

Charging the Centaurs

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Charging the Centaurs

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Summary

Three years after retiring together, Shane and Ilya are back at each other's throats.

The sticks have been traded for whistles and the peace of retirement has been replaced by the chaos of a three-year-old, but some things never change. In hockey, ice time is sacred, and neither man is backing down.

"Lower your center of gravity, Haas," Shane called out, his voice echoing. "If you're top-heavy, the defense is going to eat you alive in the corner."

Luca Haas panted, elbows braced on his knees as he wheezed. "Fatherhood has been good for you, yes? You've really got the 'disappointed dad' look down. I feel like you're going to put me in time out and take away my iPad."

Shane grinned. Three years into retirement, he still missed playing with teammates like Luca, but coaching kept the fire lit and he had plenty of excitement in his life to keep him busy. "Keep talking and you're grounded."

The heavy double doors at the end of the rink swung open. Shane looked up, his expression softening instantly.

Ilya strode toward the ice, looking every bit the high-fashion retired superstar in a long wool coat. Tugging at his arm, was a three-year-old.

"Yarinushka, slow down! You will trip," Ilya called out.

Yarina Ilyinichna Hollander-Rozanova was a vision in a custom red Ottawa Charge jersey, the nameplate on her back spanning nearly the entire width of her tiny shoulders.

"Daddy!" Rina chirped, her eyes wide at the ice.

Shane skated to the gate, leaning over it as Rina scrambled into his arms for a messy, cold-cheeked kiss. "Hey, bunny. What are you doing here?" He looked up at Ilya, noticing the flash of crimson on his husband's hand as he adjusted Rina's hair. "You went with red? Little on the nose isn't it?"

"She insisted," Ilya said, holding up his hands with a shrug. Red shimmered on his nails, identical to the tiny fingers Rina was currently wiggling at Shane. "Is important to look good for first day."

Haas skated over, breathing hard. "Hey, Little Hollanov! You coming to help me with my backhand? Your dad is being mean to me."

"Luca!" Ilya greeted him with a grin. He scooped Rina up and, before Shane could protest, handed the toddler over the gate directly into Haas's arms. "Here. Practice lifting the cup. Is very important you do not drop it. Very embarrassing."

Shane blinked. "Whoa, wait... why isn't she with Mom and Dad?"

"Yuna's car made wolf bird noise," Ilya said, waving a hand dismissively. "They are at mechanic shop."

"Okay... so why didn't you drop her off there?"

Ilya shrugged, checking his cuticles. "No time. Nail appointment ran long. Cannot be late for first day."

"You brought a toddler to a practice because of a *manicure*?" Shane hissed, though he was fighting a smile.

"Besides," Ilya added, leaning over the railing. "I think my team will like it. She is like cute mascot. Much better than scary, naked man-horse. Good for morale."

Shane groaned, rubbing his temples. "That's incredibly sexist, Ilya. Your players are professionals. They don't want to babysit a child just because they're—"

Shane stopped. He followed Ilya's pointed gaze toward the goalpost at the far end of the rink. A group of the league's toughest enforcers and fastest wingers had abandoned their drills. Hayes, was kneeling on the ice, trying to fit his massive, terrifyingly painted goalie mask over Rina's head.

She stood there, dwarfed by the the giant men around her, looking exactly like Boo surrounded by her colorful monsters. She let out a high-pitched giggle, and the six-foot-four enforcers collectively cooed like they were looking at a kitten.

"See?" Ilya purred. "Is not sexist. Good for everyone's morale."

Then Ilya's face shifted from teasing to serious. "Speaking of late, lyubimiy... you are cutting into our time. Shoo. Go away. Get your stinky boys off my ice."

Shane stood up straight. "The Centaurs have the ice until 11:00. You're supposed to start in the training room."

"I want team meeting here before we train," Ilya insisted, gesturing to the ice. "I have very inspiring speech for first day. I need the... the weight. The... gravity." He snapped his fingers.

"Gravitas?" Shane supplied.

"Yes! Gravitas," Ilya nodded. "I need ice for gravitas. You cannot give speech about glory on a carpet, Sheniuchka. It feels cheap." *Shane.*

"What's the deadlock here, boys?"

Wiebe walked up behind Ilya with a whistle between his teeth. He looked from his assistant coach's stubborn stance to Ilya's defiant chin.

"He's trying to kick us off the ice early," Shane complained.

"Now who is being sexist, hmm?" Ilya countered. "You think you deserve ice just because you are male team?"

Weibe shook his head in exasperation. "Alright...listen, you two are gonna have to learn to share. Now that the Charge are playing at the stadium and sharing this facility, this rink belongs to all of us."

Ilya stuck his tongue out at Shane. "Yes, my team is breaking attendance records. We need more room for all the fans we have. Maybe soon we give you our leftovers, eh?"

Shane huffed a laugh, his heart swelling despite the mock annoyance. "Tell you what, Rozanov. A bet. Whoever wins their season opener gets the ice first for the rest of the month."

Ilya tilted his head, his eyebrows arching in a way that Shane knew meant trouble. "And if we both win? Then what?"

Shane felt the heat crawl up his neck. He knew that look. If they both won, the payment for the ice time wouldn't involve hockey at all.

"I... we'll figure it out," Shane muttered, his face turning a shade of red that matched Rina's jersey.

Behind them, the head coach of the Charge—a sharp-eyed woman who looked like she'd survived ten Ilya Rozanovs—joined Wiebe at the bench.

"Should be a good season, right?" Wiebe asked her, nodding toward their respective bickering assistant coaches.

The Charge coach watched Ilya blow a cheeky kiss to Shane, while Rina—now holding a hockey stick three times her size—was being cheered on by a mix of male and female pros.

"With those two?" she replied with a grin. "It'll be interesting, that's for sure."

In the center of the rink, the red jerseys of the Centaurs and the Charge began to mingle as the transition began. And right in the middle of the ice, tiny Rina Hollander-Rozanova was dancing in circles, the undisputed queen of the Ottawa ice.

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