Family Is a Big Deal

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Family Is a Big Deal

by meeby

Summary

It started with an email from the team.

To: #Centaurs_Roster
From: Travel
Subject: Mentors trip

Ilya deleted it unread and put it out of his mind.

Notes

The broadcasters for my favorite NHL team mentioned the upcoming mentors' trip for the team. This idea grabbed hold of me and my first fic in 25 years was born. These books. This show. I tell ya.

This is loosely set during The Long Game *but don't look too closely at how it fits into the time line. Russian is from google translate. Don't hurt me.*

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It started with an email from the team.

To: #Centaurs_Roster
From: Travel
Subject: Mentors trip

Ilya deleted it unread and put it out of his mind. Or he tried to. Boston had these trips every year, as well, where fathers (or, for those without a father, brothers or stepdads or whomever they wanted to invite) joined the team on a road trip. They did fun activities as a group, shared stories, and the dads and mentors bonded while cheering on their loved ones. Everyone had fun and he certainly enjoyed meeting people, but Ilya had always ignored them as much as possible. It was easier in Boston. He had said his family couldn't make it from Russia, and they didn't push. But here in Ottawa, he could already tell it was not likely to be something he could brush off with his trademark aloofness—the blessing and the curse of how close knit this team was becoming.

Whatever, Ilya sighed to himself. *It's not a big deal.* He would be friendly with the mentors, then he could spend whatever time they were doing team bonding on Face Time with Shane. *Just another sign that he was not the captain material he used to be.*

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It next came up with a shadow looming over him at his stall after practice and a fuzzy muzzle snuffling up to his knee.

"Chiron! You missed me!" Ilya dropped his gloves and reached behind the team dog's ears for scratches. He studiously ignored the bearded social media manager who came with the canine company. "You don't demand anything from me but pets, do you *milyy shchenok*? Such a good dog."

"Ilya," Harris started. "I've been nominated to bug you about the mentors' trip. We need to know who you want to invite."

Ilya relented from where he was studiously petting Chiron and glanced up to see a Harris who looked like he wanted to ask about anything but. So, the dog was a bribe . . . or protection.

"Does, um, . . . does your brother—"

"No."

"OK, but…"

Ilya was walking away before Harris could finish the question.

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It wasn't something he meant to talk about with Galina.

She was really quite good at knowing when something was scratching at Ilya's mind. He had been ruminating aloud on how he was still trying to figure out whom he might open up to about his life a bit. He had thought about Harris…

"… but he can be such a gossip. And he has bothered me so many times about the mentors' trip that I am ready to take a razor to his beard if he asks me one more time…"

"What's the mentors' trip?" asked Galina, tone curious but eyes indicating she knew she was poking right at the thing he didn't want poked at. (Or did he?)

"Is no big deal…" Ilya tried.

"Then why is Harris asking you about it relentlessly making you want to resort to violence?"

"Well, it was really only couple times, and I would not actually hurt…." Galina shot him a look that put him back on track.

He explained about the trip: how nice it was that teams had opened them up to more than just dads and how some teams even did mom trips. He thought mentors should just be whomever you wanted to join you regardless of gender. Not that it would have mattered for him anyway.

Maybe he'd have invited Svetlana. Wouldn't that have set tongues wagging.

"Is not a big deal because I have never had anyone to attend. So, it does not matter." He picked at an invisible string on his sweatpants.

"Does it really not matter, or have you convinced yourself it doesn't matter? It has to be pretty lonely watching your teammates bond with family and meeting other family members who have been important to their loved one's hockey success."

Ilya shrugged. "I would not have wished my father on anyone, and my brother is a useless fool. I am better off alone."

Galina smiled sadly. "Well, we know you're not alone, but I'm sure the person you'd want to attend isn't someone who can. I get it."

Ilya pursed his lips in a sad attempt at a smile. "Boston never really bothered me about it. I could play the mysterious Russian and get away with it. Ottawa." He sighed. "They care so much. Is annoying."

"Yes, it is so hard when your employers and coworkers want you to feel happy and included." Her eyes twinkled a bit before softening, "We've talked about how you want your life with the Centaurs to improve, to be a better experience than it was in Boston. I know you're struggling with that, but maybe this is a place to start? Talk to this Harris person, not about you and Shane, but about how you're feeling about the trip. Be honest so he knows *why* you keep shutting him down. Maybe you can come up with a solution together or at the least, he'll stop?"

“Yes,” Ilya nodded. “I could do that.”

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It turned out to be an easy conversation.

He probably should have known it would be. He knocked on Harris’s office door and apologized for being so short with him, and he explained that he had never wanted his father to attend before and he wasn’t close with his brother. Thus, he had never made a big deal of the trip. He was glad Ottawa was a team that felt more like family, but he just didn’t have any external family to contribute to the experience, and he’d rather not make it something really noticeable.

“I have an excess of family,” Harris offered. “I could loan you someone?”

He was joking, Ilya thought. He smiled, but it did make him think. “Will you be on the trip, Harris?”

“Of course! Taking pictures and videos and….” Harris paused. “Why?”

