to spend some time with Irina. That will probably keep her entertained." Shane visibly relaxed. Ilya went on, lower now. "But that doesn't mean *I* won't miss you."

Shane blushed instantly. Ilya took courage from it, stepping closer. Shane's grip on his hand tightened in an unconscious gesture. Again, his lower lip caught between his teeth, his eyes lifted to Ilya's from barely a few inches below.

Ilya studied him for a moment. He was so inconceivably beautiful.

Then he raised his free hand, two fingers settling gently under Shane's chin, holding him there as he leaned in.

He wanted to kiss him so badly. He wanted to give those lips the attention they were clearly begging for. He wanted to steal his breath, to lose himself there, to taste the sweetness he was certain lived in Shane's mouth, the soft, beautiful sounds he knew Shane would make.

But Ilya wasn't so sure of himself anymore.

So instead, he pressed a slow, gentle peck to Shane's cheek, and lingered there a second longer than necessary.

"Thank you for everything, Shane."

"Please, don't thank me," Shane murmured quietly. "I—I'm not doing this out of pity. I really adore Irina. I care about her." Affection overflowed from his words, unguarded and sincere.

Ilya pulled back just enough to look at him properly.

"And I care about you too, Ilya," Shane continued, his voice barely above a whisper. "So much it scares me."

Ilya's heart jolted in his chest. For a moment, he was convinced the damn thing might actually break free of his ribcage just to reach Shane somehow.

"Do you?" he muttered, leaning in again, this time pressing his forehead gently against Shane's. He was cold there, colder than the flushed warmth of his cheek, probably because the air was freezing, the sun nowhere to be seen, and they'd been outside too long. And yet, Ilya had never felt warmer.

"Yes," Shane whispered. His gaze slipped from Ilya's eyes for a brief second, dropping to his lips. Ilya caught it immediately. "I know it's sudden," Shane went on softly, "and it's probably a bad idea—"

"Is it?" Ilya interrupted.

Shane's lips parted, just slightly. Ilya hadn't meant for the question to push anything, but it seemed to give Shane the resolve he'd been missing, because the next thing Ilya knew, there were soft lips against his.

It was so brief it could have been a blink. The warm, damp touch of Shane's mouth left him almost as quickly as it had arrived, and for a moment Ilya stood frozen, genuinely wondering if he had finally lost his mind. If he had imagined the whole thing.

But when he opened his eyes, Shane was still there.

His entire face was flushed despite the cold, lips parted and wet, eyes wide with the kind of panic that came from being terrified of having done something wrong. Ilya stared at him, stunned, unable to believe that this man—this *incredible man* who drove him completely insane—had just kissed him. Him. Ilya Rozanov. The world's biggest mess. The weak Ilya who cried in front of his daughter's teacher. The ridiculous Ilya who was falling, helplessly and selfishly, for the kindest, gentlest person he had met in years. The sad Ilya who couldn't do anything right.

Shane Hollander had kissed him. *Him*.

Shane wasn't some unknown girl at a distant club. Shane wasn't looking for casual sex. Shane knew him. Shane knew his daughter, his struggles, his fears. And he chose to kiss him.

Him. *Ilya*.

It was almost unbelievable, and yet here he was, standing in front of him, lips still tingling, eyes wide and uncertain with a raw intensity lingering between them. Every rational thought had fled. All that remained was the undeniable, reckless pull of wanting—needing.

Ilya *needed him*, and the realization sent shivers racing through his entire body.

"Was—was that okay?" Shane asked suddenly, his voice tight, betraying the worry he couldn't hide. Ilya saw him swallow hard. "I'm sorry if I—"

Ilya stepped forward before he could finish, hands instinctively coming up to cup Shane's face, thumbs brushing over the warmth of his cheeks. There was no hesitation, no doubt, only the raw certainty of wanting him.

He leaned in and kissed him properly, mouth pressing against Shane's with a hunger that made Shane gasp into the kiss. Ilya groaned immediately, mind empty, consumed only by the sweetness of Shane's lips—their softness, the warm, familiar taste of him. It felt like dying and coming back to life at the same time.

Somehow Shane parted his lips, and Ilya moved instinctively, letting desire guide him. He nibbled Shane's lower lip gently, then licked it, then sucked it, causing a soft moan that slipped past Shane's mouth. Shane's hands clutched Ilya's coat, gripping something solid, while his fingers tangled in the back of Ilya's hair, pulling him closer, pushing back against Ilya's eager tongue with a fierce, delicious resistance.

They were messy, greedy, even reckless. They were out in the middle of the street on a regular workday. Anyone could see them. Someone could take a photo, ruin his career in a heartbeat.

But Ilya didn't care. Not at all.

The kiss lingered until they couldn't breathe, until Ilya slowly pulled back, gasping for air, forehead resting against Shane's as if he'd just run a marathon. He let out a long, shuddering

sigh and planted a series of soft pecks on Shane's lips. One, another, and then another, tasting every corner, leaving them flushed and slightly sticky, entirely his.

A few seconds later, Shane seemed to pull himself together. His eyes were no longer a tangled mess of overwhelming desire, and there seemed to be rational thought behind them. Ilya remained mesmerized by his lips, debating how wrong it would be to ask him to let him come up to his apartment, to have a little more time alone, in the warmth of four walls, where Ilya could show him just how much he wanted him—

But Patricia would be leaving soon, and Shane was traveling the next day. Ilya had a daughter to care for, and no matter how tempting the idea of spending the night with him was, he couldn't.

Not tonight.

"I will miss you so fucking much," he whispered, too much feeling in his voice. His face was tense. "Tell Pike to come here next time if he wants to see you. He doesn't need you like we do."

Shane smiled at that, shaking his head.

"You'll be okay without me."

"Yes, but I don't want to be without you right now. More like opposite," Ilya said, pulling him in, arms winding tightly around his waist. "Irina would agree."

Shane returned the hug, one hand still tangled in his curls, which were surely a mess now. Ilya didn't care.

"I'll miss both of you too."

The confession caused irreparable emotional damage. Ilya buried his nose in Shane's black hair, memorizing the silky texture and the soft, floral scent. It had nearly fainted, but he swore he could still smell it.

When they pulled apart, Shane left one last peck on his lips.

"Bonne nuit, Ilya."

"Spokoynoy nochi, Shane."

Ilya watched him leave. He didn't move until Shane had climbed the stairs and entered his apartment, giving him one last glance before closing the door.

When he got back into the car, the rearview mirror reflected the gaze of a lovesick idiot and two silly stickers still glued on his face.

Ilya smiled, and felt tears forming in his eyes, but he let them fall without remorse. Because these were happy tears. For the first time in a very long, long time.

Chapter End Notes

Ilya's dialogue in Cyrillic in case any Russian reader wants to know his exact words, since something might get lost in translation:
Ты такой восхитительный и милый, и я люблю твои веснушки, просто одержим ими, ты самый красивый мужчина, которого я когда-либо встречал, и ты так хорошо ладишь с моей дочерью. Ты сидишь меня с ума, Shane, и я определенно не против этого.
Other words:
Bonne nuit/Spokoynoy nochi: goodnight
Au revoir: goodbye

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

1. rate has changed to explicit. i tried to keep it cutie and softie but i am a whore sorry.

2. for context: montreal metros are not that good in this story because they don't have shane, so that made them more humble. also, i'm making them all platonically in love with shane, so be aware that this is a huge massive enormous ooc. i don't want to hear your opinions about it. if it takes you out of the story, please close the door after leaving.

enjoy!

Ilya woke up with a sense of rest in his body, one that he hadn't felt in months. His limbs felt light instead of heavy, his head blessedly quiet instead of racing at full speed. The anxious pounding in his chest (the one that usually greeted him every morning) was nowhere to be found, and that alone felt like a small miracle.

He had slept straight through the night. No night terrors, nor sudden jolts awake, gasping for air, heart in his throat, driven by the familiar urge to walk down the hall and check on Irina just to make sure everything was still in its place, that she was still there. For the first time in what felt like forever, Ilya had rested deeply.

And he had dreamed actual sweet dreams. Maybe *far* too sweet.

They still clung to him, hazily, like the lingering taste of Shane's mouth, like the memory of gentle hands carding through his hair last night. Like the shared warmth of their bodies pressed together against the harsh, dry cold of the street. He had dreamed of climbing the exterior stairs of Shane's building, kissing him breathlessly between steps, laughter and need blurring together as his hands slipped beneath layers of clothing.

He had dreamed (too vividly) of what Shane's apartment might look like. Neat, for sure, with a faint, clean scent in the air. Fresh flowers, probably orchids, would be set on elegant vases around the house, dressing the simple furniture in soft, muted colors. Nothing flashy, because Shane for sure didn't like colors that were too bright.

None of that had truly mattered, though.

The only piece of furniture that had mattered was the couch. The couch that had felt alarmingly real beneath his hands in the dream, solid and warm as he guided Shane down onto it, as he undressed him slowly, deliberately, as if there were all the time in the world.

The dream (*fantasy)* had been detailed and lifelike enough to leave him with two very real problems.

The first was that Ilya now desperately wanted to know whether the soft, muffled sounds Shane had made in his dream would resemble the sounds the real Shane would make. If the freckles on Shane's shoulders were real, or if his mind was just too ahead of himself. If Shane was as flexible and willing to let Ilya put him into positions more than improper as in his dreams. If he would even let Ilya touch him that way.

The thoughts lodged themselves deep in his mind, sharp and insistent, and he knew he would *obsess* over them until he found out.

The second problem was far more immediate. And very much located between his legs.

With a quiet curse, Ilya swung his feet over the side of the bed and stood, heading straight for the shower. He needed to pull himself back together, wake Irina, and hope he could keep his focus. It was game day, and the team needed him fully present on the ice.

Also, he had a busy week ahead and no real chance of seeing Shane much, if at all. Even if he wanted to (and he ached to) he couldn't let his mind wander back to him. He simply couldn't afford it.

He was already regretting not asking for his number. How could he have been so stupid? If he had Shane's phone, he could at least say good morning. Send him a silly emoji. Maybe even send him a photo of Irina, in the hope that Shane would reply with one of himself, cute freckles and sweet smile and all on display.

The upper floor of the house was quiet. For a few seconds, Ilya thought Irina might still be asleep, but loud laughter drifting up from downstairs quickly proved him wrong.

He followed the sound, finding his two favorite girls in the kitchen.

"No, Aunt Sveta! I want to put freckles on him—"

"But bears don't have freckles, Irochka."

"This one does!"

Ilya smiled at his daughter's stubbornness, leaning against the kitchen doorway. Svetlana was wearing a very old Raiders t-shirt, probably from when he'd been drafted more than eight years ago. At first, the shirt brought back bittersweet memories. His life back then, despite how it might have looked to the rest of the world, hadn't been easy at all. Ilya had been living in a constant hurricane of expectations and family pressure, with his father's illness beginning to take a real toll on their lives, while Alexei had focused on squeezing every bit of money Ilya had started to earn.

Things had changed a lot since then. The people who were supposed to make his life miserable were no longer around, but somehow the sadness still settled on his shoulders with too much weight.

Maybe the problem had never really been them.

"Okay, okay. Bear-shaped buns with freckles. Anything else?"

“Do you think we can make them pink too, Aunt?”

“Pink? Hmm, I don’t think that’s—”

“Patricia keeps food coloring in those cabinets over there,” Ilya interrupted, moving closer to them.

Svetlana looked him up and down, brows raised, and maybe Ilya should have put on a t-shirt before coming out of his bedroom, because of *boundaries around Irina* and all of that, but habit was habit. And his mind was so distracted that he didn’t even remember that Svetlana was spending the weekend with them.

Looking at her, he felt a warm affection in his chest. Svetlana smiled at him.

“Morning, you two.”

“Papa!”

Ilya scooped his daughter up into his arms, planting a loud, sloppy kiss on her cheek. There was no trace left of the star-shaped stickers she’d gone to sleep with last night, which meant Svetlana had woken her up a while ago and helped her get ready. As usual, without bothering him, because she knew he needed every possible hour of sleep. Again, *game day.*

“How did you sleep, solnyshko?”

“Good,” she murmured, automatically pouting a second later, *“but I thought Shane would be with me when I woke up, and he wasn’t. Where is he, Papa?”*

Ilya didn’t miss the curious look Svetlana gave him, but she didn’t comment on it. She simply took the food coloring from its cabinet and poured it into the mixture he’d seen Patricia prepare so many times before. She was making milk buns. Pink-bear-shaped milk buns.

Ilya cleared his throat.

“Shane is in another city, love,” he explained. *“His nephews needed him for a few days because they missed him, the way you miss Aunt Sveta. You understand that, right?”*

Irina’s eyes widened immediately.

“But he’ll come back?”

“Of course, Ira. You’ll see him on Monday—“

“And can we go to the park again? Please, please, please.“

“We’ll ask him. I promise”

Irina smiled, though a hint of insecurity still lingered in her eyes. Ilya didn’t press her.

“Do you—do you think Teacher Shane likes me, Papa?”

The question tightened his chest in a way he didn't like at all. Ilya swallowed, remembering how that very same doubt had crossed his own mind just the day before. Should Irina even be worrying about things like this? Was it normal for someone so small to carry thoughts like that? He wished the whole situation would stop filling him with that quiet, paralyzing fear.

All the courage and bravery he had drawn from his dreams suddenly vanished. He hated being like this.

He masked his anxiety as good as he could, offering her a small smile and pulling her closer. He thought of every time he had caught Shane looking at his daughter, eyes full of affection and sweetness. He tried to be objective, cast out the fear, because there was no doubt that Shane liked Irina (and Ilya) just right. Maybe even more than that. *Thinking otherwise is stupid,* he said to himself, *much more after what happened last night.*

"Sweetheart, of course he likes you. He can't say it out loud because the other kids would get jealous, but I'm sure you're his favorite student."

"Really?" Irina's eyes brightened. Ilya huffed a fond little smile.

"Really," he echoed. *"Now, why don't you go get your crayons, hmm? You can draw him a picture and give it to him on Monday. Deal?"*

"Deal!"

She wriggled out of his arms with a couple of excited hops and ran off toward her room. Ilya watched her for a moment, until a gentle embrace pulled his attention away. He smiled and tipped his head to look at Svetlana. She rested her chin on his shoulder.

"So, Teacher Shane?"

"Is that jealousy?"

"You wish," She rolled her eyes. Ilya tried—and failed—to hide a grin. *"So. What's happening?"*

Ilya mimed locking his mouth shut, his grin spreading into a wide, ear-to-ear smile. Her eyes narrowed.

"I can't believe you, Ilya," his best friend said, mock-outrage curling her mouth. Her fingers, which had been resting lightly against his stomach, turned into weapons tipped with neatly trimmed nails, digging into his skin. Ilya jumped, laughing. *"He's your daughter's teacher!"*

"And he's sooo cute. You're going to love him—"

"Oh my God. Have you slept with him already?"

"A gentleman never kisses and tells, Sveta."

"So you haven't. Good." She stepped back, facing him properly now. Ilya watched her amused expression soften into something more serious, and felt his own do the same.

Svetlana's hands settled on his shoulders, her green eyes searching his face before holding his gaze. *"Is it serious? Because I know you wouldn't do casual with someone close to Irina. And I'd like it to be serious. You deserve it, Ilya."*

Ilya wrapped his arms around her. The fear tightened in his throat again, but he nodded. Again, last night had changed everything. He needed to stop doubting it.

"I want it to be serious. I think he might want it, too."

"You think?"

Ilya shrugged, feeling his cheeks warm up. Fuck. *Was he blushing like a teenager? Embarrassing.* But it felt good. It was a good feeling, even if it could ruin his reputation as a tough guy. What use was it, anyway? Ilya could be soft sometimes.

"I'm pretty sure."

Svetlana smiled, warm and sweet. She was so sweet and good to him. He didn't deserve her. But he loved and needed her enough to keep her, selfishly.

"Then Shane is very lucky," she murmured. *"I hope he knows that."*

Ilya let out a quiet laugh, shaking his head. He was the lucky one.

"I love you, Sveta."

"I love you too, idiot," she pressed a chaste kiss to his cheek before stepping away. *"Oh, and I talked to Irina this morning. The only way I could convince her that we couldn't go to the ByWard Market with her beloved Shane today was by promising we'd go to your game instead."*

Ilya sighed. Svetlana lifted a shoulder in a shrug.

"It was either that or her throwing a massive tantrum, Ilya. And besides, I kind of miss going to your games. So shut it. We're coming."

He chose not to argue, because she was right. It had been a while since either Svetlana or Irina had gone to one of his games. It wasn't that he minded his family being there. Quite the opposite, actually. He loved it.

What he hated was the sports press, always eager to twist the narrative, to turn it into a story about his adopted daughter, or about Ilya Rozanov's beautiful friend, the one who would make such a perfect mother if only he ever took the plunge.

Ilya hated people prying into their lives.

"Okay. But you're staying in the family section, close to Harris and the arena security."

"Yes, yes, whatever you say." Svetlana rolled her eyes as she finished arranging the buns on the tray and slid them into the oven. When she turned back around, a conspiratorial smile had

taken over her face. *“I have a feeling today’s going to be a big day for the team.”*

Ilya snorted softly.

“If you say so…”

***

Shane tried to straighten his neck a little to see the TV, but Jade got in his way, hunting for a better angle to braid his hair. Shane turned his head to the other side, making Ruby’s grip tug painfully on a strand.

“Ouch!”

“Uncle Shane, it wouldn’t hurt if you just stayed still,” Jade scolded, a bossy lilt in her voice. Hayden laughed next to Shane, briefly lifting his eyes from his phone.

“She sounds more like Jackie every day.”

“Watch what you say!”

Hayden looked down the hall in mock indignation. “I haven’t even said anything bad, honey!”

“Not yet!”

Shane shook his head at the exchange, a smile spreading across his face. Trying to watch the TV was impossible with both twins braiding his hair—a clear sign it was way past time for a haircut, because this was worse than torture—so he returned his gaze to his phone. If any of his college friends saw him now, they’d probably never let him live it down.

“Uncle Shane, what’s that?” Arthur’s childish voice asked curiously. Five seconds earlier, the boy had been sitting on the carpet, playing with his vast number of Lego pieces. Now he leaned over Shane’s phone, blocking his view. “Look, Dad, a green bird!”

Hayden frowned at Shane. Before he could do anything because he was still trapped by the twins’ tiny hands, Hayden had already snatched the phone and was poking his nose where no one had called it. *Shit*.

“Is this Duolingo?”

“I—”

Hayden laughed.

“Honey, come here! Shane’s using Duolingo! Can you believe it? Shane *the polyglot* Hollander using Duolingo with D for Dummies!” Jackie appeared in the living room faster than lightning, a huge smile on her face while Amber babbled incoherently into her neck. “Look, he’s studying— What language is this supposed to be? Greek?”

Jackie rolled her eyes fondly, shaking her head.

“Russian, love. That’s Russian.”

Hayden stared at him, confused.

“Why on earth are you learning Russian, Shane?”

Shane opened his mouth, then shut it again. How could he possibly explain to his best friends that he might be falling for the father of one of his students? Not only would it sound utterly unprofessional—which Shane desperately did not want to look like, *thank you very much*—but he’d also have to explain that this father just happened to be the Russian hockey player the commentators were gushing about on the TV. The one Arthur was blocking completely for his sight. *Jesus*.

Nope. Not gonna happen.

Ilya and he were nothing, despite that incredible kiss the night before, despite the looks they’d shared, heavy with complicity and longing, despite the way Irina had slipped her hand into his with complete trust and asked him to carry her to bed. Despite the way Ilya had watched them both with an affection so warm it had made Shane’s chest *ache*.

They needed to talk. A real conversation. A serious one, because this *was* serious. Shane already felt mortified for how easily he’d let himself be carried away when a child was involved, and terrified, too, of the possibility of getting his heart broken.

Was Ilya even gay? No. Ilya had too many past scandals with women to be gay. No one would go that far just for a cover. Bisexual, then? And if so, would he really be willing to commit to something serious with a man, knowing it could jeopardize his career?

There were too many things to take into account.

Shane knew Ilya was a hell of a good dad. He was responsible, caring and sweet, and his daughter was aware of how hard he tried. He only had to look at how fiercely Irina loved him back to know that. Which meant that Ilya would never do *casual* where she was concerned. Not with Shane. Not when Shane was her teacher, when Irina so clearly liked him, when Shane cared about her just as much.

Ilya had to know that.

Ilya wouldn’t play with something like that.

Right?

Shane had no idea where things were headed, and the mere thought of letting himself hope—for Ilya, for Irina—only to fall short in the end…

No.

He wasn't doing this today. Telling Jackie and Hayden all of that without any certainty would just mess more with his head. He didn't need their opinions *just yet.* He needed to stay calm and be patient and block the anxious and self-conscious side of him from taking over the logic and objective facts.

But Shane was a terrible liar, so he settled on a half-truth to cover himself.

"One of my new students is Russian. At home, she only speaks Russian, so I wanted to learn a bit of the language to help her in class. That's it."

Not that learning how to say *tomato*, *sugar*, and *cucumber* in Russian would really help him with Irina (or with Ilya) but he had to start somewhere, okay? He could look for a proper teacher later. Shane should actually start looking now, because he had been on a six-day-strike and the app was not helping *at all.*

Jackie and Hayden exchanged a look. Both puffed out their cheeks in an exaggerated pout at the same time, then let out a saccharine, over-the-top *awww* that made Shane feel painfully self-conscious and a little ridiculous. His cheeks probably looked like two ripe tomatoes.

Pomidorý, according to the stupid green owl.

He'd blame the heat in the house.

"You're so sweet, Shane!"

"So much it actually sucks, buddy. Are they even paying you enough?"

Shane shrugged, looking away until Jade yanked on his hair in reproach. He hissed from the sudden pain.

"Girls, be gentle with your uncle," Jackie scolded, heading off again. She was probably getting snacks ready for the game, as always, because even though Shane and Hayden insisted it wasn't necessary, she always worried a little too much.

"I don't care what I get paid. Every kid deserves the effort." *Especially quiet, smiley, mischievous little Irina.* Just the memory of her sleepy rosy cheeks full of star stickers made his heart a complicated void full of far more complicated feelings.

"Fuck, Shane. You're such a fucking babe—"

"Swear jar!" Shane and Jackie scolded at the same time. Hayden ignored them both.

"I can't understand how you're not married already. You're such a catch—"

“Oh? Are you interested, Hayden? I’m not sure if Jackie would make room for me in your marriage” Shane teased, raising an eyebrow. Hayden’s mouth snapped shut, a faint blush creeping across his cheeks. He visibly swallowed. “Oh my god, I was joking!”

“And I didn’t say anything!” Hayden stammered, awkwardly standing up, fidgeting nervously. Shane had to hold back a laugh. “I’m gonna— Yes. Jackie, honey, I’m coming to help!”

“I don’t need help—”

“Yes, you do!”

Shane huffed as he watched him go, shaking his head.

When he had heard about Hayden, Shane had thought he’d never really get close to him. Jackie had been a dream: chatty, open, and incredibly smart. She knew Shane was gay because, despite being a mother with a busy life, they’d run into each other at a few gatherings with mutual friends from college. Shane wasn’t exactly confident when it came to displays of affection, never had been. His romantic and sexual life wasn’t *nonexistent*, but months could easily pass between one encounter and the next, mostly because he was shy and —he admitted it—he struggled to feel fully comfortable with that level of intimacy.

But Jackie had been fine with it. She’d never made a weird comment or looked at him differently when he danced with boys or kissed them in front of her. She even commented on them, telling him that he had good taste, or that he deserved better. Depending on the case.

Shane was aware that *that* should be the common reaction. That no one should care about who he fucked or loved. *But*.

Shane wasn’t lying when he said he wanted to love himself, but the truth was he overthought far more than he’d like to admit. Of course, he had long since gotten past being overly reserved around people, but the idea of someone interesting and kind like Jackie turning away from him because of his sexuality would have hurt. A lot.

It hadn’t happened at all.

When his friendship with her progressed to the point of meeting her husband, Shane had felt nervous. Hayden was everything he’d left behind as a teenager. The ideal hockey player everyone pictured: Canadian, white, straight, wife and lots of kids, probably with a sharp tongue that occasionally let slip one or two homophobic comments on the rink.

Shane had nothing against him. He was just… cautious.

But Hayden had turned out to be just as kind and sweet as Jackie. In fact, it was ridiculous that Shane had even thought, for a single moment, that Jackie would be with an idiot. Hayden could be ignorant about some things, sure, but he genuinely tried to be thoughtful, especially since they’d become real friends.

The day Shane had told him about his past, one afternoon when Jackie had left them both to watch the kids while she had a girls' night out, Hayden had *cried* with him.

Shane still remembered the sound of his sobs, the way he had clung to him, as if trying to hold on to something solid in the middle of a storm. They had been close for quite some time, but Shane had never brought it up before. The coming-out-trauma just hadn't come up, and it wasn't something Shane let control his life, so he wasn't actively searching for a moment to talk about it. Not anymore.

But Hayden had seemed so hurt by it. Not by Shane's sexuality, but by the people who had shattered his dream. *We could have played together,* he had said. *I hate that they stole that from you, Shane. I hate them.*

And Hayden didn't hate anyone. That wasn't who he was.

So Shane felt completely at ease joking around with him. And the occasional blush on Hayden's face made him wonder, just sometimes, if maybe Hayden had been lucky enough to meet Jackie first, to be the one who belonged to her. If that hadn't happened, maybe Shane and Hayden would have more in common than just hockey.

The thing about being friends with Hayden and Jackie Pike was that it usually meant sharing most of their free time with other hockey players. So Shane wasn't surprised at all when the doorbell rang. *More guests.*

"I got it!" Hayden called.

A few seconds later, the house filled with a chorus of male voices, overlapping laughter and the unmistakable sound of too many people arriving at once.

"Bonjour, bonjour—oh! 'ollander, mon ami!"

Shane looked up just in time to see JJ stepping into the living room, grin wide, eyes immediately locking onto him.

"Look at you," JJ continued, switching languages mid-sentence, his Québécois accent thick and unmistakable. "All dolled up by these two little princesses. You are joining them for tea this afternoon, *oui?*"

Shane raised an eyebrow, lips twitching.

"Actually, yes. I was just about to invite you," he said lightly, almost flirty.

At first, he was scared about meeting all those hockey players, but the Montreal Metros turned out to be very friendly and open minded. They didn't mind that Shane was gay, at least not the ones close enough to Hayden to be invited to game nights. JJ was always the closest to him, the care-free and funny one that liked Shane's attention a *little* too much.

"You wanna be my tea party partner, JJ?"

JJ clicked his tongue, an equally flirtatious grin on his face.

“I would love to be your partner, *mon chèri,* but tea is gross.” He waved a hand dismissively. “It’s for *weaks*. I don’t drink tea, I’m Haitian.” He straightened, puffing out his chest, then flexed both arms dramatically. “I drink coffee.”

He raised his hands to display his massive biceps, veins and tattoos on full display. Impressive, unfairly so. Shane took a second to appreciate the sight. He seriously doubted Haitian coffee alone explained that build, but he wasn’t about to argue.

JJ caught him staring and winked before turning back to the girls.

“Very impressive work with Hollander’s hair, girls” he said. Then, lowering his voice conspiratorially, he added, “Maybe later Uncle JJ also wants to get done too.”

Shane choked on his own breath.

“Your *hair*,” he corrected quickly, scandalized. “Get your *hair* done, JJ.”

Patrice Drapeau burst out laughing from the doorway. Shane looked over just in time to see the goaltender nearly fold in half, tears streaming down his face, one hand clutching his stomach while the other braced against a deeply horrified Hayden.

“Oh my god, JJ!”

JJ frowned, confused.

“What? Is there a difference?”

“I speak better English than you and you were born here!” Miitka Volkov (the backup goalie) scolded him, laughing.

JJ shrugged, completely unapologetic, spreading his hands.

“It’s not my fault English is a stupid language!”

“Swear jar!” The whole group yelled in unison, Jackie included. *More than a jar, it is a whole bank account at this point,* Shane thought.

The Haitian defenseman stuck his tongue out at them before plopping down on the floor beside Arthur, already reaching for Lego pieces like nothing had happened.

After running the gauntlet of big, boisterous men greeting Shane and the kids—caressing their hair, offering fist bumps, crouching down to their level—everyone finally settled into the crowded living room. The space stopped being a place filled with childish murmurs and the distant hum of the TV and turned instead into a loud, unruly sea of hoarse laughter, drowning out any remaining hope of actually hearing what the commentators were saying about the Centaurs on the seventy-inch flat screen.

Shane sighed, defeated.

“Uncle Shane, we’re done,” Ruby announced proudly, and Shane was brought back to reality. No more tugging on his hair, *thank God*. “Jade, show him!”

Jade came into view, her light brown hair tied in a little ponytail, her blue eyes sparkling with excitement. She handed him a pink glittery mirror as if it were a precious treasure, and Shane took it with all the reverence it deserved.

“Thanks, princess.”

Shane looked at himself. He looked absolutely ridiculous, the top of his hair braided, each braid ending in a tiny colorful butterfly clip. He couldn’t help but smile.

“You did an amazing job, sweethearts. I love it.”

“You look *soooo* pretty, Uncle Shane!” Jade said proudly. “Like a prince!”

“Do I?” Shane asked, amused.

“You should find a prince charming.” Miitka suddenly suggested, the girls seemed to agree. Jade nodded enthusiastically, jumping.

“We can help you!”

Shane laughed. “Okay.”

“Where should we look, Uncle?”

“There!” Ruby interrupted, suddenly standing on the couch. Shane jumped up instinctively, circling her with his arms without actually touching her, just in case she fell. The girl was pointing eagerly at the TV. “Look, Uncle, a charming prince!”

Shane glanced at the TV. He had been assuming there was actually a prince on it, that somehow Arthur had changed the channel to Disney, but of course, that wasn’t the case.

The broadcast was still on the sports channel, showing the Centaurs' pre-game coverage. The commentators were breaking down the lineup, discussing starting forwards and defensive pairings**,** and speculating about power play units and the goalie rotation**.** They analyzed potential matchups, faceoff wins, and penalty kill strategies**,** going over every stat like the game was already halfway over.

As if the universe were playing some cruel joke, the camera was focused on Ilya on the ice, warming up with the rest of his team. His black helmet was undone, his brow relaxed—unusual—and a small, carefree smile played on his lips—*even more unusual*.

Shane swallowed. The memory of those soft, expert lips on his own sent a shiver down his spine.

“That’s not a prince, dummy!” Jade teased her sister. “That’s a knight on skates, like Dad!”

Ruby crossed her arms, clearly annoyed.

“She’s right, little Ruby. That’s an *idiot* on skates.” JJ added helpfully, just before Miitka smacked him hard on the back of the head. “Hey!”

“Stop swearing,” Miitka muttered under his breath, jerking his head toward the kids.

Ruby and Jade went right on with their argument, unfazed.

“Knights can get with princes too! Dad’s a knight and he got Mommy, silly!”

“A prince is better!”

“But I like this knight!”

Shane tore his eyes away from the screen for a moment.

“Okay, girls, don’t fight,” he said gently. “You’re both right, alright? Knights and princes are equally suited for princes and princesses.”

Jade and Ruby stared at him with wide, shining eyes.

“Then what do *you* prefer, Uncle?”

A Russian hockey player with a thick accent and a beautiful daughter, apparently.

Before he could answer, Drapeau did it for him.

“Your Uncle Shane deserves way better than that dummy over there, okay, girls?” he declared solemnly. “Ilya Rozanov is the enemy. Repeat after me. Ilya Rozanov—”

“But he’s handsome!” Ruby protested, as if that alone made him perfectly suitable for Shane.

Shane tried his very best not to blush, reminding himself that no one in the room knew about his… *thing* with Ilya.

Drapeau, JJ, and even Miitka all looked ready to argue with the child about her terrible taste, but—thankfully—they were interrupted.

“Well, who’s hungry?!” Hayden burst back into the living room, arms full, four plates piled high with snacks greasy enough to give anyone a stomachache just by looking at them.

Well. Not *everyone*, because Hayden’s teammates immediately threw their fists in the air, cheering as if they’d just won the Stanley Cup instead of being seconds away from a demonic-level stomach bloat.

Shane grimaced. *Uh*.

Maybe it was because his mother had raised him in an extremely health-conscious household, always obsessing over Shane eating organic, all-natural food. Shane had a sensitive digestive system, sure, but he’d also inherited that excessive self-control around food.

Jackie knew that. Which was why it didn't surprise him at all that she was carrying a plate just as big as the ones her husband had brought, only hers was filled with food Shane could actually *enjoy*.

"Healthy snacks for Shane, coming right up!" she announced with the same enthusiasm as Hayden, setting the plate down on the coffee table in front of him. There were mixed nuts, little brown rice balls wrapped in nori, chickpea hummus with organic honey, and carrot sticks.

Shane smiled at her, wide and genuine. Jackie returned it, then dipped her head in a small bow and pressed a kiss to the crown of his head.

"You look pretty, by the way."

"Thanks, Jackie."

"We did his hair, Mommy!" Ruby announced proudly.

Jackie laughed, kissed her daughter's head the same way, and sat down on the couch with Amber settled on her lap. The baby reached for Shane immediately, and he took her. Amber seemed mesmerized with his brand new butterfly hairclips.

"You both did such a good job, baby. You're going to be great hairstylists one day."

"Can we do yours now, Mommy?!" Jade bounced in place.

"Mmm, why don't you ask Uncle Miitka?"

Miitka had just taken a huge bite of something (sweet potato chips with garlic and salt, judging by the crumbs on his beard) when he froze. His eyes widened in pure horror as the twins turned toward him in perfect unison, already marching his way with hair ties, combs, and glittery butterfly clips clutched in their hands.

"Oh, no, no! Not my beautiful hair!" he protested through a full mouth.

Then, he bolted.

Miitka took off down the hallway at full speed, still chewing, one hand desperately protecting his curls while the other flailed for balance.

"Come back!" Jade yelled, childishly laughing.

"We just wanna braid it!" Ruby added, already in pursuit.

Shane shook his head, laughing so hard it almost hurt. To be fair, Miitka *did* have an incredible thick, curly, glossy hair. Sometimes Shane honestly wondered how the goaltender managed to fit all of it inside his helmet.

"Ew, Uncle Shane, what's *that*?" Arthur asked, a comically disgusted grimace on his face as he pointed at the hummus.

“A rabbit’s diet,” Hayden mocked from the other end of the couch.

Shane shot him a murderous look and tossed a carrot stick straight at his face. Hayden just laughed and popped it into his mouth along with three Cheetos. Shane wrinkled his nose.

“Gross.”

“It’s starting!” JJ announced from the floor, mouth full of chips, a can of Coke sweating in his hand. “I hope the Admirals crush those *enculés*.”

“Scott Hunter is totally going to win the faceoff,” Drapeau added, eyes shining with excitement as the camera cut to center ice. “Rozanov doesn’t stand a chance against him this season.”

“He’s been out for ages now,” Hayden said, almost flat and bored. “Maybe he should retire soon. I think being a dad is really wearing him down.”

“Yeah. What a shame— No, actually, better for us!”

Shane pressed his lips together, his chest tightening at the commentary—from the TV and from the players around him. He couldn’t shake the feeling that every remark was a personal attack, and it had been far too long since he’d let himself speak without holding back. So he just spoke.

“I’d like to see any of you try being a single parent,” he said, his voice sharp, almost deliberately cutting. “What would you do without your women? Your wives, mothers and sisters are always there to care for your kids when hockey keeps you away from home. It wouldn’t be easy, would it? Maybe none of you would have made it this far without that support network. Maybe you wouldn’t even have considered becoming a parent if you hadn’t known that all that support would be there for you.”

A heavy silence fell over the room, broken only by the distant murmur of the TV and the faint shuffle of Amber’s hands playing with his braids. Shane felt intensely exposed for a moment, like he’d lost control of the situation, his words hanging in the air. But he wasn’t about to back down, not when it came to defending what mattered to him.

“It takes real guts to do what Il— *Rozanov* is doing.”

When he finished, every eye in the room was on him. Even Arthur stared with wide curiosity, probably because Shane rarely spoke with such bluntness, usually so careful and gentle with everyone.

“You’re right, Shane,” Jackie said softly, a knowing smile tugging at her lips. Shane blinked, caught off guard. “Rozanov must be going through a lot. Hayden was panicking the first time he was left alone with the twins. I can’t imagine waking up one day and realizing you’re suddenly a parent. It must have been a nightmare.”

Shane wanted to tell her that Ilya had loved Irina since the first moment. That yes, he was afraid at first, that he was still afraid now, but also that Ilya had no doubts about his love for

Irina. About wanting to be the best parent possible for her. Either way, a warmth spread through Shane's chest. He felt lighter, almost buoyed by the understanding. Jackie always tried to understand.

"Now that I think about it, I'd have lost my mind…" Hayden muttered. "I have no idea what I'd do without Jackie, or my parents, even *you*, Shane."

"Hey! What are you all even talking about?!" Miitka's voice cut through. The man was carrying both twins in his arms, having already lost the battle. They were beginning to braid his curls with absolute disregard for the rest of the world. "Rozanov just won the fucking faceoff!"

"The swear jar, Volkov!"

"'M sorry, Jackie! But just look at that!"

They all looked.

It was the first time in weeks (because Shane had been watching every single Centaurs game lately, even if he pretended he hadn't, just so Irina could explain the plays to him again and insist that her dad was doing great) that Ilya actually looked fully locked in from the opening whistle. Usually, he lost more faceoffs than he won. Irina always claimed the opposite, wide-eyed and earnest, as if saying it hard enough could make it true.

Tonight was different.

Ilya moved with a sharpness Shane wasn't used to seeing, his strides clean and confident as he cut across the ice, positioning himself where the puck was going to be instead of where it had already been. The Centaurs kept the puck low and tight, cycling along the boards while the Admirals scrambled to adjust, sticks clashing, skates carving messy lines into the ice.

The New York's team hadn't been expecting that. No one had. Even Shane was caught off guard, completely mesmerized by the game. Pike's living room had fallen into absolute silence.

Luca Haas, one of the rookies of the team, was at Ilya's right, trying to keep up with him. They darted into open space, ready for a chance that never quite came but easily could have.

The Centaurs looked… good. Organized. Even dangerous.

Ten minutes into the game, the snacks had practically evaporated from the table. Everyone's except Shane's. He was far too absorbed, eyes locked on the screen, watching as Ilya scored his first goal in weeks. Zane Boodram's assist. Clean, almost surgical, like they did it a hundred times a day. Shane watched them celebrate as if they'd just won a war.

"Bullshit!"

"Poor Andersson," Drapeau murmured, wincing. "That goal would bruise my ego for years."

“Nah, there was nothing he could’ve done,” JJ added, just as stunned as the rest. “Rozanov fired that like a fucking bullet. He’s eating those defensemen like Cheetos.”

Even Jackie looked too surprised to scold them for the language.

“Almost looks like the old Rozanov,” Hayden muttered, mouth slightly opened.

Shane bit his lip. They were right. Ilya was just *glowing*. There was determination in his eyes, hunger, raw passion. The damn camera was doing an incredible job of capturing it, an expression that hockey fans, whether they loved Rozanov or not, had missed more than they probably realized.

It was *the* look. The one that promised one hell of a fucking good game.

The first goal landed like a reality check for the Admirals. They were the best team in the league, supposedly, and Scott Hunter was finally having a strong season after a clumsy start. Shane couldn’t help noticing how similar his gaze was to Ilya’s at certain moments.

Obviously, Hunter was less… reckless, somehow more polished. But his brown eyes carried the same kind of fire, the kind that could burn everything down, the kind of competitiveness that only surfaced when someone had something to prove.

New York quickly found their rhythm again. It was obvious they had stepped onto the ice expecting the usual Centaurs: clumsy, disorganized, unmotivated. Instead, they were forced to adjust. Lines started rotating faster, the pace tightened, and the game grew heavier, more physical.

By the time the second period was nearing its end, the Admirals seemed to identify Haas as the weak link. Shane actually thought Luca could become an excellent player. He was fast, smart, always in the right place, but he still lacked the confidence needed to truly keep up with Ilya as a center.

New York’s defense exploited that mercilessly.

The pressure closed in on him, the defense swarmed, and Hunter broke through the Centaurs’ zone on a clean rush that Dykstra couldn’t slow down and Hayes couldn’t stop, ending in a tying goal that silenced the room all over again.

“This is shaping up to be one of the best games we’ve seen all season, without a doubt!”

“Who would’ve thought, considering how the year started for both captains…”

“Exactly, Patrick. Let’s remember that neither Scott Hunter nor Ilya Rozanov have been anywhere near their peak lately. Hunter, for instance, hadn’t scored a single goal on the road this season until today.”

“And his home numbers haven’t exactly been stellar either. He only just broke a two-month goal drought back at Madison Square Garden two weeks ago. The Admirals have won every home game since, but this is their first road matchup after that stretch. We’ll see if that good luck travels with them.”

“As for Rozanov…” the commentator’s voice shifted into something playful, almost conspiratorial. Shane frowned. “I think we might finally have an explanation for why his game seems to have turned around so dramatically today, Patrick.”

“Oh? You’re thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Let’s just say that some players find extra motivation when there’s something waiting for them at home. Or backstage.”

Then, on the jumbotron at center ice, as Ilya gathered with his linemates near the bench for a quick tactical adjustment with the coach, the camera cut to a woman Shane had never seen before, but whose name he knew instantly.

Not only because Ilya and Irina had mentioned her before, but because Shane’s embarrassingly extensive knowledge of Ilya Rozanov’s life—recently no longer just professional, but personal as well *(*yes, he had read magazine articles and all that. Sue him)—was more than enough to recognize her without a second thought.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is something we haven’t seen in a long time,” the announcer said. “Svetlana Vetrova is in the arena tonight. Some of you may remember her from Rozanov’s best years with the Raiders, but she also happens to be the daughter of one of the most influential hockey players of Soviet Russia back in the day.”

“She’s also absolutely gorgeous, wouldn’t you say, Greg?” Patrick added, his tone sending a chill straight down Shane’s spine. “And just look at that! She’s holding Rozanov’s little girl. Could this be the reason he looks so focused tonight? You know what they say. Family is the strongest support there is.”

