

no translation required

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by [infallibility](#)

Summary

he is "ryuichi" before he ever became shane, even when the world forgets. on the ice, words disappear and "excellence" becomes the only one that keeps him safe. somewhere between what he learns to hide and what he is finally allowed to keep, he finds his way home.

or:

shane ryuichi hollander is half-japanese, even when the world tries to erase it (while also making him its exception)

Notes

i'm asian-american and have been a big hockey fan for years, so i was really not happy with how shane's japanese identity got glossed over when it 100% was something that made locker rooms not As Safe. granted i'm not an athlete, but let's be totally honest here the 2000s/2010's (and even now in This Sport) were filled with bigots.

i also wrote this after a few beers and no sleep so if there's errors don't jump me please

enjoy!

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Yuna has been praying for years by the time her body finally agrees.

Not loudly, or with the type of desperation that spills over. She prays the way she was taught, with her hands folded, spine straight, breath steady. She was asking not for miracles, but for permission and continuity. For something that would root her to this place the way her parents once rooted her to a small town in Hokkaido where winter swallowed sound and family filled the space it left behind. Canada is cold in a different way, vast and indifferent. She has learned to love it anyway.

When the baby comes, he is smaller than the nurses expected, but strong. His cry is immediate and indignant, lungs working hard as if offended by the suddenness of the world. Yuna laughs weakly through tears, sweat plastering her hair to her face, her body trembling with exhaustion and relief. Her mother hovers close, fretting the way only mothers who crossed oceans for their children know how to fret, repeating the same words over and over again like a mantra.

「よくやった。」

You did well.

Yuna hums in response, voice barely there, fingers reaching instinctively for her mother's hand. She knows this moment belongs to all of them, not just her and David, but the lineage that pressed itself forward through prayer and patience and loss. Her mother squeezes back, eyes shining, already calculating the distance between here and home, already committing to bridge it.

David wakes up after passing out for the second time with tears on his face and no memory of falling asleep. Someone places the baby into his arms, and he freezes. Not out of fear, but awe. The weight of him. The warmth. The way the tiny body curls inward like it already understands comfort. David does not speak for a long time. He just holds his son and cries quietly, reverently, as if afraid that sound might break something holy.

"Shane, do you want to go to mommy?" he asks eventually, voice unsteady, approaching Yuna with the bundle held close to his chest. The baby's cap has slipped slightly, thick black hair already stubbornly refusing containment.

Yuna's mother scrunches her nose at the name David offers without thinking. "Shane". Too Western. Too sharp at the edges. She doesn't comment. She never does. But when Yuna gathers her son into her arms, breath hitching as something ancient settles into place, she whispers the name that has lived inside her for years.

"Ryuichi."

She presses her lips into his hair, smiling as he squirms, already strong, already opinionated. Carefully and tenderly, she traces the kanji her father wrote before he passed across her baby's cheeks.

龍一.

The one who comes first, bearing the dragon's name.

For a moment, doubt flickers through her. A small, traitorous thought. Will this be too much for him? Should she make it easier? Speak only English so teachers don't warn her about confusion, about burden, about standing out? There is nothing easy about culture. It hurts. It isolates. It marks. But it is also an eternal home, something that cannot be taken once it is given, no matter how hard the world tries.

She remembers her parents whispering this to her and her brothers during weekend Japanese lessons in Montreal, their voices low and insistent, reminding them that their faces did not start with them and that they belonged to something older, something deeper than convenience. The Odas did not raise their children to disappear.

Neither will she.

Ryuichi grows up in a house where Japanese is not exotic or rare, but ordinary. Where language is not a performance, but a current that moves naturally through the day. David learns it the way you learn something because you love someone, slowly, carefully, without expecting praise. His accent is clumsy. His grammar improves. He practices flashcards late at night while Yuna laughs softly from the couch, correcting him only when it matters.

At the dinner table, language flows without hierarchy. English when it's easiest. Japanese when it's closest to the heart.

Ryuichi absorbs this without knowing it is unusual. This is respect without spectacle, and culture without explanation. He notices that this is how his parents love; stumbled words and laughs in between with pauses where his parents give him kisses on his cheeks. Obaachan says she likes Papa because he obeyed his late Ojiichan's one condition for marrying Mama: *learn every language Yuna knows; love her in every way you can*. David did this silently and without protest. This is the quiet love that breathes life into him, into all of them.

