Life changers hockey camp

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Life changers hockey camp

by peiceabread

Summary

It was Year Five of the game changers Hockey Camps, and everything was running like a well-oiled machine—until Hayden Pike found bruises on a quiet nine-year-old named Mateo. When the foster system fails a child, Shane and Ilya step up to provide an emergency placement for the weekend.

Or

Shane and Ilya accidentally acquire a child, eat a lot of dinosaur nuggets, and learn that their house was far too quiet before Mateo arrived.

Notes

I have made a discord server as a way to talk to more people from the fandom, along with that beta reader applications can be found in the announcements chat if you are interested - discord.gg/e3SvBaeSZp

so this is almost 20k words, how I have no fucking clue, I honestly didn't realise I had written this much I was kinda tempted to try split it but I really struggled to so it is being posted as 1 chapter sorry.

As always love you guys thank you for reading, if you like my writing please leave kudos and comments it makes my day.

Anyways enjoy

database of all my fics - https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1K05xfC0cJCv7ujHKqze_KhG5l0KMbPKriZjNNvM4EWI/edit?usp=sharing

Chapter 1

The sound of fifty skates carving into the fresh ice at the practice rink was a specific kind of chaotic symphony that Shane Hollander had learned to love.

It was Year Five of the game changersHockey Camps. What had started as a way to give back had evolved into a summer institution in Ottawa. They ran three sessions, two weeks each, a grueling schedule sandwiched between their own off-season training, but it was worth it. Because the main Ottawa Centaurs team wasn't using the facility for training over the summer, Shane and Ilya had full control of the building. It felt like their kingdom. The head coach had even approved the installation of a massive, permanent filing cabinet in the back office specifically for their camp records.

This year, however, felt different. Heavier, but better.

"Knees bent! Chest up!" Hayden Pike’s voice boomed across the blue line. He was skating backward with an ease that made the kids stare in awe.

On the other end of the rink, Leah Campbell, instructing a group of wide-eyed aspiring goalies. Her husband, Max Riley, was physically hauling a kid up by the back of his jersey who had fallen for the fifth time, laughing as he set the boy back on his blades.

Ryan Price was by the benches, chatting with Fabian. Fabian wasn’t a coach, technically, but the musician had become a fixture at the camps, usually handling the music playlist and charming the parents.

Ilya, meanwhile, commanded center ice with a group of the older, scrappier forwards. He wasn't shouting like Hayden or lifting kids like Max; he was demonstrating with a terrifying precision.

"Do not look at puck," Ilya instructed, his voice cutting through the arena noise as he stickhandled a puck so fast it was a blur. "Puck is friend. It follows you. Look at net. Look at open ice." He stopped abruptly, passing a puck to a girl with a fierce ponytail who was gripping her stick like a weapon. "Soft hands," Ilya corrected, skating over. "Here, look."

He peeled off his left glove, tucking it under his arm to show them the exact placement of his fingers on the shaft of the stick. "Like holding egg. Do not crush."

"Whoa, is that real gold?" a boy with messy hair interrupted, pointing not at the stick, but at the simple band on Ilya's ring finger that caught the arena lights. He looked up at Ilya with wide eyes. "You got a wife, Coach?"

Ilya paused, looking down at the ring. A softness entered his eyes that the kids hadn't seen yet, and he let out a short, genuine laugh that echoed slightly. "No wife," he said, smiling as he slid his glove back on, but not before twisting the ring once—a habit. "I am married to Coach Shane."

The group of kids collectively whipped their heads around to look at where Shane was standing by the boards, then back to Ilya.

"Coach Shane?" the boy repeated, impressed. "That makes sense. You guys pass good."

Ilya smirked, a flash of pride on his face. "Yes. We pass very good. Now, stick on ice. Let's go."

When the girl loosened her grip and managed a smooth reception, the rare, small nod of approval Ilya gave her made her beam like she'd just won the Stanley Cup.

Twenty minutes later, the whistle blew for lunch. The rink emptied in a stampede of unlaced skates and shouting as Max and Hayden herded the hungry group toward the cafeteria, leaving the ice in a sudden, echoing silence.

Shane stayed behind to clear the zone, skating slowly near the blue line as he collected the scattered orange cones. He was stacking them into a neat tower, the rhythmic *swish-clack* the only sound in the vast room, when a familiar heat pressed against his back.

Strong arms wound tightly around his waist, pulling him flush against a solid chest. Ilya had stayed behind too, gliding up silently while Shane was distracted.

"You look stressed, Hollander," Ilya Rozanov murmured, his lips brushing the sensitive skin just below Shane's ear, finally free to touch him now that they were alone.

Shane leaned back into the embrace, letting the stack of cones rest against his hip as he let Ilya take his weight. "Not stressed. Just... thinking."

"Thinking is dangerous for you," Ilya teased, pressing a firm kiss to the side of Shane's neck. He turned Shane around in his arms, ignoring the cones, his hands sliding down to squeeze Shane's hips possessively.

"We have the whole place to ourselves," Ilya added, his voice low and warm.

Shane smiled, wrapping his arms around Ilya's neck, relishing the quiet moment. "We should probably go check on the food situation. Make sure Max hasn't eaten all the sandwiches."

"Max can starve for five minutes," Ilya muttered, leaning in to capture Shane's lips in a slow, deep kiss that made the stress of the morning melt away.

This year, they had partnered with local youth groups to fill the roster with underprivileged children. No fees, full equipment provided. It was chaos, and it was heartbreaking. Some of these kids had never held a stick; some looked at the provided lunch spread like it was a royal banquet.

That night, the exhaustion hit them the moment they walked through the door of their Ottawa home.

Shane showered and collapsed into bed, his muscles humming with fatigue. When Ilya joined him a few moments later, Shane immediately gravitated toward him, practically climbing on top of him. Ilya groaned comfortably, wrapping his arms around Shane and pulling him down for a deep, lingering kiss that tasted of mint toothpaste and exhaustion.

Shane broke the kiss but didn't move far, resting his head on Ilya’s broad chest, his leg thrown over Ilya’s hips. He listened to the steady thrum of his husband's heart.

Ilya’s hand came up, long fingers threading through Shane’s hair, scratching lightly at the scalp in the way he knew Shane loved. His other hand rubbed soothing circles into Shane's lower back.

"They're good kids," Shane whispered into the dark, pressing a kiss to Ilya's pectoral muscle through his shirt.

"Mm," Ilya hummed, the vibration rumbling against Shane’s cheek. "Talented, some of them. Scrappy."

"It’s just..." Shane traced the line of Ilya’s collarbone. "You see the shoes they come in with? Or how nervous they are about breaking the sticks? It’s a lot of pressure. I don't want them to worry about money. I just want them to play."

Ilya tightened his grip on Shane, pulling him upward so their faces were level. He kissed Shane again, softer this time, reassuring. "We give them two weeks where they don't have to worry. That is what we can do."

"I got so lucky," Shane said softly, brushing his nose against Ilya’s. "My parents... they were a lot, sometimes, with the pressure. But I never doubted that they loved me. I never doubted I’d have dinner, or gear, or a ride to the rink."

The hand in Shane’s hair stilled for a fraction of a second before resuming its rhythm.

"Russia was... different," Ilya said, his voice dropping an octave. "It was hard."

Shane shifted, propping himself up on one elbow to look at Ilya. The streetlights outside filtered through the blinds, casting stripes across Ilya’s face. "You never talk about it much. The early days."

Ilya stared at the ceiling. "My father was police. But not... not like the friendly neighborhood cop. He ran our house like it was the military. Strict. Cold. Failure was not an option." Ilya swallowed hard. "He broke people. He is what drove my mother to... to end things."

Shane’s heart stopped. He reached out, cupping Ilya’s jaw, his thumb brushing over the sharp cheekbone. "Ilya. I’m so sorry."

Ilya turned his head, kissing Shane’s palm fervently. "Don't be. It was a long time ago."

"But—"

"No," Ilya cut him off gently. "I am happy now. I have hockey. I have a home." He looked Shane dead in the eyes, his gaze intense and vulnerable. "I have you. I love you so much, Shane."

"I love you too," Shane whispered. He lowered his head, capturing Ilya's lips in a fierce, protective kiss, pouring everything he felt into it. Ilya responded immediately, flipping them over so he was hovering above Shane, grounding him.

"That life... it is over," Ilya murmured against Shane's lips.

The next day, the humidity in the arena was stifling. It was Day Two, usually the day the kids started getting comfortable enough to act out.

Shane was organizing a drill sheet near the glass when Hayden skated over, his usual grin replaced by a tight frown.

"Shane," Hayden said, stopping sharply, spraying a bit of ice. "I need a sec."

"What's up? Is it the equipment shortage?" Shane asked, not looking up from his clipboard.

"No. It’s... I think we have a safeguarding issue."

Shane froze. The clipboard lowered. "Serious?"

"Yeah," Hayden said quietly. "I think so."

"Talk to Yuna," Shane said immediately. "She’s the designated lead for that. I’ll freak out if I handle it first, and we need it done by the book. Where is she?"

"Equipment room, helping the little ones ungear," Hayden said.

"Go. Tell her everything."

Hayden nodded and took off toward the locker rooms.

Inside the equipment room, Yuna Hollander was surrounded by the smell of rubber and sweat. She was hanging up jerseys, chatting brightly with a group of six-year-olds. When the last child scampered out, Hayden stepped in, closing the door partially.

"Yuna," Hayden said.

Shane’s mother turned, her smile fading instantly when she saw Hayden’s face. "What is it, Hayden?"

"I was helping the Red Team change out," Hayden said, keeping his voice low. "There’s a kid. Mateo. His paperwork says he’s nine, but Yuna, he looks seven. Maybe six. Tiny thing."

Yuna nodded, pulling a small notebook from her purse. "I know Mateo. Quiet boy."

"I took his jersey off to help with his shoulder pads," Hayden continued, his jaw tightening. "His back and sides... Yuna, he’s covered in bruising. Deep purple, some yellowing. It’s bad."

Yuna’s pen hovered over the paper. "Could it be from play?"

"We haven't even used real pucks with that group yet," Hayden said grimly. "And he hasn’t fallen that hard. This isn’t hockey contact. This is... someone hurt him."

Yuna’s expression turned steely. She wrote down the details quickly. "Okay. Thank you, Hayden. You did the right thing. Do not speak to the parents or guardians yet. Leave this to me."

Dinner that night was usually a loud affair, but the air felt heavy. Ilya was at the stove, searing salmon. Shane walked up behind him, wrapping his arms around Ilya’s waist and resting his chin on Ilya’s shoulder. He pressed a kiss to the side of Ilya's jaw, lingering there.

Ilya leaned back into Shane’s touch, taking a moment to just breathe him in before turning the heat down. "Hey," he whispered, turning his head to peck Shane on the lips.

"Hey," Shane murmured. He squeezed Ilya once more before pulling away to set the table while Yuna sat at the island, reviewing files.

They ate in relative peace for a few minutes, discussing the ice quality and Fabian's questionable choice of pop music for the warm-up playlist.

"The camp is running smoothly," Ilya noted, placing a piece of salmon on Shane's plate, his hand brushing Shane's affectionately as he did so. "Max is good with the difficult ones."

"Max is a giant teddy bear, that's why," Shane said. He looked at his mother. "Mom? You've been quiet."

Yuna set her fork down. She looked between the two men. "Hayden came to me today."

Ilya stopped eating. "The safeguarding issue?"

"Yes," Yuna said. "Little Mateo. Hayden found extensive bruising on his torso. Inconsistent with play."

Shane felt his appetite vanish. "What do we do?"

"I have to file a report with social services," Yuna said, her voice professional but sad. "But we need to know what we are dealing with."

