would be nice to hug you

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would be nice to hug you

by guusmin

Summary

“I don’t want to smell that place again,” he says. “I don’t want to hear that language around me like that. I don’t want to be small again.”

His chest tightens. His breathing gets shallow. He hates this part. The moment when the past stops being something he remembers and starts being something he feels.

“I can’t,” he repeats. “I really can’t.”

There’s a long pause. Then Ilya exhales shakily and adds, quieter now, almost breaking,

“But I can’t leave her alone.”

or;

when ilya's niece loses her mother and reaches out to him in secret, he returns to russia with shane to get her out of an unsafe home.

Notes

hi!! english is not my first language, so there may be some mistakes. thank you for reading anyway, love you!!

The TV is on, but neither of them is really watching it.

It's one of those nature documentaries Shane likes to put on when he doesn't want silence but also doesn't want noise. Soft music, wide shots of the ocean, a calm voice explaining something about migration. Ilya couldn't tell you what it's about. He's been staring at the same spot on the screen for ten minutes without seeing it.

Outside, the sun is still warm. The windows are open. The air smells like salt and sunscreen and something fried from the small place down the road.

They are on the couch. Shane's leg touches Ilya's, just enough to feel solid.

Ilya hasn't said much all day.

The news came in the morning. Short. Practical. The kind of message people send when they don't know what to say and don't want to say too much.

"Your brother's wife passed away last night."

No details. No comfort. Just information.

Ilya read it once. Then again. Then put his phone face down on the table like it might burn him.

Shane didn't ask questions. He just nodded, soft and careful, and asked if Ilya wanted coffee or tea. Later, he made eggs even though it was already late morning. Later, he suggested the beach, then changed his mind halfway through the sentence and said they could stay in if Ilya wanted.

Now they're here. Evening. The sky outside turning orange, then pink.

Shane laughs at something on the TV. It's an easy laugh, like nothing is wrong. Like the world is still simple. He does it on purpose. Ilya knows that. Shane does this when things hurt. He doesn't ignore them, but he doesn't make them bigger either. He gives them space to exist without taking over everything.

After a moment, Shane feels it. The stillness. The way Ilya's body is there, but his mind is far away.

Shane doesn't look at him. He just shifts a little closer. Their knees press together fully now. Then slowly Shane's hand finds Ilya's wrist. Not grabbing. Just resting there. Thumb warm against skin.

Ilya breathes out. He doesn't realize he's been holding his breath until that moment.

Shane keeps watching the TV. His thumb moves once, gentle. Then again. A small circle. It shouldn't matter this much. It always does.

Ilya turns his head and looks at Shane. At the sharp line of his jaw, the familiar curve of his mouth. At the way Shane's eyes soften when he senses being watched, even before he turns.

"You okay?" Shane asks quietly.

Ilya nods. Then shakes his head. "I don't know," he says. His voice sounds flat to his own ears. Like it's coming from somewhere far away.

Shane hums, understanding. He doesn't push.

Another small touch. Shane's shoulder leaning into Ilya's.

"It's strange," Ilya says after a moment. "I didn't… love her. Not really. We were not close."

"That doesn't mean it can't hurt," Shane says.

Ilya swallows. "She was… kind. Sometimes. Other times, not." He shrugs slightly. "She tried. I think."

Shane finally turns his head and looks at him. "You're allowed to feel whatever you feel," he says. "Even if it doesn't make sense."

Ilya lets out a small breath that is almost a laugh. "You always say this."

"Because you always forget it."

That makes Ilya smile. Just a little. The corner of his mouth lifts before he can stop it.

Shane sees it and doesn't react. He knows better than to point it out. He just squeezes Ilya's wrist once, gentle but real.

They sit like that for a while.

On the screen, a bird flies across a bright blue sky. The narrator talks about distance and instinct and going home.

Ilya looks away.

"I'm glad we're here," he says suddenly. "With you."

Shane's answer is immediate, simple. "Me too."

Ilya hesitates. Then adds, softer, "I love you."

Shane smiles, slow and warm. He leans in and presses a quick kiss to Ilya's temple. "I love you," he says back, like it's the easiest thing in the world.