Outside the house, the world is louder.

But inside, he is held with none of them yet know how hard they will have to fight to keep it that way.

Before school teaches him the word "different", Ryuichi learns routine.

Morning light filters through the kitchen window in a way that feels intentional, landing first on the rice cooker, then on the counter where Yuna moves with practiced ease. He learns the sound of it before he learns to read the clock, the soft click, the hiss of steam, the way his mother hums while she works, always the same melody, always unfinished. David leaves earlier than Yuna some mornings, but never without pressing a kiss into Shane's hair and trying out whatever new phrase he learned the night before.

“いってきます,” he says, careful and earnest.

Yuna smiles. “いってらっしゃい.”

Ryuichi absorbs this exchange like breathing. This, he knows, is how love sounds.

He is a tactile child. He likes to sit on the floor while his mother folds laundry, tracing the kanji on old envelopes, copying the strokes with a finger that still curls too much at the joints. Yuna never rushes him. She corrects gently, repeating that it's not about perfection more so than intention, and tells him stories about her parents' town in Hokkaido with snow so deep it swallowed shoes whole and kitchens always warm no matter how cold it got outside. Yuna reminds him that culture is something you carry, not something you perform.

Sometimes he answers her in Japanese. Sometimes in English. Sometimes in a messy blend that makes her laugh.

When they go out, though, the world presses in.

Ryuichi notices the way his parents' bodies shift in public. The way David stands a little straighter. The way Yuna's voice sharpens just slightly when she corrects people who get his name wrong. He doesn't know why yet, but he files it away that the world requires adjustments.

At the grocery store, strangers comment on how beautiful he is, how exotic, how lucky Yuna must be. They ask David where Shane gets his hair, his eyes, his skin, as if these things are curiosities rather than facts. David answers politely, firmly, never joking along. Yuna feels the familiar tightening in her chest, the awareness that being seen is not the same as being understood. They worry that this will seep into their son as a poison he will never be cured of.

At playgroups, he gravitates toward children instinctively, but something always seems to snag. He brings onigiri wrapped too loosely in plastic, watches other kids wrinkle their noses. He talks too much, too fast, enthusiasm spilling over, until someone laughs (not kindly) and he learns, for the first time, how to stop mid-sentence.

It isn't cruelty yet, but confusion (confusion teaches restraint all the same)

At home, he is still loud. Still sprawls across the floor, speaking over cartoons in Japanese because it feels right in his mouth. Yuna watches him with something like relief and fear braided together. She wants to believe this ease will last, but there is a heaviness in her chest that screams at how she also knows better.

One evening, after a neighbor's kid asks why Ryuichi's eyes look “sleepy,” Yuna stands at the sink long after the dishes are clean. David finds her there, hands submerged in water gone lukewarm.

“They don't mean harm,” he offers carefully, taking Yuna's hands out of the water. David dries them with the cloth on the counter, taking his time as he squeezed her fingers

“I know,” she says, face scrunched in a way that looks so much like their son when he's trying not to be “too big”. “*That's* what scares me. That it's normal to them to think these

things.”

They talk quietly that night, after Ryuichi is snoring after falling asleep to some cartoon. Yuna admits she is afraid that loving this culture will mark him, afraid that *not* loving it enough will hollow him out. David listens, steady, grounding.

“He needs something solid,” he says. “Something that doesn’t change depending on the room.”

She nods, leaning into him. “I don’t want him to learn to disappear.”

“He won’t,” David whispers, not as a promise but as a commitment.

The next morning, Yuna starts insisting gently, but consistently: Japanese at home, no matter what. She decides that this is the rhythm they will follow as a family, one for preservation and survival. Ryuichi doesn’t protest. After all, it’s not that different from what they do already. By the time kindergarten arrives, by the time “Shane” starts answering before “Ryuichi” can, the groundwork has already been laid. He knows how to switch. He knows how to watch faces. He knows which parts of himself bring warmth and which bring questions. Ryuichi doesn’t yet know what it costs, but he is learning.

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The first time he is called Shane more consistently is when he is six.

Ryuichi decides that he does not like being six.

He scans the room and notices that he is the only boy that looks like him. There is a girl that looks like Mama (though she doesn’t respond when he says that he likes her shirt), a few kids that look like the Singhs down the street. “Shane” is quiet in school, even though Ryuichi is loud and boisterous at home.