Shane and Ilya arrived at the rink an hour early. The lights were still humming to life as they unlocked the office.

Ilya sat on the edge of the desk, pulling Shane between his legs for a quick, grounding hug before they got to work. Shane buried his face in Ilya's neck for a second, drawing strength, then stepped back.

Ilya went straight to the permanent filing cabinet the coach had installed, the metal drawer screeching slightly as he pulled it open. He flipped through the registration forms until he found the one marked *Mateo*.

"Here," Ilya said, pulling the manila folder. Shane crowded in next to him, their shoulders pressed together.

They scanned the document.

Legal Guardian: State of Ontario / Foster Placement.

"He is in foster care," Ilya read, his finger tracing the lines. "Mother is incarcerated. Possession and distribution. Father... refusal of custody."

Shane felt sick. "Refusal of custody? He just... didn't want him?"

"Looks like it," Ilya muttered. He slammed the folder shut, a flash of anger in his eyes that reminded Shane of the story Ilya had told him in bed the night before. Men who hurt children, men who abandoned them—it struck a nerve deep inside Ilya.

"We need eyes on him," Shane said. "Constant eyes."

"Max," Ilya said instantly.

They found Max Riley by the vending machines ten minutes later. Max looked up, smiling, but his expression sobered when he saw the look on Shane and Ilya's faces.

"What's wrong?" Max asked.

"We need a favor," Shane said. "There's a kid. Mateo. Nine years old, looks seven. He's in the system, and Hayden found marks on him."

Max’s posture shifted, drawing up to his full, imposing height. The playful demeanor vanished, replaced by the protective instinct of a teammate.

"Say no more," Max said, his voice dropping.

"Just keep an eye on him," Ilya said, his voice tight. "In the locker room, on the ice. Make sure no one touches him. Make sure he is safe here."

"I'll stick to him like glue," Max promised. "He won't be out of my sight."

As the first bus of kids pulled up to the arena, Shane watched through the glass doors. He saw little Mateo step off the bus, dragging a hockey bag that was almost as big as he was.

Ilya’s hand found Shane’s, interlacing their fingers and squeezing tight.

"We got him," Ilya whispered. "He is safe here."

"Yeah," Shane squeezed back, leaning his head on Ilya's shoulder. "For two weeks, he's ours."

The moment of quiet resolve didn't last long.

"Shane! Ilya!"

The side doors to the rink banged open, and Hayden Pike stumbled in, looking more frazzled than Shane had ever seen him, which was saying something considering they had played multiple Game 7s together. He was trailing four children like a mother duck, carrying a toddler on his hip.

"Jackie said she needed a 'me day'," Hayden announced breathlessly as he reached them. "She literally handed me Amber, told me she was going out and that the fridge was stocked, and walked out the door. I didn't know what else to do."

Shane smiled, reaching out to high-five Arthur, who was six now and clutching a mini-stick like a lifeline. "The more the merrier, H. You know that."

"I'm so sorry," Hayden groaned, shifting Amber, who was two years old and happily chewing on the collar of his shirt. "I know we're fully booked, I didn't want to throw off the ratios."

"Is nonsense," Ilya said, stepping forward. He looked at the group of Pike children with a grin. "We need elite demonstration team, yes?"

Jade, the oldest at eleven and already possessing a terrifying slap shot, rolled her eyes but smiled. Ruby, who was nine and arguably even more competitive than her sister, was already eyeing the ice.

"We can help, Uncle Ilya," Ruby said seriously.

"Good," Ilya said. He reached out, and to Hayden’s shock, Amber immediately reached for him. Ilya took the toddler easily into one arm, balancing her on his hip with practiced ease while gesturing to the others with his free hand. "Ruby, Jade, you go help Max set up the tires for the obstacle course. You are in elite group today, show them how it is done."

The girls nodded and took off.

"Arthur," Ilya said, looking down at the six-year-old. "You need to put on gear fast. You are with the Red Team."

"Can I skate?" Arthur asked, bouncing on his heels.

"If you hurry," Ilya promised. "Go."

As Arthur sprinted toward the locker room, even Amber looking content to just be carried around by the giant Russian as he walked toward the cones, Hayden watched them go, his shoulders slumping in relief.

"He's a natural," Hayden said quietly, watching Ilya make Amber laugh by making a funny face. "You two... you're gonna be good dads at some point. Seriously."

Shane watched his husband, who was now crouching down to check the puck supply while somehow still holding the toddler. A warmth bloomed in his chest. "Yeah," Shane murmured. "Maybe someday."

"On it," Hayden said, looking energized again. "I'll tell Arthur he's on a special mission to make a new friend. Alright, let's play hockey."

By mid-morning, the groups were split.

The Red Team—the beginners and the younger kids—took the south end of the ice under the supervision of Shane and Max. It was a chaotic mix of wobbly ankles, clinging to the boards, and enthusiastic spills.

"Alright, everyone!" Max clapped his gloved hands together, his voice booming but friendly. "First rule of hockey: everyone falls. If you aren't falling, you aren't trying hard enough. So when you hit the ice, I want to see a smile, okay?"

Shane was down on one knee near the face-off circle, helping a little girl whose helmet had slid over her eyes. He adjusted the straps gently. "Better?"

"Yeah," she squeaked.

"Good. Now show me that stance. Knees bent."

A few feet away, Arthur Pike was vibrating with energy. Despite being six, he had been on skates since he could walk, courtesy of his NHL father. He skated circles around the standing cones before skidding to a halt next to Mateo.

Mateo was clutching the boards with both hands, his knuckles white. He looked small in the donated equipment, his eyes darting around nervously.

"Hi!" Arthur chirped, leaning on his stick like a pro. "I'm Arthur. My dad is Coach Hayden, but he's stressed today so I'm with you guys. Do you like my tape? It's neon."

Mateo blinked, looking down at the electric green tape on Arthur's stick, then back up. "It's... bright," he whispered. It was the first time Shane had heard him speak all morning.

"It makes the puck go faster," Arthur lied with absolute confidence. "Hey, you're gripping the wall too hard. Dad says the wall is for leaning, not living. Come on, I'll show you how to stop without falling on your butt. I only do that like... half the time."

Mateo hesitated, but Arthur's grin was infectious. Slowly, Mateo peeled one hand off the boards.

Shane, watching from the corner of his eye, felt a surge of warmth. He looked over at Max, who gave him a subtle nod. Mission accomplished.

On the other end of the rink, the atmosphere was different.

Ilya had taken the "Elite Team"—a ragtag group of kids who had come into the camp already knowing how to skate. It included the older kids, the natural athletes, and now, Ruby and Jade Pike who were already playing competitive hockey.

Ilya wasn't doing fun falling drills. He was running edge work.

"Inside edge, hold it!" Ilya commanded, gliding backward effortlessly while watching the line of kids snake toward him. "If you drop foot, we start over. Balance is everything."

Jade Pike, at eleven years old, was leading the pack. She looked fiercely determined, her crossovers sharp and powerful, clearly trying to impress her 'Uncle Ilya'. Ruby was right behind her, tongue sticking out in concentration.

"Good, Jade," Ilya called out as she passed. "Keep chest up. Don't look at ice. Ice is not going anywhere."

He stopped a boy who was wobbling dangerously. "Stop," Ilya said firmly but not unkindly. He tapped the boy's skate. "Your laces are loose. You have no support. Sit."

As the boy sat on the ice, Ilya knelt instantly, ripping his gloves off with his teeth to retie the skates tight. "You cannot build house on bad foundation," Ilya told him, tugging the laces

until the boot was snug. "Now stand. Feel difference?"

The boy stood up, his ankles straighter. "Whoa. Yeah."

"Good. Back in line."

Ilya stood up, catching Shane's eye across the neutral zone. He flashed a quick, sharp grin—the one that usually meant *we are crushing this*—before blowing his whistle.

"Okay! Crossovers! Faster!"

The rest of the day passed in a blur of whistles, scraped ice, and the distinct smell of sweat and rubber. By 4:00 PM, the Zamboni was revving up, signaling the end of the session.

Collection time was always organized chaos. Yuna had established a strict checkout system: parents had to sign out their children at the front desk, showing ID if they weren't recognized.

Shane was manning the door, high-fiving kids as they left with their parents.

"Good hustle today, Jimmy!"

"See you tomorrow, Sarah!"

He saw Mateo standing near the wall, still looking a bit small and overwhelmed, though he was holding a juice box Arthur Pike had clearly pressed upon him.

A woman Shane hadn't seen before approached Mateo. She looked tired, dressed in a business suit that had seen better days, carrying a heavy tote bag. She wasn't the foster mother who had dropped him off—an older, stern-looking woman.

"Mateo, let's go," she said, her voice brisk but not mean.

Mateo looked up, blinking. He didn't move immediately.

Shane stepped in, placing himself casually between the woman and the boy. "Hi there," Shane said, flashing his polite-but-firm media smile. "I don't think we've met. I'm Coach Shane."

"I know who you are," the woman said, shifting her bag. "I'm here for Mateo."

Shane glanced at the clipboard in his hand. "I need to check his file. What's your name?"

"Linda Morris."

Shane scanned the sheet. *Mateo... Safe Adults: Foster Mother (Mrs.t.Gable).*

"I'm sorry, Ms. Morris," Shane said, keeping his voice calm but dropping the smile. "Your name isn't on the list of authorized adults for pickup. I can't release him to you."

The woman sighed, rubbing her temple. "Look, I'm in a hurry. Mrs. Gable couldn't make it, her car broke down. I was in the area."

"I understand that," Shane said, his posture straightening. "But without prior authorization from the guardian on file, he stays here. It's policy. Safety first."

"I'm not a stranger," she snapped, frustration leaking through. "I'm his case worker."

Shane paused. That complicated things, but it didn't change the list. "I still can't—"

"Is there a problem?"

Yuna appeared at Shane's elbow. She was small, but she commanded the space with an authority that even Ilya respected. She looked from Shane to the woman, her eyes sharp.

"She says she's the case worker," Shane explained. "She's not on the list."

Yuna looked at Linda Morris. She took in the suit, the badge clipped to her belt that Shane had missed, and the tired expression.

"Ms. Morris," Yuna said calmly. "I am Yuna Hollander. We have strict safeguarding protocols. If you are his case worker, you will understand why we cannot simply let him leave with someone not on the list."

Linda opened her mouth to argue, but Yuna raised a hand.

"However," Yuna continued, her voice taking on a steely edge. "If you are his case worker, we actually need to speak with you. Regarding Mateo's welfare. Please, come to the office. Shane, keep Mateo occupied. Perhaps take him back onto the ice."

Linda hesitated, looking at the two of them. Then she nodded, the fight draining out of her. "Fine. Let's talk."

As Yuna led Linda toward the back office where the heavy grey filing cabinet stood, she didn't waste time with pleasantries. Once the door was shut, dampening the noise of the lobby, Yuna turned.

"Ms. Morris," Yuna began, sitting behind the desk but not offering a chair immediately. "We have serious concerns about Mateo's placement. Yesterday, one of our coaches, Hayden Pike, observed extensive bruising on the boy's torso while helping him change. It was inconsistent with play. It was severe."

Linda’s tired expression sharpened into alarm. "Bruising? Where?"

"Back, ribs. Deep purple," Yuna said, her voice uncompromising. "Coupled with his extreme withdrawal... he is terrified, Ms. Morris. He barely speaks. He flinches when adults move too fast. This is not a happy child."

Linda pulled a notepad from her bag, her hands shaking slightly. "I... I haven't seen him undressed in weeks. The Gables have been fostered for years, they have a clean record."

"Records change," Yuna said softly. "People change. You need to investigate this. Now."

While the interrogation unfolded in the office, Shane turned to Mateo, who was watching the door where the adults had disappeared.