Shane’s heart lurched when the camera widened its frame.

Irina appeared on the screen.

Both of them were wearing Centaurs jerseys. Irina’s hair was loose this time, with wild, unruly curls framing her face, making her glow under the harsh arena lights. One of her cheeks was painted in the team’s colors, black and red, but Shane could clearly see the rest of her face. He noticed immediately.

Across the bridge of her small nose and the rest of her cheeks were tiny brown dots.

Irina had freckles. Very obviously fake ones, probably drawn on with makeup, but still.

She had been so obsessed with *his* freckles that Shane couldn’t help thinking she’d done it for him again, just like that time at school. He knew it with near certainty. Irina was thinking about him, even if Shane had missed breakfast with her at the ByWard Market. Even if he had been stupid enough to forget to give Ilya the little piece of paper where he’d carefully written down his phone number the day before, just to make sure they could contact him if they wanted to.

Maybe Ilya would be willing to let him FaceTime with Irina. Or send a message. Something.

But Shane hadn't anticipated that his little outing with the Rozanovs (an innocent suggestion, truly) would end with his mouth and Ilya's involved in situations wildly inappropriate for whatever undefined thing they had going on. He'd gotten so nervous he had practically fled, taking the stupid piece of paper with him *and* any chance of talking to them that weekend.

And even if, deep down, Shane knew that maybe they *were* thinking about him, that maybe he had something to do with Ilya's good game tonight, and with Irina's smile, the next thing the idiot commentator said managed to shatter his fragile hope in the most careless way possible.

"Both of them look so good together."

Shane hated—*hated*—that they were putting this much focus on a little girl. Hated even more that they were using her as a way to pry into Ilya's private life. "I imagine Rozanov doesn't have many doubts left, don't you think?"

The other idiot laughed. Shane clenched his fists.

"Mm. It doesn't look like it!"

On the screen, Ilya lifted his gaze, realizing that Irina and Svetlana were up on the jumbotron. For a brief second, Shane caught something sharp in his eyes. Irritation, maybe, but it faded quickly when Svetlana leaned down and whispered something into Irina's ear. The girl lit up instantly, waving her little hand with unrestrained enthusiasm. Svetlana waved too.

Then Ilya smiled.

It was genuine and unguarded, one of those smiles Shane had only seen a few times. Ilya not only waved back, but blew them a kiss that made Irina laugh, right before both of them sent one back his way.

The entire interaction completely wrecked Shane's system.

His ears felt like he was underwater, and the sad little rice ball he'd eaten earlier suddenly started flipping in his stomach. Shane had never felt like this in his life. It was an uncomfortable, almost suffocating pressure right below his ribs. His teeth worried relentlessly at his lower lip, and the bitter sensation in his throat made him shift uneasily.

"Shane?" Jackie asked beside him, suddenly. He looked at her and passed Amber over with trembling hands. The baby fussed a little, but Shane couldn't focus on that. "Are you okay?"

The worst part was looking around and seeing how unconcerned everyone else was.

Hayden was laughing at something stupid JJ had said, while JJ helped Arthur build some monstrous, shapeless Lego creation. Miitka was practically dozing off in his chair, Jade and Ruby braiding his curls with what they clearly believed was care, though it was anything but. Miitka's hair was his weakness: any kind of touch turned him soft and pliant, like a puppy. Drapeau seemed to be the only one actually watching the game, but even he hadn't paid any attention to what had just happened.

No one cared. Everyone seemed to have accepted what the commentators were implying.

Maybe—maybe they even thought they were right. That Svetlana was the perfect addition to Ilya and Irina's small family. That, somehow, she was the reason for his good game tonight.

"I need to go to the bathroom."

That was all he said. Jackie didn't comment on his monotone tone or the perfectly false calm he was projecting.

Shane tried to reason with himself in the mirror.

Years ago, when things had gone completely sideways, Shane remembered feeling overstimulated and utterly out of control. The order of the world he had known until then—school, hockey, school, hockey—had shattered in the worst possible way. And it wasn't just the devastation of seeing his life fall apart, the fallout from something as intimate as a leaked sex tape had been enough to reignite old doubts that Shane and, by extension, his parents, had been ignoring, all while focusing every ounce of their attention on his future.

Shane hated not having control over situations. Maybe it sounded ridiculous, being a teacher specialized in handling chaotic teenagers, but to him it made perfect sense. Shane was good at listening, and good at helping all those kids with their problems, whether they were as simple as a math equation or as twisted as a complicated home situation or the fear of being themselves.

He had control over those situations because he was the support. But when Shane *needed* support, when something didn't fit for him or managed to hurt him, that was when his world completely fell apart.

Some people had told him over the years that maybe he was indifferent to his own matters. He wasn't. Shane felt everything, maybe too intensely. He was just extremely good at putting on a poker face and pretending the world's sharp edges didn't cut him nor made him bleed the same way they did everyone else. Playing strong was his strength.

But Shane also had a somewhat temperamental mind. Even if he wanted to use all the logic in the world to understand things, to prioritize facts over overwhelming feelings that threatened to make him implode, sometimes it wasn't enough.

It might sound stupid. Shane felt very stupid, in fact. And hearing all those things about Svetlana and Ilya…

It hadn't sat well with him. For some reason, the vision of a beautiful, accomplished woman —perfect for Ilya, perfect for Irina—was detonating a thousand sticks of dynamite in his brain, each one loaded with thoughts that kept hammering at him: *this isn't right. You're making a mistake.*

Even when the facts pointed the other way.

Svetlana could be a good mother.

Svetlana had known Ilya forever.

Svetlana had known Irina forever.

Svetlana was a woman.

Svetlana was perfect.

Shane was none of that. And even though for every one of her qualities he could offer something in return (being a good *father*, starting to *get to know Ilya*, starting to *get to know Irina*, being *a man in love with another man*, being *perfect for them*) it simply wasn't enough.

He needed someone to reassure him.

***

The plan was simple and extremely unprofessional. Shane knew, by checking the week's game schedule online, that Ilya would be busy, and he wasn't expecting him to have any time at all. So he had planned a way of getting in touch with him and having a serious conversation.

It all revolved around giving Patricia a little note with his phone number and asking her to deliver it to Ilya, praying that his face wouldn't melt from embarrassment, and hoping Irina's nanny would actually do him the favour. With any luck, they'd be in contact by that afternoon.

In the worst-case scenario, Shane might even consider breaking privacy and data-protection laws to obtain Ilya's phone number from Irina's student file, but he didn't want to go that far. The mere thought of using his access as a teacher to intrude into the girl's private life made him feel like a despicable being who deserved to have his teaching license revoked.

So, on Monday morning, his A plan started moving.

Winter was starting to become truly harsh in Ottawa. There was a forecast of storm fronts and a light snowfall, so it wasn't strange that some children arrived a little late due to traffic. Shane waited patiently beneath the protective roof of the porch that sheltered the long row of classrooms, greeting each of his students as they arrived. Most of them were bundled up to their chins, wearing enormous snow boots and double-lined hats.

Shane greeted all of them, greeted the parents as well, and made small talk with those who felt like it. He tried to appear like his everyday self, completely ignoring the anxiety clinging to his chest and the urge to scan the entrance every two seconds, searching for Irina. The folded piece of paper was burning in his pocket.

There were no students left in the entrance line when Shane began to worry. Normally, if Irina missed class for any reason, Ilya would call the school to let them know. He was certainly responsible when it came to his daughter's routine, so the absence unsettled him.

Shane glanced at his watch, puzzled. Then he looked toward the classroom, now full of children beginning to form small groups around the little tables he had cleaned one by one that morning despite the cleaning staff having done so over the weekend.

Shane wanted to make sure everything was perfect. He had also arrived early enough to sweep, rearrange the already tidy desk and clean each child's cubby.

When he was stressed, he cleaned. It was something that helped him clear his mind. The day before, after returning from Montréal, he had cleaned his small apartment twice, changed the bed dressings three times, and had even taken apart and reassembled a bookshelf that, for a moment, had visually bothered him too much. His intention had been to sell it at a second-hand shop, until he realized that without it all his books and university notes would end up scattered on the floor, and he ultimately put it back together and left it where it was.

Then he'd ordered a new one that seemed more adequate. Assembling furniture helped him with his anxiety, so he was dying to get home, open the new package and finally stop hating the way the bookshelf looked in his living room.

Shane let out an audible sigh, squeezing his eyes shut and taking a deep breath. The cold air filled his lungs, making him feel a little relief for a few seconds. He was spiraling, right?

"Shane!"

His eyes opened quickly. He recognized that little sweet voice immediately.

A smile spread across his face, and a wave of relief washed over him at once. Irina was running toward him (a little clumsily due to the snow piled up on the street) wearing an adorable hat shaped like little bear ears and an oversized pink jacket that made her look smaller than she was.

Shane automatically crouched down to receive her.

"Bon matin, Irina," he greeted her, returning her hug briefly. *I missed you so much,* he wanted to tell her. *I missed both of you*. He wanted to keep her tucked against his chest all morning, maybe even never let her go, but he was supposed to be her teacher right now, and he didn't want the other children to feel left out. So he pulled back, straightening up to look down at her. *"D'Où est-ce que tu as trouver ce joli chapeau d'ours, hm? C'est très joli.*

Where did you find that cute bear hat, hm? It's very pretty.

Irina looked at him with proud eyes.

"My aunt made it!"

"Your— Oh."

When Shane lifted his gaze, a pair of green eyes met him.

Svetlana, in Irina's and Ilya's anecdotes, sounded like a fun and sweet woman. Irina adored her. She was one of her favorite people to draw or talk about in class when they practiced French in the afternoons, and she always seemed eager to see her again when she returned from the United States, where apparently she lived.

Ilya spoke about her with a deep, unwavering affection. Shane knew they had been friends forever, and it didn't take much digging (just a couple of tabloid magazine covers from six years ago had confirmed it) to know they had been *something* at some point.

Shane wasn't someone who tended to give much importance to those things. But he also wasn't someone who usually had romantic feelings for men with that kind of public affairs, so he didn't know how to feel about it.

The Svetlana standing in front of him was studying him with cautious eyes, but her smile was kind. There was something imposing about her, and not in a bad way. She was simply too beautiful. Even Shane, who had never felt attracted to a woman in his life, felt brutally struck by the pair of green eyes, the doll-like features and the wind-tousled hair that made her look like a supermodel.

Shane felt so… *ordinary* next to her. Instantly, he scolded himself for it. They weren't competing for anything here, *for fuck's sake. Get a grip, Hollander.*

So he offered a smile and polite nod, and she studied it for a brief moment before speaking.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Shane. Irina talks about you a lot."

Shane glanced at Irina briefly.

"I hope she says good things," he murmured. Svetlana hummed, her eyes growing a little more serious. Suddenly, he felt evaluated under them. Shane swallowed.

"She truly adores you," her tone was entirely friendly, yet there was something measuring in her voice. "I've never seen her so taken with someone apart from Ilya. She even made me give her freckles again today, didn't you, Irochka?"

Irina nodded eagerly. She looked at him, waiting for his review on them. Just like in the jumbotron, or that day three weeks ago, Irina was wearing subtle make up. The tiny dots were all different from each other, just dark enough to be noticeable upon Irina's skintone.

The idea of Irina waking up earlier just to get those freckles done so she could resemble *him*… just seeing that trait he had always hated about himself on her made his chest feel full with warmth and affection. Like he had accomplished something very important for his life. And maybe he had.

"They suit you very well, Irina," Shane said softly. They really did. She looked even more adorable.

When she blushed, pleased by his words, Shane realized that he adored her, too.

It felt like an epiphany. He didn't adore Irina because she was smart, or because she was a good student, or even because she was a good kid. He didn't care about any of that. He just— he had fallen in love with her the moment he saw her smile. From the moment he heard her clumsy, adorable French and noticed how self-conscious she was about it.

The first time he saw her cry, Shane hadn't just felt bad or responsible because she was his student and it was his job to protect her. Shane didn't care about his job. He had felt as if his heart were being *ripped out.* He couldn't bear the idea of her being hurt.

Shane loved her.

It was that simple. And, ironically, that complicated.

He was terrified. He was absolutely terrified of how much he loved this little girl who wasn't his.

Svetlana was watching him now, her eyes narrowed.

"Thanks! Papa says I look like you, and I like that," Irina said casually, and Shane's heart did a ridiculous little flip in his chest. Irina slipped her hand into his without thinking, suddenly bored. "Um— Shane, *on peut rentrer, s'il vous plaît? Je suis froid."*

Can we go inside, please? I'm cold.

Shane ignored the girl's small mistake, crouching down to her level again.

"That's okay, Irina, you can go inside," he said calmly, choosing his words carefully before speaking. "But I'm going to ask you to keep calling me *Monsieur Shane* once we're in the classroom, okay? You know I'm your teacher."

Irina made a small, unhappy pout, looking up at him from beneath her lashes.

"But— That means I can't call you Shane anymore?"

"Of course you can, love. Just not inside the school. Outside, when we're with your dad, okay?" Shane replied automatically, only to regret it when Irina's sadness vanished at once, replaced by a triumphant smile, far too similar to the one he had seen on Ilya's face every time he scored a point during the game that weekend, after getting away with some shameless play involving him and Zane Boodram.

"So this weekend we'll hang out again, please? We missed you!" she asked, her childish voice sounding like someone who had just gotten exactly what she wanted. "I think Papa was a little sad this weekend, because he couldn't see you, *Monsieur* Shane!"

Shane felt his cheeks warm. He glanced up briefly, finding Svetlana hiding her smile behind an elegant gloved hand. He cleared his throat.

"Okay, sweetheart. I'll try not to make any of you sad this time."

“Okay.” She looked more than satisfied. She turned around and hugged Svetlana goodbye. They exchanged a few words in Russian, from which Shane only caught *Irochka*.

Once she was inside the classroom, Shane straightened back up, ready to say goodbye to Irina’s aunt and finally begin his classes. He adjusted his clothes just to do something with his hands.

“You know, Ilya doesn’t usually let people into their lives,” Svetlana remarked suddenly.

Her tone remained light, almost casual, but Shane knew the look in her eyes. It was the look of someone guarding what they loved. In a strange way, it reminded him of Jackie. Svetlana could not have been more different from her, and yet they shared something unmistakable: a fierce devotion to their families. No matter how different those families were from one another. “It’s not something to be taken lightly.”

Shane felt his polite smile fade.

“I’m not someone who takes anything lightly,” he replied, his voice firm.

Svetlana held his gaze for a moment longer than necessary. Then her expression softened, just a little.

“I’m glad to hear that, then.”

***

For obvious reasons, Shane hadn’t given Svetlana the paper with his phone number. Not in the morning, not at midday when she came again to pick up the girl. Irina had been absolutely wonderful in class, even more engaged than usual, calling him *Monsieur Shane* with a mischievous little tone that made him smile every single time.

By the end of the day, she had earned one of the highest numbers of star-shaped stickers, having spoken more French than anyone else, even though she hated doing it in front of the other kids. Shane felt extremely proud of her.

“All right, kids, *a la queue leu leu! Dylan— Don’t run, Dylan! You’re going to fall—”*

“But I’m hungryyyy,” the boy complained, ignoring him completely.

Shane sighed. Some of the children stayed at school for lunch. They offered that service for parents who finished work late or for those who wanted their kids to have extracurriculars in the afternoon.

The monitor in charge of picking up the first group, Olga, gave him a knowing grin from the doorway when Dylan bolted outside anyway.

“You have the patience of a saint, honey,” she teased. “I only have them for an hour and a half, and I feel completely drained!”

Shane shook his head. “They’re usually calmer. It must be the snow.”

“You and I both know that’s a total lie, honey. Snow or not, they’re always jumping around.”

Once Shane had made sure all the kids staying for lunch had left with Olga, he helped the others gather their things from their cubbies and lined them up neatly.

As always, the parents picked up the children one by one. Shane smiled, chatted, and made sure to answer their questions. One grandmother lingered, concerned because her grandson had been coughing a little the night before. Shane reassured her gently.

“Logan was full of energy today, ma’am, I promise you. He even struggled a bit at nap time.”

“That’s because he slept all day yesterday! I’m telling you, the boy has caught a cold!” the woman said, almost annoyed with the fact, grey-haired brows furrowed deeply on her face.

When she finally finished recounting everything that had happened the day before (for the second time) and a list of reasons why her grandson was for sure ill and needed to go to the hospital, the only child left in the line was Irina.

And Svetlana was the only one in the parents’ line. *Great*. Shane felt like an idiot for even thinking that giving his phone to Ilya through someone else was a good idea.

“Hello again, Shane,” she greeted, this time much more relaxed. Her eyes no longer held that sharp edge. “I forgot to tell you this morning. Irina won’t be coming to the extra class today, because we’re having a girls’ afternoon. Right, beautiful?”

Irina, already in her arms with a huge smile, hugged Svetlana around the neck and nodded enthusiastically, eyes sparkling as she looked at Shane.

“Papa gave me permission to skip school!”

Shane chuckled softly, taking the note Svetlana handed him. Since she wasn’t a direct family member, Ilya needed it to justify Irina’s absence in the afternoon without raising any flags at school. He examined the paper, which almost never arrived under Ilya’s name. The handwriting was a little crooked, clearly not used to English letters, but the signature was elegant and neat. Shane wondered how his handwriting would look like in Russian.

“Have a lot of fun, then.” he said.

“Thank you,” Svetlana replied.

Shane looked at her, then at Irina, and couldn’t help stepping closer until he could reach the girl. He placed a gentle kiss on her adorable bear-ear hat.

“À demain, ma chérie.”

He couldn’t help himself. He had been looking forward to seeing Irina again, to spend the day with her in some way, even if it was just by teaching her French words and numbers past thirty. The thought that he would have to wait until the next day to see her, and that they wouldn’t even have real quality time together, made his chest ache a little.

Irina accepted his gesture automatically, slipping out of Svetlana’s arms to wrap her little arms around Shane’s neck. He held her gently.

“Can’t you come with us, Shane?” she asked quietly, burying her face against his neck. “It will be fun! And I won’t miss you that way.”

“I can’t, love. I need to stay here and teach your classmates some *boooring* French words,” Shane said, using an exaggerating tone that made Irina laugh. “And also, it’s girls’ afternoon, so you two go and have fun. I’ll be here tomorrow waiting for you, okay?”

“Okay.”

Shane’s afternoon was miserable.

The classroom felt painfully empty without Irina in it, even though none of the other kids from the extracurricular program had been absent. When pickup time finally came, Shane gathered all the drawings his students had handed him throughout the day, stacking them neatly and going through them one by one, careful and methodical. He always did that before leaving: organized every loose paper on his desk, deciding what belonged in the school and what would go home with him, tucked safely into his drawing folder.

It didn’t surprise him to find Ilya’s note among the pile.

Shane picked up the paper, a small smile tugging at his lips when he noticed the detail scribbled inside the *reason for the student’s absence* box.

Irina is not coming to afternoon extra class today. Svetlana Vetrova has my permission to pick her up and take her to a fun girls afternoon without boring school ;)

His eyes lingered on the winking face, then on Ilya’s signature beneath it. For a brief, foolish second, Shane wished he could keep the paper, just to have something from Ilya, but he needed to take it to the front office so no one would panic over an unexplained absence, especially after the girl had been picked up by someone who wasn’t immediate family.

Shane folded the note in half.

Erika, the secretary, preferred paperwork folded that way. It gave her a guide to punch the holes and file everything more easily. Shane had noticed it a long time ago, watching her do it every time he brought in documents that needed archiving, and he’d quietly started doing it himself for her convenience.

As he pressed the crease down firmly, he noticed something else on the back of the page.

A phone number.

Shane blinked.

He would have assumed Ilya had scribbled it absentmindedly, used the note to jot something down and forgotten about it if it weren't for the words written just beneath the digits, unmistakably deliberate.

Call me.

IR.

***

Shane didn't call Ilya that afternoon. In fact, he didn't even dare to save the number to his contacts. Instead, he carefully tore off the corner of the note where Ilya had written it, as discreetly as he could, silently hoping Erika wouldn't complain about the condition of the form.

The half hour on public transport passed in what felt like a blink of an eye, and then Shane was home.

The first thing he did was pick up the package his neighbor had left by her door. She was retired and owned the small two-unit building, and she'd insisted more than once that she didn't mind accepting deliveries for him when he wasn't around. Shane was grateful for it. Having things shipped to his parents' place, so far away from the city, was always a headache.

The package was his new bookshelf. Shane wasn't the impulsive type. Still, his old shelf had been bothering him just by existing since the day before. So after washing his hands and changing into something comfortable, he sat down on the floor of his small living room and started following the instructions that came in the box.

Shane liked opening the screws' bags in order, following the steps one by one, making sure everything lined up exactly the way it was supposed to. It was methodical and satisfying. He could lose himself in the quiet certainty that, if he followed the instructions, everything would turn out *right*.

He worked without rushing himself, pointedly ignoring the weight of his phone on the table and the small torn piece of paper resting beside it.

He truly tried.

Shane was tightening a screw with an Allen key when something looked… off. He stopped mid-turn, frowned, and went back to the instructions. He looked several times at them, then back to the part he was assembling together.

He had skipped a step.

He blinked.

He, Shane Hollander, had skipped a step.

Shane knew, from the moment he saw Irina that morning, that this was bound to happen sooner or later, even if he had been doing everything he could to avoid it.

He had always thought of love as a complicated thing. Romantic love in particular. He wasn't especially experienced when it came to it, and he had never pretended otherwise. It wasn't that he lacked physical experience. He'd had enough casual encounters over the years to meet his needs without too much emotional mess, but he had never felt the kind of connection people talked about, the kind that sounded so effortless and inevitable: love at first sight, destiny, *soulmates*. All of that.

Shane wasn't a hopeless romantic looking for a love story, but sometimes he did wonder what it might be like to have someone to share his life with. Just to get along with someone on that level.

He didn't want the life Jackie and Hayden had built, surrounded by kids and bound together by a story that started in high school and never really broke. At twenty-six, that kind of life felt distant, clearly impossible. Still, he missed company. He missed having someone he could talk to, someone he felt close with without the constant feeling that intimacy meant exposing himself to be hurt. He missed something he'd never had and never wanted to have until now, and he didn't know how to handle that new… *desire*.

Shane wanted things to feel natural. He didn't need a grand, consuming passion to make it work. He was looking (that was an overestimation, because Shane wasn't putting a lot of effort on his search) for something good enough to be worth it.

The problem was that it felt like he had stumbled into all of it at once.

Talking to Ilya was disarmingly easy. Shane could do it for hours, effortlessly, without ever feeling self-conscious or stopping to wonder whether he was being too distant, or too pragmatic, or too much *Shane*.

With Ilya, he could say exactly what crossed his mind without hesitation, and despite the fact that they had known each other for what was, objectively, a ridiculously short amount of time, Shane felt connected to him in a way his rational mind simply couldn't keep up with. It was almost intuitive.

He felt like gravitating toward Ilya, pulled in by a force he couldn't resist and had no interest in escaping. Shane wanted to be the one there for him on his bad days, the one who took his hand while walking on the street, the one who could kiss him freely, whenever he wanted to.

He wanted to be the one who looked after Irina when Ilya couldn't, but also when he could. He wanted both of them to look after her, together.

And that was the difficult part of the equation. Shane didn't even care that Ilya was famous, or that the MLH could be a hostile place for people like them, because he was so caught up in the reality of getting involved with a single father that he hadn't even had the chance to worry about the rest.

What if he wasn't qualified to take care of Irina? Sure, he was a teacher, but that didn't automatically mean he knew how to be a *dad*.

Did he even want to be one*?*

Shane loved kids. He loved teaching them and learning from them every day. He loved their innocence, their curiosity, the apparent simplicity of their thoughts and, at the same time, how deeply complex and singular they could be. He held childhood in immense respect. He wasn't sure he was ready to become an active part of a child's family life.

But whenever he thought about Irina, those doubts seemed to lift on their own, dissolving into affection, into caring, into *love*.

And suddenly the answer to his question was *yes*. And Shane felt like he was going insane, because he had known this girl for two months, and her father for not even four weeks, and *he was completely in love with them.*

Love had always felt complicated to him. But with them, even with all its tangled hints, it felt exactly right.

He was reaching for his phone, already on his feet, hands shaking and heart pounding on his chest, when the doorbell rang. He jumped, scared for a moment, but he immediately went to open hoping that it was magically his parents with a tupper filled with hot soup and a big hug where he could hide while he explained everything to them, desperately needing advice that would fix this mess.

On the other side of the door, Ilya's eyes met his.

Shane looked at him for a moment before Ilya talked, concern washing his accented words.

"Why are you crying?"

Shane's hand immediately went to his face. He was crying, his cheeks warm and wet, and for a second, he thought the cold air outside would freeze the tears. Ilya didn't give them the chance, stepping into the apartment and wrapping his strong arms around him. The door closed.

He let him. Without hesitation, Shane tangled his arms around Ilya's neck, resting his weight against the slightly larger, solid warmth of Ilya's body, as if he'd been starved of human contact for weeks. Ilya buried his nose in Shane's hair, pressing a soft kiss there.

"Are you okay, *zólotse?"*

Shane didn't understand the nickname, but he felt himself melt in Ilya's arms at the sweetness, the tenderness with which he said it. Everything Ilya said in Russian always sounded impossibly soft.

"Yes," Shane whispered.

"Did you get my number?"

"I did."

"And why didn't you call, hmm? I've missed you," Ilya murmured, putting just a fraction of distance between them to look directly into Shane's eyes. He didn't give him time to answer. "You look pretty even crying, but I don't want you to cry. Tell me what's wrong. I'll fix it."

"Nothing's wrong," he mumbled, unable to stop his hands from threading through the soft curls within reach. They were silky and thick beneath his fingers, perfect to explore for hours. Just touching them made him feel better. "I was going to call you just now, I promise. Did you come all the way here because of that?"

Ilya shrugged at the sudden question. "I wanted to talk to you. So I came."

He said it like it was that simple. Shane shook his head, staring at this impossibly beautiful, wonderful man with disbelief.

"I was going to give Patricia my phone number today, so she could give it to you," he confessed, feeling his cheeks burn.

Ilya lifted his eyebrows.

"I missed you and Irina all weekend. I saw your game on Saturday."

Shane's confession made Ilya pause for a few seconds before a small, satisfied smile tugged on his lips. His hand slid over the fine fabric of Shane's pajama back, making him tense slightly. He swallowed.

"Did you?"

"Yes," Shane almost sighed. Ilya leaned in, making their noses brush gently, and Shane wanted to whimper, wanted him to kiss him until he couldn't think anymore. "I saw your friend there. She dropped Irina at school this morning."

Ilya pressed his nose into Shane's cheek, and suddenly the room felt thick and warm. Shane leaned into him, letting him press closer, letting Ilya's hands explore the curve of his back, his waist, and then down his hips. Shane wasn't a small man. He was muscular and taller than most, but Ilya was slightly bigger. His hands felt heavy on him.

"She's pretty," Shane murmured, unsure why he even said it.

"You think so?" Ilya asked.

“Yeah,” Shane shrugged. “Everyone seemed so sure about you two being something. Even my friends accepted what those commentators said. And they were right, anyway. You’d look good together.”

“Yes. Two attractive persons make one attractive couple,” Ilya said, and Shane’s heart skipped a beat. “But we’re not together anymore. She doesn’t want to be a mother, and she doesn’t love me that way. I don’t love her like that either.”

Shane stayed quiet for a few seconds. Ilya sounded sincere, and there was nothing that made him doubt it. If Svetlana had wanted that role, she could have claimed it long before Shane was even in Ilya’s life.

“Okay.”

Ilya let out a satisfied little sound against Shane’s cheek, resuming the gentle nuzzles with his nose, this time adding his lips as well. Soon he was leaving a trail of soft kisses along Shane’s cheek toward his jaw, and Shane tilted his head to give him better access. His eyes closed on instinct.

“I’ve missed you,” Ilya repeated, his accent thicker and more pronounced this time. Shane felt a shiver ripple through his whole body. “I wanted you there this weekend, not Svetlana. You would look so pretty in my jersey, and Irina would be so happy to have you there…”

Shane tried to focus on the second part of the sentence, on how sweet it would be to take care of Irina while watching Ilya play, but his mind betrayed him. He imagined what it would feel like to go to one of Ilya’s games with his name on the back. Embarrassingly, he had to admit that he would love it. He would love everyone seeing the name Rozanov on him.

“I would love to,” he whispered.

Ilya let out a low, satisfied groan. Shane tried not to moan when the Russian’s lips parted just a little, the tip of his tongue brushing against the skin of his neck. *Fuck*.

Ilya didn’t wait. He crashed into Shane, lips pressing hard against his, a hand grabbing his chin pulling him closer. Shane responded instantly, digging his fingers into the soft curls and tangling them there. The kiss was frantic, almost desperate, like every second they had spent apart was a living torture.

Ilya’s mouth devoured Shane’s, teeth grazing, tongue sliding with a raw need that made him feel dizzy. Shane’s knees buckled slightly under the force, his head tipped back, letting Ilya to be the one who led the kiss how he wanted. Every nerve in his body was alive and burning, He could feel the embarrassing hardness between his legs gripping against Ilya’s thigh.

“I want you,” Ilya growled against his lips, “I want you, Shane.”

Shane tried to catch his breath. Ilya looked at him, letting go of his face to return his hand to his hip. At the same time, both of them shifted to hold each other close, their bodies pressing together in a way that made it impossible to ignore the hardness in some places. Shane was glad he wasn’t the only one affected.

“It’s late,” he murmured. He didn’t want to mess with Ilya’s schedule. “Irina—”

“She’s having a girls’ night with her aunt. She’s not going to miss me for two or three hours.”

Shane bit his lip. “You have practice tomorrow.”

Ilya smiled, with that exciting mischief that made him look so young. *How could a man be so handsome?* Shane had been an idiot for thinking that he could escape him.

“I can start warming up now, yes?”

Ilya didn’t wait for an answer. He lunged at Shane again, devouring his mouth with hunger.

He gasped into the kiss, biting Ilya’s lower lip, needing *more*. The world outside ceased to exist. There was only the sharp, desperate rhythm of their mouths, the press of their bodies, and the raw, urgent noises filling the room as they stumbled across it until they reached the couch. Shane felt like a fucking teenager discovering what making out was.

Shane dug his nails into Ilya’s scalp as they fell onto the couch cushions. The space was small, but they didn’t need much. He tugged off Ilya’s jacket, tossing it aside while the Russian returned to his neck, gently peeling off Shane’s pajama shirt to have better access.

Shane felt every drop of blood rushing south. Ilya pulled back from him with dark eyes and parted lips, sitting up just enough to look at him. Shane didn’t feel exposed under his gaze.

He felt sensual—*wanted*.

Shane knew he was attractive, he took good care of his body, he had a good diet and a very good training plan. But Ilya was a professional athlete. Should he feel insecure? Because he didn’t. He was feeling powerful under that clouded, lost-in-desire expression.

“I dreamed about you like this last night,” Ilya confessed. Shane blinked.

“Did you?”

“Da,” Ilya leaned over him, removing his own t-shirt. Shane closed his eyes as Ilya pressed a soft kiss to his collarbone, moving slowly down to his chest. He lifted his hands, placing them upon Ilya’s full pecs. He was *huge*. “It was… trouble for me. Morning bone.”

Fuck. Shane imagined Ilya just waking up, still groggy from his dreams, touching himself in a desperate attempt to get some relief. Shane almost whimpered.

“Did you…?”

“No,” Ilya growled, as if the very fact physically hurt. Shane felt an electric thrill at the thought that he’d been like that all day: thinking about him, holding himself back after dreaming about him. “Didn’t have time. And the girls were home.”

“Want me to help you now?” he murmured.

“Fuck yes.”

Shane nodded, just as desperate. Okay, yes. They were doing this. Shane was *so* excited.

“I’ll go grab lube—”

“Lube,” Ilya repeated, a teasing lilt in his voice as he mimicked Shane’s accent. Shane winced, trying not to smile like an idiot with heart-shaped eyes. “You keep reserves?”

Shane took a deep breath, feeling his neck and ears burn.

“You don’t?”

“With Irina starting to reach cabinets? No. I don’t need it anyway. My sex life is dead.”

Shane brushed his thumb over Ilya’s cheek, smiling softly.

“That makes two of us.”

“Yes, but you have fun with yourself, yes?” Ilya went on, voice low and knowing. “I’m sure you use your pretty fingers and moan loud in this apartment. Single life is like that.”

Shane nodded. Yes. That was true. Ilya could have added that being single also meant having multiple sexual partners (like he himself had), but he didn’t. Because Shane had already told him that wasn’t the case for him. He appreciated that Ilya didn’t mention it.

“Do you miss it?” Shane asked quietly. “Your single life?”

“No,” Ilya answered without hesitation. “I prefer having Irina. But I miss sex, and on top of everything—” his gaze dragged slowly up and down Shane’s body, and he shook his head, looking utterly *starved*. “I’m having horrible time ignoring how much I like this new, pretty, freckled teacher. So these past few days were… hard.”

Shane couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped him. Ilya smiled back, leaning in to kiss him again. This time it was slow—deep, unhurried, filled with a strong sense of affection. Shane felt like living on Ilya’s mouth from now on. He wrapped his legs around Ilya’s hips, his breaths dissolving into Ilya’s lips, starting and ending there.

Shane had never kissed like this with anyone before. Kissing had always felt strange to him, sometimes even uncomfortable. He’d thought it was his fault, that he was just bad at it. But kissing Ilya felt completely different from anything he’d known. Ilya set the pace perfectly, asking for just enough to make Shane feel pushed and, at the same time, fully in control. He kissed him like he knew exactly what Shane needed, and Shane was painfully aware that he could become addicted to that feeling. Maybe he already was.

They broke apart only to shift on the couch. Ilya turned them around after tugging his pants down just enough to reveal himself. Shane’s eyes followed the thick line of hair trailing from Ilya’s stomach down between his legs, and his mouth actually watered at the sight. He was big. Thick. Veiny.

Ilya huffed at Shane's expression.

"I told you," he said. "You're hard trouble for me."

"I see," Shane murmured, settling himself over Ilya. Ilya's hands immediately clamped onto his thighs, guiding them to Shane's ass, kneading him firmly between his fingers. "You're trouble for me too."

"Mhm," Ilya groaned hoarsely when Shane wrapped a hand around him. He was burning hot and heavy. Shane felt like he could come just from holding him like that, from the solid weight of him in his palm. "I like trouble," he barely managed to say, tipping his head back. "I was better trouble some years ago. You would've liked it a lot. I had big penthouses and went to cool parties all the time. I could've invited you to my fancy flats and charmed you properly."

Shane moved his hand slowly, up and down, noticing how Ilya's English unraveled the more his groans deepened. It felt good—having enough power to leave him breathless, *wordless*.

"I think you're charming me just fine, Mr. Rozanov," Shane joked. Ilya smiled briefly, lips parting again when Shane's thumb found his slit. "I like your life exactly the way it is, Ilya."

"Even if I can't keep lube at home for you?" Ilya asked, breath heavy and unsteady. "If we can't— *Blyat.* If we can't be loud in my fancy house?"

"I'm sure you'll find a high place Irina can't reach."

"Patricia will find it," Ilya muttered. "She finds everything—"

"Then I'll bring my own lube when I need it," Shane decided easily. "And I have a perfectly functional apartment where we can be as loud as we want. I just— I don't want you to think that you being a single dad puts me off, because it doesn't, Ilya."

They both went completely still.

It didn't feel like the right moment for this conversation, but Shane needed to say it. Just like Ilya had been kind enough to clear up the situation with Svetlana, however irrational and misplaced Shane's fears had been. He wanted Ilya to be absolutely sure that this wasn't an obstacle for him.

At this point, nothing was. Not even hockey. Not even the fact that Shane was Irina's teacher. Everything else could be figured out.

Ilya swallowed, his eyes suddenly uncertain.

"It does not?"

Shane shook his head. "It doesn't, Ilya. Not at all. On the contrary."

Ilya smiled.

“So you like sleep-deprived, messy, hot *daddies*? Wow, Shane, that’s a twisted kink—”

Shane rolled his eyes. He didn’t defend himself, because he knew that admitting that Ilya was actually the first man with a child he had ever allowed himself to be interested in would only feed his ego. And even though it went without saying that Shane had never crossed a line with a relative of any of his students (he was strictly professional, *most of the time*), the truth was that Ilya wasn’t the first one who had tried to slip him a phone number for reasons very much unrelated to school.

The difference was that Ilya’s was the only one Shane had ever wanted to take.

“I like you.”

“I like you too,” Ilya murmured against his cheek, leaving a sloppy kiss there. Shane felt him move, starting to rock against his fist. Ilya’s hands found Shane’s ass again, fingers slipping under the waistband of his blue plaid pajama pants, tugging them down just enough to free him too. “I like you so much.”

Shane almost cried when Ilya touched his dick. He had always been painfully sensitive, which was why he spent money on good, eco-friendly, silicone-free lubricant, something he was suddenly desperate to grab. But Ilya had a different idea.

“Give me hand.”

Shane let go of Ilya and did as he was told, lifting his hand. Ilya caught it, spat into his palm without the slightest shame, and then wrapped it around them both again. Shane gasped at the sensation—the warmth of the saliva, the way his cock slid against Ilya’s as he began to move Shane’s fist slowly.

“Fuuuck.”

Shane couldn’t even make a sound beyond a choked, broken gasp. Ilya started moving himself, keeping Shane’s hand still, shaping it into a tight channel around both of them. They were slick instantly, the grip hot and overwhelming.

Shane hadn’t been lying when he said his sex life was boring. He hadn’t gotten laid in months, and even if he enjoyed taking care of himself, feeling another person’s hands on him (touching his ass, guiding him, paying attention to him) was going to make him last a ridiculously short amount of time. He could already feel it, coiling low in his stomach, fed by Ilya’s groans and the Russian curses spilling between their mouths.

Surprisingly, Ilya was *far worse* than him.

“Shane—” Ilya warned, his voice strained, thick with effort. It had barely been minutes since they started, but Shane got it. It made him feel even more aroused, because Ilya, who looked like a sex god, was coming apart in his hands with a dirty, precarious handjob.

“Yeah, I’ve got you.”

“Blyat’, prosti, ya— Ah, blyat’, ya koncháyu.”

Fuck, sorry, I'm— Ah, fuck, I'm coming.

Whatever that meant, Shane nodded frantically. He didn't even know where the boldness came from, but he murmured, "Come for me, Ilya. Let me see you. I want it so bad. Please, *please* give it to me."

"Oh— God, yes."

Shane looked down. Ilya's cock, flushed a violent red, tightened in his hand before spilling long, thick streaks over his skin as Ilya kept moving against his fist, sloppy and uncontrolled. The sight alone was so obscene it made Shane tremble in Ilya's arms, and Ilya's hands clenched his ass hard enough that, inevitably, one finger brushed between his cheeks.

"*Oh*, do that again—"

"This?" Ilya muttered, still moving, dragging out his orgasm as his finger rubbed against Shane's tight hole, barely touching him. "You want me here?"

"Yes, please, please—"

Shane didn't have to ask twice. Ilya stopped and, in another shameless motion, slicked two of his fingers in the mess between them. Shane writhed when that hand returned between his cheeks, this time with sticky fingertips stroking him exactly where he liked it.

Ilya—*Fuck*, Ilya had big hands, roughened by training, but he used just the right amount of pressure, enough to make Shane arch and gasp for air. He wasn't even using them properly. He was just teasing, playing with his edge without really working him, and it was more than enough. It had been months since someone had touched him with that kind of certainty.

It only took a few fleeting seconds before Shane felt himself right on the edge.

Shane literally felt dizzy for a moment. The only thing he could process was skin against his and Ilya's breath, because he was practically drinking it in. He felt more alive than ever.

A few long seconds of broken panting followed before Ilya spoke.

"I fucking needed that." He joked, and Shane laughed at his silliness. Ilya kissed him briefly. "You're even prettier like this. You're always pretty, but more when I touch your ass and make you come."

Shane huffed.

"Okay. Your words are back. I see."

Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane's waist, pulling him back in a sweaty, messy-with-cum hug. Shane didn't mind. Not enough to get up and rush to the shower *just yet.*

They stayed like that for what felt like a precious stretch of time. Ilya's head rested against his chest, and Shane was practically wrapped around him with all his limbs, cocooning him. He felt safe, his nose buried in golden curls that smelled like fresh shampoo and sex.

“Were you assembling new furniture?”

Shane felt momentarily confused by the question, until he remembered they were in his living room. He glanced over Ilya’s shoulder and spotted the half-built bookshelf. It looked like some strange piece from a design museum.

“Yeah. But it wasn’t going well.”

“I can help,” Ilya offered. “I'm a good IKEA builder.”

Shane smiled. “Okay. But shower first. And have you eaten yet? Because, you know, my friend Jackie gave me two dozen tupperwares filled with food that’s going to go bad, so maybe we could have dinner. If you want to.”

Ilya looked at him with the softest smile Shane had ever seen on his face. It was the same one he gave Irina. He tried not to blush, but he was probably blushing already.

“Okay, *Teacher Shane Hollander*. I accept this date because you’re cute.”

“Asshole,” Shane murmured.

“And you have a pretty dick. Let’s go shower before I change my mind.”

Shane laughed, standing up and fixing his very ruined pants. Ilya barely bothered pulling his up, leaving them open, his underwear still visible.

Letting Ilya corner him against the small sink of his equally small bathroom, Shane kissed him again until he was breathless. Maybe the shower was too small for two men their size, but Shane doubted there would be any complaints about the forced proximity that was about to happen.

Later, once they were both dressed (Shane in new pajamas, Ilya in spare underwear and his clothes) they sat down to eat one of the delicious, healthy meals Jackie loved to prepare every time Shane visited her. Shane always returned the containers filled with food he cooked himself for her and the kids when he went back to Montréal, trying to make her week a little easier. It was a kind of unspoken deal between them, a way of taking care of each other.

Shane told Ilya that, and many other things. He talked more than he ever had on a first date (that was what Ilya insisted on calling it all night). Later, the Russian got rid of the furniture instructions against Shane’s will, saying confidently:

“This is intuition, Hollander. Leave it to *Daddy Ilya*.”