“Shane” realizes that he does not like school. He does not like the lunch they give him, the words that do not stick to his tongue, and even the kids that sort of look like him who just give him a funny look when he tries to talk.

Ryuichi’s strike happens on a Friday.

It is not a thought out rebellion. There is no plan. He simply does not get out of bed when his mother calls his name the first time, or the second. Ryuichi pulls the blanket up over his head, curls himself inward, and presses his face into the pillow hard enough that the world dulls at the edges. His chest feels tight in a way he does not know how to explain. He only knows that walking into that building again feels unbearable.

“起きて、龍,” Yuna calls softly from the doorway. *Wake up, Ryu.*

He does not answer, instead opting to pretend being asleep, exaggerating his breathing the way he has heard David do on Sunday mornings. When she steps closer, he stiffens, the act slipping.

Yuna kneels beside the bed. She reaches out to brush his hair back, pauses when he flinches.

“Ryu?” she tries again.

“No”, he says immediately, voice thick. The word bursts out of him before he can stop it, loud and final. “I don’t want to go.”

Yuna doesn’t scold him. She sits on the edge of the bed instead, the mattress dipping slightly under her weight.

“Why?” she asks.

Ryuichi shakes his head violently, blanket slipping as his body tenses. “I don’t like it,” he says, tears already welling. “It’s *bad*.”

Bad is the biggest word he has. Bad is everything he can’t name yet, the way his other name sounds wrong in other mouths, the way teachers smile too brightly, the way kids stare at his lunch. Yuna hears what he cannot say.

She always does.

Yuna reaches for him again, and this time he lets her. He presses his face into her shoulder, fists clenched in her shirt. The sobs come fast and angry, the kind that shake his whole body. He kicks at the blankets, voice rising into something sharp and raw.

“I don’t want to go! I don’t want to!”

Yuna holds him through it. She lets it be loud. She lets it be messy. When he finally runs out of air, when the crying turns to hiccupping breaths, she presses her cheek to the top of his head.

“Okay,” she says simply.

Ryuichi freezes. He pulls back just enough to look at her, eyes red and disbelieving. Yuna never let him give up unless he had a good reason. She had made him sit through an entire puzzle that David had been saving, watching Ryuichi with a stern expression when he said that it was boring and that he wanted to watch the Metros play instead. Despite her fierce support for her home team, it was not adequate for skipping out on puzzle time. When he had placed the last piece in, his tantrum forgotten in lieu of being excited, Yuna cheers for her boys as if they had just won the Cup.

This is how Ryuichi is raised. To keep trying even when it’s hard, and that finishing something, even if the process isn’t perfect, is more important.

“Okay?” he repeats, wanting to confirm that his stern (but gentle) Mama is not playing a trick on him. She never plays tricks, that’s Papa’s job. Or Obaachan, like when she pops her dentures out to make him laugh.

To his surprise, Yuna nods. “You can stay home today.”

Relief crashes through him so suddenly it almost knocks him over. His body goes loose, boneless with it. He burrows back into her, exhausted. Maybe this isn't giving up, but something else.

And he's right.

Yuna Oda does not treat the day like a vacation.

After breakfast, rice and eggs the way he likes them, soy sauce poured carefully by Yuna's hand, she clears the table and brings out paper. Lots of it. Loose sheets, notebooks, scraps torn from old pads. Ryuichi watches from the floor, curious now that the storm passed.

"Come here," she says, patting the space beside her.

They sit together, legs folded, sunlight warming the room. Yuna picks up a pencil and writes slowly, deliberately. She doesn't explain at first. She just lets him watch.

"これはね," she says gently. "ひらがな。"

She writes his name first, in soft curves. りゅういち.

"This is how we write your name when it wants to be gentle," she tells him. "When it wants to be easy."

Then she turns the page and writes again, slower this time, strokes heavier.

龍一.

"And *this*," she says, tapping the page, "is when it wants to be *strong*."

Ryuichi stares. He doesn't fully understand, but something settles in his chest anyway. He traces the shapes with his finger, careful, reverent.

"Can I try?" he asks quietly.

Yuna smiles, eyes shining. "Of course."

She guides his hand. He presses too hard at first, lines wobbling, pencil slipping. He frowns, frustrated.