"Hey, buddy," Shane said gently, crouching down. "Adult talk is boring, right?"

Mateo looked at him, eyes wide. He nodded slightly.

"You know what's not boring?" Shane grinned conspiratorially. "Watching Coach Ilya try to hit the crossbar from the red line. He thinks he can do it ten times in a row. I bet he can't."

Mateo’s gaze flickered toward the rink doors. "He's really good," Mateo whispered.

"He is," Shane agreed, standing up and offering a hand. "Come on. Let's go see."

They walked out to the rink.

The ice was empty save for Ilya, who was currently lining up pucks at the center line. He wasn't just shooting; he was conducting a symphony of destruction against the crossbar. *Ping. Ping. Ping.* The sound was sharp and rhythmic.

When he saw Shane and Mateo emerge from the tunnel, Ilya stopped mid-windup. He straightened, resting his gloved hands on his stick, and drifted over to the boards where they were standing.

"Did you hit it?" Mateo asked quietly, his eyes fixed on the net.

"Nine times," Ilya said, a hint of a smile touching his lips. "Missed the last one because I saw you coming. Distracted by good looks." He winked at Shane.

Shane nudged the boy gently. "You want to try getting out there? Just us. No big groups, no drills."

Mateo looked at the vast, empty sheet of white ice, then down at his sneakers. "I don't have my skates on."

"Easy fix," Shane said. He grabbed a spare pair of youth skates and a helmet from the bench where the equipment manager had left a pile.

Five minutes later, Mateo was laced up. But as soon as his blades hit the ice, the fear returned. He scrambled for the boards immediately, clutching the white plastic ledge with a grip so tight his knuckles turned white.

"I can't," Mateo whispered, refusing to move his feet.

"You can," Ilya said, skating over. He didn't stop in front of Mateo; he turned and glided backward, matching Mateo's pace as the boy shuffled inches along the wall. "The wall is safe, yes. But the ice is freedom."

For the next twenty minutes, the arena shrank down to just the three of them. It was a slow, patient process. Shane skated backward a few feet in front of Mateo, offering an encouraging target, while Ilya stayed right by his side, a tall, solid presence between Mateo and the open ice.

"Knees bent," Ilya instructed, his voice low and calm, stripped of the barking tone he used for the elite drills. "Lower center of gravity. Like sitting in chair. Yes. Better."

"I'm gonna fall," Mateo said, his voice trembling as one skate slipped slightly.

"Then we catch you," Shane promised, holding his hands out ready. "Trust us, Mateo. We've got you. Try letting go with one hand."

Mateo hesitated, looking from Shane's open hands to Ilya's steady nod. Slowly, he peeled his right hand off the boards. He wobbled, arms flailing for a second, but Ilya's hand was instantly there, hovering just behind his back without touching, ready to grab him if needed.

"Good," Ilya murmured. "Now push. Just a little."

Mateo pushed. He took one choppy stride away from the wall, then another. He reached out and grabbed Shane's hands, letting out a rush of air.

"I did it," Mateo breathed, looking back at the gap between him and the boards. It was only three feet, but it felt like an ocean.

"You did," Shane beamed, squeezing Mateo's gloved hands. "You're skating, buddy."

They did a few more laps like that—Mateo holding Shane's hand, or skating between them while Ilya corrected his posture—until Mateo's legs began to tire. They drifted back to the bench to catch their breath.

Mateo looked between them, his brow furrowing slightly as he processed the interaction—the way they moved in sync, the way they communicated without speaking. He looked down at his skates, then back up at Ilya. "Are you guys... are you friends?"

Shane blinked, surprised by the innocence of the question. He looked at Ilya, who was looking back at him with that soft, open expression he reserved only for their private moments.

"We are best friends, yes," Ilya answered, leaning over to ruffle Mateo's hair, which made the boy flinch slightly before relaxing. "But we are also married."

Mateo's eyes went wide. "Oh." He kicked at the ice shavings on the floor. "I don't have friends."

The admission was so quiet it almost got lost under the hum of the arena lights. It broke Shane's heart a little more.

"Well, that's not true," Shane said gently, crouching down so he was eye-level with the boy. "I saw you with Arthur Pike today. He gave you that juice box, didn't he? And he told me earlier that you were the only one who listened to his story about the neon tape. In Arthur's world, that makes you best friend material."

Mateo looked skeptical, but a small, tentative hope flickered in his eyes. "He talks a lot."

"He gets that from his dad," Ilya said dryly.

Before Mateo could respond, the heavy door to the office hallway opened. Yuna stepped out, followed by Linda Morris. The case worker looked shaken, her face pale and her lips pressed into a thin line. It was clear Yuna had put the fear of God—or at least the fear of a very determined grandmother—into her.

"Mateo," Linda called out, her voice softer than it had been earlier. "We have to go now."

Mateo stiffened. The small spark of light that had appeared at the mention of Arthur vanished, replaced by the dull, guarded look he wore like armor.

"Okay," he whispered.

"Here, let me help you," Shane said. He quickly knelt, helping Mateo unlace the skates he had just started to get comfortable in. He pulled the helmet off gently, smoothing down the boy's messy hair. "You did great today, Mateo. Really brave."

Mateo didn't say anything. He just nodded, stepped into his worn sneakers, and walked over to Linda without looking back.

Shane stood there, watching them walk toward the exit doors. He watched the small, slumped shoulders of the nine-year-old boy disappear into the bright summer afternoon, heading back to a home where he wasn't wanted, to a system that had already failed him.

The heavy metal doors clicked shut.

And Shane crumbled.

It wasn't a slow build; it was an immediate physical reaction. His breath hitched, a harsh, jagged sound, and he slumped forward, gripping the dasher boards so hard his knuckles turned white. The image of the bruises described by Hayden, the look of resignation in Mateo's eyes—it was too much. It hit too close to the fears he carried about his own worth, about the fragility of safety.

"Shane."

Ilya was there in a second. He didn't bother with the gate; he vaulted over the boards with a clatter of skates, landing heavily and immediately pulling Shane into his chest.

"I can't," Shane choked out, burying his face in the rough fabric of Ilya's practice jersey. "Ilya, he's going back. We just let him go back."

"Shh," Ilya murmured, his arms wrapping around Shane like a vice, holding him together. He rocked them slightly, ignoring the fact that he was on skates and Shane was on solid ground. "Yuna handled it. The worker knows. They will check him tonight. He is on the radar now."

Shane was shaking, dry sobs racking his chest. "It's not enough. He's just a kid."

Yuna, who had stayed by the office door, watched them. Her expression was filled with sorrow, but she didn't interfere. She watched her son-in-law, the stoic Russian who usually kept his emotions locked behind iron walls, press his lips to Shane's temple.

"Ya tebya lyublyu," Ilya whispered into Shane's hair, the Russian vowels round and deep. *"Ya tebya lyublyu, Shane. Ya tebya lyublyu."*

He repeated it like a mantra, a steady drumbeat against the panic rising in Shane's chest. *I love you. I love you.* It was the only thing Ilya knew for certain could ground Shane when the world felt too big and too cruel.

Slowly, the tension began to bleed out of Shane's frame. The shaking subsided into occasional tremors. He took a deep, shuddering breath, inhaling the scent of ice and Ilya.

"I'm okay," Shane whispered eventually, though he didn't let go.

"I know," Ilya said softly, stroking Shane's back. "Let's go home."

The house was quiet that night. Yuna cooked dinner—a simple stir-fry—and the three of them sat around the island in a silence that felt thick and brittle. The usual banter about camp logistics or hockey news was absent. Every time a fork scraped against a plate, it seemed too loud.

Shane pushed his food around, barely eating. Ilya ate mechanically, his eyes constantly darting to Shane, assessing, worrying.

By the time they got to the bedroom, Shane was vibrating with residual stress. He couldn't sit still. He paced the length of the master bedroom, running a hand through his hair, muttering about legal statutes and foster care regulations he barely understood.

Ilya sat on the edge of the bed, watching him. He looked exhausted, the physical toll of the camp combined with the emotional weight of the day dragging at his shoulders.

"Shane," Ilya said quietly. "Stop walking."

"I should have called the emergency line myself," Shane said, pivoting at the window. "What if Linda doesn't do anything? What if the foster parents talk their way out of it?"

"Shane."

"I can't sleep, Ilya. I can't just close my eyes and—"

"Shane!" Ilya's voice was sharp enough to cut through the spiral.

Shane stopped, looking at him.

Ilya sighed, his expression softening instantly. He patted the empty space on the mattress beside him. "You cannot save the world at midnight. You cannot do anything more today. You have done everything you could."

"It doesn't feel like it," Shane admitted, his voice cracking.

"I know," Ilya said. "But you need sleep. Mateo needs you to be Coach Shane tomorrow, not... this zombie." He held out a hand. "Please. Come to bed with your husband."

The vulnerability in Ilya's request broke the last of Shane's resistance. He slumped, the fight leaving him. "Okay."

He crawled into bed, and Ilya immediately pulled him close, tangling their legs together and tucking Shane's head under his chin. Shane fell asleep to the sound of Ilya's breathing, clutching Ilya's t-shirt in his fist.

The next morning, the anxiety was back.

They stood outside the arena entrance, mugs of coffee in hand, watching the yellow school buses pull into the lot.

Bus one. No Mateo. Bus two. No Mateo.

Shane's grip on his coffee cup was so tight the cardboard sleeve was tearing. "He's not coming," Shane murmured. "They pulled him."

"Wait," Ilya said, his eyes narrowed behind his sunglasses.

The third and final bus hissed to a halt. The doors opened. A stream of kids poured out. And there, at the very end, dragging his oversized bag, was Mateo. He looked tired, but he was there.

Shane let out a breath he felt like he'd been holding for twelve hours. "Okay. He's here."

"He is here," Ilya confirmed, squeezing Shane's shoulder.

As Mateo walked toward the entrance, looking small and solitary among the loud groups of friends, Shane frowned. He pulled out his phone.

Shane: *Where are you?*

Hayden: *Dropping kids at science camp. Arthur was excited about the volcano experiment. Be there in 20.*

Shane's thumbs flew across the screen.

Shane: *Change of plans. Bring Arthur to the rink.*

Hayden: *Dude, science camp started 10 mins ago. I literally just dropped him off. He has a lab coat.*

Shane: *Too bad. Go get him. Bring him or else.*

Hayden:*...Or else what?*

Shane: *Or else I tell the media about the time you cried watching Frozen 2.*

Hayden: *OMW.*

Thirty minutes later, Hayden's SUV screeched into the lot. A very confused Arthur Pike hopped out, still wearing a miniature white lab coat over his hockey gear.

"I was gonna make lava!" Arthur complained as he ran up to them.

"New mission," Shane said, pointing toward the lobby where Mateo was sitting alone on a bench, tying his shoes. "Mateo needs a winger."

Arthur lit up. "Mateo!" He sprinted into the building, lab coat flapping behind him like a cape.

Shane watched through the glass as Arthur crashed onto the bench next to Mateo, immediately launching into a story that made Mateo look up and, for the first time in two days, smile. A real smile.

Ilya leaned in close, ducking his head so only Shane could hear him over the ambient noise of the arriving campers. A mischievous, almost conspiratorial grin tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"We are going to have at least four of them running around the house," Ilya whispered, the certainty in his voice absolute.

Shane blinked, startled by the sudden jump in numbers. He took a sip of his drink, eyebrows raising skeptically as he looked back at Ilya. "Maybe two," Shane countered, his voice dry. "Have you seen Hayden's house? It's a total zoo."

"Yes," Ilya replied immediately, not even pausing to consider the chaos of their friend's home. He crossed his arms, his expression shifting from mischievous to smugly competent. "But have you seen Hayden's house when *I* am in charge of the children?"