Ilya shrugged as nonchalantly as he could manage. “Maybe you could be my person whenever there’s a thing that … requires a person?” Ilya stared at his shoe. “It’s no big deal…”

“I will be busy,” Harris started but continued quickly when he saw Ilya’s eyes begin to shutter, “but I’m in as much as I can be!”

Ilya smiled. It was something.

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It came to a bit of a head with Shane.

He still hadn’t opened up to Shane about therapy and how lonely he was feeling sometimes—how envious he was of Shane’s support system. It should be something they talked about, he knew. But he also didn’t trust yet that he could say something about it without seeming either pathetic or angrier than he wanted to be.

Shane was home in Montreal while Ilya was on the road in Columbus. His least favorite road trip. People think Ottawa is boring. They should try Ohio. At least Ottawa was the capital of a country. Oh, and that fucking cannon….

He woke from his pregame nap when his phone rang. Shane. He smiled sleepily and answered, playing into his just-awake voice when he purred “Hello *moya lyubov*.”

Shane didn’t even seem to notice. “Sorry if I woke you,” he started. “I’m trying to plan around a new photoshoot next week and wanted to compare schedules. I might have to cut a visit short.”

So, Shane wasn’t going to play, *and* he was going to try to cancel on him. Great.

“Just send me a text with the times and I’ll confirm,” he snapped. “I need to get going to the arena.”

That got Shane’s attention. “Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t even… jeez. What a schmuck.”

Ilya smiled a little then. “I am not sure what is schmuck. If it is boyfriend who obsesses over schedules and planning, then yes.”

“Close enough,” Shane laughed. “Let me start over. Hi there. I miss you. How was your nap?”

“Lonely,” Ilya sighed. “But is not new.”

“You fly back in the morning, right? How about I keep you company after the game while you’re falling asleep?”

“Then, I will not be so much able to fall asleep,” Ilya pointed out.

“Right. That’s kind of the point.”

“Yes. I know. Is date.” Ilya smiled and decided to relent and indulge his anxious boyfriend. “What is the scheduling problem?”

“Oh, we don’t…” Shane started.

“You will worry until we settle it,” Ilya pointed out. “Just say.”

“So, I have this chance to shoot an ad for a local brand of, well, ginger ale,” Shane chuckled.

“No! Canada Dry will cut you off! How will you survive?”

“Shut up, dickhead.” Ilya knew he was stifling a laugh. “I need to use the afternoon we were going to hang out before you leave for the Nashville trip.” At least Shane sounded apologetic.

Without really thinking about it, Ilya griped, “Is mentors’ trip. Already going to suck. Why not start early?”

Shane was quiet for a moment. “You didn’t tell me that was the mentor trip. We haven’t talked about it.”

“I didn’t want to,” Ilya muttered. The lint on his sweatpants really was becoming a problem, he thought.

“Oh, Ilya…”

“No pity, Shane,” he snapped. “It’s not a big deal.”

“No, I get that. I just wish…”

Ilya knew. He wished, too. For a lot of things.

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It ended with a ring of his doorbell.

Ilya was putting the finishing touches on his dinner. He'd gotten home from Columbus late morning. Slept for a couple of hours, worked out, and now he was going to enjoy the rest of his off day as best he could with a juicy burger and homemade fries. He wished Shane could have joined him because he missed cooking together, but he had a game. Also, he would never eat this food now.

He was a bit stunned when he opened the door to find David Hollander standing sheepishly on his doorstep, rubbing the back of his head and shuffling his feet.

"Ah, Ilya. Glad I caught you at home. I know I should have called but, well, I got this idea and then it seemed important to talk to you about it right away. And traffic was a pain getting over the bridge, so I didn't want to use the hands-free phone…." Ilya loved David Hollander. He especially loved it when he could see bits of Shane in him.

"Anyway, sorry," David finished. "Could I come in to visit for a bit?"

Ilya smiled and swept his arm in invitation.

"Always welcome. I just made dinner. You want a burger?"

"I'd *love* one," David smiled conspiratorially. "It's so nice to have a kid in the family who can—and will—cook real food."

Ilya beamed. He couldn't help it. He felt like a plant getting its first taste of sunlight in days.

Ilya served up his extra burger and sacrificed some of his fries, and they sat amiably at the kitchen table, chatting about Ilya's game in Columbus (more hate for that fucking cannon) and how they were both sure the Centaurs would click soon. They had too much talent not to.

They moved to the living room to turn on Shane's game and proceeded to mock the Detroit team and cheer for Shane all through the first half of the game.

Ilya knew David had a purpose here. He didn't know what, but he wasn't in a rush and Ilya was going to enjoy the evening while he could. He just hoped he wasn't doing this to soften some bad news or something.

Finally, as the second intermission began, David cleared his throat, shifted on the sofa to face Ilya, and spoke up.

"You're a fine young man; you know that Ilya, right?"

"Uh… thank you?"

"Let me just get this out, OK? I say that because I'm endlessly impressed with what a good man you are, especially to my family, despite what I understand may have been some

difficult circumstances to grow up in." David raised his hand. "Shane doesn't talk much about it, but I know enough. And I can read. Both magazine articles and people."

Ilya smiled. "Your son is easy to be good to."