"It's okay," she murmurs. "It doesn't have to be perfect. It just has to be *yours*."

Ryuichi doesn't understand why his mother is so angry when she teaches him, only that he isn't too concerned about it since he can tell it isn't directed at him. He only knows that her movements are sharp in a way they usually aren't, that she keeps exhaling through her nose like she's holding something back. When she kneels beside him again, the floor creaking under her weight, her hands are warm but firm on his shoulders.

"Listen to me, Ryu," she starts, not harshly, but with a seriousness that makes his stomach tighten. She switches to Japanese without thinking, the way she does when the truth matters

more than convenience. “Your name is not something you give up because other people are lazy or think it's too hard. You are not wrong for being who you are.”

Ryuichi nods because nodding feels safe. He doesn't know what he's supposed to say. After all, Ryuichi doesn't know many words yet. He doesn't know how to explain that he didn't give anything up, that it just slipped out of his hands somewhere between cubbies and carpet squares and teachers who smiled too tightly when they corrected themselves. He knows only that school has taught him how to be quiet in a way home never did.

Yuna cups his face, her thumbs brushing under his eyes. Her voice softens, but the steel underneath it stays.

“Being Japanese isn't just for home,” she says. “It is not a costume. It is not for other people to approve of. It is *yours* because you were born, because you are loved, because you belong to something precious.”

The words wash over him, heavy and beautiful and confusing. Ryuichi does not yet understand inheritance as protection. All he hears is that something important is at stake, something he has already disappointed her about without meaning to. He swallows that feeling down, the way he is already learning to do.

Tomorrow, school will still be there.

But today, Ryuichi learns that refusal can become reclamation, that staying home does not mean disappearing, and that language, when given with love, can be a place to stand.

Yuna tapes the neatest of the papers to the fridge like a shield.

The paper curls slightly at the edges almost immediately, the cheap adhesive already losing its fight against gravity, but Yuna presses it flat again with the heel of her hand, smoothing it the way she smooths her son's hair when he is too restless to sleep. Ryuichi's name, carefully traced in hiragana, the kanji written slower, heavier, sits there between a grocery list and a faded photo from Japan, as if it has always belonged in that space. As if it has been waiting.

That night when David comes home, the house is too quiet. He notices it immediately. He finds them on the living room floor, papers everywhere, Ryuichi half asleep against Yuna's side, pencil marks smudged across his fingers. He understands without being told.

Later, after Ryuichi has been carried to bed and the light in his room has been left on just bright enough to feel like company, Yuna finally lets herself speak freely.

“They're so cruel,” she says, voice shaking now that she doesn't have to hold it together for their son. “He's so *young*. He doesn't even understand what he's losing, David. He's *already* making himself smaller. Did you see how quiet he was?”

David sits beside her at the kitchen table, hands folded, listening. He does not rush to fix it. He knows better than that.

“I hate that he has to be brave this early,” Yuna continues. “I hate that they make him choose. I don’t want him to resent this. I don’t want him to think being...*him*, is a burden.”

David reaches across the table, covers her hand with his own. His Japanese is careful when he speaks now, deliberate, but he does not switch away from it.

“That’s exactly why we can’t let it go,” he says. “That’s exactly why we make it solid *here*, where no one can take it from him.”

She looks at him then, eyes bright with unshed tears.

“What if loving himself makes it harder for him out there?” she asks. “What if it hurts him?”

David squeezes her hand, grounding rather than dismissing.

“It will,” he says honestly. “Sometimes. But *forgetting* will hurt more. And he’ll have us to come back to. He’ll have a place where he never has to earn his name.”

Yuna exhales and nods slowly, the fight draining out of her.

In his room, Ryuichi lies awake, staring at the glow from the hallway. He doesn’t understand the argument, only the tone of it, the weight. He knows something important is happening around him, something bigger than spelling tests and lunch trays. He doesn’t yet know how to participate, so he does what he’s already learning to do best.

He listens.

He remembers.

And he grows quieter, not because he wants to disappear, but because he doesn’t yet know how to exist without causing pain.

Ryuichi stays awake a little longer than Shane would.

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They don’t decide to put him in hockey all at once.