Shane snorted, pushing off the wall to head toward the ice. "You mean when you scare them into submission with the Russian glare?"

"Is not fear," Ilya corrected, skating backward effortlessly to face him, a smug grin plastered on his face. "Is respect. Children crave structure. And I am excellent at structure. Come. We have hockey to play."

On the ice, the difference Arthur's presence made was immediate and stark. With the younger Pike buzzing around him like a caffeinated bumblebee, Mateo didn't have time to be terrified. He was too busy trying to keep up with Arthur's stream of consciousness, which seemed to oscillate between volcanoes, Minecraft, and why blue Gatorade was scientifically superior to red.

"And then the lava goes *whoosh*," Arthur demonstrated, nearly tripping over his own blue line in his excitement. "But Dad says real lava is actually slow. Which is boring. Hockey is fast." He poked Mateo's shin pad with his stick gently. "Pass me the puck!"

Mateo hesitated, glancing at Shane for permission. Shane nodded encouragingly. Mateo tapped the puck toward Arthur. It was a weak pass, wobbling on its edge, but it connected.

"Nice!" Arthur cheered, slapping his stick on the ice. "Okay, now I pass to you. Get ready. I have a very powerful shot."

From center ice, Ilya blew his whistle. One sharp, piercing blast.

Instantly, twenty-five kids stopped moving. Even the ones who usually poked each other during instructions froze. The chaotic noise of the rink dropped to near silence.

Ilya scanned the group, hands on his hips. "Sticks on ice. Eyes up."

He waited a beat, ensuring he had every single pair of eyes locked on him.

"Today we do not play like swarm of bees," Ilya announced, his voice carrying to the rafters. "Today we play like wolf pack. Who knows what wolf pack does?"

A hand shot up from a boy in the front row.

"They hunt together?" he ventured.

"Yes," Ilya nodded, skating slowly down the line. "They work together. They trust each other. You trust your winger. You trust your goalie. If you do not trust, you lose. Now, divide. Arthur, Mateo, you are with Coach Shane on passing drills. Go."

Shane skated over to the designated zone, catching Ilya's eye across the neutral zone. Ilya raised an eyebrow, a silent *See? Four children. Easy.*

Shane shook his head, biting back a smile as he turned to the boys.

"Alright," Shane said, clapping his hands. "Arthur, less talking, more passing. Mateo, you're doing great. Keep those knees bent."

The day felt lighter. The shadow of the previous evening was still there, lurking in the back of Shane's mind—the heavy knowledge that at 4:00 PM, Linda Morris or a foster parent would come to take Mateo away again. But for now, in this rink, with Arthur chatting his ear off and Ilya watching over them like a hawk, Mateo was just a kid playing hockey.

And as Shane watched Mateo laugh—a real, surprised sound—at Arthur falling on his butt during a turn, he allowed himself to believe, just for a moment, that Ilya was right.

Maybe they could handle the chaos. Maybe they could fill a house.

Because watching Mateo look for Ilya across the ice to see if he'd seen the pass, Shane knew one thing for certain: he wasn't ready to let this kid go again.

Friday night hit Ottawa with the kind of humidity that made the air feel like soup, but inside *The Ironwood*, the air conditioning was blasting and the drinks were dangerously cold.

It was a tradition born of necessity: Friday nights during camp were for the coaches. No kids, no whistles, just alcohol and venting.

They had commandeered the large circular booth in the back corner. It was a tight squeeze for five professional hockey players, a former goalie, and a musician, but they made it work. Mostly because Ryan Price didn't mind Fabian practically sitting in his lap.

"To surviving Week One," Hayden Pike announced, raising a glass of something that looked suspiciously like a neon blue slushie. "And to Arthur only almost setting the kitchen on fire with his 'volcano' experiment yesterday."

" 'Almost' is the keyword," Max Riley grinned, clinking his beer bottle against Hayden's glass. Beside him, Leah—who had insisted on a glass of red wine despite the heat—rolled her eyes affectionately.

"I still can't believe you let him bring baking soda into the living room," Leah said. "Rookie mistake, Pike."

"He had a lab coat!" Hayden defended himself. "He looked official! I trusted the uniform."

Ilya, sitting pressed against Shane's side with an arm draped protectively along the back of the booth behind Shane's head, snorted. "You represent chaos, Pike. Your children simply follow the leader."

"Hey," Hayden pointed a fry at him. "My children are spirited. Unlike your soldiers."

"My soldiers win games," Ilya parried smoothly, taking a sip of his vodka soda.

Shane leaned back, letting the familiar banter wash over him. He felt lighter than he had on Monday. The week had been grueling—mostly due to the emotional rollercoaster of the Mateo situation—but they had made it. Mateo had shown up every day. He was quiet, yes, and he still flinched if a door slammed too hard, but he was skating. And he was passing to Arthur.

"Speaking of soldiers," Ryan spoke up, his hand resting comfortably on Fabian’s knee under the table. Fabian was humming quietly along to the track playing overhead, looking perfectly content to be the smallest person at a table of giants. "How’s the new kid? Mateo?"

The table quieted down a little. They all knew the situation; news traveled fast in their tight-knit circle.

"He's getting there," Shane said, tracing the rim of his glass. "Arthur has been... amazing, actually. He just doesn't let Mateo be sad. He just bulldozes him with friendship."

"It's the Pike charm," Fabian grinned, leaning into Ryan. "Irresistible and slightly overwhelming."

"Exactly," Shane smiled. "But Max... thank you. Seriously."

Max waved it off, though he looked pleased. "Kid’s got good edges. Once he stops being scared of the ice, he’s gonna be fast. I just stand there and look mean so nobody messes with him in the locker room."

"It is working," Ilya said. "He is eating more at lunch, too. Yuna has been packing extra 'mistake' sandwiches."

"Yuna doesn't make mistakes," Leah pointed out.

"Exactly," Ilya smirked.

Fabian took a sip of his cocktail, looking thoughtful. "You know, seeing you two with him... it's a good look. Very paternal."

Shane felt heat rise to his cheeks that had nothing to do with the alcohol. "We're just coaching."

"Mm-hmm," Ryan teased, tightening his grip on Fabian’s shoulder. "Just coaching. Is that what we're calling it when Ilya re-ties his skates three times a session just to check in on

him?"

"Circulation is important," Ilya argued, though he didn't look the least bit embarrassed. "If feet go numb, you cannot skate."

"Right," Hayden laughed. "Just like it's important for you to glare at the foster mom when she picks him up? I thought you were going to laser beam her through the glass today."

Ilya’s expression darkened slightly. "She is... efficient. But cold. She holds his hand like it is a grocery bag."

Shane felt Ilya’s hand tighten on his shoulder. He reached up, covering Ilya’s hand with his own. "He's safe for the weekend, Il. We made sure the case worker is doing a home check tomorrow."

"I know," Ilya murmured, turning his face into Shane's hair for a brief second. "I just... I hate the waiting."

"We all do," Leah said softly. She raised her wine glass. "To the good guys winning. Eventually."

"To the good guys," Shane echoed.

They drank, the heavy moment passing as Hayden launched into a story about a prank war he was currently losing to his own daughter, Jade.

As the laughter picked up again, Shane leaned his head back against Ilya’s shoulder. He watched his friends—his family, really. Ryan and Fabian whispering something to each other that made Fabian laugh; Max stealing a fry from Leah’s plate and getting his hand slapped; Hayden gesturing wildly.

It was messy, and loud, and perfect. And if Ilya was right—if they were going to have four of their own running around someday—Shane thought, looking around the table, that they probably wouldn't be doing it alone.

By the third round of drinks—or maybe the fourth, Shane had lost count—the sharp edges of the week hadn't just dulled; they had completely dissolved into a warm, fuzzy haze.

Shane was currently less sitting next to Ilya and more inhabiting the same space as him. He was practically climbing into his husband’s lap, one leg hooked brazenly over Ilya’s thigh under the table. His head was tipped back against Ilya’s shoulder, eyes half-closed, while Ilya’s nose brushed against the sensitive skin of Shane’s throat, pressing lingering, proprietary kisses there that made Shane shiver.

"You are a octopus, Hollander," Ilya murmured against Shane’s jawline, his voice a low rumble. His hand was splayed wide across Shane’s lower back, rubbing possessive circles, occasionally dipping lower to squeeze Shane’s hip. Ilya had matched Shane drink for drink,

but aside from a slight, relaxed looseness in his posture and the darkening of his eyes, the Russian was irritatingly sober compared to the puddle of goo Shane had become.

"M'not an octopus," Shane slurred, turning his head to clumsily nuzzle into the side of Ilya's face. His hands were busy, wandering with zero subtlety under the hem of Ilya's t-shirt to trace the ridges of abs, then sliding up to grip Ilya's bicep. "You're just... warm. And hard. Everywhere."

"Jesus, get a room," Hayden groaned from across the table, throwing a crumpled napkin at them.

"Jealousy is ugly color on you, Pike," Ilya shot back without looking up. He turned his attention fully to Shane, capturing Shane's wandering hand and kissing the knuckles before pressing a firm kiss to Shane's flushed cheek.

Shane hummed, ignoring Hayden completely. He felt loose and safe and incredibly affectionate. He pulled back just enough to look at Ilya, his eyes swimming and glassy. He reached up, cupping Ilya's face with both hands, squishing his cheeks slightly.

"Ilya," Shane said, his words blurring together as he leaned his forehead against Ilya's. "I have... I have a great idea."

Ilya raised an eyebrow, leaning into the touch, his thumb stroking Shane's cheekbone. "Oh? Does it involve water and aspirin? Because you will need both."

"No," Shane frowned, leaning in to peck the corner of Ilya's mouth, missing the center slightly. "Better. We should just... take him."

Ilya paused, his hand stilling on Shane's back. "Take who?"

"Mateo," Shane whispered loudly, as if sharing a state secret. "We just... take him home. Put him in the guest room. Arthur can come over. We have... we have so much soup. Yuna makes soup."

Ilya let out a low, startled laugh, the sound vibrating against Shane's chest. He shook his head, looking at Shane with an expression that was equal parts amusement and fierce adoration. He pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead.

"Kidnapping is illegal, *solnyshko*," Ilya said gently. "Even for us."

"Is it kidnapping if we have snacks?" Shane argued weakly, nuzzling back into the crook of Ilya's neck, breathing him in. "He likes us. I think."

"He adores us," Ilya corrected softly, his lips brushing against Shane's temple. "But we cannot just steal him, Shane."

"Boring," Shane sighed, closing his eyes as he practically melted off the bench. "You're boring. Kiss me."

Ilya chuckled, the sound rumbling deep in his chest. "That, I can do."

He tilted Shane’s chin up and kissed him properly—slow and deep and claiming. Shane made a happy noise in the back of his throat, tangling his fingers in Ilya’s hair, content to just exist in this moment where everything was warm and safe and Ilya was holding him together.

Eventually, even Ilya had to admit that Shane’s state of liquid relaxation was bordering on unconsciousness.

"Alright," Ilya announced, pulling back slightly but keeping a firm arm around Shane to stop him from sliding under the table. "I think the octopus has left the building. We are going home."

He stood up, effortlessly hauling Shane up with him. Shane swayed, blinking at the sudden change in altitude, and immediately wrapped both arms around Ilya’s torso for stability.

"Leaving already?" Ryan asked, grinning from where he was leaning on Fabian. "The night is young."

"Shane is not," Ilya deadpanned. "Look at him. He is trying to braid my shirt."

Shane was, in fact, twisting the fabric of Ilya’s t-shirt around his fingers with intense concentration. "It's soft," Shane defended himself, though it came out as "s'soft."

"Uber is five minutes out," Max said, checking his phone. "We'll make sure these two get home okay."