“Oh God. Don’t call yourself that!”

“But I am a sexy rich dad!”

The argument lasted longer than it took Ilya to put the damn piece of furniture together, without instructions or help. Shane was just there, looking at him and laughing at his silly comments.

By the time they were saying goodbye, past midnight, Shane felt like he was living inside a dream.

“Will you call me this time?” Ilya asked quietly, bumping his nose against Shane’s, his hands firm on his cheeks. Shane nodded.

“I promise.”

“Okay. I’ll send cute photo of Irina, if you send cute photo of your face.”

“That’s manipulation.”

“Rozanov family best trait,” Ilya bragged. Shane couldn’t help laughing. *“Spokoynoy nochi, Shane.”*

“Bonne nuit, Ilya.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> i highly recommend you to activate the creator's style for this chapter. there's a LOT of messages and i didn't spend three weeks fighting against that html code just for you to read the simple version. TURN. IT. ON.
>
> one scene from this chapter is highly inspired by @jupxnoir 's fanart of this fic on twitter. I'll let you here the link because i don't know how to link a link lmao https://x.com/jupxnoir/status/2015775826009084177/photo/1
>
> thanks for all the good messages and the love. x

Ilya: So

Ilya: What are you wearing today?

Shane: Clothes.

Shane: And you?

Ilya: Towel. Just finished practice.

Read 12:48 PM

Ilya waited a few minutes. He'd learned that Shane wasn't a good texter over the last several days of near-constant messaging, at all hours. It was midday, so Ilya knew for sure he wasn't busy. Shane just didn't know how to flirt throught messages, which was kind of funny.

It made him unbearably cute, too.

Ilya: Wanna see under?

Shane: What?

Ilya: If I send you a photo, you send me one back.

Shane: I'm having lunch at work, Ilya.

Ilya: Okay. Go to the bathroom then.

Shane: That's gross.

Ilya: It's hot.

Shane: It's not. And what if Irina takes your phone one day and finds those photos?

Shane: Kids know far more about technology than you think. She'd be traumatized.

Ilya: Wow

Ilya: You're so strict.

Ilya: I thought I was the daddy in this relationship, baby.

Shane: Stop calling yourself that.

Shane: And I am just protecting her innocence!
Shane: This isn't me being strict at all. I can be far worse.

Ilya: Sounds kinky.

Ilya: I'm interested. Tell me more.

Shane: You're unbelievable.

Ilya smiled to himself. Shane was extremely careful when it came to Irina. Ilya was too, of course, but he was her father. He'd grown used to the idea of her being exposed to certain things. Sort of. He hated it, yes, and he was aggressively overprotective about it, but this had been his reality for four years.

He knew Irina would never find those photos. Mostly because she had never shown the slightest interest in his phone beyond using it to FaceTime Svetlana. Irina, thankfully, preferred dollhouses, big teddy bears, and expensive tea party sets. The only digital media she really cared about was *Smeshariki,* a Russian cartoon that she watched with religious devotion.

Also, hidden folders existed, *for the love of God.*

Regardless, Ilya understood. Shane was new to all of this: to the constant vigilance, the quiet fear, the sudden intrusive thoughts about everything being a potential threat to Irina. He carried that responsibility the best he could, even though it had appeared overnight and settled into his life without warning. Ilya found it achingly endearing.

It also made him think, more than once, that Shane would be an excellent parent.

The daily messages helped them both. Shane kept him updated on how Irina was doing at school, sending photos of her in class, always framed carefully so no other child appeared. He had sent a selfie, too, taken two days ago when Patricia came to pick her up. Seeing Irina smiling at the camera, Shane kissing her cheek, both of their faces covered in tiny star-shaped stickers, had made Ilya feel lighter. He had created an album with their names, and he was planning to have hundreds of photos there someday.

Ilya also answered Shane's questions about Irina. Was she allergic to anything besides coconut? (*Yes, amoxicillin.*) What was her favorite color? (*Don't answer. It's pink.*) Would she like a doughnut? *(I want to try a new healthy, sugar-free recipe just for her.) (Of course, love. She'd adore it.)*

They talked about themselves, too. Ilya liked calling Shane late at night, right after finishing FaceTime with his daughter, and listening to his melodic voice poured directly into his ear. Sometimes he put him on speaker, taking advantage of the captain's privilege of having his own room. In another life, Shane could've been a singer. He was sure of it. Ilya had never felt so soothed by a voice before.

Maybe his mother's, once. But he barely remembered that. She hadn't sung lullabies after he turned eight. Sadness had taken that away, too.

One way or another, listening to Shane ramble about boring teacher things (grades, new French songs for the kids, seasonal projects, even dull faculty gossip) calmed him in a way nothing else ever had while he was on the road. Not since he'd adopted Irina. It grounded him and made him feel like he was *home*, not actual thousands of miles away from it.

And Shane listened back, mostly to his endless yapping about hockey. To his complaints about why his line wasn't clicking (*Because your right wing is young and doesn't have the confidence to keep up with you, Ilya)*, to defensive coverage that fell apart under pressure *(Well, you should try to match LaPointe with Dykstra next time. I have the feeling that it will help a lot)*. Somewhere along the way, Ilya realized Shane wasn't just being chatty with him. He gave the right answers. He remembered all their names. He picked up on patterns and created solutions to correct them.

He talked about forechecks and matchups, about when to shorten the bench and when to trust the younger players. About momentum shifts and how a team played differently when they were chasing the score versus protecting it. He made predictions before games that were unsettlingly accurate, and when Ilya asked how the hell he knew, Shane just shrugged, cute freckled face all flustered, and said *I'm good at paying attention.*

It was… hot. Ridiculously so.

Shane was passionate and sharp, thoughtful without being condescending. He spoke about hockey the same way he spoke about teaching: with care, with curiosity, with that confidence of someone who actually knew what they were talking about. Ilya had faced analysts, coaches and reporters who'd been around the game their entire lives, and somehow this soft-spoken teacher still managed to surprise him.

Ilya liked that he could meet Shane there. That they could share hockey somehow, even if it wasn't the way Shane'd wanted when he was younger. Even if he was set aside because he trusted the wrong guy back in high school. Ilya was still *furious* about it.

But talking made the distance easier to bear. And it made coming back home feel even more like a necessity. This time, not only Irina was waiting for him in Ottawa. Shane was there, too. And he was dying to come back home to both of them.

That might or *might not* be the reason why Ilya had been playing like a fucking rockstar lately.

One clean win and two losses so far, both of them overtime defeats after the Centaurs battled all the way to the final whistle. It wasn't ideal, he knew that, but it was still better than what the Centaurs had managed for years. The guys were happy. Luca Haas hadn't smiled this much since the day Ilya met him, and Dykstra was back to his pre-season self, blasting horrible music in the fucking locker room again. Ilya allowed it out of sheer mercy. Even Boodram had started inviting everyone to weekend barbecues at his place again, kids and wives included. Ilya found himself considering going, for the first time.

Coach Wiebe was happy too. Happy enough to invite them out for drinks tonight. Everyone was happy.

Ilya was happy as well. *Partially*.

He missed Irina. He missed Shane. But texting helped. At least with the completely-uncontrollable-missing-Shane situation.

Ilya: I miss you

Shane: I miss you too.

He probably looked insane, standing there in the changing room, towel low around his hips, hair wet and dripping, teammates talking loudly around him and at him. He ignored all of them. The smile on his lips wavered at Shane's next message.

Shane: Irina has been quiet today.

Ilya: Mm. She cried on FaceTime last night.

Ilya: She is upset because I'm far away and she doesn't get to see you as much either.

Ilya: She blames me. She said that you don't want to go out with her because I'm gone.

Shane: I'm so sorry about that.

Shane: I'll try to talk to her after extracurriculars today. Would that be okay with you?

Ilya: Don't be sorry, love.

Ilya: She's also moody because Svetlana left and because she hates therapy. It's not your fault.

Ilya: And yes. I'm okay with you talking to her

Shane: Maybe I can

Shane: I don't know.

Shane: Take her to Marie's this afternoon? After class? My mom and I were planning to go anyway, so maybe Irina would like to join us.

Shane: Patricia can come with us.

Shane: I just

Shane: I just want to spend some time with her outside of school. I hate that she thinks I don't want her when you're not around.

Ilya's thoughts spiraled instantly. *I think I love you,* he thought. *No. I'm sure I love you, and I can't believe I found you.*

He inhaled slowly, trying to calm his chest, trying to fight the pressure building behind his eyes. He stared at the messages longer than he meant to, forgetting where he was and the room around him.

"Are you okay, Roz?"

He looked up. Wyatt Hayes was watching him, concern etched into his face. Ilya swallowed.

"Yes."

"Everything okay with Irina?" Wyatt insisted, glancing briefly at Ilya's phone. Of course. He probably assumed it was Patricia. She was the only person Ilya ever talked with on the phone during road trips. He nodded.

*"Da— Y*es. She's okay," he said quietly. Then, surprising himself, he added, "She's upset because I'm gone."

Ilya didn't talk about his problems. He never had, not back in Boston, and not now. It felt improper. Like he was admitting a weakness he couldn't afford. He was the captain. His

teammates were supposed to lean on him, not the other way around.

But this time, he allowed himself a break.

“Do you have kids?” he asked suddenly.

Wyatt smiled. “*Nope*. One nephew, though. A little menace. I love him.”

Ilya smiled back.

“Does he have trouble at school? Making friends?”

Wyatt shrugged. “My sister switched schools for him a few years ago. She and her wife noticed he was being left out because of them being a lesbian couple. The school didn’t want to do anything about it, so they moved him,” he said easily, without realizing that sentence alone sent Ilya’s heart racing. *Would that happen to Irina too, if he and Shane…?* “Is Irina having trouble at school?”

“She’s having trouble everywhere,” Ilya said almost ironically. He felt sick on his stomach. “She is… sad. Because we don’t have any family. You know, holidays are tough for kids like her.”

He hadn’t noticed the locker room fell silent. Some of the younger guys had already left except for Luca, who lingered near the older players, but enough of the rest remained. And they were attentive enough to be actively listening to his conversation with Wyatt.

Enough to be watching Ilya open up about his concerns.

He cleared his throat, suddenly aware of himself. He turned away, forcing his body into motion, starting to change for real this time. He set his phone down on the bench.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “She’ll come around—”

“Why don’t you spend Christmas with us, Roz?” Boodram asked suddenly, obvious worry hanging in his tone. “Cassie and I were going to be alone anyway—”

“I don’t think your pregnant wife would feel like cooking for more people.” Chouinard pointed out. He was the right winger Ilya had moved into the second line because they didn’t have any chemistry. Not that Haas was doing so much better. Shane was right. Luca was a good player, but he was shy and needed time to adjust to Ilya’s aggressive play.

“Come on. She won’t mind and it’d be fun!”

“You can spend it with me, Cap. My aunt makes good food! Her husband is Polish, so maybe she can cook Eastern European recipes—”

“Or with us! Lisa and I don’t mind.”

“No.”

“But—”

“I said no. Drop it.” Ilya’s voice was sharper this time. He finished getting dressed, though he immediately kind of regretted the rush when he noticed their expressions again. Worried. Even almost-teenager Luca Haas was looking at him with something dangerously close to pity, and Ilya fucking *hated it.* “Irina is having trouble accepting that it’s just us. *Not me*.”

“It doesn’t look like it, Roz,” Dykstra murmured. He almost jumped when Ilya shot him a murderous look. “You just look… alone, man. You could use some company. We’d love to help. We love Irina.”

“And you too.”

Every head turned toward Luca at once. The kid seemed to realize what he’d just said a second too late, going red as a tomato and swallowing hard. Ilya barely managed not to laugh, despite his annoyance.

“Cute,” Wyatt muttered at his side.

“The kid’s right,” Dykstra said, a small, crooked smile on his face. “We love you. Unfortunately. So let us help.”

Ilya took a slow breath. Seeing his team like this—so supportive, so ready to step into his life without expecting anything back, without money or favors involved, knowing full well that he was exhausted and alone and he could never return them back the favor...

Well. Not that alone, lately.

He thought of Shane, probably waiting for his reply right now. Shane, who wanted to spend time with Irina even when Ilya wasn’t there to keep an eye on her. Shane, who took care of her while working, even though he wasn’t required to do more than be her teacher. Shane, who bought her silly little stickers with his own money and gave them only to her, because she was special. Shane, who refused to sext with him because he cared too much about Irina’s childhood staying safe and innocent.

“Thank you,” Ilya said finally, “but the thing is, I don’t want to spend Christmas with any of you idiots.” He raised a brow when Boodram looked deeply offended. “I’m seeing someone.”

“Yeah, sure,” Wyatt scoffed at his side. Ilya shot him a completely serious look. “Wait—Seriously? You? Ilya Rozanov? *Dating?*”

“What’s that supposed to mean—”

“Does Irina know her?”

Ilya looked at Boodram with open exasperation. He shouldn’t have said anything at all. This was already far more than he’d ever been willing to share about his romantic life. Maybe he was going soft, because he answered anyway.

“Yes.”

“Oh my fucking god, he’s serious,” Wyatt said to the room, looking at the rest of the team like he’d just uncovered Atlantis. “Fucking Roz is *in love!”*

Someone in the room actually gasped—probably Boodram, who took a hand to his chest like a Victorian child witnessing scandal for the first time. The rest of them exploded.

“With who?”

“Since when?”

“Why didn’t you tell us anything?”

“Is she hot? Show us a picture!”

Ilya pinched the bridge of his nose, already regretting everything.

“Okay, okay— Everyone calm down,” Dykstra said, failing spectacularly at not grinning. “This is… wow. This is big.”

“It is not big,” Ilya muttered. “It is private. So no questions. I will not tell you anything.”

“That’s what people say when it’s very big,” Dykstra replied smugly.

Wyatt leaned back against the wall, arms crossed, studying Ilya with unsettling focus. “Is this why you’ve been playing out of your fucking mind lately?”

Ilya paused.

“That is unrelated.”

“That’s a yes,” Wyatt decided immediately. “You’re glowing, man. It’s terrifying.”

“I am not glowing—”

“You are,” Luca murmured softly. Ilya looked at the kid. “You look happier on the ice, Cap.”

That one landed harder than the rest.

Ilya looked away, jaw tightening as he reached for his phone, more to give his hands something to do than because he actually needed it.

“She makes you happy,” Boodram said, quieter now.

Ilya didn’t correct him.

“Yes,” he said instead, voice low but steady. “He does.”

That shut them up.

The silence that followed felt suspended, like the room itself had stopped breathing. Then Wyatt blinked a few times and broke into the widest grin yet.

“No fucking way,” he said. “*Holy shit!* This just got even better.”

Boodram mouth dropped to the floor. Dykstra nodded slowly, thoughtful, like he was mentally rearranging something he hadn’t realized before. Luca stayed frozen in place, eyes bright and wide. Around them, a few low murmurs from the rest of the guys rippled through the room—surprise, curiosity, disbelief—but nothing more than that.

Ilya watched them closely.

He knew it had to be shocking. This wasn’t how he’d imagined coming out, if he’d imagined it at all. He’d never felt like he owed anyone a formal explanation of who he wanted or loved. Letting it drop like this had felt… natural.

And deep down, he didn’t even care if they minded. If they did, that was their fucking problem, not his.

Still, the way they handled it (the lack of tension, the absence of judgment) made something in his chest loosen. He felt lighter.

“Well,” Boodram said finally, clapping his hands once. “Then that’s settled. You’re not spending Christmas with any of us because you’re spending it with your *boyfriend*. And Irina.”

Ilya tried not to smile like an idiot at the word boyfriend.

“Probably,” Ilya said. “I haven’t asked yet.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Yes, Roz,” someone added. “Be a man and ask him!”

Ilya sighed, rubbing a hand over his face.

“This is serious, okay?” he said. “I really like him. I don’t want him to feel pressured to say yes.” He hesitated, then added, unable to stop himself, “And Irina likes him a lot. She’s happy when he’s around. I don’t want to scare him away.”

That did it.

A couple of them actually *whooped*. Luca laughed outright. Boodram shook his head in disbelief. Wyatt looked dangerously close to tearing up.

“Roz,” he said, voice thick. “Man. I’m really happy for you.”

Ilya swallowed, chest tight, face probably red. Fuck, was he really blushing? *Pathetic*.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “Me too.”

His phone buzzed in his hand.

Shane: Ilya?

Shane: Did I overstep?

Shane: I'm sorry if I did.

Shane: You don't have to say yes.

Shane: I understand if you don't trust me that way yet.

Shane: I need to go to work now. Have a good day.

Ilya: Shane.

Ilya: I trust you with my life, love.

Ilya: I will let Patricia know that Irina is staying with you today. I will send you her contact so you can tell her when you're dropping her at home.

Ilya: Thanks for taking care of her.

Ilya: Also, send me a cute photo of you two? I miss your pretty faces.

Sent 13:24 PM

Three hours later, when Ilya was alone in his room zapping lazily at his bed, waiting for the time to go down the hall and meet with Coach Wiebe and the guys, a message from Shane arrived. A photo of him and Irina was attached. They looked so happy together. Ilya felt jealous of not being there with them.

Shane: We miss you so much.

His heart skipped a beat or two. His eyes filled with tears, but his mouth was smiling.

Ilya: I miss you both too, love.

I love you, he thought again, but he didn't say it.

Not yet.

***

Irina was a curious, talkative child. The kind who filled silences without even noticing, asking questions all the time and trying to learn and understand the world around her.

Shane had realized almost immediately that her speech and reasoning were slightly ahead of her classmates', and while her harmless attempts at emotional manipulation (wide eyes, fluttering lashes, a careful bending of words to suit her needs) were undeniably endearing, they were also telling. Irina was sharp. Far more aware of the world around her than most children her age.

She noticed the good things. And she noticed the bad ones, too.

Starting therapy hadn't been easy. Shane knew Ilya had been stretched thin over the past couple of weeks. The games leading up to the short Christmas break were always hectic, but they became something else entirely when Ilya was doing it all alone, juggling with a demanding schedule and also caring for a complicated little girl who needed more than he could always give. Shane wished, often, that he could step in more. That he could help carry some of that weight somehow, but his fear of crossing boundaries they hadn't fully settled kept him hesitating.

He knew this was serious. Ilya had already told him it was the same for him. But still, Shane didn't want to push too far.

From his role as Irina's teacher, he'd done everything he could. He watched her closely in class, offered quiet encouragement, made sure she felt supported and safe. Still, there were other children who needed him, too, and it wasn't easy to give Irina the time she deserved when seven hours a day were filled with small lives depending on him all at once.

This week, with Ilya away, her mood had taken a noticeable turn for the worse. She was quicker to snap, quicker to retreat into herself and her emotions seemed to be all over the place. She looked constantly tense, fragile, like she was containing a storm that was about to explode at any moment.

On Monday it happened around another Christmas activity: learning carols to sing with family.

Shane had wished he could scrap the whole thing the moment he saw Irina sitting in silence, eyes fixed on the table, hands folded neatly in her lap like she was trying to make herself smaller.

When he approached her and gently asked why she wasn't joining in, she hadn't looked up.

"Papa didn't teach me this carol," she said. She didn't sound just sad. There was something sharper there: resentment. A quiet kind of anger, heavy for such a small voice. *"He doesn't know a lot of English songs."*

And that, of course, made sense. Ilya was an immigrant, surrounded mostly by Russian speakers, his world still rooted in his own language. Shane didn't even really count the Centaurs in that equation, because he had the distinct feeling that Ilya didn't participate much in anything that existed outside hockey with them. Games, practices, travel. That was it. Everything else stayed at arm's length when it came to let people inside his life.

"What if we practice some new songs together when your dad comes back?" Shane had offered softly. "Would you like that?"

Irina had only shrugged, like it didn't matter. Shane knew better, though. He knew she was angry at therapy, at the changes she didn't understand, at her father being gone when she needed him most.

And it didn't get better as the week went on.

She stayed distant and irritable. Her smiles were scarce and fleeting, her attention drifting no matter how hard Shane tried to engage her. By Friday, the worry sat heavy in his chest. Knowing that she had been crying because she felt neglected by him made him worse.

He needed to do something. He couldn't just watch her fade like this, he couldn't cope with how apathetic and sad she was.

It was breaking his heart.

Shane dismissed the last child of the day with a tired but genuine smile. The December cold cut straight through him, sinking into his bones, and he absently thought that he really should start wearing his coat during pickup. At this rate, catching a cold was inevitable, and even if he was always cautious with his health, he felt like the need to be extremely prudent now. The worst thing that could happen was passing it on to Irina.

Shane closed the door, already knowing Patricia wasn't coming today. The quiet that settled afterward felt exciting. He was dying to take her to Marie's, introduce her to his mother properly. Yuna would immediately fall in love with her. She knew she existed, and they'd met before, but she hadn't talked with Irina that time, and Shane was anticipating that they'd become best friends.

He looked over at Irina with fond affection.

She was still at her table, coloring with crayons, softly humming the French song Shane had been teaching them for the past two days. She seemed to resent French carols less, maybe because not all the kids knew them, and that made her feel less different.

“What are you painting, *ma chérie?”*

Irina looked up at him with bright, intent eyes. Shane crouched beside her, smiling, carefully smoothing a hand over her hair, styled into two messy-with-curls, beautiful braids. She held the paper up proudly.

“This is Papa, and this is me.” She pointed with a crayon-stained finger. It was good, for a four-year-old. Maybe Shane was biased because he adored her, but he genuinely thought she might grow into a great artist one day. “And this is you, and this is a Christmas tree. It’s pink because I like pink, but the one we bought is boring green.”

Shane snorted softly. “You’re right,” he said solemnly. “Green is boring.”

He studied the drawing more closely, noticing that the little stick figures of Ilya and himself were holding hands. Stick-made hands, but still. Something warm fluttered in his chest.

“Irina,” he said gently, “do you like it when I spend time with you and your dad?”

She kept coloring, but nodded eagerly.

“Papa is happy when you’re around,” she said matter-of-factly. “He smiles a lot.”

“Okay,” Shane said, smiling despite the way his heart skipped at that. “And what about you?”

Irina paused. Her crayon hovered over the paper, leaving a small pink dot where it hesitated. She frowned in that thoughtful, serious way she had when she was trying very hard to put big things into small words.

“I like you,” she said quietly. “I like it when you’re with us.”

She didn’t look at him at first. She traced the Christmas tree again, pressing harder this time.

“But you don’t want to stay with us,” she went on, “Papa always leaves and you too. I hate it.”

“Irina…” Shane swallowed the knot in his throat, shaking his head. He noticed her eyes were a little bit teary. “You know we don’t leave because we want to. I have my own home, and your dad needs to work. You like him being a hockey player, right? Would you like him to stop playing?”

That made her finally glance up at Shane.

“Okay, Papa can go.” she accepted, very simply. “But why do you have to go? My house is big, you can stay with me. I will— I will share my room with you. Please.”

Shane wanted to say yes right then and there. He wanted to tell her that he would grab his few belongings (mostly clothes and the espresso machine his mother had insisted on gifting him last Christmas) and move in with them. That he would stay. That he would always be there for her, whenever she needed him.

But he couldn't.

Even if things were going well, even if Ilya trusted him enough to let him spend time alone with her without Patricia around, Shane couldn't just decide that this was his life now. He couldn't make that choice on his own.

He didn't even know if they were *there* yet. If Ilya wanted them to be.

Shane took a slow breath, forcing himself to stay composed under Irina's hopeful gaze. He rested both hands on her small shoulders, covered by a soft unicorn sweatshirt.

"Irina, I'm going to tell you a secret, okay?" he said gently. "But you can't tell your dad. You have to promise me."

She nodded immediately, eyes bright with interest.

"I promise," Irina said solemnly, lifting her pinky.

Shane smiled despite himself and carefully hooked his finger around hers. Her hands were so small he was afraid of squeezing too hard. Her eyes looked a little less watery now, so he went on.

"I would love to be with you all day," he said softly, "and maybe someday we will. But I can't promise you that just yet."

"Why not?" Irina pouted.

"Because I love you," Shane answered honestly, feeling like he was handing his whole heart to a child who couldn't fully take the weight of it yet. But someday she would understand how much this meant to Shane, and he knew that his feelings were safe with her. "And I don't want to promise you something I'm not completely sure I can keep."

He swallowed.

"And I love your dad too. I love you both so much, and I want us to be together. But we need to be patient and take things slowly so they work out well. Do you think you can be patient for me, Irina?"

Irina looked at him with wide eyes. She blinked twice, and they were so intensely similar to Ilya's that Shane's chest ached. He didn't know much about Irina's biological father because Ilya didn't like talking about him, but he was certain Alexei must have been close enough to his brother for Irina to look so undeniably like Ilya's own daughter.

In a selfish way, Shane was grateful for that. He saw Ilya everywhere in her face, in her expressions, in the way she looked at him with eyes full of colors and dreams.

“Do you really love *me*?” Irina asked, voice shaking a bit and pout trembling.

Shane’s heart broke a little more. How could she doubt it? How could she say it like it was something hard to believe?

As a professional, he knew children could be this insecure when they carried abandonment trauma. As someone who was starting to feel, deep in his bones, that this was his kid, he understood Ilya’s frustration more than ever. It made him want to cry inconsolably for days.

He cupped her cheeks gently, thumbs brushing away the tears that had finally spilled, his own vision blurring in the process. Her skin was warm beneath his hands.

“Yes,” he said, voice rough but steady. “I really love you, Irina.”

She sniffed. “Like… forever? You’ll love me forever? Even if I’m not good at school and I don’t like carrots?”

He snorted. “Of course I will,” he replied softly. “I need you to understand that even if I can’t live with you right now, I will always care for you, no matter what you do or what happens. And I will always be there when you need me. We both need to be patient, and maybe— Maybe we can be together, soon. How does that sound?”

She studied his face with terrifying seriousness, as if she was processing every word he’d said.

“And that way,” she asked quietly, “you’ll love my dad too? Forever?”

Shane tried (and failed) to hide his smile. She was so precious, always worrying about Ilya, even when she wanted to be angry with him.

“I hope so,” he murmured. “Yes.”

Then, more carefully, “But you can’t tell him that yet, because that’s something I need to tell him myself. Can you keep that secret for me, love?”

She thought about it for a couple of seconds. Then she nodded.

“Okay. But you tell him soon, please. He will be happy if you tell him.”

Shane nodded back. “Yeah. I will. Soon. I promise.”

She leaned forward then, wrapping her small arms around his neck with sudden force. Shane closed his eyes and held her back carefully. He tried not to completely fucking break right there.

“I can wait a little,” she murmured into his neck. “And then we’ll be happy together.”

Shane pressed a kiss into her hair, breathing her in, and made a silent promise to himself.

No matter how complicated this became, no matter how slow they had to go, he would fight for her. For Ilya, too. For both of them.

Shane eased back from her slowly, schooling his expression into something light and cheerful, clearing his throat before he spoke.

“Okay, so today Patricia isn’t coming to pick you up, because you’re spending the afternoon with me. What do you think?”

Irina’s eyes lit up like two stars.

“Really?!”

“Really.” He smiled. “I thought we could go to Marie’s with my mother. Do you remember her? You met her some weeks ago.”

“Yes!”

“Good. Then let’s get ready.”

Her mood flipped completely, like someone had turned on a switch. She smiled nonstop, nearly bouncing as she carefully put away the crayons and packed her colored pencils all by herself. Shane helped her wash her hands, then slipped her coat, gloves and toque on, tucking the new drawing safely into her backpack first. Once he was satisfied she was warm enough, he took her hand and led her out of the classroom.

“Shane,” she called suddenly, peering up at him, “I think your mom is cool and pretty like you.”

He laughed, caught off guard. “Thanks, love. I do look a lot like my mother.”

“But she doesn’t have freckles. I like those from you.”

“No, those are from my dad’s side. I’ll make sure you meet him soon, so you can see.”

“Okay,” Irina hummed thoughtfully. “I don’t think I look a lot like my mom,” she said then. “I have a picture of her. Her name was Ekaterina.”

Shane noticed that every time Irina mentioned her mother, she made sure to pronounce her name properly. Maybe she wanted everyone to know her mother’s name, or maybe she was afraid of forgetting it.

“I’m sure you have traits of her,” Shane said softly, without hesitation. “You don’t only inherit physical things from your parents. Maybe she was just as smart as you are.”

Irina smiled, cheeks flushing pink. Shane brushed his thumb gently over the scar on her face. He didn’t know the details of the accident, only what Ilya had shared in vague conversations while they were late-talking through FaceTime. That Alexei and Katia had lived long enough to call emergency services. Long enough to protect Irina. Long enough to make sure

guardianship went to Ilya before they went into the operating room they never came back out of.

Shane was grateful to them for bringing Irina into the world, and for trusting, even in their last moments, that she would be safe with Ilya. He didn't know how well they'd loved her, but he promised them silently that she would be happy. That she would be cared for. That she would never feel alone if he could help it.

"Have you ever taken the train, Irina?" he asked as they walked.

"Nope."

"Oh," Shane grinned, "I think you're going to love it. Maybe we can even convince your dad to use it more."

Irina giggled. "I don't think so. He hates it."

Shane laughed too. Yeah. He didn't think so either.

Just as he'd predicted, Irina loved the train.

She pressed her nose to the window with wide, reverent eyes, marveling at how long it was, how fast it moved, how the city seemed to slide past them like a picture book. She pointed excitedly every time she recognized something: the station near the History Museum, where Ilya had taken her once and she'd gotten bored halfway through because *there were too many old things and not enough dinosaurs.*

Also the stop near Rideau, where they'd gone for hot chocolate on a snowy afternoon and she'd spilled it on her mittens, or the glimpse of the canal outside, where Ilya had promised her skating lessons when she was "bigger and braver." Shane rolled his eyes, knowing that the one who needed bravery to let Irina skate there was Ilya and his overprotectiveness. He wasn't complaining though. He would never let her near the canal.

She talked nonstop, memories tumbling out of her in a soft, enthusiastic rush, and Shane listened to every word she said. Sitting there with her small legs swinging above the floor and her voice filling the space between stations, Shane thought that maybe this was what happiness looked like.

"Shane?"

"Yes, love?"

"What's your mom's name? I don't remember…"

"She's called Yuna."

"Yuna," Irina murmured softly. Then she looked up at him, tilting her head. "That's a strange name."

Shane smiled, squeezing her gloved hand gently. “It’s not strange, sweetheart. It’s just different. How many Irinas do you know?”

Irina frowned in concentration for a moment. “Just me.”

“Exactly,” Shane said warmly. “That’s because your name is Russian. Not a lot of people here have Russian names. But that doesn’t make you strange. It makes you special.”

Irina nodded, clearly pleased with that explanation.

“So Yuna is a Russian name too?”

Shane shook his head, still smiling.

“No. Yuna is a Japanese name.”

Irina’s eyes widened with curiosity.

“What’s Japanese?”

Shane smiled, adjusting his grip on her as they got out the train.

“Japan is where my mom’s family comes from,” he explained gently. “It’s a country very far from here, on the other side of the world.”

Irina’s eyes widened immediately. “Like… farther than Russia?”

“Yes,” Shane laughed softly. “Much farther.”

She seemed shocked.

“So your mom is not from here?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“No, she isn’t. She came to Canada when she was very little, just like you,” Shane explained. “She also speaks Japanese, French, and English, just like you’re learning Russian, French and English.”

Irina looked impressed. “Wow. And she— She learned all that?”

That made Shane snort. “Yeah. I’ve told you so many times, Irina. You’re smart! Only a few people, like my mother, can speak in all those languages. It takes a lot of effort.”

“I think your mom Yuna is even cooler now!”

Shane felt something warm settle in his chest. “She’s the best.”

Yuna Hollander was a strict, serious, composed woman. Shane had grown up as her only child, always surrounded by the best things his parents’ finances could provide. Both Yuna

and David had made sure Shane never lacked anything. At least, never lacked what they believed was best for him.

He had never been a particularly difficult child. His mother loved to remind him, over and over again, of how calm he'd been as a baby, how little he cried. When he was Irina's age, Shane had been quiet and not especially social, far too busy collecting hockey cards and watching games with his mom at night to worry about making friends.

When he was old enough—five years old—to hold a stick properly, everything clicked into place.

Yuna had been his biggest cheerleader, and, in many ways, the reason Shane made such an early and unwavering decision to dedicate himself to hockey. She had also turned into a full-blown mama bear years later. She was in charge of reporting, threatening, and verbally tearing apart both the high school administration and the parents involved when that intimate video of Shane surfaced and ruined his dreams.

Yuna was one hell of a good mother. She always knew what to say, what to do, how to act. She was everything a son could ever ask for. And now, watching her with Irina, Shane could tell she was more than *delighted* to show all of her skills again.

She was already seated at a table by the window when they arrived, coat folded neatly beside her and a cup of tea steaming in front of her. She looked up the moment she spotted them, sharp eyes softening instantly.

"Ah," she said, getting halfway to her feet. "Hello, Irina."

Irina stopped short, suddenly shy, her fingers tightening around Shane's hand. She peeked at Yuna from behind his arm, studying her with the same seriousness she gave to most new things.

"Hi, Lady Yuna," Irina said politely, then glanced up at Shane as if checking whether that was correct. He nodded, waiting for his mother to say something.

Yuna raised a brow and smiled.

"Lady," she repeated. "Oh no. That makes me look so old." She crouched slightly to Irina's height, resting her hands on her knees. "You can just call me Yuna."

Irina's eyes widened. "Okay… Yuna. I like your name. Shane told me it's a special name."

His mom looked at Shane with soft eyes. He smiled back at her.

"Thank you very much, darling," Yuna said. Then she leaned in carefully. "You told me yours comes from your grandmother, didn't you?"

Irina lit up immediately. "Yes! Papa told me she was the best! So my dad gave me her name. It's special too."

Yuna hummed approvingly. “Of course it is.” She straightened, then greeted Shane with a brief hug. “Irina, do you prefer hot chocolate or juice?”

“Hot chocolate,” Irina answered without hesitation.

Yuna smiled, satisfied. “Excellent. Shane can go get it for you while you and I talk about *girl things.”*

Shane looked at her uncertainly, thinking Irina might not be comfortable staying alone with his mother. But, to his surprise, she simply let go of his hand, took Yuna’s instead without issue, and nodded solemnly.

“Okay.”

Shane nodded back and let his mother lead Irina away. On his way to the counter, he glanced at them a couple of times. Yuna helped Irina out of her puffy pink coat and gloves, folding them neatly before placing them on the empty chair beside them. Shane smiled when he saw Irina smiling too, reacting eagerly to whatever Yuna was asking her. She answered with excitement, launching into nonstop chatter under his mother’s attentive gaze.

“Look at that. *Quelqu'un ici a l’air comme un nouveau papa.”*

Look at that. Someone smells like a new dad in here.

Shane tore his attention away from them and turned to Marie. The bakery wasn’t too crowded, thankfully, but he still blushed under the knowing look she—and her coworker behind the counter—gave him.

“Mais oui bonjour, Marie.”

“Pas bonjour,” she said, planting her palms on the counter expectantly. “Spill.”

Hello to you too, Marie.
No hello. Spill.

Shane sighed, rubbing the back of his neck as she waved to her coworker. They had probably heard Irina asking for hot chocolate.

“You’re unbearable,” he muttered.

“And yet,” Marie replied cheerfully, leaning closer, *“I’m never wrong. I knew you were getting that sexy daddy—”*

“Oh my fucking god. Why is everyone calling him that?”

“Because he’s a fucking cupcake, obviously,” the guy holding the hot chocolate said. Marie laughed at Shane’s expression. “I don’t even like men. But that one? *Fuck me*, please.”

“I agree. Not that I’m pathetic enough to let a man touch me,” she added casually, “but I could stare at your *boyfriend* for hours, Shane.”

Shane flushed.

“He’s not my boyfriend.” He said quickly. Marie’s coworker—Jonah, according to his name tag—looked instantly intrigued. Shane raised a brow. *“Yet.”*

“Well, hurry up, cutie,” Jonah said. “If even I’m interested, I don’t want to imagine how long the fucking line is.”

Marie huffed, amused.

“You haven’t seen how he looks at Shane up close, *mon cher.* He looks *stupid*. Completely enchanted. It’s disgustingly cute.”

Shane rolled his eyes, pretending Marie was exaggerating. But was she? Did Ilya really look that stupidly in love with him?

Jonah shrugged, finally handing Shane the hot chocolate.

“Now that I think about it,” he added, lowering his voice slightly, “you’re kind of cute too.” He winked.

Shane kept his expression neutral. Yeah, Jonah was objectively fine. Tall, dusty blond hair, broad shoulders, a neatly trimmed beard. The kind of guy people noticed without much effort. But his eyes were dark and flat, his lips too thin, his face too clean. No moles or sun marks at all. And he was missing that infuriating, self-satisfied grin Ilya could summon so easily, like it was his nature.

More than that, there was no warmth in Jonah’s gaze. Nothing that heated Shane’s body and heart and make him crave for him, for his touch and his kissed and—

He did absolutely nothing to Shane.

“I’m not interested.”

“Pity me,” Jonah said lightly, unfazed. Marie burst out laughing.

“You’re the least straight man I know,” she teased. “You live in a glass closet, Jonah.”

Jonah waved her off and disappeared into the kitchen without another word.

Once Shane and Marie were alone, her expression softened, turning more serious. Shane sighed.

“So,” she said quietly, *“you look like you’re one step away from adopting her.”*

“Don’t even give me ideas,” he murmured. *“We’re trying to give it time. You know, doing this right. We don’t want it to fall apart and end up hurting her. Or having her hate us for it.”*

Marie’s smile turned warm, almost tender.

“Shane, baby, I think it’s already too late for that.” She tipped her chin toward the table. Irina was laughing out loud, cheeks flushed and full, while Yuna spoke to her with wide eyes and exaggerated gestures. *“I give it until the end of the year before she starts calling you Dad.”*

Maybe Shane shouldn’t have felt like the luckiest man alive at the thought.

But he absolutely did.

Shane: I think my mom is about to steal your daughter.

Ilya: Mmm, sorry. She can’t. She’s my baby, I would die without her.

Ilya: I’m assuming everything’s going well?

Shane: Yes. They’re already making plans. Irina’s even writing a list of gifts she wants to get for Christmas.

Ilya: Shameless girl.

Shane: Yeah. I think I know exactly where she gets that from…

Ilya: 😉

Ilya: Tell your mom thank you for me.

Ilya: And just ignore the list. I’m sure it’s nothing but more teddy bears and another tea set.

Shane: Too late. My mom is buying her everything.

Ilya: Well then, I should thank her in person next time.

Shane: Actually, I was thinking about dinner with them soon? After Christmas, maybe?

Shane: If it’s too soon I would understand.

Ilya: We would love to, Shane.

Ilya: Stop worrying about time.

Ilya: We will arrange it better when I’m home, but it is a yes.

Shane: Okay.

Ilya: Send me another picture later, yes?

Ilya: I miss your pretty face.

Ilya: I miss you.

Shane: Fuck, I do too.

Shane: I want to see you so bad.

Ilya: Two days, love.

Shane: Just two days.

Read 18:01 PM

***

"Troy Barrett is getting traded to the team."

Ilya felt his ears start ringing. Morning meetings always meant problems. After last night's loss against Minnesota, his mood had already been hanging by a thread, so Coach Wiebe's message asking for all of them early on the tenth floor of the hotel just made it worse.

He'd barely touched the puck last night, and maybe, just maybe, it had something to do with how relentlessly irritated he'd been feeling.

He knew he had no real reason to be like this. The road trip had been, for the most part, decent. His phone gallery was full of photos of Irina laughing with Shane, and Patricia had assured him his daughter was doing much better than earlier in the week, even taking into account that today she had to go back to therapy with Dr. Wang.

He should have been fucking happy. Instead, he felt… whatever this was. Tired. On edge. Irritated down to the bone. Like he was about to snap and kill somebody in the process.

Even if knowing things were good back in Ottawa calmed him, it also made it harder to accept that all those good moments were happening without him. While he spent his days locked inside a rink or a hotel room, he was missing key pieces of Irina's life. Missing memories with his daughter and his—*with* Shane.

The last thing he needed was some asshole coming out of nowhere and shaking the little stability the team had finally built.

“I don’t accept it.”

“That’s not part of your jurisdiction as captain, Rozanov,” Coach Wiebe replied flatly. “I’m informing you.”

“Bullshit,” Ilya muttered.

Wiebe stared at him, incredulous. He knew he was forgetting himself talking like that to his *coach*, but he simply didn’t care. He was pissed, and this was managing to ruin even more his day.

“And why the fuck is he coming now? It is mid-season.”

“You didn’t see it, sir?”

Ilya turned toward the rookie who had spoken—LaPointe. The defenseman was too polite and too… Canadian. He was always calling him sir. It made him feel old and also uncomfortable. Under other circumstances, Ilya would’ve told him to drop the formalities, but right now he was too exhausted to care.

“See what?”

LaPointe hesitated, then lifted his phone slightly. Ilya took it.

TROY BARRETT LOSES IT IN LOCKER ROOM BRAWL — SOURCES QUESTION HIS PROFESSIONALISM

Below it, a blurry photo clearly taken without consent: Barrett being pulled back by two teammates, jaw clenched, knuckles red.

Ilya frowned and started reading.

> What was meant to be a closed-door team meeting spiraled into chaos last night when Troy Barrett allegedly got into a physical altercation with teammate Dallas Kent. According to unnamed sources, Barrett “lost control” after a heated exchange, forcing staff to step in.
>
> The incident follows recent online allegations made by several women accusing Kent of sexual misconduct. While Toronto Guardians’ organization and the NHL have declined to address those claims directly, insiders suggest Barrett’s reaction raises serious concerns about his emotional stability and locker room conduct.
>
> “No matter the circumstances, a true professional knows when to keep his composure,” one source stated. “Teams can’t afford players who let personal issues interfere with the game.”

> Kent, meanwhile, continues to practice with the team as usual, while Barrett has reportedly been sidelined pending internal review. As trade rumors intensify, questions remain about whether Barrett's temperament makes him a risky addition mid-season… if any team is willing to take him in.