For a second, Ilya feels something settle in his chest. Not gone, not fixed, but quieter. Like the pain moved to the side to make room for this.

Shane clears his throat and straightens a little. “Okay,” he says, switching tone on purpose. “If I have to watch one more bird fly dramatically into the sunset, I might lose my mind.”

Ilya lets out a small laugh. “You chose this.”

“I did not know it would be this serious,” Shane says. “Why is nature always so emotional?”

“Because it suffers,” Ilya says dryly.

Shane snorts. “Wow. Okay. Russian philosopher over here.”

Ilya shrugs. “Is true.”

They talk about nothing after that. About the weird neighbor who waved at them for too long this morning. About the terrible ice cream Shane bought yesterday. About how Shane is still convinced he could survive in the wild for at least three days.

“You would die,” Ilya says.

“Rude.”

“You would try to pet something dangerous.”

“I would simply befriend it.”

Ilya smiles more freely now. The heaviness hasn’t disappeared, but it’s not crushing him anymore.

A knock sounds at the door.

Shane groans. “Oh, thank God. Food.”

He stands up, stretching his arms over his head.

“I’ll get it,” he says. “Don’t move.”

Ilya raises an eyebrow. “I was not planning to.”

Shane grins and heads toward the door, already calling out, “Yes, yes, coming!”

The sound of voices drifts in from the hallway. A paper bag rustles. The door opens and closes again.

Ilya is alone on the couch. The TV keeps playing. His phone vibrates on the table once. Ilya frowns slightly and picks it up. The number on the screen is unfamiliar. No name. No country code he recognizes immediately.

He almost ignores it. Then he sees the message preview.

It's *Russian*.

His fingers go cold. He opens it.

“Я скучаю по тебе, дядя.”

For a second, the room feels too quiet. The words are simple. Childish. Careful.

“I miss you, uncle.”

Ilya stares at the screen.

His chest tightens in a way that feels old. Too familiar. Like a door he locked years ago has just been opened from the other side.

He swallows hard.

The sounds from the hallway fade. The TV fades. The summer air fades.

All he can see are those words.

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Unknown number:

I miss you, uncle.

Ilya:

Irina?

Unknown number:

Yes. It’s me.

Ilya:

How did you get my number?

Irina:

From my mom’s phone. I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t.

Ilya:

It’s okay... It’s been a long time.

Irina:

Yes.

Ilya:

I’m sorry for your loss.

Irina:

Thank you.

Ilya:

How are you?

Irina:

I don’t know. Some days are quiet. Some days are too loud.

Ilya:

I understand that.

Irina:

Do you really?

Ilya:

Yes.

Irina:

I miss you.

Ilya:

I miss you too. You were very small the last time I saw you.

Irina:

I remember. You carried me on your shoulders. I thought you were very strong.

Ilya:

I was just tall.

Irina:

No. You were strong.

Ilya:

Are you safe?

Irina:

Most of the time.

Ilya:

And your father?

Irina:

He doesn’t talk much. He says I should be strong now.

Ilya:

You don’t have to be strong all the time.

Irina:

I know. That’s why I wanted to talk to you.

Ilya:

Is there something I can do for you?

Irina:

It would be nice to...

Ilya:

To what?

Irina:

to hug you.

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They sit next to each other on the couch.

The food is still warm on the table, untouched. The TV is on pause now, a frozen frame of blue water and sky. Outside, the evening has gone quiet. The wind has slowed. Even the house feels like it's holding its breath.

Ilya's phone is face down on his thigh.

He already told Shane. Shane hasn't said much since. He's leaning back, one arm stretched along the back of the couch, close enough that Ilya can feel the heat of him.

Shane breaks the silence gently. "So," he says. "What are you going to do?"

Ilya stares at the floor. His eyes burn. He blinks hard, like that might help. It doesn't. "I can't go there," he says.

His voice comes out rough. Lower than usual. Shane doesn't interrupt.

"The thought of going back makes my stomach turn," Ilya continues. He presses a hand flat against his abdomen, like he's proving it. "I feel sick just thinking about it."

