

First Round Pick: Little Shane

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Summary

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"I have it. I see on internet. A man. He has jar. He has bubbles."

Shane blinked. "Bubbles? Like... a fish?"

"No," Ilya said, pacing the room like a caged bear. "He make life from dust. He mix powder and water. He wait. He feed it like baby. Then... BREAD."

"Oh so baking, you want to try baking bread?" Shane asked skeptically.

"Not just bake, Shane. Sourdough. Is complex. Is science. Is war with yeast." Ilya's voice grew passionate, his Russian accent thickening. "It is sour, like my childhood. It is hard crust, like my heart."

Notes

Shane thinks Ilya needs to get a hobby to keep busy during off season. Ilya decides to start baking.... sourdough. // crack fic // just another scenario in my head lol // also finishing up on a fic where Shane and Ilya do yoga// Hope y'all enjoy.

Chapter 1: The Yeast of My Problems

Shane leaned against the doorframe of their living room, watching Ilya. His husband was currently sitting on the floor, fully geared up in his hockey pants and chest protector, staring intensely at a blank wall.

"Ilya," Shane said softly. "The season ended two weeks ago."

"I know this, Shane," Ilya grunted, not moving a muscle.

"You've been sitting there for an hour. You're vibrating. You need... a thing. A hobby. You know? Something people do for fun that doesn't involve hitting people or pucks."

Ilya turned his head slowly, his eyes narrowed in deep thought. "Hobby. Yes. I find hobby. I am capable man."

"Great! Like what? Golf? Coach Wiebe plays golf."

Ilya made a face like he'd just sucked a lemon. "Golf is for old men who hate their wives. I like my wife. I stay here."

"Okay, valid. What about gaming? A lot of the guys play Call of Duty."

Ilya shook his head violently. "No. Too much clicking. My fingers are for gripping stick, not tiny plastic buttons. I get angry, I break controller. Waste of money."

Shane moved into the room, sitting on the edge of the coffee table. "Painting? Bob Ross? You could paint some happy little trees."

"I hate trees," Ilya said flatly. "They hide the puck. And birds live in them. Birds are... suspicious."

Shane suppressed a laugh. "Okay, no trees. Woodworking? Building things?"

Ilya looked at his massive, scarred hands. "I try build shelf last year. Shelf become firewood. I am too strong for delicate wood. Everything go crunch."

He went silent again, his brow furrowed so hard it looked painful. Suddenly, his eyes lit up. He stood up, his hockey gear clanking loudly.

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Ilya sat on the sofa for six hours. He did not move. His phone was inches from his face.

Swish. Swish. Swish. Shane walked past. On the screen, a woman with a soft voice was massaging a bowl of dough.

"Is easy," Ilya muttered, his eyes narrowed. "She have small hands. My hands are bigger. I make better bread. Faster."

"Ilya, that video is titled 'The 48-Hour Patient Process,'" Shane noted.

"She is slow," Ilya barked, scrolling to a TikTok of a man slamming dough onto a marble slab. "This man! He has spirit! He has... aggression. I like him. We go to store now. I am expert."

Ilya didn't walk into the grocery store; he entered like he was skating onto center ice for Game 7. He grabbed a cart and did a 360-degree turn in the produce aisle.

"Focus, Shane," Ilya whispered. "We need... The Materials."

"It's just flour, Ilya."

"No!" Ilya stopped the cart so fast the wheels shrieked. He pointed a finger at a bag of generic flour. "This is for losers. This is for... for muffins. I need Bread Flour. High protein. Like me."

He began huffing. He was literally sniffing the bags of flour.

"Ilya, please stop smelling the paper," Shane hissed, looking around as a confused grandmother steered her cart around them.

"This one," Ilya announced, heaving a 10-kilogram bag of Arva Heritage flour into the cart like it was a sandbag. He slapped the paper packaging with a heavy palm. "He has good soul. He feels... dense. This is a 'First Round Pick' gluten, Shane. High ceiling. Great potential.'"

Shane stared at the flour, "It's a bag of dust, Ilya. It doesn't have a soul. And since when do you care about gluten protein percentages?"

"Since I see the truth," Ilya said vaguely, steering the cart toward the back of the store.

When they reached the water aisle, Shane reached for a flat of the cheap store-brand bottles. Ilya's arm snapped out like a goalie's stick, pinning Shane's wrist against the shelf.

"No. Tap water has the chlorine," Ilya warned, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "It will kill him before he is even born. We need... Eska."

"Ilya, we're in a grocery store in the middle of the afternoon. Can you please stop talking about the bread like it's a person? It's spring water from Quebec, you don't need to pay three times the price for it."

"Is for our son, Shanel!" Ilya grabbed the expensive blue bottles, tucking them into the cart with obsessive care. "Do not be cheap father!"

Ilya marched toward the organic aisle with the stride of a man on a mission, snatching three jars of Beesworthy wildflower honey and a bag of dark rye flour from the shelf

"All this for one loaf of bread?" Shane asked, his eyes widening as he watched the total climb on the checkout screen.

Ilya didn't even look back. He hoisted the 10-kilogram bag of flour over his shoulder, hauling it toward the sliding doors like a heavy bag of hockey gear. He turned to Shane and smirked.

"Is investment, Shane. You see," Ilya said, his eyes gleaming with unearned confidence. "Tomorrow, he wakes up. Tomorrow... he is on the top line."

The next day, the kitchen looked like a flour bomb had detonated. Ilya was hunched over a massive glass jar, stirring a thick, grey sludge with a look of pure, terrifying intensity.

"Is alive, Shane," Ilya whispered, his eyes wide in the glow of the stove light. "He breathes. He has the hunger."