"We are fine," Ilya assured them. He guided Shane toward the door, maneuvering him through the crowded bar with the practiced ease of someone who had done this many times before. Shane went willingly, mostly because he was too busy leaning his entire body weight against Ilya to argue.

Outside, the humidity had broken slightly, leaving the air cool and damp. Shane took a deep breath, the fresh air waking him up just enough to make him sentimental.

"Ilya," Shane said as they waited on the curb, his head resting on Ilya’s shoulder.

"Yes, Shane?"

"I really... I really think I'd be a good dad." The slur was still there, but the tone was heartbreakingly sincere. Shane looked up, his eyes glassy and vulnerable under the streetlights. "I know I mess things up sometimes. And I stress out. But... I'd love them so much."

Ilya felt a tightness in his throat. He wrapped both arms around Shane, pulling him into a hug that blocked out the rest of the world.

"You would be the best dad," Ilya promised, his voice fierce and low. "You have so much love, Shane. Sometimes I think you have too much for just one person. That is why we need

four children. To absorb it all."

Shane let out a wet laugh, burying his face in Ilya's neck. "Four is a lot."

"We can start with one," Ilya murmured, spotting the Uber pulling up. "Come on. Let's go home."

The ride home was quiet. Shane fell asleep almost immediately, his head in Ilya's lap, while Ilya stroked his hair and watched the city lights blur past. When they arrived, Ilya had to half-carry, half-walk Shane up the driveway.

The house was dark except for a single lamp in the living room. Yuna was sitting in her armchair with a book, looking perfectly awake despite the late hour. She looked up as they stumbled in, taking in Shane's disheveled appearance and the way he was clinging to Ilya.

"Good night?" Yuna asked dryly, marking her page.

"Very good," Ilya grunted, kicking his shoes off while trying to keep Shane upright. "Shane has decided to adopt the entire city of Ottawa."

"Is a good plan," Shane mumbled, eyes closed. "Start with Mateo. Then... everyone."

Yuna smiled, a soft, genuine expression. "Get him to bed, Ilya. Drink some water yourself."

"Yes, Mama Yuna," Ilya said dutifully.

Upstairs, the process of getting Shane into pajamas was a comedy of errors that involved Shane getting his head stuck in his t-shirt and laughing for a solid minute. But finally, they were both in bed. The room was cool, the sheets were crisp, and Shane was curled up against Ilya's side, his breathing already evening out into sleep.

Ilya lay awake for a long time, staring at the ceiling fan spinning slowly above them. He could feel the warmth of Shane's body against his, the steady rhythm of his husband's heart.

Four of them, he thought. *Running around.*

It was a terrifying thought. It was the best thought he'd ever had.

He pressed a kiss to the top of Shane's head, closed his eyes, and finally let himself drift off, dreaming of neon tape, skating rinks, and a little boy who deserved a whole lot more than a juice box.

Saturday morning arrived with the subtlety of a body check.

Shane woke up with a groan that seemed to come from his soul. The sunlight streaming through the gaps in the blinds felt personally offensive, stabbing directly into his eyes. He squeezed them shut again, burying his face in the pillow.

"No," Shane mumbled into the linen. "Turn off the sun."

"The sun does not have an off switch, *solnyshko*."

Ilya's voice was far too cheerful. And far too loud.

Shane cracked one eye open to see his husband standing at the foot of the bed, looking infuriatingly fresh. Ilya was already dressed in sweatpants and a tight grey t-shirt, his hair damp from a shower. He was holding a glass of water and two white pills.

"You are disgusting," Shane croaked, pushing himself up onto his elbows. The room spun slightly. "How are you awake? You drank as much as I did."

"I am Russian," Ilya said simply, as if that explained everything. He sat on the edge of the bed and handed Shane the water. "Drink. You were dehydrated octopus last night."

Shane took the pills and downed the water in one go. He handed the glass back, rubbing his temples. "Did I... did I say anything stupid?"

Ilya's expression softened. He reached out, brushing Shane's messy hair back from his forehead. "You said you wanted to adopt Mateo. And then the entire population of Ottawa. And that my shirt was soft."

Shane groaned, covering his face with his hands. "Oh god. The kidnapping plan. I remember the soup logic."

"It was sound logic," Ilya chuckled. "Come. Yuna is making breakfast. And we are waiting for call from Linda."

The mention of Linda Morris snapped Shane back to reality faster than the aspirin ever could. The headache receded into the background, replaced by the familiar knot of anxiety in his stomach. Today was the home check.

By the time Shane made it downstairs—showered, dressed, and feeling slightly more human—Ilya was already at the kitchen island, sipping coffee. Yuna was at the stove, flipping pancakes.

"Morning, Mom," Shane said, kissing her cheek before sliding onto the stool next to Ilya.

"Good morning, Shane," Yuna said, placing a plate of pancakes in front of him. "Eat. You need the carbs."

"Thanks." Shane poked at the pancakes, his appetite nonexistent. "Any news?"

"Not yet," Yuna said, glancing at her phone which was sitting on the counter, screen up. "Linda said she would go over first thing in the morning. It is..." she checked the clock, "10:30 now."

"Maybe no news is good news?" Shane offered weakly.

Ilya didn't answer. He just reached out and took Shane’s hand, squeezing it tight.

They ate in silence, the tension in the room thick enough to cut with a knife. Every time the refrigerator hummed or a car drove past outside, three heads snapped up.

At 11:15, Yuna’s phone rang.

The sound was jarring in the quiet kitchen. Yuna picked it up immediately, checking the ID. Her eyes widened slightly.

"It is Linda," she whispered.

She answered, putting it on speakerphone so Shane and Ilya could hear.

"Linda? Is everything okay?" Yuna asked, her voice steady.

"Yuna," Linda’s voice crackled through the speaker. She sounded breathless, stressed, and—Shane realized with a jolt—angry. "I... I have a situation."

Shane leaned forward, gripping the counter. "What happened? Is Mateo okay?"

"He's physically safe," Linda said quickly. "He's with me. We're in my car."

"In your car?" Ilya asked, his voice sharp. "Why is he not in house?"

"Because I removed him," Linda said, and the shakiness in her voice was replaced by steel. "I went for the spot check. Mrs. Gable wasn't there, she was 'at the store'. But Mr. Gable was. He... he refused to let me speak to Mateo alone. He was aggressive. And when I insisted on seeing Mateo's room..."

She trailed off, taking a shaky breath.

"What?" Shane demanded. "What did you find?"

"There was a lock on the outside of the door," Linda said quietly. "And inside... it wasn't a room for a child. It was a storage closet with a mattress."

Shane felt the blood drain from his face. Ilya let out a curse in Russian that sounded violent.

"I called the police for a standby assist and I pulled him immediately," Linda continued. "But Yuna... it's Saturday. The emergency shelters are full. The only open bed is at a group home on the other side of the city, and frankly, after what I just saw... I don't want to put him in another facility today. He's terrified. He hasn't spoken a word since we left."

Yuna looked at Shane and Ilya. She didn't even have to ask.

"Bring him here," Shane said instantly.

"Shane," Linda hesitated. "You aren't a licensed foster home. Technically, I can't—"

"Kinship placement," Yuna cut in, her voice firm. "Community bond. We are his coaches. We have an established relationship. You have the authority to authorize an emergency temporary placement for safety reasons until Monday, do you not?"

There was a pause on the line.

"I do," Linda admitted. "Under the emergency provision."

"Then bring him," Ilya said, his voice leaving no room for argument. "We have room. We have food. And we have safe adults. Bring him to us."

"Okay," Linda exhaled, sounding relieved. "Okay. We're twenty minutes away."

The call ended.

For a second, nobody moved. Then, pure panic set in.

"The guest room!" Shane yelled, jumping off his stool so fast it nearly tipped over. "It's full of hockey gear! We have to clear it!"

"I will get sheets," Ilya said, already moving toward the stairs. "Shane, move the bags. Yuna, do we have... do we have kid food? What do nine-year-olds eat?"

"Everything," Yuna said calmly, though her eyes were bright. "I will make soup. And sandwiches. Go. Clean."

The next twenty minutes were a blur of frenzied activity. Shane threw three hockey bags into the master bedroom closet, practically barricading them in. Ilya stripped the guest bed and remade it with the softest flannel sheets they owned, smoothing them down with military precision. They opened the window to let fresh air in, chasing away the stale smell of storage.

When the doorbell finally rang, Shane and Ilya froze at the top of the stairs. They looked at each other. Shane’s heart was hammering against his ribs.

"We can do this," Ilya whispered, grabbing Shane’s hand. "We are good team."

"Yeah," Shane breathed. "Wolf pack."

They walked down together just as Yuna opened the door.

Linda Morris stood on the porch, looking frazzled. And standing behind her, clutching a small, battered backpack with both hands, was Mateo.

He looked smaller than he did at the rink. He was wearing a t-shirt that was too big for him and jeans that had a hole in the knee. His eyes were wide and darting around, fear radiating off him in waves.

Then he saw Shane and Ilya.

He blinked. His grip on the backpack strap loosened just a fraction.

"Hi, Mateo," Shane said softly, kneeling down right there in the hallway so he wasn't towering over him. "Remember us?"

Mateo looked at Shane, then at Ilya standing solidly behind him. He took a tiny step forward, crossing the threshold.

"Coach Shane?" Mateo whispered. "Coach Ilya?"

"We are here," Ilya said gently. "Come inside, Mateo. You are safe now."

"Shane, Yuna, can I have a word?" Linda asked, stepping into the foyer but keeping her voice low. She glanced at Mateo, then at Ilya. "Privately?"

Ilya nodded understanding. He crouched slightly again. "Mateo, how about I show you your room? It is upstairs. The others will talk boring adult business."

Mateo hesitated, looking at Linda for permission. She nodded. "Go with Mr. Rozanov, Mateo. It's okay."

Ilya held out a hand, and after a second of hesitation, Mateo took it. His hand was tiny and cold in Ilya's large, warm grip. They walked up the stairs together, leaving the heavy atmosphere of the hallway behind.

In the kitchen, Yuna motioned for Linda to sit. "Tea? Coffee?"

"Water, please," Linda sighed, sinking into the chair as if the weight of the morning had finally caught up with her.

Shane remained standing, his arms crossed, anxiety making him jittery. "So, what happens now? Is he... is he ours for the weekend?"

"Technically, he is a ward of the state under emergency placement," Linda corrected, taking the glass Yuna handed her. "But yes. He stays here until Monday morning when the courts open and we can formalize a longer-term foster plan."

"We have our Vulnerable Sector Checks," Shane blurted out. "For the camp. We updated them in May. The physical copies are in the filing cabinet at the rink, but I can go get them right now. I can be back in twenty minutes."

Linda held up a hand. "Shane, sit down. There is no need."

"But the regulations—"

"I know the regulations," Linda said, a small, tired smile touching her lips. "I pulled your checks the moment Yuna called me yesterday. You're both cleared, obviously. And frankly, considering what I just pulled that boy out of... I would trust you two with him even if you had a speeding ticket or two."

Shane sagged against the counter, relief washing over him. "Okay. Good."

"We need to go over the rules," Linda said, pulling a folder from her bag. "No contacting the Gables. If they try to contact you, call the police immediately. Mateo might have nightmares. He might bed-wet. He might hoard food. These are trauma responses."

"We will handle it," Yuna said softly. "We have soup."

Upstairs, the mood was different.

Ilya led Mateo into the guest room. The afternoon light was filtering through the window, illuminating the freshly made bed with its soft grey flannel sheets. It wasn't a palace, but compared to the closet Linda had described, it must have looked like a suite at the Ritz.

Mateo stood in the doorway, afraid to step on the rug. He looked at the bed, then at the desk, then at the open window.