It arrives the way most important decisions do in their house, sideways, through routine. A game on television playing low in the background while dinner simmers. Ryuichi on the floor with his toy cars, eyes flicking up whenever the crowd noise swells. David explaining icing with the patient enthusiasm of someone who grew up with the rules written into his bones. Yuna pretending not to pay attention while quietly absorbing everything.

Hockey is not foreign to her. It is Canadian the way winter is Canadian: unavoidable, deeply ingrained, passed down without explanation. She has learned its rhythms by proximity, by watching David’s body tense and release with the play, by learning which nights the city feels louder because the team has won. Loving Canada has always meant negotiating its violences and its comforts at the same time.

What gives her pause is not the sport itself, but what it demands of young boys. The demands so strong that it stunts how they view themselves, and others, and bleeds so deeply that it remains when they become men.

She watches her son: careful, observant, absorbing everything. Ryuichi is not fragile, she knows this. He has never been because they raised him that way. He is stubborn. He is precise. He memorizes patterns quickly. He remembers slights without being consumed by them. He is already learning to stand back and assess before he moves. These are not weaknesses. They are advantages, if someone teaches him how to use them.

The first time she says it out loud, it is clear to David that it's not a whim of a mom that just wants her son to be active and out of the house. Yuna Oda never acts on a whim; every word she says is clear and calculated.

"They're going to be cruel to him anyways," she starts, standing at the counter with her knife moving decisively through vegetables. "I can already see it."

David looks up from the table, surprised by the bluntness. "Yuna—"

"I don't support violence," she cuts in, "We're not raise him to hurt people for no reason. But...if children are going to be dicks to my son regardless, then I would rather he be the one who knows what his body can do."

She finally turns to look at David, eyes bright, unflinching.

"We *know* Ryuichi," she continues. "We know his focus. We know his discipline. We gave him that...David, he *can* do this."

David considers this carefully. He does not hear aggression in her voice, but resolve.

"Hockey isn't just about fighting," he adds, knowing that disagreeing with his wife would be starting a battle he knew she would win anyways. "It's about speed. Awareness. Endurance."

"Exactly," Yuna replies. "And if he's going to be watched regardless, then he might as well be *excellent*."

There is a pause, thick with everything unspoken. Race, protection, inheritance. David nods slowly, still unsure. If he is to be excellent, then there is no room for anything else. Rest included.

"We'll think about it later. After your brothers visit." Yuna makes a face, her stubborn nature wanting to get things done *now*, but David shakes his head with a smile. "I can't think about putting our son in hockey while your brothers end up checking each other all over our house after a few drinks."

Yuna can't argue with that, since he ends up being right.

The conversation circles back a week later.

David is cleaning up after dinner when Yuna says it, almost casually, as if she's discussing groceries.

"We *can* afford it."

He pauses, dishcloth in hand. Looks at her.

"Not just the basics," she continues. "Skates that fit. Coaching that doesn't treat him like an afterthought. Ice time that isn't whatever slot is left over."

David sits down slowly, understanding dawning.

They don't talk about money often in front of Ryuichi.

Not because it's secret, but because it's irrelevant to the way they want him to understand the world. Comfort exists. Stability exists. It is not something to boast about, but it is not something to pretend away either. Yuna knows what it means to grow up counting coins and to grow up with enough. She knows the difference between wanting and needing, and she knows exactly what she is willing to spend for her child.

"He will have the best of the best," Yuna says, voice steady, eyes bright with something that borders on ferocity. "Because if the world is already measuring him differently, then I refuse to let lack be part of whatever sick calculations they're doing."

This is not indulgence. This is infrastructure.

"I don't want him just to survive this," she adds. "I want him to *dominate* it." There is heartbreak in her tone, the same one David heard each time they saw a negative pregnancy test and Yuna's determination coated itself in the '*it's not the end's* and '*we can keep trying, we're still young's*'. Both of them knew that with this path they were about to thrust their son on, they would be taking away the routine and serenity that he held so tightly onto. At the same time, David knew that it was bound to be shattered one way or another, by people who wanted to tear Ryuichi apart for the simple reason that they *could*.

David exhales, a low whistle. "You sound dangerous."

She smiles, sharp and unapologetic. "Good."

Yuna leans forward, elbows on the table, hands folded like she's about to pray or declare war (it's hard to tell which).

"They will look at him and think he is less than them," she says. "They already do. Because of his face. Because of his size. Because they think quiet means weak."

Her voice doesn't waver.