Shane leaned in, hovering at a safe distance. "It looks like wet cement, Ilya. Or something you'd find at the bottom of a gutter."

"Do not insult him!" Ilya shielded the jar with his entire body. He grabbed a Sharpie and, with a shaking hand, drew two thick, angry eyebrows and a tiny, jagged scowling mouth on the glass. He turned the jar toward Shane, his eyes shimmering with genuine pride.

"Shane," Ilya said solemnly. "Meet Little Shane. Our son."

Right then, the sludge let out a single, wet, rhythmic burp.

Shane's face went pale. "Ilya... did you just name a jar of fermented bacteria after me?"

Ilya looked up from the counter, his hands submerged in a fresh, sticky mess of dough. A frantic dusting of white powder coated the bridge of his nose. He nodded solemnly.

"Yes. This is Little Shane."

"Why, Ilya?" Shane's voice cracked with a mix of horror and confusion. "Why me?"

Ilya poked the starter. It was squishy, pale, and slightly translucent.

"He is soft," Ilya said, his voice dropping to a tender, paternal whisper. "He is pale. He cries if I do not feed him on time. He is exactly like you."

Shane sputtered, gesturing wildly at his own frame. "I do not... I am not.... I'm a professional athlete, Ilya! I don't cry if I'm not fed!"

"Last Tuesday, you almost weep because the Post-Game smoothies were late," Ilya countered without looking up. He was currently leaning over the jar, whispering a low Russian lullaby to the bacteria. "Is okay, Little Shane. Big Shane is just jealous. You are my favorite teammate now."

"Ilya," Shane groaned, rubbing his temples as he looked at the scowling sharpie face on the glass. "Please. I am begging you. Do not tell the media you are fermenting me in a jar."

"Too late," Ilya grunted, already reaching for his phone. "I make Instagram. @LittleShaneSourdough. He will have more followers than you by Tuesday."

It's been a long three days since the beginning of Ilya's hobby and now, the kitchen had become a laboratory, and Ilya was the mad scientist. He refused to take off his team hoodie, the sleeves pushed up to reveal forearms corded with muscle, now dusted in a fine layer of bread flour.

Shane walked into the gym, their actual, professional-grade home gym, and stopped dead. The treadmill was whirring at a steady, rhythmic hum.

There, duct taped securely to the center of the moving belt, was the glass jar of Little Shane. The sharpie drawn eyebrows seemed to bounce with every rotation.

"Ilya," Shane said, his voice reaching a pitch usually reserved for dog whistles. "What... what are you doing?"

Ilya stood over the machine, a stopwatch in hand, his expression grim. "He is sluggish, Shane. He sits in jar. He gets lazy. He needs cardio for... for bubbles."

"It's fermented dough, Ilya! It doesn't have lungs! You're going to launch a glass jar of sentient goo through the drywall!"

"He must be athlete," Ilya insisted, his eyes tracking the jar as it cycled around the belt. "If he is weak, the bread is flat. Flat bread is for losers. Little Shane is a winner. He does five miles today."

The treadmill sped up a notch.

"Ilya, please," Shane pleaded, watching his namesake drift toward the back of the belt.

"That's a three-thousand-dollar piece of equipment. You are literally training the bread, asshole," Shane muttered "This is insane".

Even after 5 days, feeding time was still not a simple task. Ilya treated it like a high-stakes surgery mixed with a religious ceremony. Ilya had completely abandoned the instructions, and more importantly, he still refused to use the scale.

"Ilya, the recipe says one hundred grams of water," Shane pointed out, trying to nudge a measuring cup toward the flour-coated counter.

Ilya swiped it away with a look of pure disdain. "No. I feel his hunger. My soul tells me what he needs."

He grabbed the bag of flour and began shaking it into the jar with the frantic aggression of a man playing the maracas. A white cloud billowed up, settling over the toaster and the fruit bowl.

"Eat, Little Shane," Ilya whispered into the jar. "Eat and grow big. Like bear. Like mountain."

"You have flour in your hair, Ilya," Shane noted, leaning back to avoid the dust cloud. "And on your ears."

Ilya ignored him, poking a wooden spoon into the sludge with intense concentration. "He is grumpy today. He has the low blood sugar. He needs... luxury."

Before Shane could stop him, Ilya reached into the fridge and snatched a bottle of the premium, high-pH alkaline water Shane had specifically bought for post-game recovery.

"Ilya, wait... that's nine dollars a bottle!"

"Is for his health," Ilya grunted, pouring the premium water into the sludge. "He have sensitive stomach. Like you. If I give him tap water, he die. Then I am widow."

"You wouldn't be a... you know what? Fine. Feed the 'baby' the fancy water."

Ilya sat at the kitchen table, the jar of Little Shane positioned squarely in front of him. He was leaning his chin on his hands, eyes locked on the tiny, slow-motion bubbles breaking the surface of the sludge.

"He says something," Ilya whispered, his voice thick with mystery.

Shane sighed, finally letting his book drop to his lap. "What? What is the sourdough saying now, Ilya? Is he asking for more alkaline water?"

Ilya didn't look up. His eyes twinkled with a sudden, sharp mischief. "He says he misses you. He says, 'Big Shane, why do you not pet me? Why am I forgotten?'"

"I am not petting the starter, Ilya. It's sticky. It's literally a jar of glue with a face on it."

Ilya's expression went dark instantly. He pulled the jar closer to his chest, shielding it from Shane's logic. "See? This is why he is sour. You are a cold father. I am the only one who truly loves him."

He then picked up a small piece of cloth, which Shane's heart sank as he recognized the material, it was one of his favorite, broken-in, vintage soft T-shirts. Ilya began meticulously wrapping the fabric around the glass, tucking it in like a swaddle.