He swallows.

"I don't want to smell that place again," he says. "I don't want to hear that language around me like that. I don't want to be small again."

His chest tightens. His breathing gets shallow. He hates this part. The moment when the past stops being something he remembers and starts being something he feels.

"I can't," he repeats. "I really can't."

There's a long pause. Then Ilya exhales shakily and adds, quieter now, almost breaking,

"But I can't leave her alone."

That's when his voice cracks. He presses his lips together, trying to stop it. Trying to hold everything inside where it belongs. His shoulders tense. His jaw tightens. It doesn't work. A tear slips out anyway, slow and traitorous, running down his cheek.

Shane moves without thinking. He reaches up and wipes it away with his thumb. Ilya closes his eyes for a second.

"I know what it's like," he says, opening them again. His gaze stays unfocused, somewhere far away. "I know what it's like to be a kid and feel like no one is on your side. To feel like you have to handle everything alone."

His fingers curl into the fabric of his shorts.

"I thought my brother would be different," he says, and this time there's anger in his voice. Sharp and sudden. "I really did. I thought—" He shakes his head. "I thought he learned something. From our father. From how we grew up."

He lets out a humorless laugh.

“Turns out, he learned how to repeat it.”

Shane stays quiet. He knows better than to interrupt when Ilya sounds like this. When the words are finally coming out on their own.

“How can he do this to her?” Ilya continues. His eyes flash. “She just lost her mother. And he tells her to be strong? To stop crying?”

His hands shake now.

“She’s a child,” he says. “She’s a kid. How can he make her feel this alone?”

Another tear falls. Then another.

Shane doesn’t wipe these away immediately. He lets them fall. Lets Ilya see that he doesn’t have to hide them.

“I know that house,” Ilya says quietly. “I know the silence. The way it feels heavy, like it’s watching you. I know how small it makes you feel. How you start to think maybe you don’t matter enough to be cared for.”

He breathes in sharply.

“I survived it,” he says. “But I shouldn’t have had to. And she shouldn’t have to either.”

Shane finally speaks. “If you want to go,” he says carefully, “I won’t let you go alone.”

Ilya turns his head slowly and looks at him.

Shane’s expression is steady. “If you decide to go,” He repeats, “I’ll be there. With you.”

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They don’t talk much at the airport.

Caps pulled low, shoulders slightly hunched, moving like people who don’t want to be noticed. Shane keeps his sunglasses on even inside. Ilya keeps his head down. It feels safer that way. No one recognizes them.

That part is a relief. The other part —the part that knows exactly where he is— doesn’t care.

The taxi smells like old fabric and cheap air freshener. Pine. Too strong. Ilya’s stomach tightens as soon as the door closes.

The driver doesn’t ask questions. Just nods, starts the engine, pulls into traffic.

They sit in the back seat. Shane on the left, Ilya on the right. The city moves past the window.

Ilya watches it like he's watching something dangerous. Familiar buildings. Familiar corners. Streets he learned before he learned how to leave.

His chest feels tight. Not panic. Something slower. Heavier. This place knows him.

He presses his forehead lightly against the glass. It's cold. It helps a little.

Shane glances at him, careful. He doesn't stare. Just checks. Always checking.

Under the cover of the seat, Shane slowly moves his hand. Fingers reaching, searching. A quiet question. Ilya feels it immediately.

His instinct is to hold on. To grab. To anchor himself to something warm and real. Instead, he pulls his hand back. Not fast, not angry, just firm.

He looks at Shane and gives him a small, apologetic look. His eyes say everything his voice can't. "Please," he whispers. "Not here."

Shane understands right away. He nods once and pulls his hand back to his own lap. "It's okay," Shane murmurs.

Ilya exhales slowly. Shame creeps in, unwanted. He hates that he feels like he has to apologize for needing space.

The taxi moves through quieter streets now.

"Looks very quiet," Shane says softly, glancing out the window.

Ilya nods. "It always is," he replies. "Quiet. Empty." He watches a group of big gray buildings pass by. "Soulless," he adds. "No joy."

Shane hums. "You grew up here?"