Ilya lowered the phone slowly. The small meeting hotel room they were using felt suddenly cold.

"Let's see if I understood," he said at last, his voice dangerously calm. He looked up at Coach Wiebe. "Multiple women accuse Kent of sexual abuse and the headline is that Barrett and *we* accepting the trade are the problem because he punched that piece of shit."

Silence.

Ilya let out a sharp, humorless breath.

"That's bullshit."

"So you're okay with him coming?" Wyatt asked, genuinely surprised.

"Of course not," Ilya hissed, his voice low but sharp, "but at least he's being traded for something honorable. When will he be here?"

"He's signing tomorrow. Management wants all of you there to greet him. Harris said it'd be good for PR too—some photos, showing that the team supports him."

"Do we?" someone muttered, voice too loud. Ilya's neck snapped toward him like a whip. "I — I mean, how do we even know those girls aren't lying about Kent—?"

"Dozens of girls? That is just the fucking truth," Ilya ground out between clenched teeth. The rookie nodded with a terrified expression.

"And Kent sucks," Boodram added, voice much calmer and patient than Ilya's. Maybe he should be captain again, not him. "I wouldn't be surprised *at all* that he's gone that far."

Ilya turned back to Coach Wiebe. "Tomorrow was supposed to be an off day."

"Not anymore, Roz."

Fuck. Ilya needed tomorrow, not just because he wanted to spend time with his daughter, but because it was the last day he had with Patricia before she left for her hometown for Christmas. He still hadn't told Irina that another nanny would be taking over, and he already knew she wouldn't take it well.

He needed the whole day to soften the blow somehow.

The team's morale dipped almost immediately after that. Whatever fragile good mood they'd been clinging to evaporated. The ride back was quiet: no music, no laughter, no post-game

talking. Just the low hum of rookies commenting on Barrett's trade and Ilya's mind spinning around all the things he needed to do that he didn't want to do at all.

Before boarding the plane, a message lit up his phone.

Shane: This is not me snooping, I promise.

Shane: My mom wants to know if the rumors are true.

Ilya couldn't help the small smile that tugged at his mouth.

Ilya: Which rumors? That I'm getting the Sexiest Man of the Year cover?

Ilya: They're true 😉

Ilya: Tell your mom she'll get a special edition, dedicated and signed.

Shane: Wait. She would secretly love that.

Ilya: Obviously.

Shane: But no. Troy Barrett.

Ilya: Yes.

Ilya: He's coming tomorrow.

Shane: Fuck. That doesn't make any sense.

Ilya: I know.

He hesitated, fingers hovering over the screen as a boarding call echoed distantly through the airport.

Ilya: You will be there when I land, yes?

Ilya: I want to see you.

Shane: Of course. I'll be with Irina and Patricia.

Shane: Or do you want me to wait outside?

Ilya: No. Stay with them.

Shane: Okay. Have a nice flight.

Ilya locked his phone and slipped it into his pocket, the faint smile lingering as he stepped forward in line. Even with everything waiting for him back home—Patricia leaving, the inevitable conversation with Irina about it, having to welcome Barrett, the new nanny—just knowing that Shane and Irina would be there made the tightness in his chest ease.

The flight was objectively short, but for Ilya it felt endless.

He tried to sleep, but sitting next to Luca Haas meant enduring an uninterrupted stream of nervous commentary about hockey (*I'm sorry I wasn't fast enough, sir. I promise I'll not miss any pass next time)* and his life (*I'll spend Christmas with my cousin, sir. She lives in Nova Scotia and is pregnant and…)*, which Ilya answered with vague *hums* and half-hearted *yeses* until Luca finally caught the hint and shut up, shrinking back into his seat.

That peace lasted exactly five minutes.

"So, Roz," Wyatt's voice cut through his attempt at doing nothing more than existing in silence. The man was practically hanging over the back of Ilya's seat, grinning like a menace. "You should tell us more about your *mysterious boyfriend."*

Ilya ignored him. For a solid hour. He pretended to be deeply invested in the safety pamphlet, the in-flight magazine, the stitching on the seat in front of him—anything. Eventually, Wyatt's persistence turned into the collective persistence of fifteen bored men, all trapped in a metal tube with nothing but curiosity and zero self-control.

Ilya was going to kill them.

He'd managed to keep them distracted for two days with practices and game night—but now, with three hours ahead and nowhere to run, there was no escaping it.

"Just tell us his name, pleaaase," Wyatt actually whined.

Ilya considered insulting him.

“No.”

“His age?”

“No.”

“Does he have a sister?” a rookie asked.

Ilya closed his eyes. “Absolutely not.”

“Is he hot?”

That earned a few snickers. Ilya opened one eye and fixed Wyatt with a look that had sent grown men to the penalty box without a word.

“Yes,” he said flatly. “Now shut up.”

That only made things worse.

“Oh my god.”

“I fucking knew it! He must be a total babe—”

“Show us a picture!”

Wyatt clutched his chest dramatically. “I can’t believe you’re keeping him hidden. That’s just cruel.”

“I’m not showing you anything,” Ilya snapped. “Now shut up and sit the fuck down, Hayes.”

“I’m starting to believe he’s imaginary,” Boodram said from a few rows back, amused. The team burst into laughter.

“Roz—”

“No.”

“Captain—”

“No.”

“Just his name.”

“I will end you,” Ilya said without turning around.

When Wyatt was finally gone, he leaned his head back against the seat. This was his fault. He should’ve known better than to admit anything at all. He glanced down at his phone, thumb hovering over Shane’s name before stopping himself. No signal. He could survive a few more hours without texting him. Shane wouldn’t see it anyway.

By the time the plane landed, his patience was in shreds. He stood the second the seatbelt sign turned off, grabbing his bag and ignoring the noise behind him.

The airport was busy, loud, chaotic. Ilya walked fast, like he was trying to outrun someone (the entire team), until a hand settled on his shoulder. Coach Wiebe stood beside him, eyes calm.

“What was all that about?”

Ilya sighed. “I told them I met someone. They’re unbearable about it.”

Wiebe’s eyebrows lifted slightly. He cleared his throat.

“And this person is a man?”

Clearly, the entire plane already knew.

“Yes,” Ilya answered, cautious. “Is that a problem?”

“Not at all, kid,” Wiebe said, smiling at him the way a parent would. Ilya had never received a smile like that from his own father, and it caught him off guard. “You’re a brave man, Ilya. I know people probably tell you this all the time, but you’re a wonderful player, an incredible father, and you deserve to be happy.”

No one told him that all the time. Hardly ever. Svetlana knew better than to try to convince him about it, and Shane had told him a couple of times, but he dismissed it from his mind easily. He was bad at believing those words. Ilya didn’t know how to react to them. He swallowed hard.

“Thank you, coach.”

Wiebe hesitated, as if weighing his next words.

“When I was your age—”

“Papa!”

Ilya’s head snapped to the side.

Irina was waving at him, bouncing in place. She was wearing his pink puffy coat and probably a dress, but Ilya couldn’t be sure because he was easily distracted by her rosy face full of stickers. He immediately smiled.

Patricia stood beside her, patient, and Shane—*beautiful* Shane in a blue coat, dark hair falling softly over his forehead, freckled cheeks flushed pink—was right there too. His eyes lit up the second they met Ilya’s.

Irina broke free and ran.

She let go of Shane's hand, making him gasp her name in alarm. Ilya dropped his bag without thinking and crouched just in time to catch her. The impact knocked the air from his lungs as she wrapped herself around his neck.

"Privet, solnyshko," he murmured into her hair, squeezing her tight. She smelled like fresh shampoo and orchids. She smelled like Shane. *"I missed you so much."*

"Me too, Papa," she said, pulling back just enough to look at him. Her almost-translucent brows knit together. "You look tired."

He laughed softly. *"Do I?"*

"Da."

"Well," he said, brushing her scarred cheek with his thumb, *"we can fix that. We will go home and sleep for daaaays. What do you think?"*

"No! You can't, Papa. We have a surprise!"

Shane stood a few steps away, hands tucked into his pockets, failing not to smile. He looked tired too, but achingly beautiful. Something in Ilya's chest finally settled when their eyes met again.

"Do you?"

"Shane helped me with everything!"

Ilya's heart was beating like crazy, like he was in front of a life threatening situation, not just in front the man he was in love with admitting that he plotted some surprise with his daughter.

"Hey," Shane said quietly.

"Hello, *zólotse*," Ilya replied just as softly.

He stood with Irina still in his arms and leaned in to press a gentle kiss to Shane's cheek. He wanted more. He wanted to kiss him senseless on the mouth, hold him close with his daughter between them until the three of them melted together and can't be separated—but he didn't.

Patricia cleared her throat. "Welcome home, Roz."

"Thank you—"

"No shit! Is this the guy, Roz?" Ilya nearly panicked when Wyatt slung an arm around his shoulders and leaned down to kiss Irina's cheek. "Hey, little Rozy."

"Hi, Uncle Wyatt."

"And you must be the boyfri—"

“Shane, this is Wyatt Hayes,” Ilya cut in sharply. “Our goalie. He has a big nose he likes to stick into things that are not *his business*.”

Wyatt gasped.

“Ouch.” Then he turned to Shane, giving him an assessing look before smiling warmly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Shane. This guy here talked a lot about you.”

Shane raised an eyebrow at him. Ilya gave him a small, apologetic look.

“Did he?” Shane murmured.

“No,” Wyatt shrugged. “We had to threaten him. But hey, he only told us good things.”

“Okay, time for you to go, Hayes. Shoo.”

The good thing was that Wyatt actually listened and gave them a bit of space. The bad thing was that behind him came a whole pack of players, walking fast, curiosity written all over their faces. Even Coach Wiebe was trying to steal a glance.

Ilya heard one of them blurt out, way too loudly, *“Told you he must be a freaking babe, guys! Look at him!”*

That was it. Absolutely not happening. Not here. Not now.

Before anyone could get any closer, Ilya reached for Shane’s hand and held on, firmly. With his head, he made a quick, unmistakable gesture to Patricia.

“We go,” he said, “Now.”

Patricia didn’t ask questions. She nodded immediately, already leading the way forward, while Shane squeezed Ilya’s hand back, smiling despite the furious blush spreading across his entire face. Ilya was genuinely glad his teammates had reacted well, really, but there was no way he was going to make Shane endure their intense, feral evaluation without a conversation first. Not before making sure Shane was actually okay with them knowing, watching, and participating like that in something so new to both of them.

Ilya didn’t want him to feel uncomfortable, surrounded by a bunch of overgrown children who meant well but had absolutely no sense of boundaries. Even with the best intentions, they were a lot to handle.

Behind them, Boodram yelled, loud enough for half the hall to hear. It was a relief that the Centaurs weren’t relevant enough to have a crowd of fans waiting or reporters willing to ask questions and get some photos of the team.

“Don’t take him away, Rozy!”

“You’re a stingy motherfucker!” Dykstra added.

“I do not know that word!” Ilya shot back without turning around. Shane laughed at his side. “And watch your tongue in front of my daughter!”

“Sorry, little Rozy!”

Irina ignored all of them, her face buried in Ilya’s neck as she softly hummed a French song. Ilya hugged her tighter. She always needed a quiet moment when they reunited for just breath him in, play with his hair, ground herself in his presence. It was something Ilya always noticed, something she probably got from him.

“They’re kind of cute,” Shane commented once they reached the parking lot.

“They’re idiots,” Ilya corrected, carefully settling Irina into her booster seat. Patricia slid in beside her. *“Are you okay, Ira?”*

Irina looked at him, calm, almost sleepy. It wasn’t early, but it was Sunday. She had likely stayed up late watching cartoons or playing with her toys. She was exhausted.

“Can we see a movie today, Papa? Please?”

Ilya had absolutely no defenses against that particular look, especially when paired with fluttering lashes. He nodded immediately.

“Of course, love.”

“Can Shane stay with us?”

“I’ll see what I can do about it,” Ilya promised, because the truth was he already planned to spend every possible second glued to both of them. He glanced at Patricia. “Do you want me to drop you at home?”

“Oh, you’re too sweet, Rozanov. Yes, please, if it’s not a bother.”

“Not at all.”

Ilya closed Irina’s door and picked up his backpack again. Shane stood by the SUV’s trunk, keys in hand, a soft, warm smile on his lips.

Ilya let himself drink him in for a few seconds. He was really the most beautiful thing alive, apart from his daughter. Shane was tall and broad, but it was a softness around him that made him look smaller, *sweet*. Ilya wanted to eat him whole. They were at the back of the car, the parking lot mostly empty. Patricia and Irina were already in the backseat. There was no way they could see them.

So Ilya took his chance.

He dropped his gym bag to the ground and surged forward, catching Shane completely off guard as he crashed their mouths together. Shane let out a startled sound before melting into it, arms coming up automatically to wrap around Ilya’s neck. Ilya groaned, low and satisfied,

fingers curling into Shane's coat, grabbing him by the waist and pressing him hard against his body.

Ilya's back gently hit the car without him even realizing it, legs parting instinctively to make space for Shane as they kissed like reckless teenagers hiding behind a high school building. It was so desperate and messy. He didn't care about keeping his composure. Shane seemed not to care either.

Ilya didn't care who might see them.

He wasn't even sure he'd care if *Irina* did.

Maybe it wasn't the ideal way for his four-year-old daughter to learn that her dad was in a relationship—but it wouldn't be the end of the world either. Not when what she would see was this: warmth, joy, love.

"Fucking finally," Ilya muttered, keeping Shane's bottom lip caught between his teeth. Shane let out a soft, helpless moan, fingers tangling in Ilya's messy hair (unstyled this morning, then thoroughly ruined by almost four hours of grinding his head against a plane seat). Words slipped out of him at the touch. He felt like a kitten being petted, his brain short-circuiting so badly that he didn't even bother translating to English. *"I missed you so much, I thought I was going to die—"*

"Ya skuchál po tebé."

Ilya froze. He didn't pull away, but his head snapped back like he'd been struck. He stared at Shane with wide, disbelieving eyes.

"You know Russian now?"

"I— I might have been taking online classes," Shane admitted. They held each other's gaze for a few seconds, and Ilya had to actively fight the instinctive urge to steal Shane away somehow and keep him forever. "Obviously I'm not that far. I don't know how to form sentences, but I looked it up so I could tell you—"

"Shut up, Shane," Ilya ordered, and Shane immediately did. "Stop talking or I will drop to my knees right here and beg you to be mine forever. And my knees hurt, and I look like shit right now, and I want to kiss you until my lips fall off my face—"

"Okay, Ilya. Okay," Shane said softly, cupping his cheek, smiling at him with quiet affection. "Do you want me to drive?"

"Da."

"Good. Let's put your bag in—"

"Tell me one more time. Please."

Shane leaned in and kissed him gently. Then, he said it again, slow and a little bit accented. He was good for a beginner. It was clear that he practiced a lot to get the sentence right, and

Ilya was enchanted with that. *"I missed you, Ilya."*

He could die happy now.

***

Irina's energy seemed to fully return the moment they got home and she spotted the kitchen counter, already taken over by three homemade pizzas that Patricia and Shane had prepared earlier. Apparently, his daughter had successfully convinced them that after a long week of games, her dad deserved to be welcomed with *junk food*. Clearly she was the one craving it, but she always knew how to get what she wanted.

With Patricia gone and only Shane moving around the kitchen while Irina very seriously tried to help him, Ilya felt almost calm. His bad mood still lingered at the back of his mind, leaving him tired and a little grumpy. It was the reminder that tomorrow was going to be a tough day only made it worse, but the easy familiarity Shane and Irina shared helped more than he wanted to admit.

"Est-ce que moi je peux le sortir? S'il vous plaaaaaît", Irina begged.

"Non, ma belle," Shane said gently. *"Tu vas te brûler si tu ne le fais pas bien."*

"Mais tu peux me montrer!"

Can I take this one out? Pleaaase.
You can't, beautiful, You could burn yourself if you don't do it properly.
But you can teach me!

Ilya didn't understand a word of what they were saying, but he didn't need to. Irina was pointing dramatically at the oven, which she couldn't even reach at her height, her lower lip pushed out in an exaggerated pout, oven mitts swallowing her small hands. She wanted to take out the pizza that had been baking while Ilya took a quick shower.

Shane crouched down to her level, carefully taking the mitts from her hands.

"Irina, little kids can't use the oven," he said softly. "It's dangerous, and I don't want you to get hurt. But I promise you that, one day, I'll teach you how to use it. Okay?"

She studied him for a few seconds, serious and thoughtful, before finally nodding.

Ilya's chest tightened at the sight of Shane pressing a kiss to her forehead before pulling one of the pizzas out of the oven and setting it on the counter. Then he took out the second one, steam rising into the air.

“That smells good,” Ilya said, finally making his presence known.

Irina immediately abandoned her post and ran toward him, arms lifted in a silent demand. Ilya picked her up without hesitation. He knew that many kids her age had already grown out of asking to be carried so often—but maybe because he was gone so much, Irina still clung to the habit more than most. And he didn’t mind it. Not even a little.

“You helped make those pizzas, love?”

“Yes!” Irina smiled, fiddling with the chain around Ilya’s neck. When she had been a baby (back when Ilya had barely slept, terrified that something might happen to her) she used to wrap his hand around the crucifix, sometimes even tuck it into her mouth. She had never asked where it came from. Someday, he would explain it to her. Someday, he would give it to her. *“Well… not that much,”* she added honestly. *“Shane did all the work for you, Papa.”*

Ilya glanced sideways at Shane. He was having trouble cutting the pizza without burning himself. *“Did he?”*

“Da.”

“Okay,” Ilya said, amused. *“Why don’t you go wash your hands while Shane and I set the table?”*

Irina obeyed immediately, hopping off his arms and trotting toward the hallway. Shane was cutting the pizzas into surprisingly even slices, helping himself with a spatula so his fingers weren’t hurt, when Ilya came up behind him, looping his arms around Shane’s waist and pressing his nose into the warm curve of his neck.

“Irina says you cooked all of this for me,” he murmured, kissing the soft skin there, breathing in the faint floral scent of Shane’s hair.

“Well, she’s lying. Patricia did most of the work,” Shane turned within his arms. Ilya could have drowned in his eyes and died happily. “She’s trying to make us like each other,” Shane continued, lowering his voice. “She’s selling you to me all the time. Talking about your hockey skills, how funny you are— Things she likes about you, so I’ll be interested. Kids do that sometimes with their parents, out of pride. But Irina is doing it on purpose. She’s very smart.”

Ilya thought about it for a moment. His four-year-old playing matchmaker should have been embarrassing. Instead, for him it was unbearably sweet.

“I must be doing a pretty shitty job charming you if my kid feels like she needs to help me.”

Shane huffed a laugh and shook his head. Like Irina, he seemed to have a thing for Ilya’s hair: his fingers always ended up there somehow. Now that it was still damp from the shower, he gently brushed a strand off Ilya’s forehead.

“She’s doing it the other way around too, baby,” Shane murmured absently. Ilya’s heart stopped. “She just told you I made the pizzas when I can barely cook anything more

complicated than boiled vegetables and rice—”

“What did you just call me?” Ilya asked softly.

Shane froze.

Color rushed to his face all at once, his ears turning red as he opened his mouth and then closed it again, suddenly very interested in the pizza cutter in his hand.

“I— Uh. I didn’t— I mean—”

“You mean…?” Ilya insisted, leaning in and pressing his forehead into Shane’s. His nose bumped Shane’s freckled one. “Am I your baby now, Shane?

Before he could recover, a small, frustrated voice echoed from the other side of the house.

“Papa!”

Ilya turned his head.

“I can’t reach the soap,” she announced. “It’s too far.”

Ilya sighed fondly and let go of Shane, who looked immensely relieved and deeply flustered at the same time.

“This conversation is not over, *zólotse*,” Ilya threatened softly.

Shane cleared his throat and went back to his task with exaggerated focus, making what were probably the most perfect pizza cuts ever attempted by humankind.

“Okay,” he whispered.

When Ilya reached the guest bathroom on the main floor, Irina was standing on the tips of her toes, wobbling slightly on the small wooden step stool Ilya had made sure every bathroom in the house had, just so she could reach the toilet and the sink. She was stretching dangerously toward the soap bar on the shelf above the sink, the water running freely.

“Ira,” Ilya said gently but firmly, *“what have I told you about leaving the water running when you’re not using it?”*

“Sorry, Papa,” she replied immediately.

“Okay. Come here.”

He helped her wash her hands, lifting her just enough so she could do it herself, because she insisted on being independent. At some point, their eyes met in the mirror, and Ilya couldn’t help but laugh at the sight of the two of them. He looked extremely tired, and Irina's face looked almost comically serious concentrated. She echoed his laughter instantly, giggling like it was the funniest thing in the world.

“Are you done?” he asked.

“Yes!”

“Okay, let’s dry your hands—”

“Papa?”

Ilya turned off the tap and grabbed the towel, gently drying her small fingers.

“Yes, love?”

“Do you love Shane?”

The question hit him like a punch to the chest.

Ilya froze for a fraction of a second, the towel still wrapped around Irina’s hands. He looked at her, at the way her mouth was set in a line that wasn’t quite worried, but not carefree either. She was watching him closely. Waiting for the right words.

“Yes,” Ilya said, without hesitation. *“I do love him.”*

Irina nodded once, as if he just cleared a very important matter in her head. Then she smiled to herself.

“Okay,” she said, satisfied.

She turned around and walked away.

“Ira, why do you ask—?”

“I’m hungry. Let’s go eat your surprise pizza, Papa,” she said over her shoulder, already breaking into a run toward the kitchen.

Ilya stayed there for a second longer, staring at the towel still twisted between his fingers. Then he lifted his eyes to his own reflection in the mirror.

What the fuck was that?

***

The sun was setting when Irina finally fell asleep on Ilya’s lap. She still had a plastic tiara tangled in her hair and a pink tutu she had insisted on wearing after loudly declaring that a tea party after pizza was a brilliant idea. Shane had ended up making real tea (something he was,

apparently, genuinely good at) while Ilya washed the tiny porcelain cups from Irina's tea set, the same ones she had insisted they use because *those were the correct ones*.

Irina had prepared them for the party herself, sticking pink glittery gems onto their cheeks and crowning them with two tiaras that, honestly, would never have stayed in place if it weren't for the sheer amount of thick hair both Shane and Ilya had. They were clearly designed for dolls. Or toddlers. Not for two grown adults.

Shane had taken a lot of pictures.

Ilya hadn't complained about it. Any one of those photos in the hands of his teammates would have guaranteed workplace harassment for the rest of his career, but he found he didn't care if they saw the light one day. Shane seemed invested in documenting every moment they spent together with Irina, as if afraid something might slip away if he didn't capture it. Ilya wasn't going to stop him.

He remembered too well how it had felt to realize that Irina had lived for *months* without him knowing she existed. Growing, learning little baby things (how to smile, how to respond to her name, how to laugh, how to simply keep her head straight on her own) without him anywhere near. It was just four months, but Ilya felt robbed.

If Shane loved her even *half* as much as he did, missing four entire *years* of her life must be another quiet kind of torture.

Now, after a tea party full of exaggerated fake British accents (another thing Shane was disturbingly good at it) and an hour of watching *Anastasia* (Irina's favorite princess movie, *because she's Russian like me)*, she was completely drained.

"You should take her to her room," Shane whispered, leaning in to press a soft, careful kiss to Irina's forehead. Ilya looked at the two of them. "I'll clean all of this."

"Thanks," Ilya murmured.

He changed Irina into her pajamas and tucked her into bed. She stirred just enough to mumble a sleepy goodbye and tell him she loved him before curling back under the blankets, wrapped around her favorite teddy bear *Trusha*, how she'd called it when she was little and would go around with it attached to the hip. Ilya knew she should brush her teeth, but his heart was far too soft in that moment to pull her out from the warmth of the bed. She could skip it this time.

He watched her for a second longer than necessary before quietly turning off the light, closing the door behind him.

Shane was still in the leaving room, setting the little teacups aside when Ilya grabbed him by the waist and practically dragged him down onto the couch with him. Shane let out a breathy, amused groan, trying to squirm free without breaking the tiny cup clutched in his hand.

"Leave it. I'll clean that later."

“But—”

“Later, *zólotse*.”

Shane gave in, melting against Ilya as he rearranged them on the couch, bodies fitting together easily. The house had gone completely quiet, the darkened sky stretching beyond the wide windows. They stayed like that for a few seconds, Ilya finally allowing his body to relax fully, the tension of the day ebbing away.

“You don’t get to use that against me all the time, you know,” Shane muttered.

Somehow, their fingers had tangled together. Their heads bumped softly, bare feet brushing and tangling on the chaise longue.

“Use what?” Ilya asked, innocent.

“Your Russian words,” Shane clarified. Ilya looked at him. His face was carefully neutral, but his cheeks unmistakably flushed. “You know I’ll do anything you want if you call me that—”

“Zólotse?” Ilya asked, already smiling as he invaded his space again. God, he was so far gone for him. He loved this. Loved making Shane flustered, red, visibly bothered by his audacity. Loved how obvious it was that Shane enjoyed being provoked and teased by him. “Did your new teacher teach you that?”

“I don’t have a teacher. I’m just taking an online course by myself—”

“Mmm. You’re *sooo* smart, Teacher Shane.”

“Oh, stop that,” Shane said, rolling his eyes. Ilya tried to hide his grin. He failed.

“It means you’re precious to me,” he explained, nuzzling his nose against Shane’s cheek, then along his jaw. *“Zólotse* is something I’d only ever say to you.”

“That’s— Good. Okay.” Shane’s voice wavered slightly as Ilya kept exploring him, unhurried. “I always thought I hated that kind of thing. Endearments. Whenever a partner called me something like that, it made me cringe. They used to say I’m cold.”

Ilya clicked his tongue softly.

“You’re the warmest person in the world, Shane. You’re like a star,” he whispered, pulling back just enough to look him in the eyes. “Stars shine in the cold night, but they burn just as much as the sun, yes? We’re just not lucky enough to feel them. I can feel your warmth, so I’m a lucky man.”

Shane looked stunned for a couple of seconds. Ilya took full advantage of his silence.

“I’ll only call you *zólotse,* or any other thing, if you want me to. If you don’t like them—”

“No! No.” Shane lifted his hands automatically, flustered. Ilya shut his mouth, feeling a little bit nervous. He liked calling him cute things, but he would totally understand if that wasn’t

Shane's thing. "Please don't stop. I just— I was trying to say I love it. I love that you call me that. I just thought… maybe you'd like me to call you something cute too."

"Oh. So that's the *baby thing—"*

"Oh my god, why did you say it like that?!"

"I thought that was about our conversation about your daddy kink—"

"I do *not* have a daddy kink, Ilya."

"But I could create one for you. I am very committed to the job."

"Please don't."

Ilya burst out laughing at Shane's completely mortified expression.

"Okay. One condition."

Shane gave him a wary look. "I don't know if I want to make deals with you, devil."

Ilya ignored him.

"Give me kiss. Then I'll drop the daddy thing."

Shane seemed to consider it for a few seconds. Before Ilya could even process what was happening, he leaned in and pressed a quick, chaste peck to his lips, pulling back immediately with a mischievous smile.

"Done."

"That's it?" Ilya murmured, voice low.

Shane swallowed. His eyes flicked down to Ilya's mouth and then back up again. The movement had betrayed him. "You said a kiss," he pointed out, defensive, though he bit his lip. "You didn't specify."

"Cheater."

Ilya leaned in again, unhurried this time, giving Shane enough time to pull back if he wanted to. He didn't. Their lips met properly now, noses bumping softly, breaths combining between them. Shane's hand fisted in the fabric of Ilya's shirt, knuckles pale, like he hadn't quite decided whether to let go or hold on tighter. A quiet sound slipped out of him into the slow kiss before he could stop it.

One of Ilya's hands slid up Shane's side, slow and grounding, his thumb pressing lightly at his hip.

This time it wasn't messy or desperate like it had been in the parking lot. It was just their mouths teasing, tasting, adjusting to each other's pace, warm breaths and careful tongues

tangling. Shane tasted like linden blossom tea and honey.

When they parted, it was only by a breath, foreheads resting together.

“There,” Ilya whispered, smiling against Shane’s mouth. “That’s a kiss, Hollander.”

Shane let out a shaky laugh, eyes still closed.

“I should get going. I work tomorrow—”

“Don’t go,” Ilya said immediately. “Stay here.”

Shane sighed. “Irina is here. She might feel uncomfortable.”

“Pf. She absolutely won’t,” Ilya scoffed. “She’d be thrilled to wake up tomorrow and find you here. We both know that.”

Shane hesitated, his expression thoughtful. “Ilya… I don’t even have any clothes here I could wear.”

“You can wear mine.”

“I don’t know…”

“You don’t want to stay,” Ilya said, blunt and quiet. It stung a little when Shane shrugged. “Why?”

“I think it’s too soon. And I think *you* think that too,” Shane said gently. “You’re tired and on edge because of Barrett’s trade—”

“Don’t remind me.”

“—and you think me staying will make it better. Maybe it does. But what if rushing things makes everything else worse, Ilya? We should be careful. We’re doing so good so far, we shouldn’t risk it because we’re impatient now.”

Ilya didn’t try to pretend it didn’t irritate him. It wasn’t that Shane thought it wasn’t the right moment—that part he could accept. He could even agree. What bothered him was that Shane was right about him.

Yes, everything felt lighter when Shane was around. When he shared space with him and Irina, when things felt almost *easy*. But deep down, they both knew it wasn’t fixing anything.

Someday, Shane’s presence wouldn’t be enough to keep the sadness and anger away. Not because Ilya would love him any less, or stop wanting him, but because his problems couldn’t be solved by ignoring them and clinging to the happiness someone else gave him. It hadn’t worked with Irina. It wouldn’t work with Shane.

The sadness would come back. Maybe it would be around forever. And Ilya had to learn how to live with it properly.

“You’re right,” he admitted at last, offering Shane a small, tired smile. “I’m pissed because tomorrow I have to welcome stupid Troy Barrett, and I’ll lose a free day I wanted to spend with you. And Irina will be stuck at the arena with some assistant because the new nanny doesn’t arrive until Tuesday, and I can’t leave her alone at home—”

“Then I’ll come with you,” Shane said, casually, cutting him off mid-spiral.

Ilya froze.

“I’ll come to the arena,” Shane continued. “I’ll keep an eye on Irina while you do what you need to do. Then we can get hot chocolate and spend the rest of your day off together.”

For a long moment, Ilya couldn’t move. His eyes burned, and he wasn’t sure if it was because he hadn’t blinked or because of the tight knot rising in his throat.

“You would— Would you really do that?”

“Of course,” Shane said. “If you’re okay with it. Irina will have fun, I’ll have fun, and you’ll know she’s safe with me. It’s a win-win.”

“It might take hours,” Ilya warned. “The social media team wants photos with Barrett—”

“Baby,” Shane interrupted, the word slipping out like it belonged there. He cupped Ilya’s face with both hands, affectionate and steady, smiling at him. Ilya couldn’t speak even if he wanted to. “I want to help you. I know you feel like this is a huge burden for me because you’re Irina’s dad and she’s your responsibility, but it’s not. I *want* her to be my responsibility too. I know exactly what I signed up for. And I did it gladly.”

Ilya swallowed hard.

“Okay.”

“Good,” Shane whispered, pressing a soft kiss to his bottom lip. “And try to be positive about Troy Barrett. I know he feels like a problem right now, but if you manage to make him fit into the team, and you will, because you’re a good captain, he could be exactly what your line is missing. He’s a great right winger, probably one of the best right now. Playing with you instead of Dallas Kent will be huge for him. You’re not a total spotlight hog and neither is he.”

Ilya was *so* in love it almost hurt. His whole body felt hot, restless. He had a sudden erection and, at the same time, the overwhelming urge to cry, then to make love to Shane, then to cry again because he was the luckiest man alive and his boyfriend was the hottest guy in the world and somehow knew more about hockey than him, and still managed to make that level of nerdiness unbearably sexy.

“You’re incredible,” Ilya said, still a little breathless.

“No,” Shane smiled. “I’m just a little obsessed with hockey.”

“Then you’re an incredible hockey nerd.”

Ilya managed to keep him for another half hour, kissing him stupid on the couch, hands slipping under his sweater to touch bare skin just because he could. When Shane finally managed to pull himself together and insist on the time, Ilya practically forced him to accept an Uber instead of taking public transport.

When the car was already waiting outside, Ilya walked him to the door.

“I’m emitting 2.4 times more CO2 per kilometer than I would if I took the bus—”

Ilya rolled his eyes, grabbed him by the waist, and leaned in to kiss him deeply, messy and sloppy. Just how he liked it the most.

“I think the atmosphere can handle it just this once.”

“No, it can’t. That’s literally the whole point,” Shane sighed at last. “But okay. Just this time.”

“Good boy,” Ilya said, amused, switching to Russian purely to bother him. Shane narrowed his eyes. *“Spokoynoy nochi, zólotse.”*

“Spokoynoy nochi, Ilya.”

By the time the Russian sentence registered in his brain, Shane was already too far away. Ilya stood there, watching him get into the Uber without even a backward glance.

Fuck.

Inside the house, the silence felt heavier this time. It was gloomy, and demoralizing. Ilya looked around and decided he was far too tired to cook dinner or clean up the tea set he hadn’t let Shane touch. He closed the curtains, turned off the lights, ignored his own bedroom down the hall upstairs, and went straight to Irina’s.

He didn’t mean to wake her. He didn’t want to disturb her at all. But he didn’t want to be alone either. Not tonight.

So he slipped into the tiny bed, keeping as much distance as possible, watching her sleep while his heart slowly calmed, their breathing syncing without him even trying.

He didn’t fall asleep until a message lit up his phone.

Shane: I'm home.

Ilya stared at the screen for a long second.

He wished Shane's home wasn't on the other side of the city, but *here*. With him, with Irina. He quietly mourned how long they'd have to wait for that to change.

Patience had never been his strongest trait after all.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

> this chapter has detailed descriptions of suicidal thoughts and emotional damage/trauma. please, be aware of the tags.

Nightmares kept dragging Ilya to the surface all night long. He tried to shove them away each time he jolted awake, tried to steady his breathing and sink back into the mattress, but the dark, spiraling scenarios in his head wouldn't loosen their grip. Every few minutes, he startled half-awake again, pulse racing, sheets twisted around his legs.

At some point, Irina shifted beside him, letting out a sleepy groan when he moved too abruptly, restless as a snake under the covers.

That was enough.

Ilya carefully slipped out of bed and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, lingering there for a second longer. She sighed, but didn't wake. He was pissed. Was it really too much to ask for one quiet night next to his daughter? Did his brain have to turn even *this* into a battle? Ilya was tired of losing against himself.

The sky was still pitch-dark when he stepped into the hallway, the house silent around him. He exhaled slowly, the sound loud and clear in the empty space.

He hated this. He hated the relentless nights when his mind flat-out refused to let him rest, even let him breathe properly. He hated the constant knot in his throat, the way his heart seemed to struggle inside his chest, like beating had suddenly become an impossible task instead of its *only fucking* job.

Sometimes Ilya wondered if there was a scientific explanation for that kind of ache. How could something as intangible as *thoughts* translate into something so physical? How could his mind squeeze his heart until it hurt like this? He wanted to know. He also needed a solution to it.

The thing was, Ilya had been feeling like this for what seemed like forever. Maybe even before his mother died.

Back then, younger Ilya had known how to smother the discomfort under a thousand layers of more urgent problems. He was efficient at that—ruthless, even. If something felt unbearable, he would find something else to fix. Something practical and solvable that would distract him from the pain.

First, it was how to get out of Russia. The answer was by becoming the best player in the Russian junior league, by making himself too valuable to ignore, by being *profitable* (even if he'd been just a kid screaming upon his dead mother's corpse). He'd done that almost easily.

Then it was how to make his family lose interest in controlling him. Money and prestige were all Alexei and Grigori had ever wanted, so he gave them exactly that. He fulfilled their demands, complaining little about it and making himself a ghost the rest of the time. It worked.

Then it was how to secure American citizenship. Svetlana had been the strategic answer. But Irina arrived first, so he quit on that. But having a baby gave him a lot more distractions, so it wasn't really a problem.

At every point in his life when he'd felt like he couldn't take it anymore, Ilya had redirected himself toward another problem, convinced that if he silenced the smaller noises around him, his mind would finally grow quiet. As if peace were something you could earn by completing enough side quests.

Deep down, though, his biggest problem had never been any of those things.

He couldn't pinpoint the exact moment this *thing* had settled into him. The logical answer would be his mother's death, but he wasn't entirely sure. When he examined his own feelings with honesty, Ilya realized that happiness had never been his default state. He doubted it was anyone's, if he was being honest. Happiness had always arrived in brief, glittering flashes—too fleeting for him to fully inhabit them before they slipped away.

He assumed neutrality was what most people lived in. Feelings came and went, didn't they? No one was supposed to feel one thing all the time.

The problem was that he never felt neutral either.

To claim neutrality as his natural emotional baseline would have been a blatant lie. Sadness dominated his life. And Ilya felt deeply ashamed of that, because yes, bad things had happened to him, but objectively, he was *lucky*.

He lived in a safe, beautiful city, in a modern and free country. He was a white man playing an elite, well-paid, prestigious sport. He owned a massive house. His bank account could feed three future generations without blinking. He had a healthy daughter who would grow up wrapped in privileges he himself had only ever dreamed of.

And still, more days than he wanted to admit, Ilya would have traded all of it for a single minute of silence inside his own head.

He knew how to get that silence.

That was the worst part.

But how could he act on it when his daughter would be left completely alone? Could he really do that to her?

He didn't resent his mother for what she had done. He never could. Irina had been a woman shaped by cruelty, raised by a mother who broke her down, in a poor household that constantly demanded more than she had to give. She had been trapped with an abusive husband and two difficult sons, one of them emotionally constipated and the other one spiraling into drugs and women all the time. Her life had been hell on earth. She had had *reasons*.

But did he?

Ilya was just… sad.

And that didn't feel like enough of an excuse.

What would Shane think of him? They hadn't known each other that long, not really, but Ilya was certain it would hurt him. The thought lodged somewhere under his ribs and twisted. He didn't want to hurt Shane. He didn't want to disappoint him, to vanish this early, to throw away the precious possibility of a life beside him before it had even formed.

But sometimes—too many times, terrifyingly often, Ilya felt like he was drowning in open air. There was no visible water, and yet he couldn't get enough oxygen. Living weighed on him. Even the simplest things (answering a message, brushing his teeth, standing up to pour a glass of water) could feel like climbing uphill with a heavy pack strapped to his back.

It was starting to get really hard.

And so his mind did what it had learned to do best since he adopted Irina: plans.

He thought about it for hours. This wasn't the first time. There was something disturbingly calming about the logistics of it, about turning this catastrophic situation into a… checklist. Things turned easy when he sat alone and mapped it out with methodical detail.

If he did it, it couldn't be messy. It couldn't be something Irina would find. It couldn't be something that would stain the house, or force her to live with an image she could never unsee. He wouldn't do that to her, because he knew how stormy that could be. It would have to happen somewhere else. Somewhere he controlled.

He would update his will first. He pictured himself sitting at his desk, laptop open, calling his lawyer with steady hands. Irina would be the primary beneficiary, obviously. Everything in trust until she turned eighteen. Maybe staggered payments so she wouldn't be overwhelmed all at once. College must be fully covered. Living expenses calculated with obsessive precision: tuition estimates, inflation projections, healthcare, extracurriculars. He would overcompensate. Make sure there was more than enough.

Svetlana would become her legal guardian. That part complicated things. They weren't blood-related, and paperwork would take time. He would need to start the process *now*, frame it as precaution (professional athlete, risky career, *you never know)*. Svetlana would complain. She would call him dramatic. But she would agree, because she loved Irina, and because Ilya would never tell her the real motivation behind it.

He would transfer a significant amount of money directly to her, enough to cover every necessity without her ever having to dip into her own savings. Enough that she couldn't claim he'd ruined her life without at least acknowledging he'd tried to soften the blow.

Irina would still have Shane.

That thought made his chest lighter.

Ilya wasn't sure Shane loved him (*why would he?)* but he was certain Shane loved his daughter. He could see it in the way he knelt to Irina's height when she spoke, in the patience in his voice, in the instinctive care for her. Shane would look after her. Even if he never became her father officially, he would become someone present in her life, he was sure of it. Maybe Shane's parents would help too. They seemed like the type to get attached easily, and Mrs. Hollander had already grown fond of Irina.

Ilya even imagined writing letters. One for Irina to open at sixteen. Another at eighteen. Another one on her wedding day. One for Svetlana, telling her he loved her and trusted her the most. The last one to the team, because they deserved an explanation. He could portray Luca's watery eyes, Wyatt's shaking pout, even Zane's insults toward him. Would they cry? He hoped they wouldn't. He didn't deserve it.

Maybe he should write one letter for Shane, though it felt selfish to ask him for a forgiveness he wouldn't be there to receive.

When he laid it all out in his head (guardianship, finances, logistics, timing), the panic dulled. His chaotic thoughts turned into a structured manual and that gave him a little bit of peace. As if simply knowing there was a doable plan made the idea less tragic.

By the time his thoughts finally slowed, the sky outside had begun to pale. Thin morning light filtered through the translucent curtains, washing the living room in a colorless glow.

Ilya blinked once. Then twice.

He was sitting alone on the sofa, spine curved forward, elbows braced on his knees. His legs had gone numb beneath him, pins and needles prickling faintly when he shifted. His jaw ached from clenching.

For a moment, in the pale early light, the plan felt absolutely cynical and egotistic.

What the fuck was he thinking about?

"Papa?"

Irina's voice turned his eyes into twin pools in an instant. Ilya stood up quickly, before the sob building in his throat could break free. He cleared it roughly and wiped at his face harder than he meant to.

Her small, bare feet padded down the stairs. Of course she wasn't wearing her slippers. She hated them with a passion entirely disproportionate to their existence. Ilya crossed the

distance to her as fast as he could manage, forcing a smile out of whatever strength he had left.

How long had he been sitting there? What time was it for her to have woken up on her own?