"Is... is this for me?" Mateo asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"Yes," Ilya said, leaning against the doorframe to keep the exit clear so Mateo didn't feel trapped. "Is your room. For as long as you need."

Mateo took a tentative step inside. He ran a hand over the quilt. Then he turned to Ilya, his expression serious and far too old for nine years.

"It's really big," Mateo said. He swallowed hard. "What are my chores?"

Ilya blinked. "Chores?"

"To stay here," Mateo explained, his hands fidgeting with the hem of his oversized t-shirt. "At the Gables, I had to do the dishes and the laundry and the yard work. And if I didn't do a good job, I... I had to sleep in the quiet room."

The quiet room. The closet with the lock.

Ilya felt a physical blow to his chest. He felt tears pricking at the corners of his eyes—hot and angry and sad. He forced them back, swallowing the lump in his throat. He couldn't cry now. Mateo needed him to be solid.

Ilya crossed the room in two long strides and knelt down on one knee so he was looking up at Mateo. He placed his large hands gently on Mateo’s small shoulders.

"Mateo," Ilya said, his voice thick with emotion but steady. "Listen to me very closely. You do not have chores here."

Mateo looked confused. "But... I have to earn it."

"No," Ilya shook his head firmly. "You do not earn bed. You do not earn food. You are child. Your only job is to play. And maybe to eat soup. And to sleep."

"I don't have to clean?"

"You can clean your plate if you are hungry," Ilya managed a small, wet smile. "But no scrubbing. No yard work. In this house, Shane and I do the work. You are just Mateo."

Mateo stared at him, his lower lip trembling slightly. He looked for a lie in Ilya's face, but he found only fierce, protective honesty.

"Okay," Mateo whispered.

"Okay," Ilya echoed. He stood up, clearing his throat to hide the wobble in his voice. "Now. I believe Shane mentioned snacks. Shall we go see if he was lying?"

Mateo nodded, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. "He said you guys had good snacks."

"He is sometimes right," Ilya said, offering his hand again. This time, Mateo took it without hesitation.

Downstairs, the heavy conversation had wrapped up. Linda Morris was standing by the door, her bag shouldered, looking infinitely more relaxed than she had twenty minutes ago.

When Ilya and Mateo appeared at the bottom of the stairs, Shane's head snapped up. He looked from his husband to the boy, searching for any sign of distress.

Mateo looked... okay. A little overwhelmed, maybe, but he was holding Ilya's hand.

"Everything good?" Shane asked, trying to keep his voice light.

"We have established ground rules," Ilya said solemnly. "Rule number one: Snacks are mandatory."

Shane grinned, the tension in his shoulders finally dropping. "Best rule."

Linda smiled, a genuine, tired expression. She crouched down one last time to look Mateo in the eye. "Mateo, I'm going to head out now. You're going to stay here with Shane and Ilya and Mrs. Hollander for the weekend, okay? I'll come back on Monday to check on you."

Mateo nodded, gripping Ilya's hand a little tighter. "Okay."

"Be good," she said automatically, then corrected herself. "Just... have fun, kiddo."

She stood up and nodded to the adults. "Call me. Any time."

"We will," Yuna promised.

When the door clicked shut behind her, the house fell silent. It wasn't the heavy silence of before, though. It was the quiet of a new beginning.

Shane clapped his hands together, making Mateo jump slightly.

"Sorry," Shane winced. "Too loud. Okay. Snacks. I promised snacks."

He led them into the kitchen, which—thanks to Yuna—was already smelling like chicken soup. But Shane bypassed the stove and went straight to the pantry. He opened the double doors with a flourish.

"Behold," Shane announced. " The Hollander-Rozanov fuel station."

It was impressive. Rows of granola bars, pretzels, dried fruit, crackers, and—because Shane had a sweet tooth—a hidden stash of cookies on the top shelf.

Mateo's eyes widened. "I can pick?"

"Anything you want," Shane said.

Mateo hesitated, his hand hovering over a box of granola bars before pulling back. He looked at Yuna. "Is it okay?"

"It is more than okay," Yuna said gently from the island. "It is yours."

Mateo carefully selected a chocolate chip granola bar. He held it like it was precious.

"Good choice," Ilya approved. "Now, come sit. We eat."

They settled around the kitchen island. Mateo sat on the stool between Shane and Ilya, munching on his granola bar with small, careful bites.

Shane watched him, feeling a sudden, overwhelming wave of affection. He looked over Mateo's head at Ilya.

Ilya was watching Mateo too, his expression soft and fiercely protective. He caught Shane's eye and gave a nearly imperceptible nod.

We got him, the look said.

Yeah, Shane thought, reaching out to squeeze Ilya's hand under the counter. *We got him.*

Once the granola bar was finished—crumb by crumb, Mateo eating with a deliberate slowness that suggested he was savoring it like a rare treat—Yuna tapped the counter.

"Appetizer is done," she declared. "Now, lunch. You like soup, Mateo?"

Mateo nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"It is Grandma Yuna's magic soup," Shane told him, sliding a bowl toward him that was steaming gently. "It fixes everything. Bad days, colds, lost games. It's basically a superpower in a bowl."

Mateo picked up his spoon. He took a sip, and his eyes widened. He ate quickly after that, though he was careful not to spill a drop.

When he was about halfway through, his spoon slowed. He looked at the half-finished granola bar wrapper sitting on the counter, then at the bowl. His hand moved subtly, trying to slide the wrapper into the pocket of his jeans.

Ilya noticed. His hand came to rest gently on the counter, not blocking Mateo, but close enough to be noticed.

"Mateo?" Ilya asked softly.

Mateo froze, his hand still in his pocket. He looked up, guilt flashing across his face. "I... I was just..."

"For later?" Ilya guessed, his tone devoid of judgment.

Mateo nodded, looking down at his lap. "In case... in case I get hungry."

Shane felt a pang in his chest so sharp it hurt. He exchanged a look with Yuna, remembering Linda’s warning about food hoarding.

"You know," Ilya said, leaning forward so he was in Mateo's line of sight. "In this house, the pantry is never locked. Did you see the doors?"

Mateo nodded.

"No locks," Ilya emphasized. "If you are hungry in one hour, you eat. If you are hungry at midnight, you eat. The food is always there. You do not need to hide it in your pocket. It gets sticky."

Mateo hesitated. slowly, he pulled his hand out. The wrapper crinkled.

"There is a whole box in there," Shane added gently. "If you want another one later, you just take a fresh one. Deal?"

Mateo looked at the pantry doors, then back at Shane. "Deal."

"Good," Yuna said briskly, taking the wrapper and tossing it in the trash. "Now, finish your soup. Then, I think we need to relax. It has been a big morning."

"Movie time?" Shane suggested, brightening. "We have a big TV. And a very comfortable couch."

"Do you like hockey movies?" Ilya asked, though he already knew the answer.

Mateo’s face lit up. "Yeah."

"Have you seen The Mighty Ducks?" Shane asked, scandalized when Mateo shook his head. "Okay. That settles it. Education time."

Ten minutes later, they were piled onto the oversized sectional in the living room. Shane had insisted on bringing a duvet down from upstairs, creating a nest. Mateo sat in the middle, looking small against the cushions, but after about twenty minutes of the movie, he began to relax.

He leaned slightly toward Ilya, drawn to his steady presence. By the time the Ducks were learning the Flying V, Mateo’s head was resting against Ilya’s arm. Ten minutes after that, his breathing evened out, and his eyes fluttered shut.

Shane smiled, keeping the volume low. He watched Mateo sleep, the tension finally leaving the boy's small frame.

"He's out," Shane whispered.

"Good," Ilya murmured, not moving his arm even though it must have been going numb. "He needs it."

Shane reached over, resting his hand on Mateo’s ankle, just to reassure himself that the boy was real, that he was here.

"He fits," Shane whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "Ilya, he fits."

Ilya looked down at the sleeping child, then at his husband. His eyes were shining.

"Yes," Ilya agreed softly. "He fits."

The quiet lasted for another hour. The credits rolled on *The Mighty Ducks*, and Shane carefully extracted the remote from under a cushion to switch to the sequel without waking the boy.

As the opening scene of *D2* started, Shane’s phone buzzed on the coffee table. He picked it up, dimming the screen brightness.

Hayden:*How’s the little guy? Any news?*

Shane glanced at Mateo, deep in sleep, drooling slightly on Ilya’s bicep.

Shane: *He’s here. Emergency placement for the weekend. He’s asleep on Ilya right now.*

Hayden: *That’s awesome, man. Seriously. You guys are saving him.*

Shane smiled, but then his eyes caught Ilya’s profile. Ilya looked content, but Shane knew him. Ilya thrived on activity, on caring for people. And he remembered Ilya’s whisper from

yesterday. *At least four.*

Shane's thumbs hovered over the screen.

Shane: *Hey, you and Jackie free tonight?*

Hayden: *We were gonna order pizza and collapse. Why?*

Shan:e *Bring the kids over. All of them. Ilya is in dad mode and needs a challenge. You guys go out. Get a drink. Stare at each other in silence. We've got the circus.*

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

Hayden: *Are you drunk again? You want all four of mine + Mateo? That's five kids. One is a toddler.*

Shane: *Ilya says he's excellent at structure. Plus, Arthur is Mateo's best friend. It'll be good for him to wake up to a friendly face.*

Hayden: *If you're serious, I will kiss you on the mouth next time I see you. Jackie is already putting on shoes.*

Shane stifled a laugh. He looked over at Ilya.

"Ilya," Shane whispered.

Ilya turned his head slowly. "Mm?"

"I just texted Hayden," Shane murmured. "I told him to bring the kids over. So he and Jackie can go out."

Ilya blinked. He looked down at Mateo, then back at Shane. "All of them?"

"All of them," Shane confirmed. "Arthur, the girls, the baby. I told him you needed a challenge."

A slow, terrifyingly confident grin spread across Ilya's face. "You are trying to test my theory."

"Maybe," Shane teased. "Think you can handle five?"

Ilya shifted slightly, careful not to disturb Mateo. "I am Captain. I handle everything. Besides," he looked at the sleeping boy with a softness that made Shane's chest ache, "Arthur will be good for him. Mateo needs to know this is not just a house. It is a home. Homes have noise."

Shane leaned over and kissed Ilya's cheek. "You're the best."

"I know," Ilya said smugly. "Text him back. Tell him to bring the dinosaur nuggets. The ones shaped like T-Rex."

Shane: can you *Bring the chicken nuggets your kids like. The T-Rex ones. See you in 20.*

Twenty minutes later, the peace was shattered not by a doorbell, but by the sound of a vehicle door slamming and the thundering of footsteps.

Hayden didn't knock; he just opened the door—they were close enough friends for that—and unleashed the horde.

"Freedom!" Hayden shouted, dumping a Costco-sized bag of frozen nuggets on the foyer table like a sacrificial offering. Jackie was right behind him, holding Amber.

"Here is the baby, here are the diapers, she ate at five but will probably eat again because she's growing," Jackie said, practically thrusting the toddler into Shane's arms. She looked equal parts exhausted and ecstatic. "Bye! We love you! You're saints! Don't call us unless there's blood!"

And just like that, they were gone.

Jade and Ruby Pike walked in carrying hockey bags, because apparently one did not simply visit "Uncle Ilya" without gear.

"I brought my new stick," Jade announced, kicking off her boots. "Max said my flex was off, so I want you to check it."

Arthur, meanwhile, had zeroed in on the living room. "Mateo!" he yelled, spotting his friend sitting up on the couch, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "I brought my Lego volcano! It doesn't explode real lava because Mom said no, but I have red blocks!"

Mateo blinked, looking terrified for a split second at the sudden invasion. Then his eyes focused on Arthur.

"Arthur?" Mateo whispered.

"Yeah! We're having a sleepover! Well, not a sleepover, but a late-over!" Arthur chirped, dumping a box of Legos onto the rug.