"Ilya... is that my gym shirt?" Shane's voice hit that dog-whistle pitch again.

"He was shivering, Shane!" Ilya snapped, patting the swaddled jar. "The kitchen has a draft. He needs the scent of his father to feel safe."

Shane jolted awake at 3:00 AM to a sound like a wet gunshot. PLAP. It was followed by a heavy, squelching silence. He sprinted into the kitchen, skidded on the hardwood, and stopped dead.

The kitchen was covered in grey slime. Shards of the glass jar lay scattered across the counter like a spent grenade, and a massive, pulsating glob of dough hung from the ceiling, dripping at a steady, rhythmic pace onto the toaster. Ilya stood in the center of the carnage, wearing nothing but his boxers and a fine coating of sticky grey goo. A large dollop of sourdough sat directly on his left eyebrow.

"Ilya!" Shane gasped. "What happened?"

Ilya didn't look at him. He was staring at the ceiling with the misty-eyed pride of a father watching his son win his first playoff game. He wiped a streak of slime from his eye.

"Little Shane is too strong," Ilya whispered, his voice hushed with awe. "He seeks freedom."

"He is seeking a health code violation!" Shane yelled, pointing a trembling finger at the dripping roof. "Ilya, the jar exploded! There is fermented sludge on the lightbulbs!"

Ilya stepped forward. His bare feet made a wet, suction-cup squish on the linoleum.

"He grew too fast," Ilya said, ignoring the chaos. "I gave him the dark rye. Rye is... power. He is like a bear in a cage, Shane. He broke the cage. He breathes now."

"He is breathing on my espresso machine!" Shane grabbed a dish towel, waving it frantically. "Clean the ceiling! Now! Before it sets like concrete!"

Ilya reached up, pinched a small, dangling piece of dough from the ceiling, and popped it into his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully.

"Ilya! Do not eat the ceiling-bread! That is raw bacteria!"

Ilya swallowed, his expression solemn as he nodded. "Needs salt. But he is ready. Tomorrow... we bake."

"Tomorrow," Shane groaned, burying his face in the towel, "I am moving into a hotel."

The next morning, the kitchen smelled like a brewery that had lost a fight. Ilya stood at the counter, a tiny, ruffled floral apron stretched dangerously tight over his massive, muscular

frame. He had "Little Shane" spread out on the marble—a sticky, pale blob that looked remarkably stubborn.

"Okay," Ilya whispered, dusting his knuckles with flour like he was taping up for a fight. "Now. We work."

Shane walked in, coffee in hand, and stopped dead. "Ilya. Why are you wearing my 'Kiss the Cook' apron? And why are you... why are you staring at the dough like it owes you money?"

"I show who is boss," Ilya grunted, his biceps bulging as he dug his heels into the floor. "Bread must know hierarchy. If he does not respect me, he will not rise for me."

He grabbed a handful of the dough and yanked, stretching the pale mass nearly three feet across the counter before folding it violently back into itself.

"Ilya, you're going to pull a muscle," Shane said, watching as the marble countertop actually groaned under the pressure. "And you're definitely going to ruin the finish on that stone."

"He looks... exhausted," Shane noted, leaning over his coffee to inspect the carnage. The dough was starting to look dangerously shiny and overworked.

Ilya ignored him. He leaned down until his face was inches from the sticky, pale mass. "Listen to me, Little Shane. You are a Hollander-Rozanov. You have a legacy. Do not be flat. Do not be a coward. You rise for the family... or I eat you raw."

"Ilya, please. I am begging you to stop threatening the fungus," Shane sighed.

Suddenly, Ilya froze. He poked the dough with one flour-dusted finger. The surface slowly, stubbornly sprang back into place. A huge, triumphant grin broke across Ilya's face, the kind he usually reserved for a game-winning goal.

"He is ready," Ilya whispered, his voice trembling with emotion. "He has the fire. Like me."

He scooped up the dough, cradling the heavy, slumped mass like a newborn. "Now, we put him in the Dutch Oven. It is like the penalty box. He sits. He thinks about what he has done. He feels the heat. Then... he becomes champion."

"I'm ordering a pizza just in case," Shane said, already reaching for his phone with a sense of impending doom.

Ilya pointed a white, floured finger at him, leaving a ghostly mark in the air. "No pizza. Only Little Shane. He is our son now. You do not turn your back on family!"

The moment of truth had arrived. Ilya held the dough aloft like a hard won trophy. It was pale, sticky, and vaguely lumpy, exactly like a Hollander, in Ilya's professional opinion.

He didn't just place it in the pan; he deposited it with the gravity of a man lowering a live grenade into a silk-lined box.

"Stay," Ilya commanded, pointing a warning finger at the slumped mass. "Do not move. You are in the crease now. Be a goalie. Be a wall."

He slid the heavy Dutch oven into the fiery depths of the oven and slammed the door with a final, echoing clack. Then, instead of setting a timer and walking away like a sane human being, Ilya dragged over a small wooden kitchen stool. He sat down, his massive knees nearly hitting his chin, and pressed his face flat against the oven glass.

"Ilya, you're going to singe your eyebrows off," Shane warned, leaning against the counter with a look of fond, exhausted despair. "You're literally fogging up the view."

"Shh," Ilya hissed, waving a floured hand dismissively. "He is scared. It is dark in there. It is loud. I am father. I stay."

The oven light cast a flickering golden glow over Ilya's intense features, making him look like a man watching a high-stakes replay. He tapped a single finger against the glass, right where the sharpie drawn face would be.

"Listen, Little Shane," Ilya whispered, his breath creating a ghostly circle of steam on the window. "Is hot, yes? Is like Russian sauna. You do not cry. You do not quit. You grow. You get... how you say... crusty. You get the thick skin."