"Yes. I didn't notice how dead it was, you know, when I was a kid. I thought this was just how life was."

The car drives on. They pass small shops, most of them closed. A bus stop with no one waiting. A playground with rusted swings moving slightly in the wind.

Then Ilya's breath catches. "Wait," he says quietly.

Shane looks at him.

Ilya lifts his hand and points out the window. "Do you see that?" he asks.

Shane follows his gaze. A small amusement park sits behind a metal fence. Old rides. Faded colors. A Ferris wheel that looks like it hasn't moved in years.

"Yes," Shane says. "I see it."

Ilya's voice changes when he speaks again. Softer. "My mother used to take me there."

Shane turns fully toward him now, careful not to miss a word.

"My father wouldn't ride anything with me," Ilya continues. "He said it was childish. A waste of time."

He smiles faintly.

"But my mom," he says. "She never said no."

The taxi slows at a light. The amusement park stays in view a little longer.

"I was scared of the rides," Ilya admits. "I would sit there, almost crying. Holding the bar too tight."

He lets out a quiet breath, almost a laugh.

"And she would laugh," he says. "So loud. Like she wasn't afraid of anything."

His smile grows, just a little.

"I admired her courage," he says. "I wanted to be like her."

The light turns green. The park starts to disappear behind them. Ilya's smile fades. He looks at Shane.

"One day," he says, "we should go to an amusement park. You and me."

Shane's eyes brighten immediately. "Oh, absolutely," he says. "But you should know, I am very brave."

Ilya snorts quietly. "You will scream."

"I will not."

"You will cry."

"Lies."

"I will hold your hand," Ilya says dryly. "Because you are scared."

Shane grins. "You wish."

They share a small laugh. For a moment, the city loosens its grip.

Then the taxi slows again. The driver clears his throat. "We're here," he says.

Ilya's body stiffens. The words feel heavier than they should. He nods, but doesn't move.

He turns his head toward the window. At first, he can't look. Then he forces himself to. The building stands there like it always has. Unchanged.

Ilya's breath catches.

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The living room looks like it gave up. Empty bottles on the table. One tipped over on its side, a dark stain soaking into an old magazine. Ashtray full. Couch cushions uneven, like someone slept there and didn't bother fixing it after.

Alexei sits slouched in the armchair across from them. His shoulders are heavy, his eyes dull. He smells like alcohol and something sour underneath it.

Ilya and Shane sit side by side on the couch. Ilya's jaw is tight. His hands are clenched together. He's staring at Alexei like he's trying to burn a hole through him.

Alexei lets out a dry breath. "I didn't think you'd come," he says in Russian.

Ilya lifts his eyebrows slightly. Fake surprise. His voice is calm, but his eyes aren't. "Does that bother you?"

Alexei sighs and rubs his face. "You know... it's not... safe for you... to be here—"

"You can't even finish a sentence," Ilya cuts in sharply. The words land like spit. His eyes flick to the table. To the bottles. Disgust crosses his face. "Did you drink all of these yourself?"

Alexei doesn't answer. He looks anywhere but Ilya. That silence is answer enough.

Ilya closes his eyes for a second. Breathes in. Tries to slow his heart. When he opens them again, his voice is lower. "Where is Irina?"

Alexei hesitates. "Outside."

"Why?"

"She wanted to go out."

"Why did she want to go out?"

"I don't know."

Ilya stands up so fast the couch creaks. "Because you don't even pay attention to her!" His voice fills the room.

Alexei flinches and squeezes his eyes shut. "Don't yell at me."

Ilya laughs bitterly. “What are you doing, then?”

Alexei looks exhausted. Broken in a way Ilya doesn’t feel sorry for. “Ilya… I’m not in a place to fight.”

“Call Irina,” Ilya says. “Tell her to come back here. Now.”

Alexei lifts his head slowly and looks at him. “What’s your problem with Irina?”

Ilya stares at him, disbelief and anger mixing together. “She’s my niece,” he snaps. “I’m worried about her. Unlike you.”

Alexei’s voice rises. “How do you know I’m not worried?”