"And he will show them that he is not less than them. He will show them that he is everything they will never be."

David watches her carefully. This is not ego speaking. This is foresight.

“He doesn’t have to become like them,” David says gently. “That’s my only concern.”

Yuna nods immediately. “No. He becomes *better*.”

They enroll him in skating lessons before they enroll him in a team. Yuna insists on it. Fundamentals first. Balance. Edge control. Discipline before aggression. She watches every session, eyes trained not just on his progress, but on the coaches themselves. She does not tolerate laziness. She does not tolerate dismissiveness. If someone talks down to her son, she switches to a tone that makes men straighten instinctively.

Ryuichi feels it, the way his mother watches, and the way she believes in him with a confidence that borders on inevitability. It is terrifying and comforting all at once. He wants to be worthy of it. He wants to make good on something he doesn’t yet fully understand.

It is by hard work and determination alone that his body responds quickly. He learns faster than the other kids because he listens, he adjusts, and he absorbs instruction the way he absorbs language. Carefully, thoroughly, without needing to be loud about it. Coaches begin to notice. They say things like “natural” and “wunderkid” unaware of how much of this has been built before he stepped onto the ice.

At home, Yuna becomes meticulous. Nutrition. Sleep. Stretching. This, in her mind, is how intention is taught to be appreciated with every second given to you. She tells him stories while she ices his ankles. Reminds him that discipline is not punishment, but care.

“This is how you protect what you love,” she says.

The first time a bigger boy shoves him on the ice, Shane goes down hard. The rink goes quiet for half a second, that sharp intake of breath that always precedes judgment. He lies there stunned, staring up at the lights, chest burning. He thinks of his mother’s hands steadying his helmet. Of her voice, calm and sure.

He gets up.

The second time, he doesn’t go down.

Yuna doesn’t cheer, nor does she clap. Her arms are still crossed over her chest, nails digging deep into her palm. She simply nods once, satisfaction settling deep in her bones.

Later, when Ryuichi crawls into the car exhausted and glowing, she reaches back from the passenger seat and squeezes his knee. He does not see the half-crescent moon marks that have dug themselves deep into his mother’s hand.

“You stood tall,” she says, tears brimming her eyes that are a darker brown than his.

He doesn’t yet know what it means, only that it feels like something important has been affirmed. Something solid has been placed inside him.

This is how Yuna loves: fiercely, strategically, without apology.

This is how Ryuichi learns that power does not have to mean erasure, and that he can take up space without becoming cruel. Somewhere, deep inside him, something roots itself. A certainty.

He is not small.

He has *never* been small.

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At some point, without anyone announcing it, things began to move faster. Not all at once, not dramatically, just enough that Shane noticed the days losing their edges. Weeks slipped into each other. Practices lengthened. The rink became familiar before the faces did. Hockey started taking up space in his life the way language never quite could: total, unambiguous, demanding everything while asking very little in return. It did not ask him to clarify himself or stumble over his pauses or soften when he went quiet. On the ice, motion replaced explanation. Speed became syntax. Control became a way of being understood.

Somewhere in that acceleration, he stopped flinching when people called him Shane. Not because it ever felt fully his, but because correcting them required energy he learned to ration early. Ryuichi belonged to kitchens and living rooms, to his mother's voice and his grandmother's prayers, to places where his name carried weight without needing to be justified. Shane was lighter. Easier. A version of him that fit cleanly on jerseys and lineups and scout reports. He learned how to answer to it the way he learned how to tape his stick: methodical, practiced, without thinking too hard about what was being covered up. It wasn't betrayal. It was efficiency.

He welcomed hockey because it held him tighter than words ever had. It gave him somewhere to put the parts of himself that felt too sharp or too careful or too slow everywhere else. He was good, unmistakably so, and that knowledge traveled faster than he did. Adults began to watch him the way people watch something rare, something they want to name before it changes. Their attention felt like praise and pressure in equal measure, a warmth that lingered too long. They leaned in. They stared. They spoke about him while standing close enough that he could hear his body being translated into promise, into anomaly, into future. Hockey became the place where he could disappear into excellence and still be found, where he could speak without words and still be heard, where the looking began, not yet cruel, not yet kind, but already hungry.