"Good morning, solnyshko," he murmured, crouching to scoop her up. She rubbed her eyes mid-yawn, warm in his arms. She even had the trace of the sheets on her face.

Her weight settled something inside him. Just for a few seconds, but long enough for a suffocating fault to build inside him.

How could he even *consider* leaving her? Condemning her to a lifetime of confusion and blame and *grief*? She was innocent. She didn't deserve any of this.

"You slept well?"

"Yes!" she said brightly, then her smile faltered as she took a better look at him. Her brows knit together in a tiny frown. *"You're sad, Papa?"*

Ilya felt like the worst person alive. He couldn't stand the sight of her worrying about him. But today he wasn't strong enough to lie either.

"A bit, yes," he admitted softly.

Irina cupped his face with both hands, squishing his cheeks slightly the way she'd seen adults do to her. *"Why?"*

He huffed out something that tried to be a laugh. *"Sometimes grown-ups just feel sad. It's nothing, love."*

"Did you have a bad dream?"

"Something like that, yes."

"Was there a monster?"

"No, there wasn't," he said gently.

"Was it a shark?" she pressed. *"Sharks are very scary. They have so many teeth."* She demonstrated by baring her own.

Ilya managed a small smile.

"They do, yes. But there weren't any sharks." God, he almost wished there had been. Sharks would've been better.

"Then why are you sad?" she insisted, eyes wide and insistent. *"I did something bad?"*

The question hit him like a physical punch.

He swallowed, his hold on her tightening instinctively. He would never let her believe that. It wasn't fair. None of this was.

"No. Never," he said firmly. *"You didn't do anything, Ira. Don't ever, ever think that you make me sad."* His voice wavered despite his effort to steady it. *"You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. The happiest thing. Do you understand?"*

She examined his face with grave concentration, searching for cracks in the truth.

"Yes. I understand, Papa."

"Good."

"Can I stay home with you today?"

"You know you can't." He ignored her dramatic groan and started up the stairs with her in his arms. They were later than late. Shane was probably already worried. *"But we'll go to the arena with Shane this afternoon. How does that sound?"*

Her head snapped up. *"Really?!"*

"Yes. So let's get you ready. You've already missed the first two hours. We don't want your school to worry."

She gasped. *"I'm late-late?"*

"Very late."

She giggled, delighted instead of concerned.

While Irina swung her legs from the edge of her bed, humming to herself, Ilya crossed to her closet and started pulling out clothes at random. Polar fleece leggings, a sweater, mismatched socks, gloves. His movements were automatic.

He spotted his phone where he'd left it on her nightstand in the early hours of the morning, completely forgotten. He picked it up.

Too late.

Fifteen unread messages from Shane.

Most of them sent barely two minutes after the classroom doors would have closed.

Shane: Are you okay?

Shane: Did something happen?

Shane: Is Irina sick?

Shane: Call the school and ask for me when you can.

Shane: I just want to make sure you're okay.

Shane: Please.

"Can we get breakfast on the way, Papa? Pleaaaase."

Ilya checked the time again. Irina was an hour and a half late already. It wouldn't hurt to time her arrival with recess. It would be less awkward that way, and maybe he could get Shane for some minutes. And he hadn't made breakfast anyway.

He inhaled slowly, locking the screen.

"Okay," he said, turning back to her with what he hoped looked like normality. *"We can grab breakfast. But then we need to hurry."*

"Yes!" she cheered, already trying to put her sweater on upside down.

Ilya decided not to go to Marie's. It would take too long to drive there and then back to the school, since it was farther out of the way. Irina didn't complain, too busy rambling about how funny it would be to have the three of them together on the ice.

Ilya wasn't going to lie to himself. He was nervous. More than nervous.

Having Shane there, watching over Irina while Ilya dealt with Troy Barrett, gave him a certain sense of reassurance. It was good knowing someone like Shane would be there with his daughter, that if he lost track of anything for even a second, someone he trusted would catch it.

But it also meant Shane stepping into Ilya's territory. Into the place that was both his greatest strength and, lately, what felt like his biggest failure: hockey.

It wasn't just about his performance. Ilya could live with being a mid player. He'd already made his peace with that, and he knew Shane wouldn't care. Hayden Pike was one of Shane's closest friends, after all. *Talent* wasn't what impressed him, for sure.

Still, this was different. This wasn't about stats or ice time. It was about making something personal official. About letting Shane into the part of his life that had shaped him, defined

him, *saved* him, and that was now, slowly, slipping through his fingers. It felt like too much to deal with at once. Two things he couldn't fully control, shoved into the same space just to torture Ilya somehow. If something went wrong, he was going to cry. Probably.

He felt alone in this city sometimes. Technically, he was. He had no family, no friends, no one who remembered him for who he truly was outside a hockey rink.

Except for the Centaurs.

They were chaotic, loud, and *occasionally* smelled pretty bad. But they were his. They were Ilya's mess. His only people. They loved Irina without hesitation, and they loved Ilya too. They were extremely important to him.

And Ilya wanted Shane to like them.

He wanted the easy integration he had pretended not to care about yesterday. He wanted Shane laughing at the guys' stupid jokes, rolling his eyes at their chirping, fitting seamlessly into it all. He wanted the team to see what he saw when he looked at Shane: his potential happiness.

He wanted them to get along.

And Ilya, deep down, knew that all of that escaped him. It didn't depend on him. That made his anxiety even worse, and his current mood wasn't helping at all. Ilya knew that objectively, the Centaurs were good guys, and they already seemed to like Shane a lot just from knowing of his existence. But he still worried.

"What do you want to eat, Ira?"

"Something sweet, pleaaaase?"

"Hmm, okay. But just one sweet thing, love. If you get a pastry, you have to drink juice. Okay?"

Irina pouted, but she nodded. Ilya hadn't been this strict about diet and sugar before her, but he was now. He didn't want her to eat garbage, so he closely monitored her sugar intake.

They stopped at a small bakery near the school. It wasn't fancy, just cozy enough to catch his attention with the thick scent of sugar and coffee hanging in the air. Irina chose a chocolate croissant almost as big as her face and a carton of apple juice, which she held with both hands. Ilya settled for a black coffee and a plain bagel he barely touched, tearing small pieces off while his daughter talked.

Irina probably noticed his strange mood, because she was clingier than usual during breakfast. In the only way she knew how, she tried to distract him with her endless little stories and detailed plans for the afternoon, playing with the chain on Ilya's chest whenever she was close enough, and when she wasn't, grabbing his hand tightly as they walked to the car. Ilya played along, making her laugh by smearing chocolate on her nose while helping her drink from her straw.

Once inside the car again, Ilya gripped the steering wheel harder than necessary before turning to look at her. There was something almost melancholic in the way Irina stared out the window, her cheek marked by the scar that, four years ago, had been an open wound. Sometimes it still caught him off guard, how much she had grown. How much time had passed without him noticing. How much she was beginning to look like him as time passed—not just in her blond curls slowly darkening, or in the eyes inherited from Grigori, the same eyes both Ilya and Alexei had shared once.

It wasn't even about the moles on her face, passed down from her grandmother, or her expressions clearly copied from Ilya himself. Irina carried a Rozanov sadness wrapped around her, and maybe it was just his own perception, but noticing it sent a chill through him. The creeping dread made him want to shake off that heaviness at all cost.

Ilya wanted to shield her from everything he'd been, from everything he'd learnt to feel at her fragile age.

Not wanting to linger on that thought, he started the engine.

Halfway to the school, an idea crossed his mind.

"Ira, we should prepare a gift for Shane. What do you think?"

"Really?!" Irina gasped, genuine concern taking over her face. *"But Papa, we need time!"* The seriousness in her voice made him smile.

"I think we have half an hour before your recess starts."

"We can't make a good drawing in that little time, Papa!"

This time, Ilya let out a real laugh.

"We're not going to give him a drawing today, sweetheart," he said. *"I have a better idea."*

***

Shane was trying to eat an apple when Erika stepped into the teachers' lounge, the door creaking softly behind her.

"Irina Rozanova is waiting with her father in the meeting room."

The words barely finished leaving her mouth before he was already on his feet. It was almost embarrassing how fast he moved, like something had snapped inside him. He left the apple on the table, only one bite taken out of it, and walked out under the puzzled looks of his

coworkers. A couple of them exchanged glances. They probably all thought Shane was weird, and intense, and overinvested.

He didn't care.

"I know you told me to come get you if I heard anything, but Leah's already with them. She's taking Irina to the playground so she can rejoin her class," Erika explained as she hurried after him, nearly jogging to match his considerably longer strides. "They seem okay, Shane. Really."

He nodded, but it was automatic. His jaw felt tight.

He knew—logically—that it had probably been one of those spontaneous things Ilya sometimes did. Maybe he'd woken up creative and decided to take Irina out for breakfast, or to stay home and ignore the world for a few hours. Maybe he'd just needed a slow morning for once.

That wasn't impossible. The problem was, Ilya always warned him. Well, warned *the school*. He was strict when it came to Irina's schedule, so he always made sure to update them if she wasn't coming.

When Shane had arrived at the school and checked his phone just to find no good morning message, no missed call, nor even a half-flirty emoji, a cold knot had started forming in his stomach.

He'd told himself not to be dramatic.

By the time Irina hadn't shown up for class and Ilya still hadn't answered any of his messages, the cold feeling had spread. It made Shane's thoughts turn darker, because maybe Irina was sick and he wasn't there, or maybe *Ilya* was sick and Irina didn't know what to do, or maybe something had happened (an accident overnight, a *fire*, a *robbery)* and *he wasn't fucking there.*

Because he'd left last night knowing that Ilya needed him.

He hated that his mind went there so quickly.

Maybe waiting wasn't the right decision. Maybe Shane and Ilya were already at that stage where staying over didn't need to be discussed anymore, where sharing whole nights together, even if sex wasn't involved, was simply natural. Maybe he didn't have to be so strict about time, about space, about rules that no one had actually set. They were moving at a different pace, and maybe that pace wasn't wrong.

Shane just wanted to do things right.

He didn't want Irina to grow wary of him, to see him suddenly occupying space that had always belonged to her. He didn't want to intrude on Ilya's safe place, or make either of them feel like he was a burden they had to adjust around.

He felt lost.

As he knocked on the meeting room door, the only thing running through his head was that he had never felt this lost before. Not even when he had to change his entire future plans, or when he decided to move cities and dedicate himself to teaching. This was different.

Maybe he wasn't the right person to handle a family like this. Maybe Ilya needed things Shane didn't know how to give. Or worse, maybe he *could* give them, but his own need to be cautious, to take things slowly, to measure every step, was getting in the way.

Because he wanted it, too.

He wanted to live with them already. He wanted mornings and shared dinners and Irina's boots by the door, but he hesitated. Shane was cautious and careful by nature, and that was something he couldn't help.

Maybe Irina and Ilya didn't need him to be careful.

"Come in," Leah's sweet voice called.

Shane stepped inside, his throat burning like he had swallowed something too hot.

Irina was already holding Leah's hand. She was wearing a beautiful blue sweater, thick leggings, and her winter boots. Leah had the girl's coat draped over her arm. The sight hit him all at once: she was safe and alive, smiling at him with shiny colorful eyes.

Relief flooded him so suddenly it almost made his knees weak.

"Shane, I'll take Irina for the rest of recess. Does that work for you?" Leah asked gently.

"Of course," Shane said.

For a brief second, he wished it were his place to take her himself. To watch her while she ran in the snow. To stand at the edge of the playground and make sure she was having fun. The thought surprised him with its intensity.

He crouched down in front of her.

"Put your coat on and behave, okay? I'll see you in class."

Irina nodded enthusiastically, curls bouncing. Shane had to resist the urge to pull her into his arms and cover her face in kisses. He forced himself to stay composed in front of Leah.

He didn't look at Ilya until the room fell completely silent after the door clicked shut. When he did, Ilya was already looking back at him.

Even though Ilya looked fine at first glance (standing in front of the desk, leaning lightly against it with his hip, dressed in loose jeans and a big coat, curly hair pushed back in an attempt to look more styled than it probably was) Shane knew.

Somehow, he knew that Ilya was not fine *at all.*

His expression was serious. There was something heavy in his eyes, something Shane had seen weeks ago, in this same room, when Irina had been sent home after that fight with a classmate.

“Shane—”

“Don’t,” Shane said immediately, shaking his head. His feet moved before he consciously decided to. “Don’t ever do that to me again.”

“I’m sorry.”

Shane wasn’t angry. Not really. What he felt was raw panic all over his body. He felt helpless. The kind of feeling that was making his hands shake like he was in front of a life-threatening situation.

He had been so afraid that something terrible had happened that he didn’t even register that they were still standing in his workplace. Without thinking, he stepped forward and pulled Ilya into his arms. He clung to him with fierce strength.

Shane breathed him in and hated the way Ilya’s body felt under his hands. He was stiff, shaking in small, uncontrollable waves, like he was holding himself together by force.

“What happened?”

“Horrible morning,” Ilya said. His accent was thicker than usual, the syllables heavier. He wasn’t trying to soothe it. “My head is noisy. It… it won’t shut up.”

“Okay,” Shane murmured gently.

His fingers slid into Ilya’s hair. Despite the product in it (some kind of styling wax) it was still soft, curling around his knuckles. Ilya’s forehead dropped against his shoulder. His grip was unsteady, but his arms were strong around Shane’s waist, holding on like he needed something solid to anchor him.

“Do you want to tell me what you were thinking?”

“No,” Ilya answered immediately. Three seconds after that: “Yes. I don’t know. It was horrible thing.”

Shane’s spine went rigid. He swallowed.

“I’ve thought horrible things too,” he said quietly. “When things were worse for me, years ago.” He kept his tone steady. He needed Ilya to feel safe, not judged. “When that video got leaked, I spiraled. I was depressed. I didn’t hurt myself physically,” he clarified, searching for the exact words, “but I stopped eating properly, I punished myself that way. I kept thinking everything would be easier if I just… stepped out of the picture. That life wasn’t worth fighting for.”

Ilya lifted his face.

Shane had never seen someone look that unbearably sad. He looked hollowed out from the inside. It scared him more than anything in his entire life.

“How did you stop it?” Ilya asked, almost breathless.

Shane studied him fully now.

Ilya always looked composed. Sharp. Controlled to the point of seeming cruel to people who didn’t know him. From the first time Shane had seen him play as a junior, he’d thought the same thing: Ilya Rozanov was built differently from him. Cut from something sharper and merciless. Trained to endure things most kids shouldn't endure, not even hear of.

Ilya had had a difficult life. Shane knew that. He’d never learned how to ask for help, how to accept that sometimes he couldn’t take everything by himself.

“Ilya, you need help,” Shane said, careful. “You can’t do this on your own.”

When Ilya tried to look away, Shane cupped his cheeks and brought him back. He was gentle, but firm.

“Baby—”

“And what if it doesn’t work?”

“Then we try again.”

“And what if—” Ilya’s voice fractured. “What if they can’t fix me? What if I’m still sad and one day I just don’t care anymore?”

“Ilya—”

“I was making plans,” he interrupted. Everything inside Shane went cold. “I lost track of time because I was on the couch *making plans.* Planning how to do it.” His breathing turned uneven. “For a moment, I didn’t care about leaving you. Or Svetlana. Or my team.” His voice broke on the last word. “My daughter.”

Shane couldn’t speak. A violent knot tightened in his throat. The room felt unreal, like the air had thickened into something suffocating. His ears rang faintly.

"What if I can't stop it?" Ilya whispered. "What if I can't help it?"

Shane didn't let go of him.

His hands slid to the back of Ilya's neck, guiding him those last few millimeters until their foreheads pressed together.

"I can't fix this for you, Ilya," Shane murmured. "I wish I could. I can hold your hand, I can stay when it gets ugly, but only you can choose to fight it. And I don't want you to do it for me, or the team, or Svetlana. Not even for Irina. You have to do it for yourself."

Ilya didn't answer right away. He just looked at him for a long few seconds, eyes uncertain and lost in a way that made him look almost childlike.

"Do you want to do something about it?" Shane asked softly. He didn't want to push too hard. If Ilya wasn't ready, he wouldn't press. Not today.

"I don't want to feel like this," Ilya whispered. "I don't want Irina to grow up losing her only parent, and I don't want to leave you. But I also don't want to become my mother. I don't want to suffer the way she did. I want to— to be happy, have a family, live a beautiful life. I want that."

"Good," Shane breathed, relief slipping into his voice before he could hide it. Ilya wanted to live, even if some days he felt like it wasn't worth it. His thumbs brushed gently under Ilya's damp eyes. "That's good. We can work with that. You need therapy and time, but you won't have to do it alone. I'm here with you, your daughter will be here with you, Svetlana and your teammates. We'll all be there."

Ilya nodded. "Okay."

"You can always talk to me about this. You won't scare me. I'm not going anywhere."

There was hesitation in Ilya's expression, but he nodded again. In that moment, he didn't look like the sharp, intimidating player everyone feared on the ice. He looked young and fragile. Like one of Shane's students after a bad fall, waiting to see if it was safe to cry in front of him.

"I don't know how I deserve you," Ilya confessed.

Shane shook his head immediately.

"You deserve every good thing that ever finds you," he said, and kissed him. Ilya kissed him back like he was starving. A wounded, breathless sound left his throat, swallowed between their mouths. Shane pulled away just as Ilya's tongue tried to deepen it, reining them both in. "Never doubt that, please," he whispered.

Ilya answered in Russian.

Shane didn't understand the words. They were soft, almost reverent against his lips, repeated more than once. Ilya's eyes were squeezed shut, his grip tightening, as if the confession itself required physical effort. His tone wasn't frantic anymore. It was raw and vulnerable. Devoted in a way that made Shane's chest ache.

Shane wanted to understand him.

"Care to translate for me?"

"Mhm…"

Ilya kissed him again. It was short, wet, almost clumsy, and it made Shane feel lightheaded. His head spun and he felt dizzy, almost *stupid,* while he returned the slow movements with

hungry lips. Ilya's tongue found its way into his mouth eventually, letting him taste the bitter flavor of coffee. If Ilya was trying to distract him from his Russian words, he was succeeding.

"I need to go back," Shane muttered, forcing himself to breathe. "Recess will end soon."

"Yes, okay," Ilya said, English settling back into place. "Irina will stay for lunch today."

Shane nodded. That meant he could stop by the dining area just to see her. Just to reassure himself she was okay.

"Do you want to be alone?"

"No. It's not that." Their mouths were still barely apart. "I need to be somewhere later."

"Can I know where?"

"No. It's a surprise."

"For me? Or for her?"

Ilya smiled. It didn't fully reach his eyes, but he looked calmer now.

"You'll see."

"Okay."

Ilya leaned in for one last kiss. Shane clung to him for a second longer than necessary. Ilya bit him, soft and slow. *Fuck*.

"Mhm, Ilya—"

"Yes, I know. I'm leaving."

But he wasn't.

Ilya leaned in again, deeper this time, a low groan vibrating into Shane's mouth. Shane nearly lost control when wandering fingers slid over the curve of his ass through the fabric of his pants, possessive and unapologetic. Ilya touched him there, digging into the muscle and *squeezing*.

"*Fuck*, you're so—"

A knock cut him off.

Shane jumped back immediately, ending up on the other side of the room, covering his swollen mouth just as the door opened. His heart was racing.

Erika peeked inside with a polite smile.

"Cynthia is looking for you," she said, then glanced at Ilya and blushed faintly under his steady gaze. Shane understood her completely. "Do you— um, want me to walk you to the

exit, Mr. Rozanov?"

"Yes, thank you," Ilya replied smoothly, pushing off the desk with that sideways smirk that could ruin lives. *Shane's life*, to be precise. He looked at Shane for a few seconds and extended his hand, mischief glittering in his eyes. "It's always a pleasure to see you, Teacher Shane."

Shane cleared his throat and took the hand that had been *groping* him with sinful intent. Ilya squeezed just a little too firmly, with the same pressure he'd been using on his ass-cheek fifteen seconds earlier, pulling him forward a fraction.

Shane tried to stay composed.

"Have a good day, Mr. Rozanov."

"Goodbye."

Shane watched them leave. Erika walked beside Ilya, visibly excited. Ilya flashed her one of his devastating smiles—warm, charming, dangerously attentive. Shane almost laughed when Erika's voice floated back through the still-open door.

"My son is a huge fan of yours, Mr. Rozanov. We're giving him tickets for Christmas."

"Really? What's his name?"

"Paul."

"Okay. I'll arrange better ones. And I can meet Paul after the game."

“Oh! You don’t have to—”

“But I want to, Erika. You always answer all my calls and emails.”

Shane shook his head. That was Erika’s job, but Ilya was being sweet with her anyway. Yes, maybe he called and reached out to them more than the average parent, but that wasn’t any bother. Shane was sure Erika loved talking to him, just like every other teacher or staff from the school.

Well, maybe Madame Dubois was the exception, Shane thought.

Erika made an excited sound that Shane couldn't quite make out (they were too far by then), but it made him smile anyway.

Ilya truly deserved the best things in this world.

Shane prayed, even if he wasn't even a believer or anything, that Ilya would want to stay long enough to receive them.

Just the idea of a life without him was enough to make him feel like he could die too.

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“Can I see it pleaaase?”

“Not right now, sweetheart. You need to wait for Shane to come and open it.”

“But I want to see how it turned out!”

Ilya leaned over the back seat, eyebrows raised and a smile too wide for his own face.

The thoughts created a low hum inside his head that sounded like everything he had told Shane, like everything he had admitted to himself that morning, and like the short but decisive phone call with he'd had with Dr. Molchalina (the therapist whose number had been sitting in his contacts for two weeks). It was constantly irritating him, but after saying it out loud, after finally booking the appointment, after Shane had held him and told him everything would be alright, it was quieter and bearable.

Irina’s happiness was helping, too.

“You need to be patient, love. It’s Shane’s present. You can’t open it before him.”

Irina pouted dramatically and turned toward the window, radiating impatience.

“Why is he taking so looong?”

“He’s coming soon, Ira.”

Shane wasn’t taking long at all. Ilya had picked Irina up barely ten minutes ago, and Shane had asked them to wait in the car while he cleaned the classroom and gathered his things. Irina was just vibrating with excitement at the idea of going to the arena with him.

Outside, light snow drifted down lazily despite the sun breaking through in pale streaks. For some reason, this kind of weather always reminded Ilya of the coldest days back in Russia, the ones where the air burned your lungs even if the sky was unexpectedly bright. Canada wasn’t warmer than that, not really. But it felt… softer. Much more cozy.

“Look, Papa! He’s coming!”

Ilya followed her finger.

Shane was crossing the parking lot with a backpack slung over one shoulder, a canvas tote bag hooked on his arm, and a folder pressed tightly against his chest. The ring of keys Ilya had noticed weeks ago jingled in one hand. His cheeks were flushed from the cold and the rush, and he looked slightly swallowed by his oversized down coat.

Ilya got out of the car immediately and walked toward him, taking the bag and backpack without asking. Shane let out a breath.

“Sorry. The classroom was a disaster.”

“It’s okay,” Ilya said, lifting the bag slightly in his hand. It was heavier than expected. “You carry rocks in here?”

As they reached the trunk, Shane shook his head.

“Just supplies. We’re building little cardboard theatres this week with shadow puppets. The school doesn’t have materials for all the children, so I stopped by the craft store last week. I might’ve gotten a bit carried away.”

Ilya glanced at him.

Of course he’d paid for supplies with his own money. Shane was too sweet and caring with his students. He was such a good teacher.

He placed everything neatly in the trunk, just beside Irina’s pink skates and helmet. Then, taking advantage of the raised door and the fact that Irina couldn’t see them from inside the car, he grabbed Shane by the lapel of his coat and pulled him in, pressing a loud kiss to his lips.

“Privet, zólotse,” he murmured against his mouth. “I missed you.”

“It was just a few hours,” Shane complained, but he held Ilya close and kissed his lips again, “I missed you too.” He confessed at last, long lashes brushing against his blushed, freckled cheekbones. “Do you feel better?”

“Yes, better,” Ilya mumbled. “Let’s go inside. Irina wants to give you something.”

Shane narrowed his eyes.

“You’re being mysterious today,” he accused lightly. “First, you say things to me in Russian that I don’t understand. Then, you disappear somewhere you won’t tell me about. Now, a surprise. What’s going on?”

Ilya tried to hold his smile steady.

He wasn’t being mysterious on purpose. He and Irina had had a wonderful idea, and it had taken time to arrange, that was all.

The 'mysterious thing in Russian' he’d said that morning hadn’t been planned either, they had just *slipped* out of his system, uncontrollably.

In that small meeting room, wrapped in Shane’s arms after the gentlest encouragement anyone had ever given him, the confession had simply forced its way out.

I love you. I love you so much it scares me. I need you. I don't know how to exist without you. I love you, my love. I love you.

Shane had looked at him with wide, tender eyes still soft from the conversation, but also confused, trying to understand. Ilya had *panicked*. And when Shane had asked what he'd said, he'd been cowardly enough to ignore him and change topics.

He closed the SUV's trunk and turned back to him, projecting calm he didn't entirely feel.

In reality, he wanted to curl around Shane, with Irina wedged safely between them. Disappear somewhere small and warm until his heart stopped threatening to give up under the sheer weight of everything he felt.

He wanted to tell them (openly, recklessly, to both of them at the same time) that they were the reason he still fought every day. That they were the best thing that had ever happened to him. That he loved them. That he would do everything in his power to stay with them, to never leave, to never let himself go.

But he couldn't.

Irina was too small to understand words that heavy, and Ilya was terrified of saying them out loud to Shane. Of telling him that he loved him, even if it was an undeniable truth he no longer had any chance of escaping.

Reaching that conclusion that morning had been what finally pushed him to schedule an appointment with a professional. Ilya didn't need another reason for his chest to feel tight and his thoughts to turn against him. He didn't want his love for Shane to become a weapon he used on himself.

Dr. Galina Molchalina hadn't been able to see him this week. Next week, she'd promised. In the meantime, she had recommended breathing exercises whenever the anxiety surged and, even if it felt difficult, trying to speak to someone he trusted instead of isolating himself. He didn't have to tell them everything, but letting them know when he wasn't feeling well, or when he needed a moment to breathe and calm down in stressful situations, was a good start.

Don't keep it to yourself and just endure it, Ilya. Be gentler with your needs and ask for a little help. It won't be the end of the world.

He cleared his throat.

"We have some time before the meeting," he said. "And I feel a bit… overhelmed?"

"Overwhelmed," Shane corrected gently.

"Yes."

"Okay." Shane's gloved hand brushed over Ilya's forearm, grounding. "Do you want to grab a tea? There's a good place halfway to the arena. They have good British biscuits."

Ilya almost smiled for real at that.

“Or we can just sit in the car and talk. Whatever you need.”

“Tea is okay,” Ilya said quietly. “But first, the present.”

Irina practically bounced in her seat as soon as they were back inside the car.

“Now? Now?” she insisted, already reaching for the carefully wrapped bundle at her feet.

Shane laughed softly. “Alright, alright. I’m opening it.”

Ilya handed it to him without speaking. His hands felt colder than they should have.

Shane peeled the paper away slowly at first, teasing Irina on purpose, until a deep black fabric appeared beneath the torn wrapping. The Centaurs logo.

His smile shifted. Ilya waited impatiently for his reaction, pulse loud in his ears.

“Oh,” he breathed.

He unfolded it fully.

It was a Centaurs jersey.

It could have seemed a little narcissistic on Ilya’s part, as if he just wanted Shane to wear his name on his back (which he *did want),* but that wasn’t it right now. Ilya had practically argued with the clerk at the official Centaurs merchandise store to get the jersey customized —not because it couldn’t be done, but because Ilya had very *specific* demands about it.

Across the back, instead of a number, there was a drawing clearly done by a child, lines uneven and a little clumsy. Three stick figures. One tall, messy hair made of chaotic scribbles, another slightly shorter, with dots beneath large round black eyes, and the smallest one in the middle, stars on her face and a wide curved smile. The little figure stood between the two taller ones, holding their hands (or what passed for hands).

Above the drawing, printed cleanly, the name HOLLANDER practically shone against the glossy material of the block lettering.

For a moment, Shane didn’t say anything.

Ilya’s stomach dropped. For a second, he thought the argument with the store employee (*Sir, we can’t print a child’s drawing directly onto a jersey)* had been for nothing. That the follow-up conversation with the manager (*We’ll try to make it work, Mr. Rozanov. Please forgive Rob, he’s new here)* while the first clerk stared at him in dawning horror after realizing he wasn’t just any customer, had all been pointless.

Irina leaned forward from the back seat.

“I did it, Shane!” she explained unnecessarily. “It’s us. I made Papa taller, but he said it’s okay.”

Shane's fingers traced the outline of the little figures as if they might disappear.

"I love it," he said quietly.

Ilya forced himself to breathe.

"I didn't know your number, so we thought this would be more appropriate. I'll order another one with your number too," Ilya added, sounding more nervous than he intended. "I hope you like it."

Shane looked at him. There was an undeniable sheen of tears in his eyes.

"Of course I do, dummy," he mumbled, jaw tight and voice rough.

He broke eye contact, escaping Ilya's gaze, and leaned forward through the gap between the seats to hug Irina.

"The drawing is incredible, sweetheart. Thank you so much."

Irina smiled into his shoulder. "It was Papa's idea, but he's not good at drawing, so he asked me to."

When they pulled apart, Shane looked at him again. Ilya could feel his ears turning red. Probably his neck and face too.

"I don't like drawing," he muttered, voice still rough, phrasing almost awkward. "Irina is the better artist."

Shane let out a soft, shaky laugh. He was clutching the jersey tightly now, pressing it against his chest as if he were afraid someone might take it away.

"I can imagine," he murmured. "Thank you, Ilya."

"There's more," Ilya announced, the words stumbling over each other in his mouth.

Fuck. It was just a gift. Shane wasn't going to stop caring about him over a bad present. He wasn't going to be scared away if it was too intimate or too personal. Shane had told him he was sure about them. That he knew what he was getting into. That he was happy to be here.

Ilya reached into the backseat again, pulling out the long box he had hidden beneath his equipment bag. This one he handed over more carefully.

Shane looked between them. "What is it?"

"Open it," Ilya said.

Inside, nestled in tissue paper, was a pair of professional Bauer skates. The stainless steel blades were already polished and sharpened because Ilya had ordered them that way. He had made sure to discreetly check Shane's size days earlier, when he had surprised him at home

before the road trip. They were unmistakably pink, the exact same shade as the skates Ilya and Irina owned.

For a second, Shane just blinked.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am very serious,” Ilya replied.

“Now we match!” Irina added proudly. “It’s the family color.”

Shane swallowed. His eyes had gone suspiciously bright again.

“These are— Ilya, these are professional level. I told you I already have a pair.”

“I know,” Ilya said softly. “But yours aren’t pink, and we need pink if we’re going to skate together, yes? It’s nothing, Shane. It’s just a little indulgence for us. Please accept it.”

Please stay with us. Be ours.

That was what Ilya was trying to say without saying it. Irina and he wanted him on their small team. In their small family. Maybe it was stupid. Just skates and a hockey jersey, but to Ilya it meant everything.

Shane looked down again at the jersey. At the drawing of the three of them. Then at the skates.

“Okay,” he murmured.

Irina nodded enthusiastically. “Yes!” She leaned forward between the seats. *“Papa, he liked it!”*

Something inside Ilya’s chest tightened painfully. He hadn’t meant for it to feel this exposed. This obvious.

Shane looked at him then. Really looked at him.

“This is what you were being mysterious about?”

Ilya shrugged one shoulder, suddenly shy.

“Yes. It was a surprise. You didn’t need to know.”

Shane leaned across the center console and kissed him on the cheek. Ilya held his breath.

It was more than they had ever done in front of Irina. Shane was usually restrained, extremely careful. The gesture was brief, but deliberate and somehow calculated. Shane’s lips were cold against his flushed cheek.

“Thank you, baby,” Shane whispered when he pulled back. “I love it, I promise.”

Ilya let out something that might have been a relieved laugh.

Good.

Irina clapped her hands loudly from the back seat, already wrestling with her seatbelt to fasten it again. Ilya leaned back to help her.

“Now let’s go skate, Papa! Quickly!”

“Okay, okay, we’re going, but we’re eating something first, alright?”

“Whyyy? I don’t want to eat.”

“Yes, you need to,” Shane reminded her. Even as he fastened his seatbelt, Ilya noticed his grip never left the new jersey pressed tightly against his chest. “You need energy if you want to win against me, love. I’m a *really good* player.”

Irina’s eyes sparkled.

The area around the Canadian Tire Center was usually quiet on days like this and, if he was being honest, on game days too.

Ilya still remembered his first home game as the only time he had ever seen the stands nearly full, the parking lot packed, Centaurs fans buzzing with something dangerously close to hope as warmups began and his name echoed through the arena.

Attendance had dipped steadily once it became clear that Ilya Rozanov alone wasn’t going to fix a franchise that had been broken long before he arrived.

Today, though, there was more movement than usual.

Not crowds—nothing close to that, but small clusters of fans lingering near the entrance. Most of them were probably there hoping to sneak a glimpse, maybe even to voice their disagreement after that morning’s announcement. Hockey fans were like that. Just like management, coaches, and players, they avoided uncomfortable conversations like the one Troy Barrett had started when he called Dallas Kent out for his behavior toward women.

Ilya resented those kinds of fans, the ones who chose denial when it suited them, but he understood they represented a significant portion of the money that kept the league running. And if not them, then the sponsors, the corporations that loved to flee from media circuses like the one Barrett’s sudden trade had ignited.

It had exploded across every hockey outlet in the country.

Ilya knew because Coach Wiebe had sent a very clear message to their inboxes that morning: *Do not read the news. Do not engage on social media.* Ilya hadn’t needed the warning. He was too busy being a father to care about comments on Twitter or Instagram, but he knew this would shake the team somehow.

Barrett hadn't been moved because of cap space or a rebuild. He had been traded because he'd publicly clashed with the star player in Toronto (his former best friend) after serious accusations against him. He started a locker room argument that should have stayed internal. A hot mic that didn't. A blunt comment about what a shitty person Dallas Kent was.

Within twenty-four hours, the Guardians management had chosen their golden boy, and Barrett had been shipped out.

Officially, it was a hockey decision. Unofficially, everyone knew it was damage control.

Ilya almost felt sorry for him, except for the part where, if his memory served right, Barrett could also be an asshole. At least now he wasn't on a team full of bigger ones. That was *something*.

The real presence outside the arena came from the media vans lined up along the players' entrance, cameras positioned strategically, reporters rehearsing their segments while they waited for the first footage of Troy Barrett entering the Centaurs' home.

Being traded was part of the business. Getting traded because you'd challenged the face of your former franchise was something else entirely. And now Barrett's first appearance in Ottawa would happen under tight media control: no open practice, just a closed-door meeting, medicals, and a carefully worded press conference about *fresh starts* and *new opportunities*.

Ilya would sit beside him, expected to tell the world that Barrett was welcome with open arms when it wasn't entirely true.

The fanbase probably hated him already. And while the Centaurs' locker room was decent enough to give him the benefit of the doubt (none of them doubted that Kent had likely deserved whatever Barrett had said), that didn't erase half a decade of being a real piece of shit on the ice. Even Ilya could recall several times Barrett had been a dick with him.

Ilya shifted slightly in his seat, watching one of the reporters rehearse in front of her camera.

He knew how this went. They would ask him about chemistry, about leadership, about whether he and Barrett could coexist on the same line as if that were the real issue here. They would demand explanations, push for statements, dissect every word, and no one would hold Dallas Kent accountable for the serious accusations that had started all of this.

Hockey culture loved to pretend everything stayed in the room.

"You'll go to the staff entrance. Harris, our social media manager, will be waiting for you there," Ilya explained, eyes still fixed on the media vans outside.

His anxiety was climbing again, sharp and uncomfortable beneath his ribs. Just the thought of reporters getting too close to Irina and Shane made his skin crawl and his breath catch in his throat.

"He'll guide you inside. I will probably be tied up for a few hours—"

“Hey, Ilya.” Shane’s warm hand closed gently over his knuckles.

Finally, Ilya tore his gaze away from the window and focused on Shane’s soft brown eyes, steady and grounding as always.

“It’s okay,” Shane said quietly. “I’m here. Irina’s with me. She’ll be fine.”

Ilya studied him for a few seconds, searching his face as if trying to measure the risk of all of this going bad. It was high, but Shane seemed so confident.

“They’ll turn this into a shit show if they see both of you,” he muttered under his breath. “I don’t want you dealing with that.”

“Okay,” Shane replied easily. “Then we won’t. They won’t see us. And if they do, we won’t say anything.” He leaned closer, brushing his fingers gently over Ilya’s cheek. “We’re good, okay? You go do what you need to do. We’ll wait for you on the ice.”

Ilya nodded.

Yes. He just had to go in there, listen to whatever management and Wiebe had to say, and sit through the media circus for some minutes. Maybe take a few staged photos with Barrett after the short press availability. It would be awkward—probably painfully so, but then he would be done.

And Shane would be waiting for him with Irina at the rink. They could spend the rest of the afternoon together, alone, skating, laughing, being ridiculous on the ice.

“Okay,” he nodded. “Everything you need is in my equipment bag.”

Shane nodded, turning to look at Irina. She seemed lost in her own little universe, softly humming a song Ilya didn’t recognize, her boots tapping lightly against the back of his seat in an absent rhythm.

“Allons-y, chérie.”

Let’s go, love.

She obeyed despite her excitement, practically vibrating in place.

Ilya leaned over the center console to kiss her loudly, almost throwing himself into the back seat through the gap between the front seats just to reach her properly. She giggled, squirming under the exaggerated affection.

Then it was Shane’s turn.

Shane flinched slightly at the sudden attack to his cheek, but his hands came up instinctively, fingers sliding into the curls at the nape of Ilya’s neck, stroking them absentmindedly. Ilya nipped at his cheek playfully, though there was a tight knot lodged deep in his throat.

He didn’t want to go in there. He didn’t want to face any of it. He wanted to stay in the car with them, pretending he didn’t have a responsibility waiting on the other side of those doors. Fuck. He was starting to resent this, to hate the part where he needed to separate from his family and lose special moments with them. Ilya knew they would wait for him, but he wanted to be there from the beginning.

“I’ll try to be back quickly.”

“Take all the time you need. We’ll be waiting for you,” Shane said softly before pressing a lingering kiss to Ilya’s cheek and stepping out of the car.

Ilya took a few more minutes before his phone lit up with a message from Harris.

Harris: I got them, Roz.

He exhaled slowly.

For a second, he let his head fall back against the seat and closed his eyes. He counted his breaths the way Dr. Molchalina had told him to over the phone *(steady in, slower out)* until the tightness in his chest loosened just enough to function.

Then he reminded himself who he was. Ilya Rozanov. Captain of the Ottawa Centaurs. Franchise player. The one who had carried this team on his back for two years while the rest of the league laughed at them. He would never be ashamed of choosing this team.

This was his fucking house, his *family*. He won’t let anyone tear it apart.

He grabbed his bag, stepped out of the car, and headed toward the players’ entrance wearing his best I-don’t-give-a-shit expression, the same one the cameras loved to interpret as arrogance, the one that kept reporters at arm’s length, the one that said *untouchable*.

Ilya was trying his best to believe he was that man.

***

The man who had welcomed them was named Harris, and he was the human embodiment of a ray of sunshine.

He was several centimetres shorter than Shane, his face framed by a bright ginger beard that matched his slightly wavy hair. He wore a loud sweater absolutely covered in pins: one shaped like a dog, another with the Centaurs logo, one that read *Marketing Star!* in glittery letters, and finally one with the LGBTQ+ flag.

Shane admitted he was surprised.

It wasn't that he found it shocking that Harris was lovely (he clearly was), but he did have to admit he hadn't expected a hockey team employee to be so openly… himself.

"So, those are the changing rooms— You can use them now because they're empty— Oh! Roz told me to grab you anything if you're hungry, so just let me know. There are water bottles in that machine— take this. It's Roz's company card, you won't have to pay for anything if you use it— Hi, Theresa!"

Harris interrupted himself mid-sentence to wave enthusiastically at a woman who was hurrying in the opposite direction.

"She's the management director's secretary. She's always running late, poor girl," he explained with dramatic sympathy. "Okay, come here— Irina, watch the step, that's it, honey. And here we are! This is where the magic happens. Centaurs' rink. Have you even been to a game, Shane?"

Shane was too distracted making sure Irina didn't trip over the step Harris had pointed out without even looking back at them. The girl seemed far too determined to keep up with the marketing manager to actually pay attention to where she was putting her feet.

"Uh—yeah. My mom used to take me to games when I was little," he muttered.

It had been a long time. Probably years since Shane had stepped into a professional rink.

He'd gone a few times to the Metros' arena, invited by Hayden, but those visits had dwindled when university became too overwhelming, when Jackie had more kids, and when the Metros discovered Shane was far too good to be considered amateur and started getting reluctant to play against him—even as a joke.

Shane had always found it amusing to bruise their fragile little egos.

These days, his skating was limited to frozen lakes in the winter when he had time. Maybe public rinks if Jackie or his mother managed to drag him out. He hadn't stood under a Jumbotron with a stick in his hands in years, and the adrenaline had been building in his veins from the moment he saw the arena from the outside.

He wasn't going to pretend he didn't miss it, and he definitely wasn't going to pretend there wasn't a small, bitter part of him that resented not having been able to devote his life to *this*.

"So you're a Centaurs fan?" Harris asked, smiling at him like he already knew the answer.

Shane let out a soft huff of laughter.

“I was. When I was little. It’s the local team, after all,” he explained with a small shrug. “But my house was wrapped in Metros' colors. My mom is passionate about hockey, and her dad was a Metros fan. She inherited it.”

“Hey, as long as you don’t tell the guys that, you’ll be welcomed as one of us,” Harris joked, pulling an exaggerated grimace that made Shane laugh despite himself. “Alright, Shane, all yours. You can grab whatever equipment you need. No one’s going to stop you. Rozanov privileges.”

Shane tried very hard not to blush when Harris winked at him.

The manager then crouched in front of Irina, lowering his voice conspiratorially.

“Don’t score too much, little Rozy.”

“No!” she protested immediately.