“Because instead of talking to you, she texts her uncle on the other side of the world! One she hasn’t seen in years!”

Alexei freezes. “She texted you?”

Ilya sits back down, forcing himself to breathe. His hands shake slightly, but he presses them together until they stop.

Alexei’s jaw tightens. “I told her not to.”

“Why?” Ilya shoots back. “So she wouldn’t hate you?”

“You’re not a good example for her.”

Ilya lets out a sharp laugh. It sounds almost unhinged. “Because I’m gay?”

Alexei stands halfway out of his chair. “Because of everything!” he shouts. “Your character. The way you live. And yes, because you’re gay. You keep embarrassing us.” His eyes flick to Shane. “And you even brought your whore with you—”

He doesn’t finish the sentence. Ilya is already moving. The punch lands hard. Alexei’s head snaps to the side. Blood appears instantly at his nose.

Shane jumps up, heart racing. “Ilya—!”

He reaches for Ilya’s arm, tries to pull him back, but it’s too late. Ilya has Alexei by the collar now, fist clenched in his shirt, dragging him up.

Their faces are inches apart. Alexei sees it then. Really sees it. The veins standing out on Ilya’s neck. The red in his face. The fury that’s been held back for years, finally given permission to exist.

“Watch your mouth,” Ilya says, low and deadly. “Or don’t even try to imagine what I’ll do next.”

Shane’s voice cuts in again, nervous and tight. “Uh… Ilya?”

Something in his tone makes Ilya pause. He turns his head. Shane is staring toward the other side of the room. Ilya follows his gaze.

Girl stands there. Frozen. Pale. Eyes wide.

“Uncle?” she says quietly.

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Irina’s room is small, but tidy. Posters on the wall. A shelf full of books that look half-read. A backpack resting against the desk like it was dropped there in a hurry. The air smells faintly like soap and something sweet.

Irina sits on the edge of her bed, her legs swinging slowly back and forth. Her hands are folded in her lap. Ilya and Shane sit across from her on two old chairs pulled in from the kitchen.

Ilya looks tired. His shoulders are slumped, the anger from before replaced by something heavier. Something quieter. There’s a bruise already forming on his knuckles.

Irina doesn’t mention it.

For a moment, no one speaks.

Ilya studies her face. Tries to connect the girl in front of him to the child he remembers. The one who used to cling to his jacket. The one who laughed easily.

He smiles softly. “You’ve grown,” he says.

Irina nods and looks away, suddenly shy. “Yes.”

Silence settles again.

Ilya shifts in his chair. He glances at Shane, just for a second. Shane meets his eyes and gives him a small, encouraging smile.

Ilya breathes out. His shoulders relax a little. “I’m sorry for what you saw,” he says gently, looking back at Irina. “I didn’t want us to meet like that.”

Irina shrugs. Her reaction is calm. Almost too calm. “It’s okay.” She lifts her big blue eyes toward him, hesitant but honest. “He fights with his friends sometimes,” she adds quietly. “I’m used to it.”

Ilya frowns. “With his friends? He fights in front of you?”

Irina nods, slow and careful. “About money.”

Something dark flashes across Ilya's face. "Money?" he repeats. "He took everything from me. He still has debts?"

Irina doesn't answer. She looks unsure, like she doesn't really know. Or doesn't want to know.

Ilya sees the coldness in her expression and forces himself to calm down. He smooths his face, pushing the anger away.

"Never mind," he says softly. "That's not important right now."

Irina hesitates. "Um," she starts, then stops. She looks down at her hands, suddenly very shy.

Ilya smiles again, warmer this time. "You don't have to be nervous with me, Irina," he says. "I'm still your uncle."

She swallows. "Did you come for me?" she asks quietly.

Ilya nods without hesitation. "Yes," he says. "We came for you."

She blinks. "Don't joke."

"I'm not," Ilya replies. "No one else could have brought me here."

Irina goes quiet. When she doesn't answer, Ilya frowns slightly.

"Did you think otherwise?" he asks.

She shrugs, small and uncertain. "I didn't think you would take me seriously."