The rink smells like cold metal and old sweat, and Shane catalogues it the way he catalogues everything else: sharp, stale, layered. There is the coppery tang that lives close to the boards, the dampness that clings to gloves even after they've been aired out, the faint ammonia bite from the ice itself. He likes knowing what to expect. He likes predictability. Smell, at least, does not lie to him.

The noise is harder.

The rink is never quiet, not really, but the volume changes shape depending on the people inside it. When it's empty, sound echoes back at itself, skates biting into ice like punctuation marks. When it's full, the noise becomes a living thing, swelling and collapsing, parents

shouting advice no one asked for, coaches barking instructions that contradict each other. Shane feels all of it at once, his body tightening instinctively, attention fracturing and reassembling in patterns only he understands.

The other kids are white. Loud. Already learning how to take up space as if it belongs to them by default.

They sprawl across benches, elbowing one another, laughing too hard at nothing. They speak over Shane without noticing. Or maybe they do notice, and that's the point. He doesn't know yet how to tell the difference.

“So, Mr. and Mrs. Hollander, you put him in hockey or karate first?”

The question lands somewhere between joke and provocation. Shane doesn't understand the words fully, but he understands tone. He understands when something is not meant for him, but about him. He feels heat flood his cheeks before he knows why, his face burning as if he's done something wrong.

David's mouth tightens into a thin line. Yuna's eyes sharpen, her entire posture shifting subtly, like a cat going still before it decides whether to strike. Shane watches this exchange the way he watches plays develop on the ice later, silently and with intent, noting cause and effect.

Didn't this guy know there wasn't even a karate place in their town? Shane thinks, absurdly literal. Didn't he know that hockey was what everyone did here? That his parents watched games on television, that his father explained offsides with diagrams on napkins? That his mom was never a Hollander, despite being married to one and the mother of another. She is, and always has been, an Oda. A quick Google would tell you that.

But the question isn't about reality, as Shane will learn later. Movement makes sense to him in a way conversation doesn't. There are rules here that stay rules. Physics doesn't change its mind halfway through a sentence.

He is fast. Quiet.

Even when they line him up between boys with names like Tyler and Josh, boys who talk constantly, whose bodies crash into one another without consequence. Someone pulls their eyes back with their fingers when the teacher isn't looking. Shane sees it. He always sees it. He stores it away carefully, not reacting because reacting requires choosing the correct response, and he doesn't yet know what that is.

He doesn't cry.

Crying would confirm something. He doesn't know *what* yet, only that he cannot afford it.

That night, his mother makes tonkatsu and shreds the cabbage too finely. Shane notices because he notices *everything*. Her movements are faster than usual, more precise, as if control is something she needs to feel in her hands. The knife hits the board in a steady rhythm that almost calms him.

She asks him, in Japanese, if everything is okay.

Shane answers in English. “Yeah.”

He doesn’t know why English feels safer when lying. He only knows that Japanese feels too close to the truth, that the words there reach parts of him he doesn’t yet know how to guard.

Later, a scout tells him, “You don’t play like some of the other kids like *you*”.

Shane doesn’t understand immediately why this makes his stomach twist. It’s framed like praise. He nods, because nodding keeps adults talking instead of looking closer. He hears Japanese stereotypes repackaged as compliments (*discipline, quiet, respect*) words that flatten him into something manageable.

This is when he decides he will never bring Japanese to the rink again.

Culture becomes something private, carefully folded and stored somewhere safe, like his mother’s good sweaters. Something you don’t wear where it might get snagged or torn. Something you protect by hiding.

It is here, in these small comments that have snowballed into something he can no longer outrun, that Shane learns the rule that will shape him for years: being exceptional is the price of staying.

He is never allowed to be average. Never allowed to have an off day. Never allowed to disappear. Average boys are allowed to be invisible. He is not.

Media attention arrives early. Cameras appear without warning, lenses tracking him as if he might bolt. Questions follow predictable paths, and Shane learns to prepare answers in advance, scripts stored neatly in his head. He practices expressions in the mirror, not smiling too much, not too little.

Neutral.

Agreeable.

Safe.

David sits in the stands, watching the game the same way his son watches the tape: alert, contained, always a step ahead of whatever might come next. When a reporter asks how Shane’s “background” influences his game, David hears everything folded into that word: the curiosity dressed up as interest, the expectation that he will translate his child into something legible. He considers, briefly, how much he could say. How many languages he knows well enough now to answer in. How easy it would be to offer something colorful, something that would satisfy them.