“Oh, poor Shane. You’re going to go hard on him?”

“Yes! I always win!”

Shane couldn’t help shaking his head. That determined spark in her eyes was *pure Ilya*. The same arrogance that somehow wasn’t arrogance at all, just belief. She really thought that she was the best, and if she played, she would probably be.

Harris sprang back to his feet.

“I’ve still got to set up a tripod for some welcome photos— Don’t even ask,” he added with theatrical despair, already jogging away. He didn’t sound thrilled about it, but there was something unmistakably passionate in the way he moved. “Have fun!”

Harris seemed like someone who genuinely loved his job. Shane smiled, waving at him. “Thanks!”

“Shane, can we go now?” Irina tugged at his sleeve impatiently.

“Oui,” Shane replied automatically, the French slipping out without thought. “Let’s go. But first, warm-up. And I need some equipment if I want to survive your incredible shots.”

Irina beamed.

“Coach Wiebe says I’m the star of the team.”

“Of course you are, love.”

“I’ll be captain when I’m old. Like Papa.”

“Oh, will you?”

“Yes! And I will win a Stanley Cup.”

Shane could imagine it far too clearly.

In his mind, Irina grew up into a beautiful, intelligent, determined woman. Strong and stubborn, just like Ilya. She would become whatever she wanted to be, because she would never lack support. Not from him, not from her father. They would build the kind of foundation under her feet that never cracked.

He could see her as an artist if she decided to pursue it. She already had that focus when she painted: tongue caught between her teeth, brows furrowed, completely absorbed. A lot of kids lost interest in drawing once they got closer to ten or eleven. Other things (friends, screens, new pre-teenage insecurities) replaced it. So there were still years to see whether that love for art would stick or fade.

If Irina wanted to bake cakes, like she always claimed whenever they visited Marie’s and she pressed her nose against the display counter, then she would become the best pastry chef in all of Canada. Shane would personally taste-test every single disaster batch until perfection happened.

And if she wanted to be a hockey player like her father—*well*.

Shane’s jaw tightened slightly inside the goalie mask as he watched her skate toward him again.

If she wanted that, he would make sure she had *every* opportunity.

He would find her the best private skills coach in Ontario. Someone patient but demanding. He would get her into elite development camps. Make sure her name was whispered early in the right circles (scouts, development directors, people who actually shaped careers long before draft day). He knew how the system worked because he’d been close enough to it once.

When the time came, he’d make sure she entered the draft eligible and ready, which meant being strong enough, fast enough, *mentally sharp* enough to handle the pressure. And if the hockey gods had any sense at all, she’d go first overall to a cohesive organization that knew how to build stars instead of burn them out.

He would make sure no one mishandled her talent, no one dimmed her light, and if, at any point, Irina changed her mind, if her path swerved somewhere none of them could predict, then that would be fine too.

If she decided she hated hockey at fourteen and wanted to study astrophysics, or if she fell in love with architecture, or if she wanted to travel the world with a backpack and no plan. If she wanted this, or that, or nothing at all.

Shane and Ilya would still be there. On the boards. In the stands. In the kitchen at midnight, helping her fill out applications. On the other end of every phone call.

Whatever she wanted to be, they would support her without hesitation.

A puck slammed into his chest protector, knocking him clean out of his thoughts.

“Shane! Pay attention!” Irina yelled, scandalized.

Shane blinked behind the mask and then laughed, pushing himself upright from where he’d leaned too far back.

“I was paying attention,” he lied easily.

“You weren’t! Papa says lying is bad and your nose will grow!”

She circled him again, pink skates carving messy but enthusiastic lines into the pristine ice. Her jersey flapped behind her with every push, slightly too big for her small frame. She was wearing her dad’s number, huge across her back, swallowing her whole.

Would the expectations that name carried swallow her? Shane wouldn't allow it.

“Let’s go again,” she demanded.

He reset his stance properly this time. Knees bent. The blade of his stick flat against the ice. Gloves up and ready.

He wasn’t a good goalie, but he *technically* knew how to play as one, and even if he wanted to let Irina score every single time just to see that victorious grin split her face, she was so determined, probably trying to impress him, that she would absolutely notice if he didn’t try. She might only be four, but she wasn’t stupid.

Besides, Shane was competitive by nature. He wasn’t going to go hard on a four-year-old, but he also wasn’t going to pretend he was terrible.

“Alright, future captain,” he called out, adjusting his weight on his new pink skates. They fit perfectly, and even if the blades weren’t proper for a goaltender, they felt secure and steady enough. “Show me what you’ve got.”

She pushed off harder this time. The puck stayed surprisingly close to her blade as she approached. She shifted it left, then right. She was still a little bit unbalanced, yes, but surprisingly intentional. She was good, she knew what she was trying to do, and Shane imagined that Ilya had taught her those movements with a lot of patience and care. He'd probably gotten her in skates when she learnt how to walk.

She was more skilled than a lot of kids in organized hockey camps, honestly.

She shot low, aiming for the blocker side. Shane caught it cleanly.

Irina groaned dramatically, shoulders slumping.

“That was luck!” she accused.

Shane stared at her in exaggerated offense.

“Sorry, little lady, but I have years of experience,” he bragged shamelessly. “That was *skill*.”

Irina narrowed her eyes, her tiny mouth twisting into a suspicious little pout.

Shane had to physically stop himself from laughing and pulling off his helmet just to scoop her up and squeeze her until she squeaked. She was unbearably adorable. Fierce in the smallest body imaginable.

“I’ll be better than you and Papa,” she declared.

“If you say so…” he replied lightly, the corner of his mouth curling beneath the mask.

Irina did, in fact, score a few genuinely good goals that Shane couldn’t stop.

Every time she celebrated with arms in the air and her stick raised like she’d just won Game Seven, he would arch a skeptical brow and claim it was because he was rusty and his goalie training was nonexistent. But the truth was simpler:

Irina had ridiculous potential.

When they grew tired of just practicing shots, Shane peeled off the extra goalie gear and skated back to center ice to face her properly. What started as a half-serious one-on-one quickly devolved into a chaotic chase, each of them trying to steal the puck from the other, circling, pivoting, nearly colliding.

Irina’s laugh echoed through the empty rink, bright and unfiltered. It ended with Shane catching her around the waist, lifting her clean off the ice as she squealed, and pressing his nose into the crook of her neck in revenge.

“Got you,” he muttered, nuzzling until she shrieked with giggles.

“That’s not fair!”

“Hey— um, sorry? Your phone— your phone is ringing.”

The voice carried strangely in the vast space. Shane turned, Irina still in his arms.

Down the corridor where the players exited, a man stood near the bench area, pointing awkwardly toward the seat where Shane had left his things. His posture was stiff and his shoulders tight, like he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to exist there.

Shane immediately recognized him.

He set Irina back down on the ice.

“Irina, why don’t you try to score from the blue line?” he suggested, gesturing toward it. *“Je vais retourner dans une minute.”*

“D’accord!”

Irina, why don’t you try to score from the blue line? I'll be right back.
Okay.

She skated off with total trust, already lining up her next attempt.

Shane made his way to the boards, his expression turning serious as he approached Troy Barrett.

How long had he been standing there? And why was he alone, if he was supposed to be in a meeting with the rest of the team?

Shane pushed open the small gate and stepped into the bench area, grabbing his phone. It had several missed calls and a string of messages from his mom. As usual, he’d left it on vibrate after class and forgotten to switch the sound back on.

“Thanks,” he said to Barrett, who was watching him with wide, uncertain eyes.

When Barrett didn’t move, didn’t say anything else, the silence stretched. Shane shifted slightly.

“Um. You’re new, right? Are you lost or something?” The moment the words left his mouth, he realized it might have sounded… mean. Like he was dismissing him.

Barrett blinked.

“Uh— yeah. Yes. I’m new here. I just wanted to see the rink, you know,” he said, voice dropping almost into a murmur. “Get used to it.” He added, as if he still couldn’t quite believe he was saying it.

Shane studied him.

Barrett was dressed in a suit that screamed expensive: tailored, sharp, completely out of place against the casual way Ilya had dressed for the meeting earlier. Maybe in Toronto they had stricter expectations for appearances. Montreal was like that too, according to Hayden.

Still, the contrast was striking.

Shane could imagine how brutal a transition like this must be. Sure, he knew enough about hockey to know Troy Barrett had built himself a reputation as one of the most disrespectful and problematic players in the league—a *bully*. That didn’t change just because Barrett currently looked… intimidated and vulnerable.

He had always hated bullies, but sympathy flickered anyway.

“You’ll get used to it,” Shane said simply. “You might even learn something useful from this team. They’re not the kind of mess you’re used to.”

He wasn't trying to be cruel, but he wasn't trying to comfort him either. He simply said what he thought. He was being honest.

Still, the words made Barrett's eyes narrow.

He assessed Shane openly now, scanning him from head to toe before letting his gaze linger on the Centaurs logo stitched across his new shirt.

"You're not a player," he concluded, in a tone that almost made Shane smile. Barrett glanced back at the ice. "That's Rozanov's kid, right? Are you her personal trainer? I saw you. You seem to know what you're doing, teaching her."

Shane opened his mouth to answer, but a voice cut cleanly through the rink.

"Little Rozy!"

Shane lifted his gaze from Barrett and found an entire herd of players jogging toward the ice. Most of them were looking at him with open curiosity (actually, nearly all of them), but he didn't have time to analyze that before Ilya's eyes found his.

There had been a softness there at first that almost made him *melt*. Two seconds later, it hardened when he noticed who was standing in front of Shane.

It took barely ten seconds for Ilya to reach them. He wrapped an arm around Shane's torso and leaned down to press a loud, unapologetic kiss to his cheek.

"Zólotse," Ilya breathed against his skin, sounding tired and tense. "Everything alright?"

Shane swallowed.

Across from them, Troy Barrett's expression shifted into something dangerously close to shock.

Shane leaned comfortably into Ilya's side. He'd never really imagined their affection would be displayed so openly this fast—but he didn't shrink back, nor falter under Barrett's stunned stare. He would never hide himself again.

"Yes. Barrett— *Troy* was introducing himself," Shane explained lightly, a small smile playing at his mouth. "He thought I was part of the staff since I'm incredibly *talented* at teaching Irina."

Ilya's gaze slid to Troy and stayed there. For a second, Barrett actually looked like he might step back. Shane couldn't blame him. When Ilya Rozanov wanted to, he could look like someone carved out of a war.

Shane did wonder, briefly, if Ilya's tension had something to do with the fact that Troy had been watching him earlier. Ilya had been saying for weeks how much he wanted to see Shane at the rink. Or maybe just his presence was bothering him.

"Did he?" Ilya muttered. "Well. Shane is not staff, Barrett. He is my *partner*."

Shane stiffened at that.

Barrett did too.

For a few long seconds, the only thing Shane could hear was the not-so-distant chatter of the rest of the team and Wyatt Hayes making Irina laugh as he chased her in sneakers, slipping spectacularly and crashing onto the ice.

“Oh,” Barrett said at last, swallowing. “Your *partner*. Right. Of course.”

“Yes,” Ilya nodded once. “I hope you remember our conversation. About this team. And loyalty.” His tone was astonishingly calm. So calm it bordered on threatening. “In this team, we are good people. We care about our family.”

Barrett seemed to fully wake up at that.

“I’m not going to say anything,” he replied quickly, almost defensively.

“I do not care if you do,” Ilya shot back instantly. “But you will keep your opinions out of my locker room and away from my hearing. Am I clear?”

Shane watched the color drain from Troy’s face. The words seemed to lodge in his throat.

He couldn’t help himself.

“Ilya,” he said softly, drawing his *partner’s (were they partners like associates, or like boyfriend and boyfriend? Should he ask?)* attention. He stroked a hand over Ilya’s shoulder the way one might soothe a restless beast. “I don’t think that’s necessary. Troy knows this is a fresh start. He’ll be on his best behavior.”

The flames in Ilya’s eyes dimmed when they settled on Shane’s. He gave him a small, reassuring smile.

Then both of them looked at Troy, waiting.

“Right! Of course— Yes. I’ll— yes,” Barrett stammered when he realized he was expected to speak. “I should get going. I— Yeah.”

He cast them one last look (at them, at the team, at the whole scene like he still couldn’t quite process it) before retreating quickly down the hallway.

Shane followed him with his eyes, wondering whether Troy was truly that homophobic, or simply intimidated by Ilya… or if there was something else altogether beneath all those nerves. Certainly, he didn’t look like the full-of-himself idiot that Shane was used to seeing on TV.

“Wow, Rozy, you made him shit his pants—”

“One more swear word in front of my kid and I’ll rip your tongue out, Dykstra.”

“Fuck— I mean, *sorry*, Roz.”

And suddenly, without Troy *the inconvenient novelty* Barrett standing there anymore, Shane became acutely aware that he was now the *only* novelty left in the room.

Dozens of grown men were staring at him with far too much interest. This time, not out of discomfort, but fascination.

Despite himself, he shrank slightly against Ilya’s side. Ilya responded immediately, tightening his hold around Shane’s waist.

“Okay, listen up,” Ilya called, and the players instinctively formed a loose circle around them, almost like the children in Shane’s classroom did when he asked them to gather. It was oddly adorable. “This is Shane Hollander. He’s a better player than some of you, so you better treat him right.”

“Ilya!” Shane smacked his shoulder, mortified as the heat climbed from his feet straight to his face. Ilya only grinned wickedly while his teammates laughed.

“He’s handsome,” someone called from the back.

Ilya pointed immediately toward the voice. “What did you just say, kid? I’ll end you—”

“Ilya,” Shane muttered, horrified. This was so embarrassing. “Um—hello. Please don’t listen to him. It’s really a pleasure to meet you all. I hope I’m not intruding being here today. I know it’s been a tough day, so thank you for having me.”

Dozens of eyes remained fixed on him, openly fascinated.

“He’s cute too.”

“And polite.”

“How the hell did Rozanov get him? This is so unfair.”

“Dykstra, you’re envious, yes?”

“A little bit, man, yeah,” the defenseman admitted easily, glancing at Shane and then at his captain. “I mean…”

Shane tried to suppress his smile. Beside him, Ilya scoffed.

“Oh my God,” someone muttered. “Look at Rozy! He has heart eyes.”

“This team is disgusting. I demand a trade,” another voice called.

“To where?” someone else shot back. “No one else would *tolerate* you.”

Laughter rippled through the rink.

“Okay. All of you, out of my ice!” Ilya barked, his accent somehow thicker when he raised his voice. “I have a family date scheduled.”

A chorus of dramatic groans echoed immediately.

“Can we stay, Cap?” a blond kid asked, blinking up at him with exaggerated puppy eyes and a near-pout. Shane recognized him instantly: left wing, rookie, Luca Haas. He was adorable, and Shane felt the automatic urge to say yes bloom warm in his chest.

Ilya sighed heavily beside him, looking at his team making pleading faces, then at Shane.

“What do you say, sweetheart?” Ilya asked, low enough that it felt private despite the audience. “Should we let them stay?”

Shane made a show of appearing unimpressed. He slipped his phone into the seat again (he’d texted his mother minutes ago to assure her he was fine and would stop by later), then reached for the stick resting against the boards. He tested its weight in his palm and clicked his tongue thoughtfully.

“Yeah,” Shane said at last, casual as anything. “I feel like kicking some professional asses today.”

The rink exploded.

“Whoo!”

“Oh, he’s got bite!”

“Cap, your man just declared war!”

Ilya’s grin widened until it nearly split his face in half. There was sharp competitiveness in his eyes now, but beneath it, there was also unmistakable pride.

“I’m betting on Hollander.” Wyatt Hayes crowed.

“Are you implying he’ll score you, Hazy?”

“Shut up, Boodram.”

“Hey!” Zane Boodram looked at Ilya then, brows raised and a malicious grin on his face. “If he embarrasses you, are we allowed to bring it up forever?”

“He will not embarrass me. He will make all of you *cry*,” Ilya replied smoothly.

Shane felt a little overwhelmed under the weight of all those expectations, but deep down, beneath the nerves, he somehow knew he could be up to them.

There was something electric in the air now. The easy teasing had sharpened into competitiveness.

He stepped back onto the ice with Irina gliding carefully toward the boards to watch, his blade carving a confident arc into the surface. The cold hit him instantly, *familiar*. The sharp scrape of steel, the hollow knock of sticks tapping for passes, the low murmur of chirps and mock threats. It all wrapped around him like muscle memory.

He hadn't felt this in years.

They split quickly into two makeshift lines, defensemen hanging back near the blue line while the forwards drifted toward the center. It wasn't a full five-on-five (they were keeping it informal, just a loose scrimmage), but the structure settled into place almost instinctively.

Shane took his old position at center, rolling his shoulders once as he lined up over the dot. Luca Haas slid into place at left wing, bouncing lightly on his skates with energy, while a broad-shouldered and quiet reserve winger (Sanders) set himself on the right spot. Two defensemen called out coverage behind them.

Across the red line, Ilya stepped into the opposing circle, lowering himself into a ready stance. His wingers hovered at the hash marks, sticks angled inward, prepared to crash the puck the second it dropped. One of his defensemen tapped the ice twice in anticipation.

Irina, now safely by the boards with the rest of the benched players, cupped her hands around her mouth.

"Shane! Shane! Shane!"

Shane bent at the knees, left hand firm at the top of his stick, right hand sliding slightly down for leverage. He angled his blade just off-center on the dot. Ilya mirrored him, eyes dark and locked in.

Across from him, Ilya rolled his shoulders once, jaw set in open challenge.

"You sure about this, *zólotse?"* he called.

Shane adjusted his grip, lips curving.

"Try to keep up, Rozanov."

Boodram, self-appointed referee for the day, skated into position and held the puck out between them.

"Clean draw, ladies," he warned. "Crying *and* kissing are forbidden."

He let it drop.

Shane snapped his wrists fast and low, tying up Ilya's stick while kicking the puck back cleanly with the inside of his skate. Sanders reacted instantly, collecting it off the draw and sending it back to their defense before Ilya could muscle through.

"Blyat'" Shane recalled Ilya muttering.

He pivoted and accelerated, cutting through the neutral zone as the play transitioned. The rush of speed hit him like a shockwave. Ilya recovered just as quickly, turning and chasing him down with lethal grace, edges biting hard as he closed the gap.

Adrenaline flooded Shane's veins.

Irina's delighted laughter rang across the rink. Someone yelled *backcheck, Cap!* just to be obnoxious.

God. He had missed this.

The sharp decision-making, the rhythm of the game unfolding in real time, the way the world narrowed to angles and instinct.

He had missed feeling alive like this.

Sanders swung the puck back to Shane at the top of the left circle just as one of Ilya's defensemen stepped up to challenge. Shane caught it clean on his forehand.

Time slowed.

He saw the lane before it properly opened—the faintest hesitation between the defenseman's stick and his skates, the goalie shifting a fraction too early toward the near post, anticipating a pass to Haas.

Shane didn't pass.

He pulled the puck slightly inward with a quick toe drag, just enough to change the shooting angle, transferring his weight from his back skate to his front. His stick flexed under pressure as he snapped his wrists, releasing a low, fast shot through the defender's legs.

It wasn't the hardest shot he'd done, but it was *precise*.

The puck skimmed just above the ice, threading through traffic and sliding blocker side before the goalie could seal the gap.

There was a sharp *clack* as it kissed the inside of the post. Then, the unmistakable swish of the net echoed on the rink.

"Yes!" Irina's voice echoed off the boards, high and triumphant.

Haas whooped and tackled Shane around the shoulders. Sanders raised both arms like they'd just clinched the Stanley Cup. Even one of the defensemen on Ilya's side let out an impressed *oh, shit.*

Shane didn't celebrate immediately. He coasted backward instead, eyes already searching until he found Ilya staring at him from a few meters away, chest rising hard, lips parted slightly in something between disbelief and *desire*.

Shane lifted one eyebrow.

“I told you to keep up, *Rozy*,” he repeated softly, mocking him.

Ilya’s mouth curved slowly and dangerously.

“You are being an asshole,” he called out.

“And you’re being *so* slow.”

The team erupted in laughter.

Ilya pushed off hard, skating straight at him until they were nearly chest to chest.

“That was luck, Hollander” Ilya murmured, low enough that only Shane could hear.

Shane tilted his head.

“No, baby,” he said, echoing himself from earlier. “That was *skill*.”

By the end of the day, Shane had to take a quick shower while Ilya waited for him in the stands with an increasingly drowsy Irina curled against his chest.

Ilya had stopped playing the second his daughter started rubbing her eyes and calling for him in that small, tired voice that undid him faster than any opponent ever could. Shane had watched him drop his stick without hesitation and scooped her up, pressing a kiss into her hair as if the game had never mattered in the first place.

The Centaurs, however, had claimed *him* for nearly another hour.

They dragged him into another quick game. Then a shooting drill. Then what was supposed to be a simple one-on-one that turned into three-on-one because, according to Wyatt Hayes (*all me Hazy, please) we can’t let you embarrass us in front of our captain.*

They bumped him along the boards. Not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough to test him. They chirped at him relentlessly. They celebrated every clean pass and every clever play like scouts evaluating a potential league player.

Under the hot spray of the locker room showers, steam curling around him, Shane braced his palms against the tile and let his head fall forward. His muscles ached in that deep, satisfying way that only came from real physical effort.

His level was still there. Maybe he didn’t have the conditioning for a full professional anymore, and obviously he’d lost a fraction of the resistance that came from daily competition at the highest level. But his hands were still quick, his vision still sharp, his instincts still immediate and precise. Time hadn’t taken that.

Hockey had taken other things from him, a version of his future he’d once believed was guaranteed. It had left scars in the shape of horrible memories that he’d wanted to erase more than once, but it had also *built him*.

Hockey training had shaped the way he thought under pressure, the way he read people. It had given him discipline, resilience, and the capacity to love something fiercely, even when it hurt.

Maybe, despite the damage, hockey was still something intrinsically tied to him.

He could only wonder.

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“We can go to our house if you prefer it, Shane—”

“I don’t.”

“Irina is a lot to handle and your parents—”

“She isn’t, and my mom loves her,” Shane cut in again.

Ilya pressed his lips together. Shane sighed.

“Baby, they just want to share some tea with you. Irina can sleep in my room, or beside us, or wherever you want.”

Ilya did want to go. He had already technically accepted Yuna Hollander’s invitation to spend the evening with her and her husband, but wanting to go and actually *walking through that door* were two very different things.

He was nervous. He was afraid that they wouldn’t like him, or worse—they wouldn’t like his daughter.

“Ilya, look at me,” Shane said softly. He did. “You don’t have to do it if you don’t feel ready, okay?” Shane continued, voice gentle and sweet. “But I really, really want you to meet them.”

His eyes searched Ilya’s face with such open warmth that it made something in his chest tighten painfully.

“They’re dying to meet you properly,” Shane added with a faint smile. “And my dad wants to meet Irina. He already bought her a ton of new toys.”

Ilya swallowed. The image struck him harder than he expected: Shane’s father walking through a store, choosing toys for a child who wasn’t his by blood, who owed him *nothing*. A

man preparing space for her before even knowing her.

It squeezed at his heart in an almost unbearable way.

Would Grigori have been a good grandfather? Probably not. Ilya didn't let himself think about it for long.

"She would hate me if I didn't go inside, then," he muttered.

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. "She'd be very pissed, yes. But it's up to you, baby."

The Hollanders' cottage stood a few kilometers outside the city, secluded and private, likely miles away from the nearest house. It wasn't enormous, but it had the warmth of a vacation home: wide porch, sloped roof heavy with snow, soft yellow lights glowing through the windows.

Night was settling in, snow falling steadily, but even then Ilya could picture it instantly: a younger Shane in the middle of summer, racing down the gravel path on his bike, skidding to a stop near the mailbox, carefully leaning it upright before sprinting toward the wide porch. The same porch that now held a layer of packed snow, the wooden planks darkened by cold and moisture.

The house didn't look intimidating. It actually looked safe, like the perfect place to raise a little kid. A home built with love, with patience, with *respect*.

Ilya looked at Shane again.

"Okay," he said at last, quiet but certain. "We go inside."

Waking Irina wasn't difficult. Her forty–minute nap had done its job, and the moment she blinked up at them and asked where they were, Shane smiled and said, "At my mom's house."

That was all it took.

She unbuckled herself with clumsy excitement and practically launched out of the car before either of them could properly react.

"Ira, wait—" Ilya tried, but she was already on the porch, pressing the doorbell with determined little fingers.

Too late.

The door opened only seconds later, as if someone had been standing there waiting.

Irina gasped.

"Yuna!"

“Oh my, look at you, Irina! You grew so much in just a few days!” Shane’s mother crouched down and wrapped her arms around her with a gentleness so instinctive, so full of care, that Ilya had to physically hold his breath. “How are you, sweetie? Are you hungry? We made cookies and hot chocolate just for you.”

“Really?!” Irina squealed, throwing her arms around Yuna’s neck. Yuna lifted her easily, like she had done it a thousand times before.

Then Irina twisted around to find him.

“Papa, papa, can I have some, pleaaase?!”

Ilya was frozen.

He hadn’t even taken his coat from the back seat. Snow was still melting into the shoulders of his sweater, but his eyes were locked on the image in front of him.

The first time he had ever held Irina in his arms, his mind had betrayed him with a memory: a grainy, yellowed photograph he had managed to salvage from the small pile of belongings left after his mother’s death. Irina Rozanova, his mother, had never been a woman to keep physical memories. Back then, he had resented it. Now he understood she was not attached to her past, that it had hurt her too much.

As the years passed, Irina began to look more and more like her. Alexei and Ilya had always resembled their mother’s side of the family anyway, perhaps even beyond appearance. Alexei might have inherited some of Grigori’s worst tempers, that much was true, but his daughter—

His daughter was their mother’s reflection.

And Ilya resented—deeply—that Irina would never know her grandmother. It hurt him in a way that made him *yearn*, knowing his mother would never meet his child. That she would never hold this small, miraculous piece of heaven who had saved Ilya’s life without ever knowing she had done so.

Seeing Shane’s mother with the same dark hair of him (only threaded with the softest strands of gray at her crown), with the same almond-shaped eyes, assertive and kind, the same composed warmth in her smile—holding Irina like a grandmother would…

It was dismantling him.

My mom will never hold her, he thought. The realization settled like a punch straight to his gut.

Then, beside Yuna, a tall man appeared, broad-shouldered, blue-eyed, freckles scattered across his high cheeks.

“Oh, you must be Irina!” he said warmly.

Shane stepped closer to Ilya, cautious, placing a gloved hand on his shoulder.

“Mom, Dad, please take Irina inside. It’s cold,” he said gently. “She can have three cookies and unlimited hot chocolate.”

“Yes!” Irina clapped, then immediately searched for Ilya again. “Papa, are you coming?”

Ilya opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

“We’ll come in a minute, love,” Shane answered for him.

Yuna and David seemed to understand without asking questions. They looked at Ilya with soft, knowing eyes.

“But—” Irina began.

“Irina,” Yuna interrupted lightly, “why don’t you help us decorate our Christmas tree?”

Irina’s eyes lit up like someone had turned on a switch.

“Okay!”

After one last look back at them, David Hollander gently closed the door.

The cold hit harder in the sudden quiet.

And immediately, Ilya’s arms came up, gripping Shane’s coat as he stepped forward and pressed his forehead into his chest. His body folded in on itself, a trembling gasp breaking free of him, half from the cold, half from tears, half from everything all at once.

“Shh, it’s okay,” Shane whispered into his hair. “It’s okay, baby. It’s okay—”

“I miss her so much,” Ilya confessed suddenly, the words tearing out of him before he could stop them. He hadn’t told Shane much about his mother, just enough for him to know she was gone. And *how*.

“I miss her every fucking day of my life,” he continued, voice cracking. “And sometimes I feel like everything would be easier if I just followed her.”

“Ilya…”

“And I miss my dad too, even if he was a fucking *ublyudok* that killed her.” The word felt bitter on his tongue. “And I miss Alexei, because it’s not fair that Irina didn’t even get to know him properly. I miss them all, Shane. I know they weren’t good family, I know that, but now I have *nothing*—”

“Don’t say that, Ilya,” Shane pleaded, his voice unsteady. “You have your daughter. You have Svetlana. You have a whole crowd of guys looking out for you, cheering for you.”

He paused, swallowing.

“You have me.”

Ilya said nothing.

Snow continued to fall softly around them, settling over their shoulders, melting against warm skin. Shane's breath came out uneven.

"And I know it hurts that your mother isn't here," he continued, his tone growing rougher, wetter. "But I'm sure she would want you to be happy. To keep choosing life."

Ilya lifted his head at that. The sound of the fragility in Shane's voice cut straight through him.

"I didn't know her," Shane went on, tears now slipping freely down his cheeks, "but I'm sure she wouldn't want you in her place, Ilya. So please… don't think like that. Don't think any of us would be better without you, because that's simply not true."

He had made Shane *cry*.

Ilya's frozen hands came up instinctively, cradling Shane's damp cheeks, thumbs brushing under his eyes. He forced him to hold his gaze.

"She would've loved you," he whispered, steady despite the tremor in his body. "Just the way I love you."

Shane sniffed, a broken, helpless sound leaving him.

"I love you too," he sobbed. "I love you so much. And I intend to keep you with me for a very long time, so she'll just have to wait for you, Ilya. You are forbidden to leave me here alone."

The words came out tangled, desperate. And despite the ache still clawing at his ribs, Ilya let out a soft, shaky huff of laughter.

"I love you," Shane repeated, smiling through his tears.

Ilya leaned in, pressing his forehead to Shane's, their breaths tangling in the sharp winter air.

"Ya lyublyú tebya bol'she," he murmured against his mouth. "I won't go anywhere."

I love you more.

Shane nodded, eyes still glassy, and Ilya closed the distance between them.

Their lips met in a kiss that tasted like salt and promises. Like grief and devotion all at once.

He was still terrified. He still hated his father for making his mother miserable. He still hated his brother for leaving Irina alone in this world. He still missed his mother with a desperation that bordered on madness—

But in Shane's mouth, breathing felt lighter.

"Ya tebya lyublyú," Ilya practically worshipped against Shane's sweet lips, like he needed the words to carve themselves into his bloodstream. *"Ya tebya lyublyú—"*

Shane stole his mouth again before he could finish, kissing him deeper, firmer, like he was sealing something sacred between them.

For a few long minutes, it was only the two of them there. Together in the vast Canadian winter, snow settling in their hair and on their lashes, kissing beneath the pale wash of the moon and the warm porch lights of the Hollanders' cottage.

Yuna and David Hollander welcomed Ilya with warm tea, gentle hugs, and easy conversation that kept him lingering in their home until Irina was asleep again and both he and Shane were long past their usual bedtimes.

Ilya had a tough day ahead: morning practices, a new babysitter to get acquainted with, and preparations for the last road trip before Christmas. Shane had to be up early for school, so eventually, despite feeling perfectly at home, both of them made their way to the car once Irina was safely secured in her seat, her cheek pressed against the side, already drooling in deep sleep.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Ilya," David said, shaking his hand, his other resting intentionally on Ilya's shoulder. "Please, come by more often. We'd love to have you and Irina for dinner sometime."

"Okay," Ilya answered smoothly, letting a rare ease settle over him. "Thank you very much, sir— *David*."

Yuna sent him off with a hug that lasted longer than Ilya would have expected. She cupped his cheeks in her small hands, her smile warm and slightly crooked. Though she was much shorter and smaller than him, for a moment he felt like a little boy again, seeking the quiet comfort of a mother's embrace.

"You'll think about spending Christmas with us?" she asked softly.

Ilya blinked, surprised by the gentle invitation.

"Da, I will think about it, Yuna," he replied.

"And you'll take the vitamins I gave you, right? I don't like how pale you are."

Shane stifled a laugh beside him. Ilya blushed.

"Yes, I will," Ilya answered, obedient.

Yuna seemed pleased. She patted his cheek affectionately. "Then you can go, sweetie."

After dropping Shane off at his house and tucking Irina into her bed, Ilya stayed frozen for exactly three minutes, staring at the ceiling, letting the quiet sweep over him before fatigue

finally claimed him.

That night, he dreamed of Christmas lights, the warm aroma of hojicha tea, and the blurry image of golden curls and long black hair swaying as the laughter of two women faded into the distance.

In another life, perhaps.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

quick note: if you came here expecting my characters to behave like role models, you're in the wrong place. people make mistakes and bad decisions out of fear and anxiety (and love) even when they're supposed to be responsible and composed. shane's actions along this story will have consequences, but even if i decided not to address it, it would be okay because this is not a manual about how to be a good kindergarten teacher, much less a thesis about professional ethics. this is a piece of fiction based on fictional characters and fictional situations. if this bothers you, the back button is free to use.

[update 04/07]:
i know the situation with fic writers is not good at the time, but it's been almost a month since i decided to hide this fic and things are not improving. i believe it's unfixable, and even if i feel extremely sad about it, i've reached the conclusion that we'll have to simply deal with mean comments forever. haters never get tired, that's a reality.

i will be completely honest. writing has been my source of joy since i was 12 years old. i've written for the 1D fandom, for the Avengers fandom, for the BTS fandom, even for the Arcane fandom, and never in my life i felt like i owe the readers nothing, because i certainly don't. i hate to be this straight-forward, but we owe you nothing. you didn't pay me or any other writer here for this content, and that isn't the purpose of our creations. we do this for fun, for love, for nothing literally. there's no big publisher working with us. there's no more reward than the happiness of writing something you'd love to read, and share it with people that, hopefully, will appreciate it as it is: a gift.

the hr fandom hasn't been really appreciative of anything lately. i've already talked about this in my twitter, so i won't repeat myself. i'll just say that it's sad to see a fandom so creative losing so many artists because of a nosy group of losers.

sadly, i'm not in a position where i can deal with those losers. but i also love this story, i love hollanov and i still enjoy being here (sometimes), so this is going public again. for now, comments will be limited, and if things get ugly again, the story will be locked for ao3 users (let's hope we don't have to go that far). i'm sorry for the ones that wouldn't be able to read it if that happens, but i promise that i will share the epub on my twitter account (@rozanover) once the story is finished.

i will start posting new chapters next month, maybe sooner. i will prioritize myself this time, so i'll give it a few weeks to see how things go. for now, i hope you can enjoy the story (even if yes, i've changed punctuation details because there's no fucking way i'm getting accused of using ai too, and i say this openly because it is what it is: i'm scared to death of the ai police. if someone fucking dares to run my stories through one of those garbage detectors, i will literally kill myself).

also, be a little bit more patient and maybe less cruel? please? thank you :)

Boston, 2013.

Ilya had argued with management for what felt like hours.

First, because a press conference was not, under any circumstances, a good enough reason to leave Irina alone in the arms of a babysitter who barely knew her. They had just endured hours of travel. She was exhausted, overstimulated, clinging to him like he was the only solid thing left in the world.

Which, objectively, he was. Ilya was the only person left in *her* world.

He didn't want his niece (now his daughter, in every way that mattered) terrified in her small, grieving mind, watching him disappear for hours. He didn't want her to think he had left too, just like her parents.

The second reason was simpler: none of his teammates had held a press conference when they became fathers, nor when they got married. Not even when they *divorced*. Those announcements came through carefully worded statements. Minimal details, polished language, released just when the situation interfered somehow with the team's schedule. If a player wanted to share more, he could post on social media. Or say nothing at all.

In his entire career, Ilya had never heard of a press conference orchestrated solely to announce that a player had suddenly become a parent.

"The fanbase wants transparency, Ilya," Aaron Lowe, the management director's assistant at the time, had told him, voice smooth, corporate tone. The fake smile on his face was making Ilya sick. "You've been out for almost a month. We can't just have you back on the ice tomorrow without an explanation."

"I think you gave enough explanation yesterday," Ilya had replied flatly, "when you posted that announcement without my permission."

He had known exactly what they were doing. He was the face of the franchise, the captain. The cool, carefree but good leader that fans adored. But he was also a narrative.

Ilya was a product, and that product needed an urgent reshape now that he couldn't be actively doing the things he was created for: parties, women, scandals. Ilya could be a parent and still win, yes, but the Raiders needed to justify the changes in his public persona, because apparently having a daughter under these circumstances was not enough. He had never truly felt exploited before; the machine of professional sports benefited him too, mostly through endorsements, reputation and influence. It was transactional. But the moment he read the statement they had released (*After the tragic passing of his brother, Boston Raiders' captain Ilya Rozanov stepped in without hesitation to adopt his young niece)* he felt anger. He'd felt *used*.

They were laying the groundwork, creating a new storyline: the manwhore, careless captain becomes a devoted single father. Tragedy. Sacrifice. Strength. Resilience. *Marketable grief.*

Until that moment, he hadn't cared much about how they spun his image, but now he cared. Because this wasn't about him, this was about Irina's life. Her trauma. Her parents' deaths reduced to a paragraph designed to boost engagement and soften Ilya's public persona. She was just a baby, and it felt like they were trying to package her pain and sell it to the fans, hoping that it was enough for them to accept it as an explanation for why Ilya Rozanov would settle down and stop giving them headlines.

"She is four months," Ilya had said through clenched teeth. "I don't want strangers discussing her on television."

"No one's discussing *details*," Aaron had countered quickly. Ilya tried to ignore the gut-clenching feeling he got from hearing him refer to his daughter as *details*. "We're controlling the narrative. That's the point."

Ilya had almost laughed. He had lost control the day his phone rang and that woman told him about Alexei and Katia. He had lost control when he boarded that plane with shaking hands. He had lost control when a social worker placed Irina in his arms and she smiled at him.

"It's good PR," someone else had added carefully. "People respect this. It shows leadership. Responsibility."

"I don't need to prove I am responsible," Ilya had said quietly.

Which was far more dangerous than if he had raised his voice.

"Well, you haven't exactly been the model of responsibility these past few years, Rozanov —"

"Have I not?" Ilya cut Aaron off, his tone still level. "Sorry if my personal life was not to your liking, but I thought taking this team to the playoffs four years in a row would have been enough." A beat. "Clearly, it is not."

Five more minutes passed of what management would have called *clarifying expectations,* which translated to telling Ilya exactly how things would go: which questions he should answer, which ones he should deflect, and how to redirect anything inconvenient, Finally, he was given a moment to step away before facing dozens of cameras.

He locked himself in the bathroom. The man staring back at him in the mirror looked disturbingly like his brother.

Ilya had never managed Alexei's effortless thick facial hair, but the unshaven stubble along his jaw and the dark circles under his eyes made the resemblance almost unbearable. He was looking at a ghost from ten years ago. His hair was longer than he had ever worn it, slightly tangled from travel and lack of care. His jaw was tight, straining, holding back more emotion than he had ever been permitted to show.

His father would have criticized it all *immediately*.

For a fleeting, humiliating second, he wished Grigori were there. Even if his guidance would have come in the form of a cold, uncompromising order *(Stand straight. Speak clearly. Do not embarrass yourself)* it would have been something.

More than what he had now, which was nothing. Ilya was alone. This time, truly alone in the world, and that fact was killing his soul. He felt ridiculous and helpless and *lost*.

What was he supposed to do now?

He ended up in the press room anyway. He answered questions about Alexei (*Were you close? How did he die? How does this settle with you after your father's passing?)* and about Irina (*How are you going to raise her without a mother? Do you think her presence is going to affect your performance? What does your girlfriend think about this?).*

He couldn't remember what kind of answers he gave. Ironic ones, probably, because he did remember very clearly the horrified expression on the PR agent's face when it was over.

The only thing he appreciated that day was the soft, steady hand of a petite woman asking for her turn to speak. She seemed to represent a smaller outlet, because she was the only one without a recording device or a brand-new tablet. Just a notepad and a pen.

"Not a question, Mr. Rozanov," she said when he nodded toward her. "My colleagues have asked enough." Her tone carried unmistakable reproach, and the two men seated beside her glanced at her with visible irritation. "In case no one has told you, I wanted to congratulate you on becoming a father. I hope everything goes well with your daughter."

Ilya blinked.

"Thanks," he said, after a second.

Two years later, when his contract expired, leaving Boston wasn't even up for debate. Not because the team was bad, or because management had been *entirely* dissatisfied with his new life. He was still a good player. A good captain. He'd led them to a Stanley Cup, and he could probably win more with them, if they kept up with the hard work.

That wasn't the issue.

The issue was that the reporter hadn't been wrong.

No one had congratulated him for becoming a father, because it was a tragedy to their interests. And that was how he knew that place had never truly been home.

Ottawa, present.

"It's Shane again," Ilya knew, even before Harris spoke, who would be on the line. "Do you want me to go pick her up?"

Ilya pulled off his helmet and shook his head as he took the phone.

“She needs to get used to the new nanny. But thank you.”

Harris nodded and stepped away, giving him privacy. It wasn’t technically his job to manage calls from Irina’s school while Ilya was at practice. That should have been handled by Ilya’s agent or the team’s manager, but Harris had always taken a personal interest. And Ilya trusted him blindly.

After a brief nod from Coach Wiebe, Ilya slipped down the rink tunnel and pressed the phone to his ear.

“Sweetheart.”

“Mr. Rozanov,” Shane’s polite voice greeted him, and despite everything, Ilya smiled at the formality. “Sorry to bother you. Irina doesn’t want to leave with Maya.”

Ilya looked up at the ceiling, exhaling slowly.

“Okay.” He ran a hand over his damp hair. He knew how stubborn Irina could be. He also knew Shane was in the middle of end-of-term meetings this week, which was the only reason he was calling instead of handling it himself. “Tell Maya to wait for me. I’ll go pick her up and then I’ll come back to practice—”

“Yuna is offering to do it, if you want,” Shane added, his voice lowering slightly. “Maya can go with them too and finish her shift.”

Ilya went quiet.

It wasn’t the first time in the past few days that Yuna and David had offered to help.

He had always struggled with accepting help. The only people he had consistently allowed into that space were Patricia (because it was her job) and Svetlana. Occasionally, when things truly overwhelmed him, Harris could talk him into it. But, when it came to his daughter, Ilya was protective to a fault—he didn’t want anyone treating her like a charity case. Objectively, he knew that wasn’t what was happening here. Yuna and David cared about her, about *them*.

Still, something in his brain resisted letting go.