"Ilya, he's a fungus," Shane deadpanned, leaning over to peer at the dark oven. "He doesn't have ears."

"He hears with his bubbles!" Ilya snapped back, not daring to break eye contact with the Dutch oven. He turned his intensity back to the glass. "Do not be flat, Little Shane. If you are flat, Big Shane will laugh at us. He will say, 'Ilya, you are bad baker. You are failure.' You want this? No. You rise. You rise like Stanley Cup over head!"

Ten minutes passed in a heavy, flour dusted silence. Ilya didn't blink. He didn't even seem to breathe.

"He is moving!" Ilya suddenly roared, lunging to his feet so fast the wooden stool clattered across the linoleum. "Shane! Look! He is... he is inflating! Like balloon!"

Shane peered over his shoulder, squinting through the steam. To his genuine shock, the dough was actually fighting back against the heat. It was puffing up, the jagged score mark Ilya had sliced into the top peeling open like a wide, bready grin.

"He did it," Shane admitted, his voice hushed with actual, reluctant respect. "He's got some serious oven spring."

Ilya puffed out his chest, his eyes shimmering with misty-eyed pride. He pressed both palms against the hot glass of the oven door, seemingly immune to the 450-degree heat radiating through the kitchen.

"That is my boy," Ilya crooned to the window, his voice a soft, vibrating bass. "You show them. You be the biggest loaf in Ottawa. I buy you butter later. The expensive kind. The one

from the fancy farm with the sea salt."

He turned to Shane, a wild, triumphant glint in his eyes that bordered on the evangelical.

"See? I told you, Shane! Look at the crust! He has the Rozanov heart," Ilya declared, gesturing grandly at the rising dough. "And he has the... uh... the Hollander complexion. Pale and stubborn, but with the good structure."

Shane stared at the oven, then at his husband, who was still wearing the "Kiss the Cook" apron over his massive frame. "I'm not sure if I should be insulted by the 'pale and stubborn' comment, or just impressed that you haven't melted your hands off."

Ilya didn't hear him. He was already leaning back in, whispering through the glass. "One more minute, Little Shane. Hold the line. Finish strong."

The timer shrieked like a final buzzer. Ilya moved with the explosive speed of a man jumping off the bench for an overtime shift. He shoved his massive hands into a pair of mismatched oven mitts, one featuring a smiling cartoon cat, the other a singed, plain grey and hauled the Dutch oven onto the counter with a heavy thud.

"Move, Shane! Give him air! He needs to breathe!" Ilya barked, waving Shane back with a padded cat paw.

He lifted the lid. A magnificent, yeasty cloud of steam billowed up, hitting the ceiling. There, in the center of the pot, sat Little Shane. He was slightly lopsided, charred to a dark mahogany on one side, with a crust that looked thick enough to stop a bullet.

Ilya didn't move. He leaned in, his ear inches away from the blistering hot loaf.

"Ilya, what are you doing?" Shane asked, peering cautiously over his shoulder. "Is it... is it supposed to look like that? Is it dead?"

"Shh!" Ilya hissed, holding up the singed grey mitt to silence him. "He is talking. He is... cracking. He has things to say."

The bread was making a faint, rhythmic popping sound as the crust cooled, the "song" of the sourdough. Ilya's eyes went wide with professional focus.

"He has good lungs," Ilya whispered, leaning so close to the loaf his nose nearly brushed the crust. "You hear that? Pop. Crack. That is the heart of a champion. He has... how you say... the high IQ."

"It's a loaf of bread, Ilya," Shane deadpanned, rubbing his eyes. "It doesn't have an IQ. It barely has a crust. It's a fermented rock."

Ilya ignored him entirely. He snatched a metal spoon from the drawer and began tapping the bottom of the loaf with the clinical intensity of a doctor checking reflexes. Thump. Thump. Thump.

"He is hollow," Ilya announced, his voice thick with emotion. "Like my soul before I met you, Shane. This is good. This mean he is light on his skates."

"Great. He's a hollow, soulful bird. Can we eat it now?" Shane reached for the bread knife, his stomach letting out a mournful growl.

Ilya swatted his hand away with the speed of a professional defender. "No! He is in post-game recovery! He must rest! If you cut him now, he loses all his... his steam spirit. He becomes mushy. You want mushy center, Shane? No. We wait two hours."

"Two hours? Ilya, it's nearly 12am!"

Ilya stood his ground, crossing his massive arms over the ruffles of his 'Kiss the Cook' apron. He looked like a nightclub bouncer protecting a high-profile carbohydrate.

"We wait," Ilya said firmly, his gaze fixed on the cooling loaf. "I stay here. I watch him. I make sure no one... no one trades him to another kitchen while I sleep."

Shane sighed, leaning his head on Ilya's shoulder for a brief, exhausted second. "You're a weirdo. You know that, right?"

"I am Baker," Ilya corrected, his chest puffing out so far the floral apron strings strained. "And Little Shane? He is a First Round Pick. Guaranteed. No bust here."

Two hours later, the kitchen was silent except for the rhythmic ticking of the stove clock and Ilya's heavy, expectant breathing. The "recovery period" was officially over. Ilya stood over the loaf with a serrated bread knife held aloft like a ceremonial sword. He looked like he was about to perform a sacred rite in a very small, very racy apron.

"Okay," Ilya whispered, his voice cracking with nerves. "We see if Little Shane is a bust... or if he is Legend."

He pressed the knife down. The crust didn't just give way; it roared. CRUNCH. The sound was sharp and clean, like a fresh skate blade hitting a sheet of untouched ice. Ilya sawed through the thick, mahogany exterior until the loaf finally fell open in a cloud of glory.