The noise level spiked instantly. Amber started babbling in Shane's arms, grabbing at his nose. Ruby was asking if they could play mini-sticks in the basement. Jade was swinging her stick dangerously close to a vase.

Ilya stood up from the couch. He didn't yell. He just clapped his hands once. Sharp. Loud.

"Attention!"

The Pike kids froze. Even Amber stopped babbling to look at him.

"Boots off," Ilya commanded, pointing to the door. "Line up by wall. Jackets on hooks. If you do not hang jacket, the jacket goes to charity."

Jade rolled her eyes, but she did it. "You're so intense, Uncle Ilya."

"I am efficient," Ilya corrected. "Arthur, show Mateo where to wash hands. Ruby, you are sous-chef. You help me with nuggets. Jade, you set table. Shane, you have the baby. Do not drop her."

"Aye aye, Captain," Shane saluted with his free hand, bouncing Amber who giggled.

"Go," Ilya said.

The troops scrambled.

Arthur grabbed Mateo's hand. "Come on! The bathroom has the foaming soap. It smells like lemons."

Mateo looked back at Ilya one last time. Ilya gave him a reassuring nod.

"Go with Arthur," Ilya said gently. "Wash hands. Then we feast on dinosaurs."

As Mateo let himself be dragged away by Arthur, a small, genuine smile broke across his face. He looked back at the chaos—at Jade arguing with the silverware drawer, at Ruby lining up dipping sauces like soldiers, at Shane spinning Amber around—and he didn't look scared anymore.

The Hollander-Rozanov kitchen, usually a place of sleek lines and quiet espresso making, had been transformed into an industrial nugget production facility. The oven timer was ticking down with ominous finality. Ruby Pike was guarding the oven door like a goalie in overtime, wearing an oven mitt that went up to her shoulder.

"Three minutes, Uncle Ilya!" Ruby reported, checking the digital display. "The T-Rexes are almost crispy."

"Good," Ilya said, chopping cucumbers with machine-like speed at the island. "Crispy is essential. Soggy dinosaur is extinct dinosaur."

In the dining room, Jade was setting the table with a terrifying precision that mirrored Ilya's. Every fork was perfectly aligned. She had even folded napkins into triangles, a skill she claimed to have learned on YouTube just to impress them.

Shane came in from the living room, Amber currently perched on his shoulders, chewing on his hair.

"We have a situation," Shane announced. "Arthur and Mateo are building a Lego defense perimeter around the dining table. They say we need a password to enter."

"Is the password 'dinner'?" Ilya asked without looking up.

"I think it's 'volcano'," Shane laughed, bouncing Amber who shrieked with delight. "Or possibly 'booger'. Arthur was being vague."

The timer beeped.

"Deployment!" Ruby yelled, pulling the baking sheet out.

Ten minutes later, the noise level in the dining room rivaled a playoff game. Five kids, three adults (Yuna had retreated to the living room with a book but was smiling at the noise), and a mountain of dinosaur nuggets.

"Okay," Ilya announced, standing at the head of the table. "Formation. T-Rexes first. Then Stegosaurus. Do not neglect vegetables."

"Cucumbers aren't vegetables, they're fruit," Jade argued, spearing three nuggets at once. "Botanically speaking."

"Botanically speaking, you eat them or you do pushups," Ilya countered smoothly.

Jade ate the cucumber.

Mateo sat between Arthur and Shane. He had a plate full of dinosaurs and a small pile of cucumber slices. He was watching the chaos with wide, fascinated eyes. Every time Arthur made a loud explosion noise while dipping a nugget in ketchup, Mateo giggled. It was a soft sound, but in the cacophony of the Pike children, it felt like a triumph.

Then, it happened.

Mateo reached for his glass of milk. His elbow bumped Arthur’s arm as Arthur gestured wildly about a Minecraft creeper.

The glass tipped.

White liquid splashed across the table, soaking into the placemat and dripping onto the floor.

The table went silent.

Mateo froze. His entire body went rigid, his shoulders hunching up as if bracing for a blow. His eyes darted to Ilya, then to Shane, terror replacing the joy in a split second.

"I'm sorry," Mateo whispered, his voice trembling. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—I'm sorry."

He started to scramble out of his chair, looking like he was ready to run or hide.

"Whoa, hey," Shane said softly, putting a hand out but not touching him, keeping his palms open. "Mateo, it's okay."

"Nice one," Jade said casually, not even looking up from her food. She grabbed a handful of napkins from the center of the table and tossed them over the puddle. "I spilled grape juice on the white rug in the living room last Christmas. Dad literally cried. Actual tears."

"He did," Ruby confirmed, dipping a Stegosaurus. "It was tragic. Mom laughed."

Mateo stopped, blinking. He looked at the girls, then at the milk. No one was yelling. No one was angry.

Ilya stood up. He walked over, not with a scowl, but with a roll of paper towels he'd grabbed from the counter. He knelt down next to Mateo's chair.

"Mateo," Ilya said, his voice calm and level. "Look at me."

Mateo looked down, terrified.

"Is just milk," Ilya said, wiping the floor quickly. "Cows make lots of it. We buy more. The table is wood. It washes. You are washable. Everything is fine."

"I... I made a mess," Mateo whispered.

"We all make messes," Ilya said. He stood up and topped off Mateo's glass. "Shane spilled coffee on my favorite shirt this morning. Did I yell?"

"You sighed very loudly," Shane clarified. "But no yelling."

"Exactly," Ilya said, resting his hand briefly on Mateo's head. "Drink your milk. Eat your dinosaur. You are safe here, mess or no mess."

Mateo looked at the refilled glass. He looked at Ilya's calm face. Slowly, the tension drained out of his small shoulders. He sat back down.

"Okay," Mateo whispered.

"Okay," Arthur chirped, as if nothing had happened. "Anyway, so the creeper blew up my house, right? And I lost all my diamonds."

As the conversation roared back to life, Shane caught Ilya's eye across the table. He raised his glass in a silent toast.

Ilya winked, biting the head off a T-Rex.

By 8:30 PM, the sugar crash had hit the Pike clan hard. Amber was asleep on Shane's chest on the couch. Arthur was lying on the rug, staring at the ceiling and muttering about Lego structural integrity. Jade and Ruby were actually quiet, watching a hockey highlight reel with Ilya.

When the front door opened, the silence was broken by Hayden's cheerful voice.

"Honey, I'm home! Is the roof still on?"

Jackie walked in behind him, looking significantly more relaxed than she had three hours ago. She scanned the living room—the scattered toys, the sleeping toddler, the relatively calm children.

"Sorcery," Jackie whispered. "You two are sorcerers."

"We just fed them dinosaurs until they stopped moving," Shane said, carefully standing up to transfer the sleeping Amber to Hayden.

"A valid strategy," Hayden agreed, settling his daughter against his shoulder. He looked at Arthur. "Up, buddy. Time to go."

Arthur sat up, rubbing his eyes. He looked over at Mateo, who was sitting on the floor next to him.

"You coming to camp on Monday, right?" Arthur asked.

Mateo nodded. "Yeah."

"Cool. I'm gonna bring my other stick. The one with the orange tape. You can use it if you want."

"Okay," Mateo said, a small smile appearing.

The departure was a flurry of boots, jackets, and lost gloves. Ilya supervised the jacket-zipping process like a drill sergeant, ensuring no child left with exposed skin.

"Bye, Uncle Ilya! Bye, uncle Shane!" Jade called out, hauling her gear bag.

"Bye, Mateo!" Arthur yelled from the driveway before scrambling into the SUV.

When the door finally closed, the silence that descended on the house was heavy, but peaceful. It felt like the air clearing after a summer storm.

"Well," Shane exhaled, leaning against the door. "That happened."

"We survived," Ilya noted, locking the deadbolt. He turned to Mateo, who was standing in the hallway, looking suddenly very small again without Arthur’s loud presence to buffer him.

"And now," Ilya said softly, crouching down. "It is time for the final mission of the day."

Mateo looked at him warily. "What mission?"

"Operation Sleep," Ilya declared. "Come. Let's get you settled."

The bedtime routine was slow and careful. Yuna had laid out a pair of pajamas she’d bought earlier she had snuck off to the store while shane and ilya babysat the pike’s kids. Mateo

changed in the bathroom and emerged looking shy but comfortable.

In the guest room, Ilya turned down the duvet. Mateo climbed in, pulling the covers up to his chin immediately.

"Do you need anything?" Shane asked, hovering by the doorway. "Water? Another nightlight?"

"Can..." Mateo hesitated. "Can you leave the door open?"

"Wide open," Shane promised. "And the hall light stays on. All night."

Mateo nodded, relaxing slightly into the pillow.

"Goodnight, Mateo," Ilya said, resting his hand briefly on the boy's shoulder. "Sleep well. We are just down the hall."

"Goodnight," Mateo whispered.

They left the door wide open, as promised.

Later, in their own room, Shane collapsed onto the bed face-first.

"I am exhausted," Shane mumbled into the mattress. "How does Hayden do that every day?"

"He drinks a lot of coffee," Ilya said, climbing in beside him. He pulled Shane close, wrapping an arm around his waist.

Shane turned over, resting his head on Ilya’s chest. "You were good today, Il. Really good."

"I told you," Ilya murmured, pressing a kiss to Shane’s hair. "I am excellent at structure."

"You are," Shane agreed. He traced a pattern on Ilya’s t-shirt. "Four kids, huh?"

Ilya hummed, the sound rumbling in his chest. "Maybe we start with one. And see how the furniture holds up."

Shane laughed softly. "Deal."

He closed his eyes, listening to the quiet house, knowing that down the hall, a little boy was sleeping safely in a warm bed, with the door wide open. And for tonight, that was enough.

Sunday morning arrived with the smell of browned butter and the sound of quiet instruction.

Shane woke up alone, the space beside him cool. He stretched, popping his back, and shuffled out into the hallway. The door to the guest room was still wide open, the bed neatly made—or as neatly as a nine-year-old could manage.

He followed the scent downstairs.

In the kitchen, Ilya was standing at the stove, a tea towel thrown over his shoulder. Mateo was standing on a step stool next to him, watching a skillet with intense concentration.

"Now," Ilya said softly. "Wait for the bubbles. See them? One, two, three. Now flip."

Mateo wielded the spatula with two hands. He hesitated, then shoved it under the thin pancake and flipped it. It landed a little off-center, but intact.

"Yes!" Ilya cheered quietly, high-fiving the boy. "Perfect execution. You are natural blini maker."

Mateo beamed, looking prouder than he had when he'd skated away from the boards.

"Morning," Shane rasped, leaning against the doorframe. "I see the kitchen staff is hard at work."

Mateo spun around. "Coach Shane! We're making blini. It's Russian pancakes. They're really thin."

"I see that," Shane smiled, walking over to ruffle Mateo's hair. "Did Coach Ilya tell you he usually eats about twenty of them?"

"Twenty-five," Ilya corrected, pouring more batter. "I am growing boy."

They ate at the island again, drowning the blini in syrup and jam. The atmosphere was lighter than yesterday morning, the frantic energy of the emergency placement replaced by a tentative rhythm.

But the specter of Monday hung over the room. Shane could see it in the way Mateo's leg bounced under the table, in the way he kept glancing at the calendar on the wall.

Finally, Mateo put his fork down.

"Tomorrow is Monday," he said quietly.

The kitchen went still. Yuna, who was reading the paper at the end of the table, lowered it.

"Yes," Shane said, keeping his voice even. "It is."

"Do I..." Mateo picked at a loose thread on his placemat. "Do I have to go back? To the Gables?"

Ilya stopped eating. He turned his stool so he was facing Mateo directly.