A part of him also wanted to be the one who showed up every single time. It bothered him that his professional obligations got in the way. But that was reality. Every parent faced it in some form.

The difference now was that he wasn’t alone.

“Okay,” he said at last. “That’s fine. Can I talk to her for a bit, please?”

“Of course.”

Irina's voice came on the line watery and petulant, and Ilya's chest tightened so sharply he almost started unstrapping his gear on the spot.

"Papa?"

"Hey, Ira—"

"I want to go home with you."

"I'm not home right now, sweetheart," he said gently. *"Maya is there to take care of you while I'm working—"*

"But I don't like her!" Irina cried. *"I like Patricia. I don't want Maya—"*

"Okay, Irina, listen to me," he said softly but firmly, hoping that Shane, wherever he was standing, could help soothe her like Ilya couldn't from here. *"What do you think about going with Maya to Yuna and David's house? They'll both be there. Would that make you feel better?"*

There was a small pause on the line. He could almost hear her thinking.

"Is Shane coming too?"

Ilya smiled despite himself. *"Later, sweetheart. Shane has to work now."*

"Okay," she said finally, her tone still shaky but calmer. *"I miss you, Papa."*

His heart clenched.

"We saw each other this morning, Ira," he reminded her gently. *"I want you on your best behavior with Maya, or otherwise I won't let you visit Yuna and David on weekdays. Do you understand?"*

"Yes, Papa." She sounded annoyed. Ilya smiled.

"I'll pick you up this evening, okay? I love you."

"I love you too."

Two seconds later, Shane's voice returned to the line.

"That sounded like an agreement."

"It is," Ilya sighed. "She'll leave with Maya on the condition that they go to your parents' house. I'm sorry to bother you, darling."

"It's nothing," Shane replied. His tone was still professional and composed, but there was an unmistakable softness underneath it. "Have a good day, Mr. Rozanov."

"I love you, Shane."

Ilya knew Shane couldn't respond (not like *that),* but he smiled anyway when he heard the faint hitch in his breathing before the line went dead. He could picture him perfectly: cheeks flushed so deeply his freckles seemed to glow, big brown eyes shiny while he bit his lip without noticing, just like every time Ilya had said those words over the past few days.

When practice ended in a few hours, he was fairly certain his phone would be full of messages scolding him for being so careless over the school's phone. Shane was always tense about these things, even if he indulged Ilya way more than he should.

He took a minute for himself in the tunnel.

Things were going… *well*. Or at least, they were moving, which was more than he had expected.

Maya was a good nanny. Patricia had recommended her personally before leaving, and she truly was sunshine in human form. She didn't ask unnecessary questions, not even when she saw Irina's teacher walking into their house with his own set of keys, and she cared about Irina in exactly the right way. She was professional, warm, attentive, and she was trying her best.

Despite Maya's efforts, Irina hated change. She especially hated change that involved new people in her comfort space. She also hated that it was Christmas season and Svetlana wasn't around, that Patricia had left for the first time in two years, that Ilya was missing so much time with her when she needed him the most. None of it was anyone's fault. Ilya had known from the beginning that she would resent whoever stayed with them until January.

He just hadn't expected her to antagonize Maya directly. Children could be cruel when they were hurting—Irina was cruel when she hurt, so he preferred not to think too hard about how Maya might be feeling before Irina's defiance.

He would talk to her again about how her behavior was rude and unkind. Hopefully, after an afternoon with Shane's parents, she would be more receptive. He also needed to bring this up with Dr. Wang tomorrow, when Irina had her weekly therapy session. And he had his own first therapy session, which he hadn't told anyone about, to keep in mind.

He exhaled slowly. He was already exhausted.

"Everything alright, Roz?" Harris asked the moment Ilya stepped back onto the ice. The social media manager was leaning casually against the boards, chatting with Troy Barrett. Barrett, straightened abruptly when their eyes met and skated off as if he was being propelled by a spring.

Over the past few days, Ilya had noticed Barrett was quieter and stranger than he'd expected. Almost like a skittish kid—except more unsettling, because there was something too nervous in his pale blue stare. He wasn't actively getting along with the team, but not because he seemed to dislike them. Barrett just seemed weird around them, careful, mostly around Ilya. He was like a little scared hamster or something.

Maybe he was just being an homophobic little shit. Ilya would've done something about it, but his intuition was keeping him from it. Something in Barrett's behavior made him feel like he was not being hostile at all, even if that went against all he knew for sure about him. It was just a feeling, like something was off.

"Yes. Thank you, Harris."

"Good." Harris took his phone back when Ilya handed it over. "You should bring Shane to the farm this holiday break, you know? We've got new puppies and a batch of cider we haven't opened yet."

Ilya wondered briefly whether artisanal cider would fit into Shane's carefully structured diet, but the mention of puppies was persuasive enough.

"I'll see what I can do to convince him," he said.

Harris grinned. "Great. Bring Irina too. My mom misses her."

He was already walking away when Ilya called after him, "Does Marlene know that she's *my child*, not hers?"

"Try convincing her yourself! The girl's been a Drover to us since the day we met her," Harris shot back without turning around.

Warmth spread through Ilya's chest.

It was a strange kind of comfort, knowing his daughter was loved not just by him, but by his teammates' families, by the staff, by people who had no obligation to care and yet did anyway. He hadn't grown up surrounded by that kind of effortless affection. It still caught him off guard.

He couldn't ask for more than that.

***

The next day at 10AM, Ilya was alone in a waiting room without windows, just with the company of a bright-green monstera and an abstract painting by its side.

"I'm afraid that plant is fake, Ilya."

He almost jumped out of his skin at the sound of the soft, Russian words.

The reaction irritated him more than it should have. He had done far more terrifying things in his life than sitting in a quiet room to talk about his problems: adopting his niece overnight, leaving his country alone, making decisions that had no undo button. And yet here he was, startled by a therapist's gentle joke.

He turned toward the woman standing in the doorway, watching him with a calm, assessing expression and steady green eyes. She was short, and her hair was blond, and she seemed kind. She was not the monster Ilya's mind had created to scare him away.

"Ah," he said, swallowing. "I was wondering how it was that healthy without any windows."

Dr. Galina Molchalina's smile softened.

"No windows are better for privacy," she said. "And it helps reduce distractions. Most people find it easier to focus that way."

That made sense.

If he was being honest, it had already been a relief to find no receptionist, no other patients in the waiting room. No curious glances. No chance of being recognized. Just a discreet hallway and a closed door. Even so, he had dressed in black from head to toe: black jacket, black cap, sunglasses despite the grey sky.

During the five minutes he'd been waiting, he had paced instead of sitting. He hadn't touched the magazines. Hadn't checked his phone. He hadn't answered Shane's messages.

At three in the morning, wired and sleepless after picking Irina up from the Hollanders' cottage and kiss Shane goodbye before watching him climb his apartment's stairs through the window, he had sent him a short one:

Ilya: Tomorrow is my first session.

Shane had replied this morning.

Shane: It's gonna be alright, Ilya.

Shane: Take it easy, okay? You don't have to talk more than you're ready to.

Shane: Just going is already huge progress.

Shane: I love you.

Maybe it had been a terrible idea to schedule his first therapy appointment on a game day. He hadn't had any other free slot before leaving for another week-long road trip, and the timing felt almost masochistic in retrospect. It certainly would have been easier to use that as an excuse to not book it at all, but Ilya had forced himself to make the call anyway.

So showing up exhausted, emotionally wrung out, with a game still ahead of him, was him trying his fucking best.

"Would you like to come in, Ilya?"

He blinked, suddenly out of place. "Oh, yes."

Dr. Molchalina stepped aside to let him enter her office. The room was warm but neutral; there were one armchair and a couch angled slightly toward each other, a small table with a box of tissues placed within reach but not pushed forward and a bookshelf along the wall. There was no desk separating them, which made him uncomfortable, because the wide space was exposing and almost raw. Ilya couldn't picture himself opening his mouth and talking without a shield in between.

Dr. Molchalina waited until he sat down on the edge of the couch with his back straight, his hands clasped tightly, before taking her own seat.

"You seem nervous," she said evenly. He nodded once.

"I'm nervous. Is that not normal?"

"Yes, if it's your first time, yes. First sessions are usually about understanding what brings you here and what you'd like to work on. We don't have to go anywhere you're not ready to go." She explained.

Silence stretched between them.

"What if I don't know what I want to work on?" he asked finally.

"That's completely fine," she replied. "Then we can start with what made you book the appointment."

Another pause.

"As I told you," he said, his voice quieter now. "I think I might be depressed. I— Sometimes I think I am. Maybe."

Dr. Molchalina gave a small nod. “When you say depressed, what does that mean to you?“

Ilya took a few seconds to think. Maybe too many. He knew this was the point: *honesty*. There was no use minimizing things, no point in trying to maneuver the conversation so she would reassure him he wasn’t as bad as he feared. She was watching him with a steadiness that made it feel pointless to pretend.

“My mother had depression,” he began. “So I know what it looks like.”

“Okay,” she said gently. “Why don’t you tell me about her? That might be a good place to start.”

He grimaced faintly, but nodded.

“Okay.”

It was a catastrophic start.

Forty-five minutes later, Ilya was sitting hunched forward in his place, sobs catching painfully in his throat, his face wrecked with tears. His hair had turned into a mess from the countless times his fingers had dragged through it, trying to ground himself. It didn’t work that well, at least not compared to when Shane or Irina did it.

Dr. Molchalina had listened without interruption, stepping in only quietly when he forgot the tissues sitting within reach on the little table in front of him. By the end of the session, he was fairly certain there were only one or two left in the box.

“I just— I don’t want to end up like her,” he mumbled through the wet fracture of his voice. “And I’m scared that I will.” He pressed his palms briefly against his eyes. “I don’t want my daughter to think she isn’t enough reason to stay.”

There was a brief pause before she spoke.

“Is that what you think about your mother, Ilya?”

He swallowed hard.

“Not that way,” he said. “I don’t resent her. I know she loved me.” His voice thinned. “But I also know that I wasn’t enough reason for her to stay.”

Dr. Molchalina adjusted slightly in her chair, her tone calm but firm.

“I need to challenge that belief,” she said. “Depression is an illness that distorts perception. Love doesn’t cure it, a child cannot cure it, a partner cannot cure it. Your mother’s depression was not a reflection of your worth, Ilya.”

He looked away, jaw tightening again.

“She didn’t receive professional help,” Galina continued. “Untreated depression can become overwhelming and all-consuming. That is not the same thing as not loving your child enough.

That's not a decision she could make."

"What I'm hearing," When he didn't answer, she went on, "is that you're afraid that your sadness could mean you don't love your daughter enough. Or that if you struggle, it means she isn't enough to keep you stable."

His breathing hitched again, quieter this time.

"Yes."

"It's important to separate those things," she said. "You can love someone deeply and still feel overwhelmed. You can be devoted and still be depressed. Those two experiences can coexist."

He stared at the floor, absorbing her words.

"Okay," he nodded, though his voice lacked conviction. "I understand."

She offered him another small, steady smile. "Good, Ilya. I think that's enough for today."

He frowned immediately. "Is it?" She tilted her head slightly, surprised by the urgency in his tone. "I mean…" He ran a hand through his already disheveled hair. "What do you think? Am I… ill? Can I get better?"

"It's too early for me to know that," Galina said gently, folding her hands in her lap. "One session isn't enough to determine the outcome. But I can tell you that the fact that you're here is a very important first step." She paused. "How are you feeling right now?"

"Tired," he muttered.

That seemed to amuse her. The corner of her mouth lifted, and somehow that made it impossible for him to feel defensive. She was more charismatic than he had expected a psychologist to be. Obviously it was his bigoted perception, but he was glad he was wrong.

"But… it was good," he admitted after a moment. "To speak Russian with someone who understands what I'm actually trying to say."

"Mhm, Russian seems like an important thing to you, right?" He nodded. "Does your daughter speak Russian?" she asked.

"She does," Ilya said, and despite himself, he smiled while thinking of Irina's clumsy grammar and stubborn pronunciation. "But she's small and I'm not a good teacher." His expression dimmed slightly. "I wouldn't explain any of this to her anyway."

"Of course not," Galina said. Then, after a brief pause: "May I ask if she's seen a therapist? From what you've told me, she has also experienced significant loss."

"Yes," Ilya nodded quickly. "She has. My— A *friend* helped me find someone."

Galina's head tilted again, her smile subtle but knowing.

“You don’t have to conceal that you have a girlfriend, Ilya. Nothing you say here leaves this room. We discussed confidentiality on the phone, remember?”

He swallowed. Of course she had recognized him immediately when he first called. She had assured him she had no interest in breaching discretion, that it was her professional obligation regardless, and that she would even sign a nondisclosure agreement if it gave him peace of mind. He hadn’t thought it necessary. Involving lawyers would have meant involving the team, and he hadn’t been ready for that.

Just like he wasn’t entirely ready to talk about Shane.

He had opened up to one person for the first time in years and now, within days, he had opened up to another. His mind felt heavy, saturated. Explaining who Shane was, what he meant, the fact that he was another man... It felt like too much for one morning.

So he didn’t correct her wording directly.

“Okay,” he cleared his throat. “My partner is a teacher. So it was easier to find a child therapist.”

Galina nodded approvingly. “That’s another very meaningful step.”

He looked down at his hands.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

After walking home, Ilya found another message from Shane waiting in his notifications.

Shane: Mom asked me to remind you that you’re having dinner with us tonight after the game.

Shane: But you don’t have to come if you’re tired. I can stay with Irina and give you some space. I’ll bring her home later.

Shane: Good luck, baby. I love you.

He typed back without overthinking it.

Ilya: I wouldn’t miss David’s chicken parmesan. I’m coming.

Ilya: Therapy went okay.

Ilya: I love you too, Shane.

Read 11:05 AM

***

Shane ended up being the last teacher to leave the school that Friday afternoon. He knew he was already running a little late to his parents’ house to watch Ilya’s game, but he couldn’t leave without tidying up the small chaos the children had left behind and organizing some of the notes he had taken during that day’s end-of-term conferences.

Unlike the last school where he had worked (a public high school in Montréal, where he had been responsible for a class of sixteen-year-olds), meetings here were far more demanding in terms of individual follow-up. The children were only four years old, which meant the class sizes were smaller, yes, but the attention each student required was much more intensive. Parent-teacher conferences at this level rarely focused on grades. Instead, most of the conversations revolved around developmental observations: how well the kids were socializing with their classmates, whether they were gaining confidence expressing themselves, how their French was progressing in the bilingual environment, and the occasional interpersonal conflict that inevitably appeared when fifteen small humans tried to share the same space every day.

Each family wanted reassurance, so Shane made sure that each child had a plan, however small it was. He knew exactly how to encourage each one of them to speak more during circle time, how to help them manage frustration, how to reinforce early literacy or cooperative play. The meetings had stretched over several afternoons already, longer than Shane had initially anticipated.

Still, he liked working with little kids far more than he had ever expected.

He had only taken the position so he wouldn’t spend the year sitting at home waiting for the next academic year to begin, but early childhood education had slowly grown on him over the past months. The classroom routine, the honesty of the children, the way tying a shoe, saying a sentence clearly in French or learning a new country name could feel like a triumph... He still preferred the field he had trained for, of course. But he felt comfortable. Useful.

Happy.

And yet Shane knew the job came with an expiration date.

Even if he had wanted to remain in early childhood education longer, he knew it wouldn't be ethical to stay at this particular school. He loved the staff, the principal was fair and genuinely invested in improving the school, the administrative team was competent and the kids were small bursts of light that brightened his days and made him feel like his work mattered.

Shane was happy. But he also knew he had crossed a line he shouldn't have.

Having Irina in his class was already complicated enough. Leaving aside his relationship with Ilya, being personally involved with a student was a conflict of interest. Being the partner of her father made it even *worse*. Shane knew the responsible thing to do would be to speak to the principal and ask for Irina to be transferred to another classroom.

Shane also knew he wasn't going to do that.

Moving Irina would mean taking away the fragile sense of trust she had built in the last few weeks and destabilizing her entire school environment. He knew it was his duty, but selfishly he couldn't bring himself to do it. He also knew he had never shown favoritism toward her and he couldn't imagine a situation in which he would put her needs above those of the rest of his students. But objectively, he also knew his word would never be enough. Not when this very line of thinking was already favoritism in its purest form. Shane was painfully aware that, in the end, his word would count for nothing, because his actions spoke for themselves.

Shane had been far too naïve. He had always assumed that catching feelings took longer for him than it did for most people. He hadn't expected to be *in love* within a matter of months. At least, not to the point where loving Ilya (and loving Irina) was starting to put his job into question.

The worst part was that, without a doubt, Shane knew he would sacrifice it.

Every time the thought surfaced, Shane's eyes would inevitably meet Irina's, and his worries dissolved into nothing. The ethical code he had promised himself he would respect all his life simply vanished, and the only thing that mattered was her happiness. The only thing that mattered was Irina, his little ray of light with star-filled eyes that melted his heart every time she looked at him and called him *Monsieur Shane* in that sweet, trusting voice. She was his to protect and care. He couldn't do anything about it.

Shane would never place professional ethics above her, and that alone was reason enough to accept that he would have to leave the school when his temporary contract ended. That was the longest he would allow himself to wait.

Irina would get used to another teacher. She had to do that every year anyway, and it was better than uprooting her now and placing her in a classroom full of children she didn't know, sending her all the way back to where she had started at the beginning of the term. Shane had

a plan—a *terrible* plan, one that made him feel awful, but it was a plan that guaranteed Irina would be okay. And therefore, to him, it was the right one.

“You’re late,” his mother said when he pushed the door open, shaking her head as she watched him juggle a ridiculous number of bags while trying to shrug off his coat and hang the car (kindly lent by his father so he could drive back and forth to the cottage more easily) keys on the rack by the entrance. “Maya looks like she’s about to cry because Irina’s upset about it.”

“Fuck,” Shane muttered. “I had four parents today. It was endless.”

Yuna huffed out a laugh and relieved him of two of his tote bags.

“She’s with your father watching the first period.”

Shane took a breath, giving himself a couple of seconds to settle down. His mother watched him with understanding eyes.

“You’re doing your best, sweetie,” she reassured him, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek. For a moment their eyes met, and Shane could clearly see the pride reflected in hers. “Go on. She wants you to see Ilya playing so badly.”

“She keeps acting like she has to sell him to me,” Shane huffed, making Yuna laugh.

“She doesn’t need to convince you with his hockey skills,” Yuna made a face. “Convince *me*, on the other hand…“

“Ilya is doing good!” Shane protested, startled by her boldness.

Yuna only shrugged.

“Mom!”

“He can do better, and he will,” she said with a small smile. “I know it.”

Shane wasn’t about to question his mother’s spider-sense when it came to hockey, so he simply said, “If you say so.”

The house smelled like tea, banana bread and buttered popcorn, David’s favourite snack to watch hockey. When he stepped into the living room, the first thing he noticed was Maya sitting stiffly in one of the armchairs, as if she didn’t quite know what to do with herself. She held a cup of hojicha tea between both hands, and there was a slice of banana bread waiting for her on the coffee table.

She was probably younger than Shane, and this was likely only her second or third job as a nanny, so he couldn’t help feeling a little sympathetic toward her.

“Good afternoon,” he greeted with a smile, drawing everyone’s attention in the room. “I see you’re having quite the feast, huh.”

“Shane!” Irina called excitedly.

Shane finally looked at her, and suddenly the exhaustion of the entire day seemed to drain out of his body. He had seen her barely three hours ago, but it felt like a lifetime.

“You’re late!” Irina scolded him, though she didn’t look truly upset. That might have been because David had her perched comfortably on his lap, a huge bowl of buttered popcorn resting between them. Both of them were wearing Centaurs jerseys with Ilya’s name on the back**,** and Irina was holding a mug of hot chocolate almost as big as her face.

“I’m so sorry, love. But you don’t seem to need me so much anyway.”

Shane locked eyes with his father. David simply smiled back.

“Come join us, son. Irina’s betting on four goals from Ilya.”

Shane swallowed.

His father didn’t even seem aware of how he looked sitting there with Irina. Of how happy she was, how natural it appeared for him to be taking care of her like she already belonged in their family.

“That’s… a lot of goals,” Shane managed to say through the knot on his throat.

“I say he’ll score two,” David shrugged, already turning his attention back to the TV. Shane pressed his lips together when both he and Irina grabbed a handful of popcorn at the exact same time and tossed it into their mouths. “Maya doesn’t want to bet.”

“I— It doesn’t feel right to bet on my employer, Mr. Hollander—”

“Booooooring,” Irina sing-songed in Russian. She was smart enough to know no one else in the room would understand her. Unfortunately for her, Shane was a fast learner, and that exact same word had been on his latest vocabulary sheet.

Shane frowned when he saw Maya shrink slightly into herself. She couldn’t understand the words, but she knew Irina didn’t like her, so she was clearly bracing for the worst from the little girl.

“Irina,” he hissed quietly, “that is extremely rude. Would you like someone to mock you in French so you can’t understand?”

At the unmistakable annoyance in his voice, Irina looked up at him with wide eyes and a trembling pout.

“I’m sorry—”

“Not to me, Irina. Say it to Maya.”

Irina turned toward the nanny. Maya cleared her throat nervously.

“It’s really not necessary—”

“Yes, it is,” Shane said firmly. “Irina.”

“I’m sorry for calling you boring in Russian, Maya,” Irina said. She sounded sincere enough, but she looked far more worried about Shane’s reaction than Maya’s.

Maya took a quiet breath and gave her a gentle smile before nodding.

“Thank you, Irina.”

The girl simply nodded. After shooting Shane a small pout that didn’t soften him (at least not outwardly, because inside it absolutely did), she turned her attention back to the television under David’s tense silence.

She was being difficult. Over the past few days, Shane had gotten a glimpse of just how difficult Irina could be when she truly disliked someone. She was a sweet and quiet child most of the time, but she had inherited the same venomous tongue Ilya could wield when he wanted to, especially when it came to confronting adults she had decided were her enemies.

Sharing space with his parents had helped soften the situation. Now that both Ilya and Shane were busy, Irina seemed to trust Yuna and David enough to let them take care of her. She felt safe in their house, which meant things weren’t nearly as catastrophic as when Maya looked after her at Ilya’s place.

Still, her attitude wasn’t good, and Shane needed to do something about it before Maya decided to quit her job.

“How is it going?” Yuna asked cheerfully, walking into the strange atmosphere of the living room with a wide smile and a freshly brewed cup of tea in her hands. “Are we kicking their asses already?”

“Mom!” Shane looked at her in horror. David burst out laughing.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Yuna said quickly, sitting down beside David. He welcomed her immediately with an arm curling around her shoulders. Shane swallowed when he saw Irina receive a quick kiss on the cheek from her and dissolve into giggles.

“Maya,” Shane called softly.

She looked up at him with wide, slightly frightened eyes.

“I think your tea is cold. Come with me?”

“I—Okay.”

His parents' kitchen was wide and warm, and it smelled the way only that kitchen ever smelled: something between dashi and whatever his father had decided to attempt for the evening. Today, it was parmesan and oregano. The kitchen was a mix of layers that didn't quite belong together, but somehow, they always managed to fit.

Yuna's ceramic jars still lined the counter, small and spotless, labeled in kanji that Shane could half-read at best, which was almost funny given the amount of languages he'd buried himself in at university. Reading had always been the first thing to slip, even more so after his mother decided it was better to prioritize French over Japanese when he was little. It still felt like an incalculable loss, though Shane would never question the struggles of his young mother, uprooted from her culture and wrapped in the judgmental stares and opinions from his father's conservative family.

A wooden rack by the window held a row of knives that looked professional, and the rice cooker hummed to itself in the corner like it had never once been turned off. It probably hadn't. Shane wasn't entirely sure what parmesan chicken was supposed to be served with, but for Yuna the perfect side dish had always been rice, without exception. Shane had inherited that from her.

Next to the rice cooker, a little clay Maneki-neko with the chipped ear that had lived on that counter longer than Shane could remember, had one paw raised at nothing in particular. Just looking at the kitchen was like going back to when he was eleven and watched his parents cook together while he did homework on the counter. Shane was a lonely child in terms of friendships, but he was never truly alone.

As his father had promised, everything was already set for tonight's dinner. It smelled incredible, so even if the idea of skipping his diet turned his stomach a little, the truth was he was just hoping for a quiet evening with Irina, Ilya, and his parents.

“Is this your first time working for a family like Ilya's, Maya?”

The girl shook her head. Shane started pouring her another cup of tea.

“Um, no. I worked for a single mother before, but the baby was smaller than Irina,” Maya responded. “This is my first time working for a baby that actually knows how to walk, haha.”

Shane nodded. Well, that explained a lot.

“I've told this to Mr. Rozanov,” Maya said carefully. “Is— Do you think it's a problem? I'm sorry if I haven't done a good job, sir— Shane—”

“Oh, no, Maya, please,” Shane gave her a smile. “I know you're doing your best. You're actually a good nanny, and certainly a much better cook than me or Ilya.”

The girl actually smiled at that. “My father was a chef. He taught me everything.”

“He did a good job,” Shane nodded. “I just want you to know that you don't have to endure Irina's bad behavior just because she's a child. You're sweet, and you're used to dealing with babies, but Irina needs to learn how to respect people, and you're part of those educational duties while Patricia isn't here.”

Maya looked at him for a few seconds.

“Are you… saying I should be harder on your daughter?”

Something shifted in Shane at the way she referred to Irina, but it was a good feeling. Too good, actually.

“Yes, Maya. You're young, but you're the adult here, and she needs to learn how to respect that. So,” Shane handed her another slice of banana bread, “don't make yourself smaller because of her. She'll get used to you, and when that happens, I'm sure you two are going to get along just fine. She’s a good kid.”

Maya looked like she was about to cry. Oh, Shane was already quite fond of her. She reminded him of himself when he'd first started working with teenagers and felt like they were going to eat him alive. No amount of training prepared you for the possibility of being publicly humiliated or hurt by people who didn't measure their words and their consequences. Shane knew that all too well.

“Thanks, Shane,” Maya told him sincerely, and her smile looked much less tense than before. “I'll try my best.”

“I know you will,” Shane assured her. “Now, let's go. I think I'm going to bet on three goals from Ilya tonight—”

“Uh, Shane?”

“Yes?”

“You and Ilya make a great couple,” Maya mumbled. Shane felt a warmth at her shyness. “I grew up with two dads, and you remind me a lot of them.”

Shane's eyes lit up. “Where are they now?”

Maya smiled. “Travelling the world together, just like they always dreamed. This year they're spending Christmas in Thailand, I think.”

“That's amazing, Maya.”

“Yes, they're amazing,” she cleared her throat. “Irina is very lucky.”

Shane had always considered himself lucky for his parents. Yuna and David were lovely, understanding and calm in a way that felt almost unfair to other people's families. Never once in his life had Shane felt truly pressured by them, and on the rare occasions he had, it had almost always been his own expectations bouncing back at him dressed up as their support.

But Shane had to admit that some part of him had always been afraid of letting them down, sometimes over the most ridiculous, trivial things imaginable. He would never be able to give them biological grandchildren, and knowing his mother had always dreamed of a big family and never quite got there had sat heavy on him for years. He'd never become the hockey star they'd once projected onto him either, and even though Shane had a good life and a career that fulfilled him, some part of him, no matter how hard he tried, was always going to feel like a failure.

He didn't need the encouraging words of a stranger to feel good about his life, but something about Maya seeing her own fathers (people she spoke about with such unguarded love) in him and Ilya settled somewhere deep in his chest.

“Thanks, Maya.”

A collective roar from the living room cut the conversation short. Maya startled, and Shane let out a laugh. Five seconds later, Irina came running.

“Papa scored, Shane! You're missing it!”

By the time Shane had her up in his arms, Maya was already heading toward the living room.

“Ok, let's go.”

“Are you still mad at me?” Irina asked then. Shane looked at her.

How could he be mad at her when her face was all round and soft and her enormous eyes were shiny enough to make him forget entirely about her bad behavior? Shane was doomed. He couldn't hold a stern face for more than two seconds.

“I'm not, love. But I don't want you to treat Maya like that ever again, okay?”

“Okay,” Irina buried herself against him. “Mmm. Shane?”

“Hm?”

“Je t’aime.”

Shane stopped in the middle of the hallway. He felt something crack in his chest before the words even fully landed, and he looked down at Irina making herself small against his neck like it was nothing, like she hadn't just said the thing that was currently making his heart beat fast enough to be visible through his skin and bone.

“Je t’aime aussi, Irina,” he said, because it was true, and because he couldn't help it. It wasn't the first time he'd said it, but it was the first time she said it back. He tried to compose himself, to seem like a functioning adult with something resembling emotional intelligence. *“I love you more than anything.”*

I love you more, Irina.

“Papa says that too,” Irina said, sounding almost dreamy about it.

“Because we both love you more than anything, sweetheart.”

She mumbled a small, satisfied sound. “Okay.”

***

Playing against the Boston Raiders was always bittersweet for Ilya. His decision to leave had been firm, but his ego was still (and always would be) large enough to admit how much it stung to watch them thrive. Cliff was more than a remarkable captain, one of the few friends he'd kept in the United States, and Ilya was genuinely happy for him. Genuinely happy for all of them.

But it was never easy to be crushed, without ceremony, by the home he'd willingly left behind. He wasn't going to pretend that didn't *hurt* his pride a little. He wasn't going to admit either.

It was complicated.

From the moment he'd held Irina in his arms for the first time, there had been no question: she was his first priority, full stop. The problem was that a small, stubborn part of him, the part that had always been wired for competition, still missed what it felt like to be at the top. No one had achieved what Ilya had achieved at his age, and his career could have been brilliant from start to finish. He knew it. The Raiders knew it too.

He could imagine what they said about him. How foolish they thought his decision had been. He had money and influence. He could have afforded the best nannies, private tutors willing to travel with him and Irina wherever the season took them. But it had never been just about that. Ilya needed to feel like a useful father. With Boston, his seasons would have stretched longer every year because they always ended deep in the playoffs, and the expectations would have been relentless. Ilya didn't have the bandwidth to manage a team that demanding, entirely on his own, without someone at home he could trust with Irina without a second thought.

And beyond all of that, there was the simple fact that Ilya didn't want to be that kind of father. He wanted to raise his daughter himself, not leave her adrift in the hands of a strict governess who would treat her like a source of income.

He had no regrets. Not a single one.

He was still trying to convince himself that all of this was fine when a hand landed on his shoulder gear and pulled him back. Bood was looking at him with a small, knowing smile.

“Some words, Cap?”

Ilya blinked. Right. His job as captain was to say something to his teammates before they hit the ice, not stand there drowning in his own head.

He needed to focus. He needed to find that *thing* again—that stubborn, bone-deep belief in himself that had carried him through worse game-nights than this. What did it matter if he

was about to lose to his former team? It was just another game. He'd go out there, give everything he had, and then he'd get to spend the rest of the evening wrapped in the warm, familiar smell of the Hollander cottage while Irina told him about her day and Shane watched her with that look he tried so hard to keep neutral and never quite managed. Shane's brown eyes always ended up full of love and pride while looking at her.

Maybe tonight he'd convince him to stay over. Ilya was going to try everything in his power, because the idea of waking up alone tomorrow and then disappearing for a full week of away games was already doing a number on his morale.

If he played well enough, maybe Shane would be *generous*.

“Yes,” he said, clearing his throat and turning around. The team was already facing him, waiting. “Okay, guys.”

He looked at them. *Really* looked at them. Wyatt, calm as ever, was doing something deeply strange on the floor that Ilya wasn't going to question. Luca, young and bright-eyed and stupidly talented, looked completely horrified, the way he always did right before a game, like the ice was personally coming for him. Bood was still smiling at him like he knew exactly where Ilya's head had been two minutes ago.

The rest of them were watching him with so much attention and trust. Even when Ilya wasn't his best self (not as a captain, not as a player, not as a father either), this team showed up for him anyway.

“I'm not going to stand here and tell you Boston is beatable because they're having a bad season. They're not. They're having a great season, which is annoying, and Cliff motherfucking Marlow is playing some of the best hockey of his career, which is personally annoying *to me.“* He paused, letting that sit. “But here's the thing. They don't have Wyatt Hayes on the net. They don't have Luca Haas, who is going to be insufferable in three years when he finally realizes how good he is.”

Luca opened his mouth, ready to complain. Ilya pointed at him. “Shut up, kid.”

A few laughs rippled through the room.

“And they definitely don't have me, which, let's be honest, is the part that's really costing them.” More laughter, louder this time. Ilya let himself smile. “Look. We are not a good team. I know it. You know it. The entire league knows it. But we are good players, every single one of us. We have what we need. We just have to make it work together.”

Despite Ilya privately thought that his speech was falling flat, that they wouldn't buy it this time—someone whooped from across the room, and the sound rippled outward into something louder than he'd expected.

“Maybe we can't win. But we can make it hard for them, and we *should*. They deserve a tough game,“ Ilya set his jaw. ”We can fucking give them that.“

The entire locker room answered with a roar. Ilya smiled, clapping backs as they filed out toward the tunnel. Dykstra was the last one through the door, and his grin was so wide and so deliberately obnoxious that Ilya had the very specific urge to knock it off his face (affectionately).

“That was a lovely speech, Rozy. Is *Teacher Shane* giving you new prose techniques? In bed?“

“Shut your ugly face.”

Dykstra just laughed and walked out. Behind him, the slightly smaller figure of Troy Barrett came into view, and Ilya's smile disappeared. The guy was staring at him with those enormous, pale blue eyes, his expression so thoroughly out of place that this time the urge to knock it off his face wasn't affectionate *at all.*

“What?”

“I— Nothing! Nothing—”

Ilya raised an eyebrow. That was enough. Barrett practically fled out of the room.

Ilya found himself actually enjoying the game. The arena wasn't exactly packed, and most of the crowd had made the trip from Boston. They were mostly those kind of fans who followed their team everywhere, which also meant they were passionate to the bone, and that kind of passion translated into a string of inventive insults toward Ilya. Boston fans loved to get under his skin, and that particular dynamic had always awakened something in him: a deep, satisfying thirst to earn every single word they threw at him. Tonight, he let himself off the leash a little more than usual.

“Good to see you alive,” Marlow said to him during the face-off, and there was real warmth underneath the dig. Ilya smiled at him, which earned him an irritated tongue click. “You could answer the fucking phone, Rozanov.”

“Are you my toxic girlfriend, Marly?” Ilya tilted his head. “You're not my type. Your ass is flat and your backhand is embarrassing—”

“You son of a—”

Ilya won the face-off.

The game was ugly in the best possible way. The Centaurs played like they had something to prove—which, against Boston, they kind of did—and the ice was fast and physical from the first whistle. Ilya scored twice in the first period alone, both goals made the Boston fans go very quiet before they remembered they were supposed to boo him. Luca added another one in the second period, clean and almost offensively easy, and Ilya got two more before the third period was halfway through. Four goals. The arena, sparse as it was, felt *loud*.

It still wasn't enough. Boston pushed back the way Boston always did: aggressive, relentless, deeply *annoying*, and with three minutes left, they tied it up. Overtime came and went in a

blur of held breath and Wyatt making saves that had no business being that extremely impossible, until finally, on a power play that felt like a punishment from the universe, Boston found the back of the net. Game over.

Ilya stood at center ice for a second longer than necessary, just breathing. Then he skated back toward his bench, and one by one, he grabbed each of his teammates.

“I love you,” he told each of them, completely serious, because he meant it every time. He even stopped in front of Troy Barrett, who looked like he might actually pass out.

“I— Thank you, man. I love you too?”

“Go inside, Barrett. Stop being ridiculous.” Ilya patted his cheek once, not entirely kindly, before moving on.

He was almost entering the tunnel when Cliff caught up to him, falling into step beside him with that easy smile that had always been impossible to dislike.

“Were you saving all of that for us, Roz? Four goals.” He whistled low. “You hate us that much?”

“You deserved another one just for being this annoying.”

Cliff laughed, shaking his head. “You good?”

Ilya glanced at him sideways. There was real curiosity underneath the chirping, and Ilya knew Cliff cared deeply about him. He'd been an idiot for ignoring his calls, but the world had been feeling like a lot to deal with lately. He knew that the moment he picked up, Cliff would know something was wrong immediately, without even having to ask, and Ilya didn't need another person worrying about him.

“Getting there,” Ilya said, and he meant it. “You?”

“I’m good.” Cliff bumped his shoulder once. “Answer the phone sometime. *Please.“*

“If you ask like that…” Ilya said. Cliff looked at him with exaggerated seriousness. “Okay, I will. Stop acting like a controlling wife. I already have a boyfriend to control me, Marly.”

“What the fuck does that mean?!”

He let the tunnel swallow him.

Ilya headed to the Hollander cottage as fast as he could manage. His teammates noticed, and some of them felt comfortable enough to comment on it with light jokes that may or may not have made him flush *slightly*. Naturally, the moment Wyatt had the audacity to point it out publicly, Ilya practically snapped at him.

“Russians do not blush. Fuck you, Hayes.”

“Denial is a river…” Dykstra said, and Ilya looked at him like he'd lost his mind. “You know, the saying. Denial is a river in Egypt—”

“Did someone hit you in the head? Are you concussed?”

“Fuck you, Ilya. You know what I'm saying!”

“No, I don't.” Ilya obviously did. He smiled at them anyway. “Don't party too much tonight. We leave early tomorrow.”

“Ten bucks says he's late to the bus,” someone offered from the back of the locker room. Ilya put on his most offended expression.

“Twenty that he shows up late with marks on his neck,” Boodram added, looking at him with open delight. “And his back.”

“Fuck all of you.”

“Say hi to Honey Shane!” Wyatt called after him. Several teammates immediately voiced their support. Ilya turned to look at them with pure contempt.

“Is that what you're calling him? *Honey Shane?“*

“The other option was Sexy Shane. Do you prefer that one?”

Ilya gave them all the finger and walked out.

When Ilya parked the car, he sat there for a moment before getting out.

He just needed to breathe.

It had been a full day. Fuller than most had been in a long time, and even if that wasn't entirely true because every day of his life was undeniably busy in one way or another, there was something different about today. Something lighter sitting in his chest that he hadn't felt in longer than he could remember. Like a window had been cracked open somewhere inside him and the air was finally moving again.

His session with Galina had probably been the most terrifying thing he'd done in years. But now, with a few hours of distance between him and that office, something else had settled in its place: pride. He’d walked the first step. And he knew the road ahead was still impossibly long and he still had no idea how to walk it properly, but at least now he was facing the right direction.

Ending a day like this one here, at his… *in-laws' (*or something close enough to it) house felt almost poetic. Ilya had never had a family home to come back to after a hard day. Not since he was twelve. He hadn't walked through a door with the certainty of open arms on the other side in over fifteen years, and standing here now, in this quiet driveway, with the warmth spilling out from the windows of the Hollander house, felt so foreign it was almost unreal.

His conversation with Galina drifted back to him then, and without thinking, his fingers found the crucifix resting against his chest. He thought about his mother every day. It was as involuntary as breathing. On the days when he was sufficiently untethered from himself, he could still wake from a deep sleep and forget, for one second, that she was simply gone. And every time reality came back, which happened far more often than he would have liked, Ilya felt that part of him that had died with her fifteen years ago wither again, quietly, in the center of his chest.

A knock on the window pulled him out of it. Ilya looked up, blinking away the thin film of tears that had gathered without permission, and found David Hollander's worried eyes on the other side of the glass.

He cleared his throat, shut off the engine, and got out of the car.

“Goodnight, David,” he said, and the name still felt strange in his mouth. Unfamiliar. Both David and Yuna had insisted on it, firmly and without room for negotiation. They didn't like formality.

They were nothing like Grigori Rozanov.

Yuna was a hurricane. She always had something to say, and she led every conversation with the ease of someone who had never once doubted that it was exactly what she was made for. She was a sharp, deeply intelligent woman, and her opinions had a way of sounding like established facts by the time they left her mouth. She wasn’t exactly intimidating, but she was *impossible* to dismiss. Ilya felt a natural, unforced respect toward her that he couldn't have explained even if someone had asked.

David was something else entirely. Quieter, much more contained. In the handful of conversations Ilya had managed to have with him, David had seemed far more interested in watching others speak than in speaking himself, and nowhere was that clearer than in the way he watched his wife. Ilya had never seen a man look at a woman the way David Hollander looked at Yuna. His father loved his mother, he knew that, but his love was repressing and controlling, not gentle and warm.

He found himself wondering what it must have been like for Shane to grow up inside that particular dynamic. Then, he'd understood, with complete clarity, why Shane was the kind of person he was: patient, warm, someone who made room for other people without even realizing he was doing it. David also reminded him of that other side of Shane, the one that only surfaced occasionally, almost shyly. The slightly awkward social edge that Shane kept carefully tucked beneath his composure. Ilya had always thought of Shane as his mother's son: methodical, precise, always controlling of the situation around him. But there was something in David's quietness that lived in Shane too, and it was, frankly, unbearably endearing.

Ilya couldn't stop marvelling at how perfectly Shane was made of both of them.

“I was just going to get more wood for the fireplace,” David said in a slightly apologetic tone, like he had only just realized he might have interrupted something. Ilya watched him hesitate for a second. “Mhm— Do you want to help me?”

Ilya nodded without thinking. “Okay.”

Ilya liked this part of David. The silence. He had very few quiet moments in his day. Irina was always talking, and his teammates were a pack of loud, restless jokers who couldn't tolerate five seconds of stillness. David's comfortable silence walked with them around to the back of the house, where a pile of already-cut wood waited in the dark. Ilya carried what David pointed to, and at no point did he feel the need to fill the quiet with meaningless conversation.

It was pleasant. Ilya would have given a lot for this kind of silence when he was younger.

“You played a good game tonight,” David said eventually, a small smile on his lips. “Irina and Yuna both predicted four goals.”

“Yes?” Ilya grinned, easily picturing the two of them celebrating and collecting on their bets with complete shamelessness. He was still aware they'd lost, but it was hard to feel too bad about it knowing he'd at least given his family a good night. “What did they win?”