Steam curled into the midnight air. The inside was a beautiful, airy mess, creamy, stretchy, and riddled with the kind of irregular holes that professional bakers weep over. It smelled like a dream of a Parisian morning filtered through an Ottawa spring.

Ilya stood frozen, the knife still trembling in his hand. A single, triumphant tear traced a path through the flour dust on his cheek.

"Shane," Ilya whispered, awestruck. "Look at the bubbles. He has... he has the vision. He sees the whole ice."

"Ilya," Shane said, his eyes widening as the steam cleared. "That actually looks... like real bread. Like, professional, five-star-bakery bread."

Ilya didn't respond with words; he simply hacked off a thick, jagged wedge with the force of a man splitting wood. He smeared a literal mountain of the expensive sea-salt butter onto the steaming surface and shoved it toward Shane.

"Eat," Ilya commanded, his voice a low, vibrating growl. "Tell me I am genius. Tell me I am the father of the year."

Shane took a massive bite. His eyes slid shut instantly. The crust was shatteringly crisp, giving way to an interior that was chewy, tangy, and dangerously perfect.

"Oh my god," Shane mumbled, his voice muffled by a mouthful of warm rye. "Ilya. This is... it's actually incredible. It's better than that artisan place down the street. It's better than anything I've had in this city."

Ilya took a massive, predatory bite of his own. He chewed slowly, his eyes glowing with a terrifying, newfound power that Shane recognized from the final minutes of a tied game. He swallowed hard and slammed his flour-covered fist onto the marble table.

"I am Baker King!" Ilya roared, a cloud of white powder flying off his floral apron like a localized snowstorm. "Little Shane is Elite! He is Top Line! He is Franchise Bread!"

"Okay, okay, calm down," Shane laughed, snatching a second slice of the warm, buttery bread before Ilya could reclaim it. "You found a hobby, Ilya. You can't be 'Baker King' every night. You can relax now. The madness can end."

"Relax?" Ilya's head snapped toward the pantry with the speed of a predator. His eyes were wide, glowing with a newfound, sourdough-fueled ambition. The Renaissance Man had peaked, and there was no going back. "No. This is only the beginning, Shane. Little Shane is just... the basic model. The rookie. We need upgrades."

"Upgrades?" Shane asked, a crumb of crust falling from his lip.

"Yes!" Ilya shouted, beginning to pace the kitchen, his accent thickening and accelerating. "Tomorrow, I make Blueberry Sourdough. For the antioxidants. For the recovery! Then, I make Protein Sourdough with the crushed walnuts. For the gains. Then... maybe Vodka Sourdough?"

"Ilya, I'm almost certain you cannot ferment vodka into—"

"I am Scientist now, Shane! I put everything in the jar!" Ilya grabbed a notepad and a pen, scribbling so furiously the paper nearly tore. "Then, we make Honey Walnut. For... for the crunch-power. And then, Cheddar Jalapeño. For the fire in the belly. He will be spicy, Shane. He will have the attitude. He will talk back!"

"Now we're talking," Shane laughed, leaning back against the counter and watching Ilya draw what looked like a tactical map of a blueberry. "You're actually a natural at this. Terrifying, but a natural."

Ilya stopped scribbling, the pen hovering over his notepad. He looked at the leftover starter clinging to the sides of the glass jar—the progenitor of the masterpiece they were currently devouring. He leaned in, tapping the glass with a gentle, reverent knuckle.

"You hear that, Little Shane?" Ilya whispered to the rising bubbles. "Tomorrow, we add the berries. Tomorrow, we become Purple King. You are not just bread. You are a legacy."

Shane watched him, a half-eaten slice of heaven in his hand, and realized with a start that the gym was no longer for lifting weights, and the fridge was no longer for sports drinks.

"Ilya," Shane said softly, "please tell me the treadmill is retired. Please tell me the blueberries don't need cardio."

Ilya didn't look up. He just adjusted his tiny 'Kiss the Cook' apron and narrowed his eyes at the jar.

"Blueberries are heavy, Shane. They need core strength. We start at four in the morning."

Shane groaned, sliding down the kitchen cabinets until he was sitting on the floor, defeated by his own delicious dinner. "I'm going to have purple footprints all over the house, aren't I?"

"Is the price of greatness," Ilya muttered, already reaching for the expensive water. "Is the price of the King."

Chapter 2: The Breadwinner

Chapter Summary

Bood took a tentative, terrified bite. The room went silent. His eyes widened, his jaw worked slowly, and then, a look of pure, unadulterated shock washed over his face.

"Oh," Bood whispered, a purple crumb clinging to his lip. "Oh, wow. It's... it's salty. And sweet. And it feels like... a hug from a bear."

"A Russian bear!" Ilya corrected proudly, slamming the knife back into his bag.

Shane watched his husband covered in flour, wearing a floral apron, and currently negotiating a multi-year deal with a jar of yeast.

"Well," Shane sighed happily, reaching for the butter. "At least you aren't staring at the wall anymore."

Ilya didn't hear him. He was already checking the blueberry levels in the fridge. "We need more jars, Shane. We make army. Big Shane, Little Shane, and... Medium Shane."

The "army" grew steadily through the sweltering heat of July. The kitchen became a laboratory of sticky surfaces and bubbling starters, a manic distraction from the fact that the ice had been melted down in arenas across the country. But as August bled into September, the floral apron was traded back for compression gear. The flour under Ilya's fingernails was replaced by the familiar sting of friction tape, and the frantic energy he'd been channeling into sourdough began to pivot back toward the net.

By the time the first crisp morning of training camp arrived, the hobby hadn't died, it had simply been weaponized. Ilya didn't just show up for his physicals; he arrived bearing the spoils of his off-season war.