"No," Ilya said. fierce and immediate. "You are not going back there. Ever."

Mateo looked up, his eyes wide. "But Linda said it was just for the weekend."

"Linda speaks the law," Ilya said. "But we speak the truth. We are going to fight for you, Mateo. Yuna is already working on the paperwork. We have lawyers. We have..." he gestured around the kitchen, "blini."

"We're asking to be your foster parents," Shane clarified, reaching out to cover Mateo’s hand. "For real. Not just emergency. For as long as you need us."

Mateo stared at them. "You want me to stay?"

"We want you to stay," Shane said, his throat tight. "We want you to come to camp with us tomorrow, and then come back here. We want to see you skate without the wall. We want to see you play with Arthur."

"And I need sous-chef," Ilya added. "My flipping technique is getting old. I need fresh talent."

Tears welled up in Mateo’s eyes, but they weren't the scared kind this time. He wiped them away furiously with his sleeve.

"Okay," Mateo whispered. "I want to stay."

"Then it is settled," Yuna said from the end of the table, her voice final. "I will call Linda and the lawyer within the hour. Do not worry about the adults, Mateo. We will handle the paperwork. You handle the syrup."

The rest of the day was lazy and domestic—a buffer zone before the reality of the week started. They played video games (Mateo beat Ilya at Mario Kart, which Ilya claimed was rigged). They walked to the park down the street so Mateo could show them he knew how to use the monkey bars.

That night, the bedtime routine was easier. Mateo didn't ask for the door to be open; he just assumed it would be.

As Shane turned off the hall light—leaving just the nightlight glowing—he felt Ilya come up behind him, wrapping his arms around Shane’s waist and resting his chin on Shane's shoulder.

"We have to win tomorrow," Ilya murmured, looking into the shadowed room where Mateo slept. "With Linda. With the agency."

"We will," Shane said, leaning back into him. "We're the Hollander-Rozanovs. We don't lose the important games."

Ilya kissed his neck. "No. We do not."

Monday morning arrived with the beep of an alarm and the rush of adrenaline. But this time, as they packed the car—three hockey bags now, one significantly smaller than the others—it didn't feel like just another week of camp.

It felt like the start of the rest of their lives.

"Ready?" Shane asked, looking in the rearview mirror.

Mateo was sitting in the back seat, wearing his new camp jersey. It was a little big, but he'd rolled the sleeves up. He looked nervous, but when he met Shane's eyes in the mirror, he nodded.

"Ready, Coach," Mateo said.

Ilya put the car in drive. "Let's go play hockey."

When they arrived at the rink, Linda Morris was already there. She was standing by the entrance in her professional blazer, looking like she meant business.

As they approached, Linda raised a hand. "I need to speak with you three. In the office."

She gestured to Yuna, Ilya, and Shane.

Shane hesitated, looking at Mateo. "But someone needs to be on the ice with the Red Team."

"Go," Hayden Pike said, appearing suddenly with a clipboard. He looked suspiciously energetic for a Monday morning. "I've got Ilya's group and Max has the Red Team warm-ups. Go handle the suit."

Ilya nodded at Hayden, then crouched down to Mateo. "You go with Coach Max, okay? We will be right back."

Mateo nodded, but his eyes were darting around the lobby. "Okay."

As the adults filed into the office and the door clicked shut, Shane felt a knot of anxiety tighten in his stomach. But outside on the ice, a different kind of anxiety was taking hold.

Mateo stepped onto the ice with the Red Team. It was loud and chaotic, just like last week. He looked around for the familiar bright neon tape on a hockey stick. He scanned the faces of the kids skating in circles.

No Arthur.

He checked the bench. No Arthur.

Mateo stood near the blue line, feeling the cold seep through his jersey. Without Arthur’s constant chatter, the rink felt huge and empty and terrifying. The confidence he’d built up over the weekend—eating blini, watching movies, sleeping in a safe room—began to evaporate.

Slowly, instinctively, he drifted backward until his back hit the boards. He grabbed the white plastic ledge with both hands and held on tight.

Ten minutes later, Shane emerged from the office. The meeting had been tense but promising—Linda was supportive of the kinship placement, but the paperwork hurdles were going to be a nightmare. He needed to get back on the ice to clear his head.

He skated out, his eyes immediately scanning the group for the smallest helmet.

He found Mateo exactly where they had found him on Day One: clinging to the wall, head down, making himself as small as possible.

"Hey," Shane said softly, skating over and dropping to one knee so he was eye-level with the boy. "What's up, buddy? You were skating circles around everyone yesterday."

Mateo didn't look up. He kicked his skate against the ice. "Arthur isn't here."

"Ah," Shane said, understanding dawning. "Yeah, Arthur has a dentist appointment this morning. He hates them. He says the dentist steals his teeth."

"He's not coming?" Mateo’s voice was small and wobbly.

"He'll be here after lunch," Shane promised. "But right now... it's just us."

Mateo didn't let go of the wall. He sniffled.

Shane’s heart broke. He stood up and looked across the ice. He saw Hayden coaching the older group, shouting something about backchecking.

"Hey! Pike!" Shane yelled across the neutral zone.

Hayden turned, startled. He saw Shane waving him over and skated across quickly, spraying a bit of snow as he stopped.

"What's wrong? Is it Linda?" Hayden asked, lowering his voice.

"No, Linda is fine," Shane said. He gestured to Mateo, who was still looking at his feet. "We have a morale crisis. Arthur is at the dentist, and we have a man down."

Hayden looked at Mateo. His expression softened instantly. "Aww, kiddo."

"So," Shane said, leaning on his stick. "I was thinking. Since Arthur missed the morning session... maybe he needs some extra strategy talk tonight? A sleepover?"

Mateo’s head snapped up. He looked from Shane to Hayden.

"A sleepover?" Mateo repeated.

"With Arthur?" Hayden asked, grinning. "Oh, absolutely. Arthur would lose his mind. He was complaining all the way to the dentist that he was missing camp."

" really?" Mateo asked.

"Really," Hayden confirmed. "So, how about this? I'll drop him off at your place tonight. You guys can build that Lego volcano again. Maybe this time we let it explode."

Mateo’s grip on the wall loosened. A small, shy smile appeared. "With baking soda?"

"With so much baking soda," Shane promised. "But we do it outside. On the porch."

"Deal," Mateo whispered.

"Okay then," Shane said, offering his hand. "Now, do you think you can skate to the face-off circle? Just to show Hayden how fast you are?"

Mateo looked at the open ice. Then he looked at Shane’s hand. He took a deep breath, let go of the wall, and grabbed Shane’s glove.

"Watch this," Mateo told Hayden, and pushed off.

Chapter 2

The morning of the first day of school was organized chaos. Or, at least, Ilya was trying to organize it while Shane provided the chaos in the form of burnt toast smoke and anxious pacing.

"Stand still," Ilya commanded gently, kneeling in the hallway to tie Mateo’s new sneakers. "Double knot is essential. You cannot run at recess if you are tripping."

Mateo stood perfectly still, clutching the straps of his new backpack—a dark blue one with a discreet hockey stick keychain. He looked older than he had a month ago. Taller, certainly, and filled out thanks to Yuna’s cooking. But mostly, he looked steady. The hunted, fearful look in his eyes had been replaced by a quiet curiosity.

"Done," Ilya declared, patting Mateo’s knee. He stood up, smoothing down the boy’s collar. "You look like a scholar. Very smart."

"And handsome," Shane added, coming out of the kitchen with a plate of scrambled eggs that were surprisingly not burnt. "Eat up, buddy. Brain food."

Mateo sat at the island. He picked up his fork but didn't eat immediately. He poked at the eggs, a small frown appearing between his brows. The shyness was back, a ghost of the boy who had first walked into the rink.

Shane stopped wiping the counter. He exchanged a glance with Ilya.

"Hey," Shane said softly, leaning his elbows on the marble. "What's up? Nervous about the bus?"

Mateo shook his head. "No. Arthur said we sit in the back. It's the cool spot."

"Okay," Shane smiled. "So what is it?"

Mateo put his fork down. He looked at his hands, then up at Ilya, then at Shane.

"The lawyer lady came yesterday," Mateo said quietly. "To sign the papers."

"She did," Ilya nodded, moving to stand next to Shane. "Everything is official. You are stuck with us."

"She said..." Mateo swallowed hard. "She said on the paper, you guys are my dads now. Legally."

Shane felt his heart stutter in his chest. "Yeah. Yeah, we are."

Mateo looked Shane dead in the eye. "Does that mean... can I call you Dad?"

The kitchen went silent. The only sound was the hum of the refrigerator and the thumping of Shane's heart. He looked at Ilya, who looked like he had been struck by lightning in the best possible way.

Shane cleared his throat, which had suddenly gone very tight.

"Mateo," Shane said, his voice thick. "You can call us whatever you want. You can call us Shane and Ilya. You can call us Coach. You can call us Dad. You can call us... I don't know, Captain Awesome and The Russian Bear."

Mateo giggled, the tension breaking instantly.

"But yes," Shane whispered, walking around the island to crouch next to the stool. "I would really, really like it if you called me Dad."

"And me," Ilya added, his hand resting on Mateo's shoulder. "Papa? Dad? Whatever fits."

"Okay," Mateo smiled, picking up his fork again. "Dad." He looked at Ilya. "Papa."

Shane thought he might explode. Or cry. Possibly both. Instead, he stood up and grabbed Mateo, swinging him up onto his back in one fluid motion.

"Alright, that's it!" Shane announced, marching toward the door with Mateo laughing on his back. "If I'm Dad, I get to embarrass you. It's in the job description. We are skipping to the bus stop!"

"No skipping!" Mateo shrieked, laughing. "I'm in fourth grade!"

"We skip!" Shane yelled, bursting out the front door.

Six hours later, the SUV was parked in the pickup lane. Shane and Ilya watched the doors of the elementary school like hawks.

"Do you think he ate his lunch?" Shane asked for the third time.

"Yuna packed it," Ilya said calmly, Shane's mom had come over the night before to make Mateo's food, she felt bad that she couldn't be there for his first day of school. "Of course he ate it. It was gourmet."

Then, the bell rang. A flood of children poured out.

And there he was. Walking next to a very animated Arthur Pike, who was gesturing wildly with a lunchbox.

Mateo spotted the car. He didn't just walk; he ran. He sprinted toward them, his backpack bouncing.

Ilya unlocked the doors, and Mateo scrambled into the back seat.

"Hi!" Mateo breathless.

"Hi yourself," Shane grinned, turning around. "How was it?"

"It was awesome!" Mateo beamed. "I'm in ruby's class! And we have cubbies with our names on them! And my teacher, Mrs. H, she said I have good penmanship!"

he paused before continuing, "we have the same luck as Arthur tho so we can play together still"

Ilya started the car, a proud smile playing on his lips. "See? Scholar."

"And Arthur traded me his fruit snacks for my carrot sticks because he said carrots make you see in the dark like a ninja," Mateo continued, vibrating with energy.

"Sounds like a fair trade," Shane laughed.

"Where are we going?" Mateo asked as Ilya pulled out of the lot. "Home?"

"Not yet," Ilya said, catching Mateo’s eye in the rearview mirror. "It is Monday. Monday is practice."

Mateo’s eyes lit up. "Hockey?"

"Hockey," Shane confirmed. "You've got a lesson. And I hear the coach is pretty good. Though he might be a little biased since he's your dad."

Mateo grinned, settling back into the seat. "Let's go."

As they drove toward the rink, the late afternoon sun casting long shadows across the road, Shane looked over at Ilya. Ilya reached across the console, taking Shane’s hand and interlacing their fingers.

They didn't have four kids running around the house. Not yet. But they had one in the back seat who was happy, and safe, and theirs.

And as far as Shane was concerned, that was a pretty good start.

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