"I know. And while I would not want to do it that way again, I'm grateful, in a way, that I walked in on you guys that summer." He chuckled. "I'm grateful that it meant you didn't have to hide from us, that we could get to know you. And I'm glad you came to Ottawa—if only so I have someone to gang up on Yuna with on game night."

Ilya wasn't sure where this was going, but it was getting a little hard to breathe. His eyes stung. He nodded along with David. "You and Yuna have been most welcoming."

"I want you to know, Ilya, that it's become about being more than 'our son's boyfriend' for us. I don't pretend to know how your relationship with Shane will shake out exactly, but I know it will. I know you're it for him, and, well, you're it for me and Yuna, too. We already think of you as family."

Ilya's cheeks and lips tightened. It was such a complicated word, "family."

"And I need you to know what family means to us." David took one of Ilya's hands—the one he'd started to pick at his sweatpants with. Ilya looked up.

"Family shows up," David started. "Family is more than blood. Family is love and support – and—if you're Yuna—loving criticism and a protective mama bear." They smiled at each other. Neither acknowledged that their eyes were a bit damp.

"I'm a big believer in found family, Ilya. I'm lucky that I have a beautiful wife and son, but I know not everyone has that, and you make family where you can. We love you, Ilya, and you are family."

Ilya thought he knew where this was going now, but he wasn't sure he wanted to. He also might have to kick Shane in the shins if he put him up to this.

"Ilya, don't be cross with Shane."

David Hollander might be as scary as his wife in his own way.

"He didn't ask me to do anything. He told Yuna he couldn't do the ginger ale shoot when she wanted him to because he wanted to keep you company before your team's mentor trip. It got me thinking…."

"You Hollanders think too much," he muttered. But he was touched. And he couldn't really hide it.

David smiled. "You don't have anyone to go on the trip with you, do you?"

"Is not a big deal," Ilya tried.

“I think it is a big deal. I think you’ve told yourself it’s not because what other option did you have? That brash Russian exterior can be pretty useful armor, I’d wager. But, your life is different now, Ilya. You have love in your life. Ottawa is a different sort of team. And you have family now. I promise you do.”

Ilya had dropped his head while he listened, trying to stifle a sniffle. David placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

“Ilya Rozanov, I would be most honored if you would let me accompany your team on the mentors’ trip.” He smiled.

Ilya looked up, let some tears fall, and replied quietly, “I would love that.”

David reached over and gave Ilya the best dad hug he could muster while sitting awkwardly on a sofa.

Ilya cleared his throat and pulled back. He needed some distance before he continued. “I would love that, but how would we even make that work?”

“Well, I imagine you let that social media guy—Harris?—know that you want to add me to the roster. I’m sure they can make room. Or I’ll pay my own way.”

“Or I would,” Ilya insisted. “But I mean, how do we even explain that to everyone?”

David smiled. “It’s hockey, Ilya. I’m a hockey dad. I’m a pro with these guys. Look, I’ll tell a version of the truth. You and Shane have become friends through the foundation work. And while Shane’s away in Montreal and you’re here, you’ve become kind of like a billeted son to us. Everyone understands that concept in Canada.”

It could work, Ilya thought.

“What do we tell Shane…?”

“Enh, let him find out on the broadcast.” David laughed. “He needs a little surprise now and then.”

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“That’s a slash, ref! What the hell!” David Hollander shouted from the team suite at Nashville’s Bridgestone Arena. Number 65 had been pressing his luck with Ilya the entire game and if Ilya didn’t do something about it, David was going to find his way to the ice.

Bog Boodram laughed loudly. “You’re a good hockey dad, Hollander. Even if I still don’t quite understand why you’re supporting your son’s rival.” He chugged more beer.

It had been a good trip. The team and mentors had a blast at a Nashville bar the night before. Social media video of Ilya and David Hollander line dancing had taken the internet by storm. Shane had called sputtering so incoherently that Ilya and David laughed and told him to call back when he could form sentences. He calmed, later, when David explained how no one

batted an eye at his matter-of-fact explanation and once Ilya told Shane, quietly, what it meant to him to have David there.

Roger Haas poked Boodram in the side. “Family is what you make it Bog,” he pointed out. “Stop thinking about it and just enjoy that we made a new friend!”

David smiled. The Centaurs really did have a great group of players, and the extended families were more of the same. He could even admit that he liked these guys more than the dads he had met on the Metros trips. What a stuffy bunch of entitled know-it-alls (other than Pike) who often tried to insist their kids were just as good as Shane. As if.

And now, David could bask in the knowledge that he had *two* sons who were the best in hockey. He knew someday he’d get to crow about it in public. For now, he would quietly support his “family friend” and wait.

On the ice, Ilya lined up a clean and beautiful open ice hit on 65, sending him ass over teakettle, landing hard on his butt.

“Hope your car has cushy seats,” Ilya taunted as he skated away. He glanced up at the family box and saluted.

He felt lighter than he had in a while. He knew he had more work to do. He knew he had to talk to Shane. But he had family in his life—maybe for the first time since he was 12. His mama would be happy for him. And that . . . . That was a big deal.

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