Ilya marched into the team locker room with the swagger of a man who had just scored a hat trick. The locker room, usually a place of high-protein shakes and the smell of expensive leather, was suddenly overwhelmed by the scent of fermented yeast and cooked fruit. The teammates slowed mid-tape and mid-sentence, staring at the gargantuan, violet-hued mass cradled in his arms.

"Gentlemen!" Ilya shouted, slamming the loaf down onto the center table. "Look! I have made... The Purple King."

The room went silent. Hayes, the team goalie, leaned over with a grimace. "Rozy. Why is that bread... vibrating? And why is it purple?"

"Is Blueberry Sourdough," Ilya said, chest puffed out so far his jersey strained. "Is antioxidants. Is Little Shane's brother. Eat. You become fast. You become strong."

"You named your bread Shane?" Luca asked, poking the loaf with a roll of sock tape.

"Do not touch with tape!" Ilya barked, swatting his hand away. "He is elite prospect. He has high crust-IQ."

Shane walked in a moment later, rubbing his face in exhaustion. He saw the team gathered around the purple monstrosity. "Don't look at me," Shane muttered. "I tried to stop him."

Ilya pulled out a massive hunting knife he usually used for camping. CRUNCH. The purple crust shattered, revealing a steaming, violet interior studded with bursting berries.

"Eat," Ilya commanded, pointing the knife at Bood. "Or you are scratched for next game."

"Ilya, that's a team violation," Bood stammered, staring at the jagged, violet slice trembling at the end of the hunting knife. "You can't scratch me. You aren't the coach."

Shane leaned against the doorway, watching his teammates, men who signed multi-million dollar contracts and faced ninety-mile-per-hour pucks, legitimately cowering before a sourdough loaf.

"Just eat it, Bood," Shane sighed, reaching for a piece himself. "Resistance is literally futile. He's already started a spreadsheet for the next three weeks of flavors."

Bood took a tentative, terrified bite. The room went silent. His eyes widened, his jaw worked slowly, and then, a look of pure, unadulterated shock washed over his face.

"Oh," Bood whispered, a purple crumb clinging to his lip. "Oh, wow. It's... it's salty. And sweet. And it feels like... a hug from a bear."

"A Russian bear!" Ilya corrected proudly, slamming the knife back into his bag.

Within seconds, the entire team was swarming the table. Professional athletes, worth millions of dollars, were fighting over purple crumbs like seagulls.

"Rozy, this is amazing," Hayes muffled through a mouthful. "Can you make one with jalapenos? My wife wants the recipe."

Ilya folded his arms, a smug, dark grin spreading across his face. He looked at Shane and winked.

"No recipe," Ilya said firmly. "Is state secret. But for fifty dollars... I give you a jar of Medium Shane."

Shane groaned, leaning his head against his locker. "And there it is. My husband, the yeast tycoon."

"Fifty dollars?" Hayes sputtered, then immediately started reaching for his wallet. "Actually, fine. My wife says the grocery store stuff is like eating cardboard. If I bring home a jar of 'Medium Shane,' maybe she'll forget I forgot our anniversary."

"Medium Shane has high standards," Ilya warned, his voice dropping into a low, conspiratorial rumble. "He needs the filtered water. He needs the warm spot near the toaster. If you neglect him, he becomes sour. Like a goalie who gives up five goals in first period."

"Ilya, please," Shane begged from the depths of his locker. "Stop comparing the microbes to our teammates."

But the dam had broken. The defensemen were lining up, Paypal apps already open on their phones. Ilya stood at the center of the chaos, a smudge of flour still decorating his cheek like war paint, looking more triumphant than he ever had after a shut-out.

"I am not tycoon, Shane," Ilya whispered, his thumbs flying across his phone screen as he scrolled through wholesale listings for organic Himalayan sea salt. "I am the Godfather of Grain. I provide for my family. I provide for the boys."

He looked back at the remains of the Purple King, nothing but a few violet crumbs and a smear of expensive butter left on the table.

"Tomorrow," Ilya announced, his voice ringing out with terrifying authority. "The Jalapeño Fire arrives. Bring your own milk. It will not be for the weak of heart."

Shane watched the team cheer, actually cheer, for a spicy loaf of bread. He realized then that his kitchen was gone, his pantry was a laboratory, and his husband had officially traded his stick for a rolling pin.

"Well," Shane muttered, grabbing a stray purple crumb and popping it into his mouth. "At least the 'Godfather' makes a damn good sourdough."

The following Tuesday, the equipment room no longer smelled like sweat and skate bake. It smelled like a high-end Parisian boulangerie with a hint of Russian intensity.

Ilya had commandeered a corner between the spare sticks and the goalie pads. He was wearing a team-branded apron he'd modified with a sharpie to read: GODFATHER OF GRAIN.

"Next!" Ilya barked, slamming a bag of flour onto a crate.

Luca, stepped forward, looking around nervously. "Uh, Roz? You got the... you know. The 'Spicy Shane'?"

Ilya narrowed his eyes, leaning over a tray of golden, blistered loaves. "You have payment?"

Luca reached into his bag and pulled out a high-end, designer espresso machine he'd bought for the "trade." Ilya inspected the box, nodded once, and reached under a pile of practice jerseys. He pulled out a loaf of Cheddar Jalapeño Sourdough that smelled so good it should have been illegal.

"Is sharp. Like my skating," Ilya whispered. "Do not let coach see. He say 'too many carbs.' He does not understand... art."

"Thanks, Roz," Mark whispered, tucking the bread under his arm like a football and scurrying away.

Shane walked in, dropping his gear bag and staring at the line of million-dollar athletes waiting behind the skate sharpener. "Ilya. Tell me you aren't running a black-market bakery in the locker room."