“Shane is buying Irina new crayons, and my wife is making me gift her more artisanal dishes for her collection.” David's expression shifted into something caught between fondness and quiet suffering. “They were fun to make the first time. But they take so much effort…”

Ilya couldn't help laughing at the image in his mind: David surrounded by ladies, hands deep in clay, making plates in a ceramics workshop for the woman he loved. Love had a way of dragging you into the most unimaginable places. And honestly, if Shane asked, Ilya would get his hands dirty without a second thought.

“You love her very much, yes?”

David glanced at him for a moment, then quickly looked away. The light was almost nonexistent out here, but Ilya could still make out the faint color that rose in his cheeks.

“More than anything,” he murmured. “When Shane was born, my family wasn't exactly excited about it. They didn't like the fact that Yuna was Japanese.”

Ilya kept quiet, because there was nothing useful he could add to that. He'd never cared about that kind of thing himself, but he was certain his own father would have had something to say. He remembered, dimly, certain comments made about Svetlana's mother when he was young enough that he didn't yet have the concept of racism registered in his mind.

“We had a tough time. She tried her best to make them like her. But then we couldn't get pregnant again, and they just decided she was… broken. They blamed her for it. I've never forgiven myself for not standing up to them sooner. It wasn't fair. My parents are still out there somewhere believing Yuna has no value, and that's on me. I wasn't strong enough to confront them and tell them that the problem was *mine*, so I just stopped talking to them,“ David continued, his voice low and even. He was composed, but Ilya was sharp enough to catch the pain underneath the surface. ”I regret it every day.“

Ilya assembled his response carefully before letting it out.

“It’s not easy to stand up to the people you love,” he said. “I hated my father, and I still never found the guts to confront him. My mother is gone, so I will never know if she would’ve approved of my relationship.” He paused. “What I do know is that it would've broken me if she hadn't. So I try not to think about it a lot.” He shifted the wood in his arms. “In a fair world, I know she would've loved Shane. But in a fair world she wouldn't be dead, so this world is not fair, yes?”

David looked at him.

“If she was anything like you, I think she would've come around,” he said. “I think she wanted you to be happy.”

“Thank you, David.”

“Don't thank me, son.” He pushed the front door open with his foot, and Ilya nearly lost his grip on the firewood at the the ease of the word. David said it with a complete lack of effort, like it cost him nothing. Like it was just any word, not the entire world for a fatherless man. “Yuna and I are very happy that Shane found his person, and we’re even happier that Irina is part of your family. She’s an incredible girl, and you’re a good man.”

Ilya said nothing. He didn't trust his voice enough.

David didn't seem to need an answer. He just stepped inside, holding the door, and waited for Ilya to follow.

“Papa!”

Ilya tightened his grip on the firewood when Irina crashed into his legs and nearly knocked him sideways. Shane appeared from somewhere quickly, reaching out to take the logs from him. Ilya didn't let him.

“Nuh-uh. Let me do it.”

“But you're tired—”

“I don't care.” He leaned down slightly and pressed a kiss to Shane's cheek. Irina was still attached to his leg. “Ira, do you want to learn how to keep a fire?”

“Da!”

“That's dangerous,” Shane said, trailing after them with his arms crossed.

“I'm grown, Shane!”

She was not, but Ilya had no intention of letting her touch the fire, or the wood. She was simply going to sit in his lap while he did it himself.

David had left the poker and the log tongs ready for him beside the fireplace. Ilya settled Irina against his chest, still wearing his jersey, while Yuna appeared from the kitchen carrying a cup of tea and offered it to him with a quiet smile.

“You played *well*,“ she said, resting a hand briefly on his shoulder. Ilya raised both eyebrows. ”Okay— You played incredible. But we're crushing you next week.“

“We as in the Montréal Metros?“ Ilya pulled a face like he'd bitten into something sour. ”Boston is better than them, and we almost had Boston today. I think we will take Montréal.“

“Keep dreaming,” Yuna scoffed. He knew she was a devoted Metros fan and had been for as long as Shane could remember, according to him, but there was something underneath the dig that wasn't entirely unkind. Like she was rooting against him with one hand and *for* him with the other. “Wash your hands after, sweetie. Dinner's ready.”

Irina lost all interest in the fire immediately and bolted after her. “Yes! Can I taste it first?”

“Mhm, I don't know…”

“Pleaaase!”

Ilya let out a quiet laugh. Then, when the logs were properly settled and the fire had caught again (hungry and warm and bright), he set the poker aside and reached his hand out toward Shane, inviting him into the space Irina had just vacated.

Shane didn't hesitate. Ilya wrapped himself around him completely, arms and legs, pulling him back against his chest. The rug beneath them was warm from the fire, and Shane made himself small, which was not something Shane was particularly built for, but he managed it anyway, tucking into Ilya like he'd always fit there. Ilya loved it.

“Finally,” he murmured, closing his eyes and filling his lungs with the floral scent of Shane's shampoo. It was soft and clean, made for sensitive skin. He couldn't remember the brand from the one time he'd been in Shane's bathroom, but he was going to find it. He'd fill every shower in his house with it and feel absolutely no remorse about it.

“Missed me that much?”

“Always.” Ilya had no issue admitting it. If there was anything that came close to the particular torture of missing Irina, it was missing Shane. “How was your day?”

“The kids were fine, but the parents…” Shane exhaled. “God. They have so many questions, and they never trust my judgment anyway, so why ask?”

Ilya swallowed a smile. “Do you think they are exaggerating?”

Shane glanced at him sideways. “No. I'm probably worse than them, aren't I? I ask you questions about Irina all the time, and honestly it would destroy me not having her in my class where I can keep an eye on her at all hours.”

“Exactly. That makes you lucky,” Ilya murmured against his ear. “And me too. I know you're with her, so I don't worry too much.”

Shane let out a long breath, then made a small, defeated face.

“I shouldn't be complaining. I'm just tired. It's been a long week.”

“You can complain to me, Shane. It doesn't make you less professional,” Ilya said. “It doesn't make me think you don't love your job. I know you do.”

“Actually, talking with you about work is extremely unprofessional, *Mr. Rozanov*,“ Shane muttered, shaking his head. Ilya laughed this time, properly.

“I've done worse things in my workplace—”

“Excuse me?” Shane looked genuinely horrified. “Ilya, if you're about to tell me you slept with a coach or something—”

“No, no,” Ilya shook his head quickly. Shane visibly relaxed. “But a coach's son…”

“Ilya!”

“I was a horny teenager!” Ilya attempted. Shane almost growled at him. “Okay, that is not relevant. I would've done it as an adult anyway.”

“God, I know you would have…”

They fell quiet after that, Ilya resting his chin on Shane's shoulder, both of them watching the fire without feeling the need to fill the silence with anything more.

“Mom asked me to stay here for the weekend,” Shane said eventually, his voice softer now. “With Irina.”

Ilya's throat moved. “And what did you tell her?”

Shane shifted, turning in the circle of his arms to look at him. He hesitated for a moment.

“Do I have a say in this?”

Ilya lifted his hand without thinking. His fingers moved over Shane's freckles slowly, tracing them like a map he had already memorized, while his eyes moved across his face with patience. Ilya had nowhere else to be, just here with Shane, admiring how beautiful he was. The most beautiful thing Ilya had ever seen in his life, and he still couldn't fully account for how he'd gotten this far without him. Without *belonging* to him.

“Of course you do, Shane,” he said quietly. “Irina is part of me, and I trust you with me, so I trust you with her. You are part of us now. That means you get to make decisions. Like a team.”

Shane pressed his lips together. Ilya had learned to recognize the way Shane received words like those ones by now: the held breath, the inside of his bottom lip bitten gently, the careful composure held just a moment too long. But his eyes never lied, and Ilya watched them shine and go soft at the edges.

“Then I'd like to stay here with her this weekend. I can have Maya come in for her shift, or I can give her the days off.”

“That's up to you, love. Whatever you prefer.” Ilya nodded.

For the first time since he'd opened his eyes that morning, he finally let himself do what he'd been wanting to do all day.

Kissing Shane always felt like winning back a small piece of his sanity. Ilya had been a runaway thing for a long time, with no direction, no fixed point, held together only by the presence of his daughter waiting for him at home. But now there was something else. Someone to share his life with. A future worth building, worth pouring himself into.

Letting himself kiss Shane in front of this fireplace, without hurry or guilt, made him feel hopeful. The faint sweetness of tea on Shane's lips felt like a promise they were making without words, and the warmth of his body, solid against his own, wrapped itself around Ilya's bleeding heart.

He knew that love couldn’t cure anything, but Shane's love made him feel tender, and exposed, and completely surrendered. It made him feel *alive*.

If God existed (and Ilya liked to believe, in his own way, that it did) then this was the clearest and most irrefutable proof of it. This kind of feeling could only be the work of something sacred.

***

“Papa?”

“Yes, solnyshko?”

“Are we going to live here now?”

Ilya smiled at his daughter, shaking his head as he made sure the duvet (patterned with hockey sticks and helmets, soft from years of washing) in Shane's old bedroom was tucked properly up to her chin. Irina was looking up at him with bright, expectant eyes, her blond curls fanned out against the pillow like a halo.

When Yuna had suggested they stay the night, she'd come armed with an entire list of reasons why it made no sense for Ilya to take Irina home (*You have an early morning, and you're exhausted. Besides, Irina is coming with Shane tomorrow anyway, so they might as well stay here tonight)* and Ilya had put up something of a resistance.

First, he didn't want to be a burden.

Second, and more importantly: he was not going to be capable of leaving tomorrow if he spent tonight with Shane, *in the same bed*, for the first time.

Aside from Shane's old bedroom, the Hollander cottage only had one other room on the upper floor, and it was the only one available. Ilya had even offered to sleep with Irina because he was used to it anyway, accustomed to folding himself into his daughter's small bed on the nights he couldn't sleep alone, his feet hanging off the edge and his back complaining about it for days. Yuna had refused outright, reminding him firmly that he needed to rest properly before a long week of away games.

So here he was, tucking his daughter into bed while Shane showered in the bathroom next door, the sound of the water just barely audible through the wall. Ilya was a low-grade panic growing inside of him, but pretending he was absolutely fine and definitely not thinking about the implications of things happening around him was, at this point, as natural as breathing for him. So he was not actively panicking. Not this time.

He was good. Totally okay.

"No, sweetheart. You're staying here this weekend, but you'll be home on Sunday."

Irina pouted.

"I like it here, Papa," she said in her small voice. Ilya brushed the side of her face with his hand, his thumb passing gently over the scar on her cheek—the one she hated and he had learned to touch with enough tenderness that maybe, someday, she wouldn't. *"Yuna and David can be my grandparents. I like them."*

Ilya went completely still. For a few seconds he had absolutely nothing to say. His daughter was four years old and she had just asked for the most adorable and sad thing Ilya'd ever heard in his life.

And he couldn't give her an answer about it, because it wasn't his decision to make.

"Do you want them to be?" he asked, just to be sure. Irina nodded without hesitation. *"Then you should ask them yourself, Ira."*

She shrank a little into the pillow, suddenly shy.

"And," she hesitated. Ilya nodded gently, encouraging her. "Can I ask Shane, too? To be my dad?"

"I think so, if you really want him to be," Ilya answered, with every ounce of calm he had left, which wasn't much, because inside he was coming apart. Again, Irina was *so* small. She probably didn't understand half of what was happening around her. But her little mind had found the shape of a family, recognized it, and reached for it without any hesitation at all. *"Do you want another dad?"*

"I like my Papa," she said carefully, like she was trying not to offend him, *"but I like Shane too. And Shane loves you, and you love Shane, and parents love each other.* Right?"

“Yes,” Ilya laughed before he could stop himself. *“We love each other.”*

“I knew it!” She beamed with pride, smiling. “I can have two fathers, Papa. You and Shane.”

“Yes, you can, solnyshko,” Ilya leaned in and pressed a long kiss to her forehead. *“You should ask him tomorrow too. He'll say yes.”*

“How do you know?!”

“Mm— Because I'm your dad and I know everything,” he said, and she dissolved into giggles against his face, reaching up to tangle one small hand in his hair the way she'd been doing since she was small enough to fit entirely in the crook of his arm. He let her pull him close and stayed there, nose pressed to her curls, for a few extra seconds.

“Liar,” she murmured, her laughter settling into a sleepy and soft hum. “Daddy Shane knows more things than you.”

Ilya pulled back just enough to look at her. She was watching him carefully with those sleepy hazel eyes, checking that what she'd called Shane was okay. That she hadn't gotten it wrong.

His throat tightened.

“You're right,” he murmured. “He's smarter than me. Now go to sleep, Ira.”

“Okay.” She seemed genuinely satisfied with that conclusion, her eyes already growing heavy. *“Ya tebya lyublyú, Papa.”*

“I love you too.”

He stayed until her breathing evened out completely, until her hand went slack in his hair and her face relaxed into the uncomplicated peace that only sleeping children had. Then he straightened up slowly, turned off the lamp, and stood in the dark for a moment longer than necessary.

The walk to his shared bedroom was quick. Ilya had the biggest smile on his face, and he didn't hesitate when he entered the room, stripped off his clothes, pushed open the bathroom door, and closed it behind him.

Shane had his back to him. The water fell from the showerhead down the wide, flushed expanse of his back, the entire room thick with steam so dense and white as fog. Ilya stood there for a few seconds and just looked at him: the uncovered skin, the curves carved by Shane's full muscles, the rounded shape of his ass and the two dimples sitting above it like they'd been put there on purpose. When Shane tipped his head back to rinse his hair, his back muscles contracted all at once, and Ilya spent a pleasant moment imagining pressing his mouth to every line and groove they created.

Then he moved. Silent and strategic, the way a cat would cross a room, until he was at the shower door. He slipped inside without a sound, one arm wrapping around Shane's wet torso

and startling him badly enough that he almost slipped.

“What are you—”

“Shh.” Ilya's free hand came up immediately, palm flat over Shane's mouth, muffling the noise. “Quiet, *zólotse*. Irina is next door.”

“Exactly,” Shane muttered against his palm, turning slightly to look at him. His expression could have passed for irritation, but his hands had found Ilya's arm and were gripping it, *holding him,* not pushing him away, while his ass settled back against him with a slow, deliberate pressure that Shane was absolutely going to pretend was accidental. Ilya *knew* it wasn’t. “Your daughter is right next door. Why are you ambushing me in the shower?”

“What is ambushing?”

“It’s like, um, surprise me without my permission—”

“Ah,” Ilya ignored the answer entirely, dragging his mouth to the curve of Shane's ear and just breathing there. “You know what my daughter told me tonight?” He felt Shane tense in his arms despite the scalding water, the shift making their bodies press together in a way that made it genuinely difficult to remember what he'd been saying. “She told me she wants to live here with your parents. That she wants them to be her grandparents.”

Shane barely contained a breath. “R-really?”

“Yes.” Ilya kissed the ear he'd just had his mouth against, then found the available stretch of neck beneath it. Shane exhaled a small, trapped sound that caught in his throat before it could become louder. “She also said that we love each other the way parents love each other. And that she can have two dads.”

Shane swallowed, his pulse jumping under Ilya's lips. Ilya knew immediately how much this was unraveling him. How easily it got under his skin.

“That sounds good,” Shane murmured, barely above a whisper. “I would love to be part of that.”

“I know.”

“That still doesn't explain why you're in here,” Shane turned in his arms, facing him now. Ilya made a move for his mouth and was stopped by two pruned fingers pressed firmly against his lips. “We can't do this here, Ilya. My parents are right downstairs—”

“They're cool parents. They won't mind,” Ilya said, and he was aware he sounded completely pathetic and didn't care even a bit. He needed Shane the way he needed air. *“Please.”*

Shane bit his lip. “But Irina—”

“Our daughter,” Ilya said, stopping just long enough to make sure he wasn't crossing a boundary. Shane's eyes practically melted, and Ilya knew he'd won. “—is asleep in your room, exhausted, and she won't need us until tomorrow. But I need you now, Shane.”

“Fuck,” Shane breathed against his mouth, and nodded. “Yes, okay. Okay.” Ilya couldn't help the grin that split his face. “You manipulative asshole—”

Ilya kissed him quiet. Shane let out a small, delicious sound that traveled straight to his cock. He pressed his tongue into Shane’s mouth, making him gasp when his back hit the cold shower wall with a wet thud, pinning him against it so he could feel exactly what he was doing to him.

It felt like years since the last time they'd touched, and if Ilya weren't such a busy man with no time to himself, he would have made love to Shane the way he'd been wanting to since practically the moment they *met*. As one of his hands slid down to his boyfriend's ass, Ilya nearly groaned out loud imagining what it would feel like to finally bury himself in there and watch Shane come apart around him.

“Not here,” Shane repeated against his lips, just as Ilya was ready to suck his own fingers and get him opened up. He almost whimpered. Shane smiled. “I'll get us some alone time when you come back next week, I promise.”

That was actually a reasonable idea. Ilya was just an impatient little shit.

“But I want to fuck you, Shane,” he fake-cried against his jaw, both hands grabbing his ass this time and squeezing. “I'll be slow and quiet—”

“Maybe you will, but I won't,” Shane admitted, looking almost embarrassed about it. “I want to be loud, so don't ask me again. I'm going to say yes and regret it after.”

Ilya smiled. “You would regret *me*?”

“Not you,” Shane mumbled. He seemed to be very much enjoying what Ilya's hands were doing. “Having you but not getting to enjoy you properly.”

Ilya nodded. Fair enough. He could be patient. One more week sounded like nothing, objectively, especially if he thought about all the dry spells he'd endured since Irina came into his life—but that didn't change the fact that he was absolutely *dying* right now.

“Okay, I'll fuck you next week. But I can suck you now, yes?”

“Ilya…”

Ilya was already on his knees. Shane muttered something else under his breath that Ilya didn't catch because he was too busy pressing his nose into the soft, neatly trimmed hair at his base. He smelled like hot water and plain soap, and his cock (thick and cut and flushed dark) was already nudging his jaw with very clear expectations.

Ilya looked up at him from under his lashes, completely unhurried, hands resting loose on the backs of Shane's thighs. The steam curled around them both. Shane's chest was rising and falling a little too fast for someone trying to look composed, and the hand he'd braced against the shower wall had gone white at the knuckles.

“Ask nicely,” Ilya murmured against the soft skin of his inner thigh, dragging his lips there slowly, just to watch him suffer. The water was making his eyes hurt a little bit, but Ilya enjoyed the pain while looking at Shane’s flustered expression.

“Ilya.” Shane's voice came out rougher than intended.

“Hm?”

“Please.” Then, quieter: “Please, *please* suck my dick.”

That was more than enough.

Ilya wrapped one hand around the base and took him in slowly, without mercy. Shane's whole body jolted and then went very still, like he was afraid that if he moved it would be over before it started. A broken sound caught in his throat, muffled immediately, and his hand found the back of Ilya's head without thinking. He didn't push. Shane's fingers curled into his wet hair like he was trying to hold onto something solid, and Ilya enjoyed the salty taste of skin and precome on his tongue while those fingers moved carefully tender through his hair and tiny moans escaped his lover's pretty, full lips.

The noise of the shower drowned out the more obscene sounds, but Ilya could sharpen his hearing and still catch Shane underneath the water hitting the tiles. It was almost angelic. Shane's voice was masculine and rough, but melodious too. Sweet even when he moaned and gasped. Where Ilya sounded like some slobbering, panting animal, Shane made the softest, richest little sounds in the world.

Ilya pulled back until just the tip rested against his lips, then looked up at him. Shane was already looking down at him, eyes dark and blown wide, and something about holding his gaze like that (on his knees, tongue attached to Shane’s dick, Shane's hand still cradling the back of his head) made Ilya's stomach pull tight with desire.

“Tell me what you want,” he said, his breath warm against him. Shane made a truly wrecked sound.

“Don't— Don't stop?” his hips pushed forward just slightly, involuntarily, and Ilya let him. “You feel so good, please—”

Ilya took him deeper this time, and with his free hand he wrapped his fingers around himself and started moving slowly, matching his own pace to Shane's breathing. The water ran warm down his back. Shane's thighs trembled under his palm.

He set a pace that was slow enough to be torturous and deep enough that Shane had to tip his head back against the tiles and breathe through it, jaw clenched, the tendons in his neck pulling taut. Every time Ilya swallowed around him, Shane's fingers tightened in his hair, and Ilya took that apart methodically, pulling back when his breathing got too ragged, dragging his tongue along the underside of him when it evened out again, working him up and then walking him back from the edge until Shane was trembling and half-desperate and whispering things that didn't fully form into words.

“Ilya—” his voice cracked. “I'm close, I— F*uck*, please, don't stop—”

Ilya didn't stop. He took him all the way in and stayed there, and Shane came apart with his wrist pressed hard against his own mouth, the sound slipping through anyway, low and wrecked and helpless. His other hand had migrated to Ilya's shoulder, nails buried deep into the skin there, leaving small, perfect crescents that Ilya privately hoped would scar.

That way, he would have something from Shane's permanently on his body. A claim.

His whole body shuddered through it while Ilya swallowed around him and worked him through every last second without pulling back. It was probably Ilya’s insanity doing things to him, but it tasted so sweet and delicious. He stayed on his knees a moment, catching his breath, his own hand still wrapped loosely around himself and aching with it.

Then, he stood.

Shane was still leaning against the tiles, eyes half-closed, panting. Ilya didn't give him time to recover. He turned him by the hips, hurried, and pressed him face-firm against the cold wall. Shane hissed at the shock. Ilya pressed up behind him immediately, one arm hooking around his chest to pull him back, and groaned low against the side of his neck when his cock slid between Shane's ass-cheeks.

“Fuck.”

“Ilya—”

"Shh," he breathed against his ear. "Just let me."

He rolled his hips slow and torturing, finding a rhythm, his forehead dropping to Shane's shoulder. Shane reached back and grabbed his thigh, pulling him closer rather than away, and that was what did it. The wet heat of him, the soft sounds Shane made even now, oversensitive and still willing, the feeling of his hands pulling him in like he wanted this too —

Ilya came with his teeth pressed to the curve of Shane's neck, muffling himself, his whole body going rigid for one long moment before unraveling completely.

Neither of them moved for a while after that.

“Jesus,” Shane finally murmured against the tiles.

“Da,” Ilya managed. He pressed a kiss to the back of his neck, slow and grateful. “You ruined me, Shane Hollander. This is the second time you've made me come in less than five minutes.”

Shane laughed. “So Rozanov's legend was all talk, huh?”

“No, I am a very good lover,” Ilya complained, like a small child who'd been told something deeply unfair. His half-hard cock was still resting against Shane's ass, and the mere sight was

enough to make it twitch with renewed interest. “It is your fault. You make me stupid, like a teenager.”

“Well, you make me stupid too,” Shane murmured. “Not even as a teenager would I have done this in my parents' house.”

“Mhm, sooo boring,” Ilya pressed a playful kiss to his cheek before pulling back and letting him turn around and find a more comfortable position.

“Now I know where Irina gets her attitude from…” Shane murmured, watching him with disapproval. Ilya was too wrung out to ask what he meant by that. Shane must have noticed, because a moment later Ilya found himself wrapped up in his arms. “Let me clean you up. Then we'll go to bed.”

“Okay.”

Shane seemed genuinely happy to take charge of the aftercare, and Ilya couldn't have been more grateful that tonight, of all nights, someone else was handling everything.

Shane lathered him up just for the pleasure of it since Ilya had already showered after the game, using the soap as an excuse to run his hands slowly over every part of him. His fingers were unhurried and thorough, like they were learning him by touch. One day, Ilya thought dimly, he was going to have the pleasure of being kissed and claimed in every single one of those places properly.

That was the only mid-coherent thought his drowsy mind managed to produce.

When Shane was done with both of them, Ilya let himself be towelled off like a child and didn't complain about it. Minutes later, they were both tucked into the warmth of the down duvet, clean-smelling and heavy-limbed.

Shane made space on his chest, and Ilya took it without argument. He molded himself against him the way he might settle into a pillow, head resting between firm pectorals, one arm draped across his stomach, and let Shane's arms close around him, like they'd been doing this for years.

Ilya closed his eyes.

The house was quiet around them.

“Shane,” he murmured.

“Hm?”

“I love you.”

“I know,” Shane's hand moved slowly up his back. “I love you too, baby.”

“I know,” Ilya said. Then, he fell asleep.

When Ilya woke up the next morning, he felt miserable and completely devastated at the thought of leaving. Everything got worse when he realized that the bed was no longer just the two of them. At some point during the night, while he was sleeping deep enough that he hadn't noticed, Irina had slipped into the room. Shane must have let her in, because she was curled up on his side of the bed, tucked against him, while Ilya held them both from behind.

Getting ready to leave was like ripping his fucking heart out. He actually felt like crying. But when Shane cracked one eye open to say goodbye, Ilya put on his best smile before pressing a kiss to his forehead and whispering against his skin.

"Sleep, love."

Shane nodded at his words and let his eye fall shut again, and Ilya felt a raw pain in his chest at the sight of him sinking back into the pillow, his nose nuzzling their daughter's hair just like that. Both of them looked so warm and completely unaware of how hard it was for Ilya to walk away from them.

Downstairs, Yuna was already awake, a cup of tea ready on the counter and a small folded pile of what looked like David's clothes sitting beside it. When Ilya came over to say goodbye, aware that he was running slightly late, she explained:

"I know you can buy yourself clothes wherever you go, but I thought you might want a change when you get to Philadelphia," she said simply, sliding the pile toward him. "Take them."

Ilya accepted the clothes without a word. The knot in his throat only got tighter.

"Thank you, Yuna."

She walked him to the door and made him bend down so she could reach his cheek, cupping his face in both hands and holding it there for a moment. She looked at him for long seconds, and Ilya knew that she could see straight through him.

"Oh, sweetie, it's going to be alright," she reassured him, her smile soft. "We'll take good care of Irina, and we'll be here waiting for you when you get back."

Ilya sniffled, nodding. "Okay."

"Make me very proud, mhm? Give them a hard time."

Ilya laughed despite the tears. "Even Metros?"

"Especially them." She patted his cheek once before letting go. "I'm on your team, Ilya. We all are."

Ilya's team was suddenly *so* big.

***

When Wednesday afternoon arrived, Shane was sorting through the photos they'd use for the school's winter recital—the last thing before the kids broke for Christmas. Outside, snow was falling lightly, and Ilya's face on his phone screen had been quiet since the morning.

Spending time in Ilya's house without Ilya didn't feel strange anymore. Shane had his own set of keys now, and if he was being honest, he'd spent more nights here this week than in his own apartment.

The reason was a very specific one.

He looked up when the sound of the front door opening pulled him out of his thoughts. From his spot at the living room table he could see Irina come in laughing, Maya holding her hand, Yuna closing the door behind them both.

The girl's eyes found him immediately.

"Daddy, Grandma let me buy a new ball for the Christmas tree!" she announced, practically launching herself across the room toward him. He lifted her into his arms, careful not to crush the small wax paper bag she was clutching in her mittened hand, and kissed her cheek loudly before answering.

"Can I see it, sweetheart?"

"Yes!"

Under the watchful eyes of his mother and Irina's nanny, Shane opened the bag. He recognized the store logo. It was the same place his grandmother had taken him to buy Christmas decorations when he was little. If there was one thing his Japanese grandparents had loved about Canada, it was hockey, Christmas, and his father, in no particular order. He remembered their house always being decorated down to the darkest corner, and even though they kept their own Japanese celebrations, Shane had never lacked for gifts or a typical Christmas atmosphere on their side of the family.

It didn't surprise him that Yuna was repeating the pattern with Irina.

The ornament Irina had chosen was a delicate blown-glass ball, clearly fragile, topped with a beautiful gold cap from which the hanging loop extended. Inside, three small figures made of light and detailed resin stood in the shape of three beavers. Two of them the same height, one smaller in the center. The only difference between the two adult beavers was the tiny pink bow one of them wore on its head.

Shane smiled.

"Who are they?"

“Me, you, and Papa.” Shane burst out laughing when Irina pointed to the one with the pink bow as Ilya. “Pink suits Papa more.”

“Of course it does,” Shane set the ornament carefully back in its packaging and kissed her cheek again. “Do you want to hang it now?”

“Yes, please.”

This was the reason Shane couldn't go back to his own apartment without feeling a bone-deep anxiety.

It had been exactly as Ilya had warned him. Irina had found her moment (with him, and with his parents) to ask, very simply and very seriously, if they could please be part of their family. Shane had the moment slightly blurred in his memory, because his brain had stalled completely for a second.

He'd assumed she would forget. Children said things they didn't entirely understand and then moved on. And even though Shane had always known better than to underestimate them (they constantly had something new to teach him), Irina's question had caught him off guard anyway. It didn't matter that Ilya already referred to her as *our daughter*. It didn't matter that Shane already thought of her as his. The only thing that mattered was that Irina wanted him to play that role. To be that person.

Shane couldn't go sleep in his bachelor apartment while his daughter was in this big, cold house missing both her fathers. He wasn't going to put her through that.

“Is everything ready for tonight's game?” Yuna asked after taking approximately a thousand photos of Irina and Shane hanging the new ball, which she would almost certainly end up sending to Ilya, because the two of them seemed to be texting each other at all hours now. Maya nodded from the kitchen, where Shane had wandered over to help. “I have a good feeling about this one.”

“They've lost every game on this trip.”

“Yes, because Brandon Wiebe is a fool without vision that hasn't had the guts to put Barrett and Ilya on the same line!”

Shane raised an eyebrow while Maya laughed beside him. “Mom, they can barely stand each other. Ilya's been complaining about Troy being weird all week.”

“So what?” Yuna had somehow ended up sitting cross-legged on the carpet while Irina worked through her long black hair, braiding it clumsily and murmuring a carol in French. “They don't need to be friends. They just need to play together.”

Shane understood where Yuna was coming from, because he was the same way. During his years as a player, he'd never needed a particularly strong personal connection to perform well alongside a teammate. As long as they did their job and understood the game strategically, Shane could adapt to almost anyone.

But Ilya wasn't like him in that regard. Ilya was a player who channeled everything through pure passion, and chemistry wasn't a bonus for his style of play. It was a requirement. It wasn't just about getting along. It was about matching his rhythm. Shane understood Coach Wiebe's decision to give Barrett more time to settle in with the rest of the Centaurs, especially with his captain, knowing they'd eventually have to share a line.

It was a cautious call. Shane respected it.

Yuna, however, was not even remotely on board.

Through the first two periods, Shane listened to her huff, mutter, shake her head, and occasionally curse in Japanese (so Irina wouldn't understand) every time Ilya looked left for someone to connect with and found nobody there to receive him. It wasn't poor Luca Haas' fault, either—he was clearly hurting after taking an early hit from one of the Admirals' defensemen in the first period, and it showed in the way he was moving.

To top it all off, Scott Hunter had apparently decided to have the game of his life.

The tall, bearded man had already scored three goals, every single one of them celebrated with his eyes fixed on Ilya, like he had something personal against him. Shane knew that wasn't really it. Ilya was a loudmouth, and Hunter was a legend, and needling each other was practically a professional obligation when two rivals shared the ice. But Hunter's way of getting under people's skin was quieter than most, and somehow that made Ilya even more annoyed.

Shane shook his head with a smile when he watched his boyfriend (strange word, still made his stomach turn over pleasantly) flip Hunter off somewhere around the midway point of the second period before skating to the bench, where Coach Wiebe received his complaints, spoke to him for a few seconds, and then made the call.

A wave of his hand toward Troy Barrett was what made the Garden go quiet.

"Fucking finally!"

"Mom!"

Irina let out a delighted giggle at the swear word. She had long since finished with Yuna's hair or given up, because her grandmother was an impossibly restless subject when she was watching hockey, and was now drawing on the floor without so much as glancing at the screen. She had no interest in the game today, apparently.

Or maybe she just didn't feel like she needed to narrate Ilya's every great achievement to Shane anymore. Like she had nothing left to convince him of.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Shane shook his head but didn't say anything.

On the TV, Ilya skated toward the bench and tapped his stick twice against the boards before turning. Barrett was already stepping over, helmet slightly crooked, looking like a man

approaching a beast. Ilya reached out and knocked their helmets together, welcoming him to the game.

Barrett blinked like he hadn't expected it. He was kind of cute.

Then Ilya skated away, and Barrett followed.

The first minutes they shared were messy. They were still finding each other's timing, still miscalculating the half-second between pass and movement that separated a chance from a turnover. Maya made a disappointed sound. Yuna put a hand on her arm.

“Wait for it,” she said.

The third period was better.

Ilya drove into the offensive zone with two Admirals on him, sorting through them cleanly, and at the exact moment the defenseman committed to closing him down, he slid the puck back blindly to his left. Barrett was already there. The shot was clean, low, and it rang off the post and in before the goalie had finished moving.

The arena erupted.

In the living room, Yuna was on her feet before the goal light even turned red.

“Yes!” She spun toward Shane. “I knew it!”

Maya, from her spot in the armchair, covered her mouth with both hands, hiding a smile.

Shane sat very still on the couch and smiled so wide his face hurt.

With two minutes left and the Centaurs having pulled level (one more from Ilya, one from Boodram), the Admirals looked like they had lost the thread of what they'd been doing so well all night. The Centaurs were controlling the puck, controlling the pace, and the Garden had gone from loud to uneasy. At some point in those final seconds, Ilya got the puck behind the Admirals' net and didn't shoot, confusing the defenseman. He waited a quick beat, and then wrapped a perfect pass around the post to Barrett cutting near him.

He didn't hesitate.

4-3.

Shane watched Troy turn and immediately find Ilya while the commentators tried to explain what had just happened to a game that had looked completely lost an hour ago. Ilya had already dropped his stick and was skating toward his new teammate at full speed. They collided somewhere around the crease, Barrett barely staying upright as Ilya grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him with a wide, ridiculous grin, and then the rest of the Centaurs arrived and it stopped being a celebration and became a tower of grown men in full hockey gear.

Irina looked up from her drawing.

“Did Papa win?”

“Papa won, sweetheart,” Shane told her.

She nodded, satisfied, and picked her crayon back up.

Two hours later, when it was just Shane and Irina left in Ilya's room, an incoming video call made his heart jump in his chest. Shane set aside the book he'd been reading with Irina, not bothering to take off his glasses before answering.

Ilya's smiling face appeared on the screen, hair still damp.

“Ah, are you two using my bed without my permission?” was the first thing he said, raising his eyebrows with great indignation. Shane wanted to kiss him so bad.

“Papa, don't be *radin*,” Irina said.

Shane burst out laughing.

“What did you just call me?!”

“*Radin*,” Irina repeated, with a delighted, slightly evil laugh. “Daddy taught me that word today in class.”

“You're teaching our daughter insults,” Ilya accused. Shane rolled his eyes.

“I'm not doing such a thing,” he said. His expression softened when he watched Ilya throw himself onto what was probably a very lonely hotel bed. “Good game today, by the way.”

“It was okay,” Ilya shrugged. “Barrett could've done better. He is clumsy, like a baby in diapers—”

“Why are you being an asshole? I was okay!” a voice came through the phone. Shane blinked, surprised.

“Do not curse in front of my daughter, Barrett,” Ilya said, looking off screen. “And cover yourself. Your nipples are ugly.”

“What the fuck, man—”

“As I was saying,” Ilya looked back at Shane. “He'll get better.”

“Are you sharing a room this time?” Shane asked, amused, already picturing exactly how irritated Ilya was about that fact.

“Da,” his boyfriend answered, with magnificent disdain. “Hayes and Dykstra thought it would be funny to pair us together. Team bonding, they call it. I call it: they want me to murder them.”

Shane covered his mouth to keep from laughing. “It can't be that bad.”

“It is,” both Ilya's and Troy's voices answered at the same time, and Ilya looked off screen again with murderous eyes. He'd probably told Barrett not to listen, which was clearly *not* going well.

Irina yawned against Shane's chest, curling into a smaller shape while she looked at her dad with dreamy, half-closed eyes. Ilya watched them both for a few seconds, his expression shifting from amused to something deeply, quietly miserable.

“I miss you both so much,” Ilya said in a low voice. “I should be there with you.”

“You're right where you need to be, baby,” Shane said. “Tomorrow is the last game of the year. Then we have all the holidays just for us.”

A small ray of something hopeful seemed to light up in Ilya's eyes. By that point Irina was already asleep against Shane's chest, breathing slow and even.

“You will stay with us, yes? At home?”

Shane nodded without hesitating. “I will, yes.”

“Good.” Ilya seemed genuinely relieved. Shane noticed his eyes drift to Irina again. “Kiss her goodnight for me, *zólotse*.”

“Of course.”

“*Ya tebya lyublyú.*”

“*Ya tebya lyublyu,*” Shane still struggled a little with the pronunciation, but Ilya seemed to love it when he said things in Russian, even if it was a broken, clumsy attempt on the language.

When the call ended, Shane just took off his glasses, turned off the bedside lamp, and settled in with Irina, pressing a kiss to her forehead on her father's behalf.

Sleep had never been something that required effort from him. But tonight, for some reason, Shane found himself fighting for it.

Like the empty space at his back was unsettling him.

He pushed the feeling away, held his daughter close, and slept.

***

The next morning, Shane received just one early message from Ilya telling him they were already boarding for Montréal, followed immediately by:

Ilya: Give Hayden Pike condolences.

Ilya: I'm beating his ass tonight 😚

Shane: Why so sure?

Read 07:48 AM

Shane snorted at his nonsense and got on with his day. He made sure to wake Irina with enough time before heading to school, making reluctant use of the car Ilya had insisted he take while he was away—for convenience, *supposedly*. Shane knew it was purely because Ilya hated the thought of him standing in the cold waiting for the bus at that hour of the morning.

The morning was quiet. Shane helped the kids practice their winter recital songs, then they worked on some new French vocabulary while coloring Christmas-themed mandalas. Irina was happy, well-behaved, addressing him as Monsieur Shane all the time and earning star-shaped stickers that she put on her beautiful face.

When recess was approaching, Shane was mediating a dispute (over a crayon) between two small, very serious boys when a knock at the classroom door interrupted him. He turned to find Erika in the doorway, her expression unsteady. She was pale, and her hand trembled slightly on the door handle.

"Oui?" Shane approached her with a calm smile, the way he always did. *"Est-ce que ça va, Erika?"*

Everything alright, Erika?

"I need Irina Rozanova to come out of the classroom," Erika said, the words coming out rushed. "Her nanny is here for her."

"What?" Shane asked automatically. Had he forgotten a doctor's appointment? Maybe Ilya had overlooked mentioning a therapy session? It was strange. Her appointments were usually in the afternoon, when Shane, or Yuna or David, could take over. "Did something happen?"

Erika glanced over Shane's shoulder. As always when someone knocked, the sharper kids were craning their necks to see who it was and why. Most of them were still busy painting or playing with their classmates, but something in Erika's face made Shane feel a cold weight drop in his stomach.

And then she said the words that sank his heart entirely.

“Her dad was involved in a plane incident,” Erika whispered, looking stricken. “It's all over the news. I suppose Maya has orders to take the girl—”

Shane stopped hearing her.

Shane Hollander had always, always been someone who liked order. Who liked structure. He dealt with unexpected things the way anyone did: facing them head-on, moving through them as best as he could, but Shane's natural state was *anticipation*. He had always been this way. He sorted potential problems from largest to smallest, and devised solutions in advance purely as a precaution.

He knew it could become compulsive, and with a lot of therapy and a lot of work on himself, he had learned over the years to loosen his grip on it. But it was still in his nature. Shane was still, at his core, a man who prepared.

When he'd met Ilya and been completely disarmed by him, Shane had quietly constructed a long-term plan that respected the boundaries of the small family Ilya had built with Irina. Months of getting to know each other, of being friends first, of easing himself carefully into their lives. If things worked, then maybe (eventually) he would figure out how to set aside his own peculiarities around physical intimacy, because he knew that part was important, and because he wanted it to work.

Their relationship had moved faster than anything he'd mapped out, and Shane wasn't going to pretend he hadn't panicked. He had never once imagined what it might feel like to *want* a child until Irina asked him to hold her for the first time. He had never wanted a fairytale romantic love story, until he met Ilya for the first time. He had never desired another person the way he desired Ilya Rozanov. It wasn't even about sex or attraction. Shane desired it all. He wanted *everything* (house, kids, even a dog) with him.

And when his mind had finally settled into the idea of them, when he had a little girl who called him *dad*, when his parents had found in Ilya another son to take care of—

Right when Shane had everything, and more than he'd ever thought to ask for, his plans seemed to change again. Unexpectedly.

His eyes went to Irina immediately. She wasn't looking at him. Why would she? She was absorbed in a drawing she was probably making for Ilya, so her father would have something of hers when he came home, like she always did. The mere thought that there was a possibility that Ilya might not come home this time made his mind *break*.

“Shane?” Erika shook him slightly. “Shane, are you okay?”

What would happen to Irina? *If Ilya wasn't here, who would...?*

“I need to go,” was all Shane could manage. He didn't know what language he said it in, or how loud, or whether the children had heard him. “I need to go with her—”

“Oh, Shane.” Erika looked at him with pity, shaking her head slowly. “I was *so* hoping what I saw that day in the office had been my imagination…” she murmured. “Shane, if you leave now, you know what happens. You're not her guardian, and you don't have any other excuse —”

“She's alone,” Shane said, and he was on the verge of tears. “Ilya is the only person she has left. I can’t stay here and do nothing.”

“Okay.” Erika nodded, her voice going quiet and firm at once. “He'll be okay, Shane. I know it. Take your things and go with Maya— I'll cover for you.” She looked sad. “But I will have to tell them the truth. I can't lose my job over this.”

Shane didn't care about the consequences. He just nodded.

By the time Erika had handled everything (calling Irina over, helping her with her coat, passing her carefully to Shane, reminding him in her most authoritative voice that he was to go with Maya, that he had no official permission to take Irina out of school himself), Shane could only stand there with his phone clenched in one hand.

The notification on the screen read:

Ilya: Shane.

Ilya: My love.

Ilya: You and Irina are the best things in my life.

Ilya: I am only thinking about you right now. About all the things I would love to do with you.

Ilya: I’m so sorry.

Ilya: Please take care of our daughter. Tell her I love her. That I never wanted to leave her.

Ilya: I love you.

Ilya: I love you.

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