Ilya inhales slowly. Then he leans forward and reaches out, gently taking her hand. His touch is careful. "I take everything you say seriously," he tells her. "Nothing you say is unimportant to me, Irina."

She looks at their joined hands. Then she smiles. Just a little.

Her eyes drift toward Shane. Shane notices immediately. He straightens slightly and offers her a friendly smile.

"Hello," he says in Russian, the word careful and a little stiff.

Irina's smile grows. "Are you Shane?" she asks in English.

Ilya scoffs softly, fake offended. "Oh, now you speak English?" he says. "Really?"

Irina nods. "I practiced."

Shane chuckles. "Yes, I'm Shane," he says. "Do you know me?"

She tilts her head. "Yes. You're my uncle's husband. Do you know me?"

“Of course,” Shane answers easily. “Ilya talks about you a lot.” Then he glances at Ilya and adds with a grin, “With a much worse accent.”

Ilya rolls his eyes. Irina giggles quietly.

Ilya looks back at her, something lighter in his expression now. “Hey,” he says. “Would you like to go eat something with us? Outside.”

•••

They pick a place that doesn’t feel important.

A small food stand with a few plastic tables outside. No bright lights, no loud music. Just people eating quietly, minds on their own lives. The kind of place no one looks twice at you.

Shane and Ilya keep their caps low, sunglasses still on even though the sun is almost gone. They sit angled slightly inward, backs to the street.

Irina sits across from them, holding her fries with both hands. She looks around like she’s afraid someone might recognize them, then relaxes a little when nothing happens.

Ilya eats slowly, watching.

Shane tries first. “Food is… good,” he says in Russian, carefully.

Irina smiles and nods. “Yes. Is good.”

Shane looks proud. “I said it right?”

Ilya doesn’t look up from his fries. “Barely.”

Shane clicks his tongue. “Rude.”

Irina giggles, covering her mouth with her hand. Ilya watches that laugh like it’s something fragile. Something he doesn’t want to scare away.

Irina glances between them, then focuses on Shane again. She hesitates, searching for words.

“You… love him,” she says slowly in English. “When… you know?”

Shane blinks, then his smile softens. “From the beginning,” he answers.

Ilya freezes mid-chew. He points at Shane with a fry. “Liar,” he says. “You didn’t even know you were gay.”

Irina looks between them, confused but entertained.

Shane laughs, unbothered. “That doesn’t change anything,” he says easily. “I loved him from the first moment. I just understood it later.”

Ilya smirks. “It’s true,” he says, leaning back slightly. “I’m very hard to resist.”

Shane rolls his eyes so hard it almost looks painful.

Irina watches them, fascinated. “You fight like this always?” she asks in English.

“Yes,” Shane and Ilya say at the same time.

They look at each other.

Shane adds, “Lovingly.”

Ilya nods. “Very lovingly.”

Irina smiles, then frowns a little, thinking.

Shane turns to her again. “You’ll understand,” he says gently. “When you love someone.”

Irina tilts her head. She looks at him. Then at Ilya. She clearly doesn’t understand. Ilya laughs quietly and translates into Russian.

Her face changes immediately. Softens. Something clicks. “Oh,” she says. “Okay.”

Shane tries Russian again. “*Privet*,” he says confidently.

Irina nods. “Good.”

Shane beams. Then he adds something longer. Completely wrong.

Ilya winces. “No.”

Irina laughs. “Very wrong.”

Shane sighs. “I hate this language.”

“It hates you too,” Ilya says calmly.

Sometimes Irina switches to English. “I watch… your games,” she says carefully.

Both Shane and Ilya straighten instinctively.

“All of them?” Shane asks.

Irina nods. “Yes. Night. Quiet.”

“Secretly?” Ilya asks.

“Yes,” she says. “Headphones.”

Ilya looks down at his hands, suddenly very interested in his fries.

After a while, the talking slows. The fries are gone. The air cools.

Ilya looks at her. “How did you think of me?” he asks.

Irina shrugs, embarrassed. “You’re always in my head.”

He blinks. “I thought you forgot me.”

She shakes her head immediately. “No. Never.” Then, quieter. “I watch all your games.”