"Is not black market, Shane," Ilya said, not looking up as he dusted a loaf of Honey Walnut with powdered sugar. "Is... supply and demand. They have hunger. I have Little Shane. We are partners."

"You're trading sourdough for hockey gear and favors!" Shane hissed, pointing at a pile of premium sticks and a pair of luxury headphones on Ilya's 'desk.'

"I trade for value," Ilya shrugged. "Troy give me his prime parking spot for a month. All for one loaf of Blueberry King. Is fair trade. He walk more, he get cardio. I park close, I save energy for kneading."

The rookie defenseman stepped up next, looking intimidated. "Mr. Rozanov? Can I get a... a 'Medium Shane' with extra salt?"

Ilya leaned in close, his flour-dusted face inches from the rookie's. "You have the goat cheese I ask for? The one from the farm?"

"Yes, sir," the rookie squeaked, handing over a cold bag.

Ilya swapped it for a warm loaf with the speed of a professional magician. "Good. You are smart boy. You go far."

Shane just put his face in his hands. "I created a monster. You were supposed to just get a hobby, not become the Al Capone of Carbohydrates."

Ilya stopped, looked at his flour-covered hands, and then at the long line of teammates waiting for their fix. He gave Shane a slow, satisfied grin.

"I have no hobby, Shane," Ilya said, his voice deep with pride. "I have Empire."

The locker room door slammed open with a sound like a thunderclap. Silence fell instantly. The line of million-dollar athletes froze, loaves of bread hidden behind their backs like guilty children.

Coach stepped into the equipment room. He sniffed the air.

"Why," Coach groaned, his voice low and exhausted, "does my locker room smell like a brunch spot in Vermont?"

He marched straight toward Ilya's corner. Shane winced, bracing for the explosion. Ilya didn't blink. He just wiped a smudge of flour off his cheek and stood tall, still wearing his

"Godfather of Grain" apron over his practice gear.

"Roz," Coach muttered, staring at a loaf of Cheddar Jalapeño. "What is this?"

"Is... hobby, Coach," Ilya said, his Russian accent sounding particularly innocent. "Shane say I need hobby. I make life from dust."

"You're running a bakery out of the stick room! I have players skipping off-ice workouts to 'check the rise' on their orders! Bood tried to trade his power-play minutes for a baguette!"

Shane stepped forward, hands raised. "Coach, I'm so sorry, I'll take him home, I'll—"

"Quiet, Hollander" Coach exhaled. He leaned in close to Ilya, his eyes darting left and right to make sure no one else was listening. "Is it true? About the Purple King?"

Ilya's eyes narrowed. He reached slowly under a pile of goalie leg pads and pulled out a perfectly browned, blueberry-stained loaf. It was still warm. The scent of toasted grain and dark berries filled the small space.

"Blueberry Sourdough," Ilya whispered. "High antioxidants. Good for... Coach with high blood pressure."

Coach stared at the bread. His jaw worked silently for a moment. He reached out a hand, his fingers trembling slightly as he touched the crust. Crunch.

"I heard..." Coach whispered, "that it has a 'complex crumb structure.'"

"The best," Ilya nodded solemnly. "Strong in the middle, very reliable on the back-check. Like me."

Coach grabbed the loaf and stuffed it into his tactical coaching clipboard bag. He stood up straight, his face returning to its professional, tired scowl.

"I don't want to see another crumb on this floor, Rozanov!" Coach said louder for the benefit of the room. "And if I find out anyone is trading ice time for carbs, there will be hell to pay!"

He turned to leave, then stopped and looked back at Ilya. "I expect a Honey Walnut on my desk by Thursday morning. Or you're on the fourth line."

The door slammed shut behind him.

The locker room erupted into cheers. Ilya crossed his arms, a look of supreme triumph on his face.

"See, Shane?" Ilya said, patting a fresh jar of starter. "Coach is not scary. He just hungry. Everyone want piece of Little Shane."

Shane leaned his head against the wall, defeated. "Ilya, you just bribed the head coach with sourdough. We are officially a crime family."

Ilya grinned, a dusting of flour falling from his eyelashes. "Is not bribe, Shane. Is... consultancy."

Shane sat on the kitchen floor, his head in his hands. The house smelled like a brewery and a fruit stand had collided at high speed.

Every flat surface in the kitchen was covered. There was a jar of Blueberry Shane, a jar of Honey Walnut Shane, and a massive, bubbling bucket labeled MEGAPUCK.

"Ilya," Shane groaned. "I just wanted you to relax. Maybe do a puzzle. Not start a sourdough cult."

Ilya stood over the counter, wearing his "Kiss the Cook" apron and a pair of hockey gloves for "better grip" on the dough. He looked incredibly smug. He looked like he had just won the Olympic gold.

"Puzzle is for weak men, Shane," Ilya said, his Russian accent thick with triumph. "I make life. I make bread. I am God of Yeast."

"Coach called me, Ilya. He asked if you could make a 'Tactical Rye' for the playoffs. You are bribing the staff with carbohydrates!"

Ilya shrugged, his chest puffing out. "Is business, Shane. I have 'Hobby' now. I am very good. Best in league."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled stack of twenty-dollar bills, the locker room bread tax. He tossed them onto the flour-covered table.

"I buy you nice dinner with bread money," Ilya said, giving Shane a wink. "But no bread. We have plenty at home."

Shane looked at the ceiling, where a small, dried patch of the original Little Shane still clung to the light fixture. "I hate myself for suggesting this. I created a monster."

"No," Ilya corrected, leaning down to pat the jar of starter tenderly. "You create Legend. Little Shane and I... we have big plans. Tomorrow, we try Chocolate Chip Shane."

"Ilya, no—"

"Ilya, yes," he grunted, already reaching for the cocoa powder. "The Empire must grow."

It was 7:00 AM on a Saturday. Shane just wanted to sleep. Instead, his doorbell sounded like a machine gun. Ding-dong-ding-dong-ding.

Shane dragged himself to the door, squinting against the morning light. He opened it to find three massive professional hockey players standing on his porch. They looked frantic.

"Shane," Dykstra whispered, his eyes bloodshot. "Is he awake? We have... situation."

"A situation?" Shane rubbed his eyes. "It's Saturday. The game isn't until tonight."

"Is bread emergency," Hayes said, holding up an empty paper bag. "My mother-in-law is in town. She tasted the Blueberry King yesterday. She says if I don't bring more for brunch, I am 'disappointment to family.' Please. Help me."

Suddenly, Ilya appeared behind Shane. He was wearing his team-issue tracksuit and his "Kiss the Cook" apron. He was holding a spray bottle of water like a sidearm.

"Who wakes the Baker?" Ilya thundered.

The players scrambled. "Rozy! Please! We need the 'Spicy Shane'! And a loaf of the 'Honey Walnut'!"

Ilya crossed his arms over his chest. He looked down at them with the cold, calculating gaze of a man who held the keys to the kingdom.

"Spicy Shane is high demand," Ilya said slowly. "He is... elite prospect. Very rare."

"I'll give you my luxury box seats for the concert next week!" Dykstra yelled. "Just give me a loaf!"

Ilya turned to Shane, his face a mask of supreme smugness. "You see, Shane? My hobby is... essential service."

"It's a bread-based mafia," Shane muttered, leaning his head against the doorframe. "I created a carbohydrate kingpin."

Ilya turned back to the players. "Fine. You go to back door. Do not let neighbors see. I have two 'Honey Walnuts', one 'Spicy Shane' and one 'Purple King' left. But it cost you."

"Anything!" they cried.

"You," Ilya pointed at Bood. "You take my turn on the penalty kill tonight. I have... flour-lung. I need rest."

"Deal!"

As the players sprinted toward the back of the house, Ilya looked at Shane and gave him a slow, flour-dusted wink.

"I have hobby, Shane," Ilya whispered, patting the jar of Little Shane sitting on the entryway table. "And I am very, very good."

Shane just closed the door and went back to bed, dreaming of a world where bread didn't have a jersey number.

Six months later, Shane found himself buried in the humid chaos of a fairground tent. Beside him, Ilya stood at attention, his Olympic gold medal clinking rhythmically against a "Kiss the Cook" apron.

"Ilya, please," Shane whispered, leaning in. "It's a county bread competition, not the Stanley Cup finals. Dial it down."

"Is scouted event, Shane," Ilya hissed back, his eyes darting across the table like he was tracking a puck in the neutral zone. He jerked his chin toward a silver-haired woman three stations down. "Look at Entry 42. Mrs. Gable. Her crust is weak. She is a defensive liability."

Ilya had spent forty-eight hours sleeping on the kitchen floor to "monitor the humidity" of the final bake. He looked like a man who had been through a playoff grind; his hair was wild, his eyes were bloodshot, and he smelled faintly of yeast and ambition.

When the head judge finally reached Ilya's entry, the tent fell into a church-like silence.

"Name of the loaf?" the judge asked, pen hovering over her clipboard.

"Little Shane," Ilya said, his voice dropping to a reverent, gravelly bass. "He has the heart of a lion and the crumb of a king."

The judge sliced into it. The CRUNCH was so loud it silenced the goats in the next pavilion. She took a slow, methodical bite. She closed her eyes. She nodded once.

Ten minutes later, the blue ribbon was pinned. "First Place: Ilya Rozanov."

Ilya didn't just celebrate; he had a total sensory breakdown. He let out a primal, locker-room roar that rattled the jars of prize-winning pickles. He hoisted the sourdough loaf high over his head like the Stanley Cup, doing a frantic victory lap around the potting soil display while screaming, "WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS!"

That night, the house was finally quiet. The flour had been swept, and the blue ribbon was tucked into the corner of a framed photo of the two of them. Ilya sat on the back porch, staring at the stars, with the jar of starter bubbling quietly on the table beside him like a sleeping pet.

Shane sat down next to him, bumping their shoulders together. "So. Does the Baker King officially retire for the night?"

Ilya didn't make a joke. He reached out and took Shane's hand, his thumb tracing the line of Shane's knuckles with a slow, deliberate rhythm.

"I know I am... a lot," Ilya said, his voice low and uncharacteristically steady. "I sit at wall. I vibrate. I make house smell like old socks and fruit. I make you 'Mother of Bread' against your will."

Shane laughed softly, the sound catching in his throat. "You did. You really, really did."

"But you stay," Ilya said, turning to look at him with a soft, tired smile. "You push me to find thing that is not hitting. You buy me the expensive water. You do not leave when the ceiling is covered in dough." He squeezed Shane's hand. "Thank you for supporting my crazy, Shane. You are the best teammate I ever have."

Shane leaned his head on Ilya's shoulder, the faint, sweet scent of yeast still clinging to his husband's skin. "Well," Shane whispered. "Someone had to make sure you didn't accidentally ferment Anya"

Ilya chuckled, a deep vibration in his chest, and kissed the top of Shane's head. "I love you, Big Shane."

"I love you too, Baker King."

They sat in the silence for a long moment, the peace of the off-season finally settling over them. Then, Ilya's eyes drifted toward the dark silhouette of the garden.

"Shane?"

"Yeah, Ilya?"

"I see a bee today. He look... lazy. Form is bad. I think he need coach."

Shane closed his eyes, a resigned smile tugging at his lips. "Let's go to sleep, Ilya."

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