Something warm and painful spreads through Ilya’s chest. “Did you like it?” he asks, trying to sound casual.

“Yes,” she says. “I want to be like you.”

He smiles. “A hockey player?”

Irina shakes her head slowly. “No,” she says. “A figure skater.”

Shane’s eyes widen. “Wait,” he says, pointing at her. “I understood that. You? Figure skating?”

Irina nods. “Yes.” She switches to Russian, faster now, more confident. “But my father doesn’t want it. He says I shouldn’t be on the ice.”

Shane turns to Ilya. “What did she say?” Ilya translates. Shane grimaces. “What is his problem?”

Ilya shrugs. “He can’t stand seeing another version of me.”

Ilya turns back to Irina, voice firm. “Don’t worry,” he says in Russian. “I’ll convince him. Consider it done.”

Irina’s smile fades. She shakes her head.

Ilya frowns. “What? Isn’t that what you want?”

She looks down. Then at Shane. Then back at Ilya. “Can’t I come with you?” she asks softly, in English.

Shane and Ilya look at each other.

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Ilya stands near the couch, arms crossed tight over his chest. Shane stays close, silent but alert. Alexei sits at first, elbows on his knees, jaw locked.

"No," Alexei says flatly. "Absolutely not."

Ilya exhales sharply. "She'd have better training there."

Alexei looks up, eyes sharp. "I'm not asking you where my daughter should be educated."

"I'm not deciding anything," Ilya snaps. "She wants this."

"You can talk as much as you want," Alexei says, standing now. "I'm not sending her away with you."

Ilya laughs, bitter. "You think this is about me?"

"Yes," Alexei fires back. "Everything with you is about you."

"I'm not leaving her here," Ilya says, voice rising. "I won't walk away and leave her in your hell."

"I will change," Alexei says, too fast. Too rehearsed.

Ilya's face hardens. "When?" he asks quietly. "Ten years? Twenty? Thirty? When exactly do we stop waiting for you to feel ready?"

Alexei clenches his fists. "You don't get to judge me."

"I do," Ilya says. "Because I survived you."

The words hang heavy.

"We're not waiting around for your moods," Ilya continues. "I'm taking my niece with me. I won't let you break her the way you broke me."

Alexei steps closer. "I don't trust you."

Ilya doesn't hesitate. "She does."

Alexei scoffs. "She's fourteen. She doesn't even know what she's asking for."

"She knows more than you think," Ilya says. "And more than you ever cared to learn."

Alexei's breathing grows rough. "You're filling her head with nonsense."

"I'm listening to her," Ilya snaps. "That's the difference."

"You ruined your own life," Alexei shouts. "I won't let you ruin hers."

Ilya steps forward. "My life wasn't ruined. You just hate what I became."

Alexei explodes. He slams his hand against the table. “Enough!”

He storms toward Ilya, voice breaking into a furious shout, words tumbling over each other: accusations, insults, old poison dragged back to the surface.

Ilya doesn’t move.

But Shane does.

“Shut your fucking mouth!"

Both brothers freeze.

Shane steps forward, placing himself squarely in front of Ilya. His back is straight. His shoulders tense. His jaw tight with barely controlled rage.

Alexei turns his fury on him. “Stay out of this,” Alexei growls.

Shane points at him. “Look at me,” he says sharply. “I don’t know how much Englsh you understand, but this will be the first and last time I speak to you.”

The room goes dead silent.

“We will not let you keep Irina in this shithole,” Shane continues, voice cold and steady. “Do you hear me?”

Alexei sneers. “You think you can threaten me?”

Shane steps closer. “This isn’t a threat. This is a promise.”

He gestures back toward Ilya without turning.

“If you ever touch him again,” Shane says, eyes dark, “I will make you regret the day you were born.”

Alexei stiffens.

“You scream, you drink, you rot,” Shane adds. “And you think that gives you power. It doesn’t.” He lowers his hand slowly. “You’re done.”

For a long moment, the three of them just stare at each other. Breathing heavy. Eyes burning.

Finally, Alexei breaks the silence. He looks at Ilya.“You’ll send money every month.”

Ilya’s restraint shatters. “Fuck you!” he shouts. “You’re still thinking about money?” He laughs, sharp and ugly. “Take it. Take everything. I don’t want any of it.”

He turns on his heel and storms toward the hallway. Irina’s door.

Shane gives Alexei one last look. Full of warning, full of contempt. Then he follows Ilya without another word.

The living room is left empty.

And for the first time, Alexei looks afraid.

•••

three years later – canada

The rink smells like cold metal and clean ice.

Ilya stands with his arms crossed, leaning against the barrier. Shane is next to him, relaxed, coffee in hand. Both of them are watching the same person.

Irina sits on the bench by the ice, tying her skates. Her movements are confident now. Familiar. Like she belongs here.

She looks up at them, smiling. “You came early.”

“We’re never late,” Shane says. “We’re just… aggressively punctual.”

Ilya doesn’t answer. His eyes are fixed somewhere behind her.

Irina follows his gaze and immediately groans. “Oh no.”

Ilya squints. “Is that him?”

His tone is sharp. Almost offended by the ice itself.

Irina’s cheeks turn pink. “Yes. That’s him.”

Shane leans forward, trying to see better. “Wait… is he Asian?”

Irina nods, embarrassed. “Half Asian.”

There’s a pause. Ilya looks at Shane. Shane looks at Ilya.

Shane grins. “Well.”

Ilya shrugs. “It’s genetic.”

Shane’s smile grows wider, memories flashing behind his eyes. “Wow,” he says softly. “*Genetic*.”

They exchange a long, knowing look.

Irina rolls her eyes. “Please don’t be weird.”

Ilya immediately straightens. “We’re not weird.”

Shane nods. “We’re concerned.”

“For my safety?” Irina asks.

“For his,” Ilya says flatly.

Irina laughs nervously. “You don’t even know him.”

“I know enough,” Ilya replies. “He exists.”

“That’s already too much,” Shane adds.

Irina shakes her head. “You’re acting like jealous dads.”

“We are jealous dads,” Shane says proudly.

Ilya points toward the ice. “Does he know how old you are?”

“We are the same age.”

“Does he know I exist?”

Irina hesitates. “I… might not have mentioned you specifically.”

Ilya gasps. “Unacceptable.”

Shane puts a hand on Ilya’s shoulder. “Breathe. Don’t scare her before practice.”

Irina ties the last lace and looks up at them. “He’s nice. He brings me tea after practice.”

Ilya grimaces. “I don’t trust anyone who brings tea.”

“You drink tea,” Shane reminds him.

“Yes, but I’m not sixteen and flirting,” Ilya snaps.

Irina hides her face in her gloves. “Stop.”

Shane chuckles. “What’s his name?”

Irina sighs. “Min-jae.”

Ilya repeats it slowly. “Min… jae.” He doesn’t like how natural it sounds. “I don’t like him,” Ilya declares.

“You’ve never spoken to him!” Irina protests.

“That won’t help his case,” Shane says.

Irina stands up, testing her blades on the ice. “You’re impossible.”

“We love you,” Shane says gently.

“That’s the problem,” Irina mutters.

A whistle echoes across the rink. “IRINA!”

She turns toward the ice. Then back to them.

“I have to go,” she says. “When are you coming back?”

“Before your practice ends,” Ilya answers without hesitation.

Her smile softens. “Promise?”

“Promise,” Shane says. He steps forward and presses a gentle kiss to her forehead. “*Ya tebya lyublyu.*”

Irina beams. “*Ya tebya lyublyu, papa*.”

Something tightens in Ilya’s chest.

She pushes off the ice, gliding smoothly toward the center. Strong. Focused. Free.

Ilya and Shane watch from behind the barrier, pride written all over them.

“She’s incredible,” Shane says quietly.

Ilya nods. “She’s brave.”

They fall into a comfortable silence, following her movements as she spins, lands cleanly, smiles to herself.

Then Ilya speaks again.

“So,” he says casually. “When do we beat up the kid?”

Shane checks his watch. “I’m free right now.”

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