The “background” that they want to hear is why his son isn’t white and blue eyed, why he doesn’t fully look like David or Yuna. It wouldn’t be enough for them if he explained that Yuna is the heart that beats for them, the one that helps Ryuichi articulate the passion that pumps through him when he’s on the ice. Or that David, despite his silly dad jokes and his

calmer demeanor compared to his wife, is the one that taught their son the rules when it was a bit more complicated than he expected, when he struggled with understanding the hockey politics and locker room talk.

That all of this happened in Japanese with only bits and pieces of English scattered throughout. How his in-laws were the biggest Metros fans he's ever met and it was actually his son's Uncle Takuya that held his hand on the ice for the first time. Or how it is people that don't look like "them", like these reporters, that shaped Ryuichi's love and knowledge of this environment more than any of them ever could.

He chooses not to.

"My son is influenced by hard work and good coaching," he says evenly.

Shane doesn't fully understand the significance of this until years later, but the memory lodges itself anyway. His father choosing language as a boundary. Choosing not to translate himself for comfort

Later, alone in hotel rooms that all smell the same, Shane watches Japanese variety shows on his mother's laptop with the volume low. People are loud there. Emotional. Ridiculous. Allowed to be strange. Allowed to fail publicly. Allowed to laugh without irony.

He mouths the words under his breath, practicing a version of himself that doesn't require monitoring every reaction. A self that doesn't have to be explained.

His body changes in ways that feel like betrayal.

He grows broader, stronger, suddenly useful. The comments shift.

"Man, *he's* built."

"Didn't expect *that*."

There is an unspoken "from *him*".

Shane learns the difference between visibility and acceptance. He learns that being seen does not mean being understood. It only means being evaluated.

His mother gives him his omamori one morning before a tournament. A small navy pouch from the temple near his great-aunt's house in Sapporo, bought years ago and kept in a drawer. Protection. Strength. Shane ties it into his hockey bag carefully, methodically, the ritual soothing.

He starts tucking it inside after Barnsey nearly tears it apart after practice one morning.

"Some Jackie Chan shit," Barnsey says, laughing. He tosses it to Howie, who throws it to Turner before a sympathetic Jonesy gives it back to Shane.

Shane laughs too, a dry sound that doesn't reach his eyes. He's good at that now. He doesn't explain what it is. He doesn't explain how it felt to go to Japan for the first time, how the air

smelled different, how his body felt like it fit the landscape in a way it never quite does here. He doesn't explain that his Obaachan bought it for him before they visited the grave where her parents were buried, incense curling upward as prayers settled into the ground.

No one cares. No one asks. No one wants the context.

No one cared, no one cared, *no one cared*.

That night, Shane scores every goal. He checks Barnsey during the last one and lets it look accidental. He understands impact now. He understands how this part of the game works.

Superstition is only embarrassing if it's non-white, he learns. No one questions lucky socks.

The league hardens around him. Hypermasculinity becomes currency. Pain becomes proof. Shane learns how to hit without looking angry, how to fight without throwing the first punch. Coaches praise his "coachability," words that mean obedient when applied to boys like him.

When someone calls him a slur, it's always followed by laughter, like a test. If he laughs too, it's erased. If he doesn't, it becomes a problem. Shane learns to calculate response time the way he calculates puck trajectory.

At home, Yuna watches him carefully, like she's waiting for something to fracture. She notices the way he drops his bag by the door without the usual care, the way his shoulders stay lifted long after he's taken his skates off, the way his answers arrive pre-flattened, safe. He eats. He sleeps. He does his homework. All the things that mean *functioning*, none of the things that mean ease.

She switches back to Japanese without announcing it, like slipping a blanket over someone who insists they aren't cold. They had begun using English a bit more casually the past few years, after they had ensured that Shane wouldn't forget Japanese.

At first it's practical (ごはんだよ, dinner's ready; お風呂先に入って, take the bath first) but soon it becomes deliberate, a gentle insistence. She asks him about his day in Japanese even when she knows he'll answer in English. She tells stories from Hokkaido he's heard a hundred times, details he used to interrupt with corrections and questions. Now he listens politely, like a guest.

She watches what that politeness costs him.

One night, folding his laundry, she finds the omamori tucked deep into his bag, frayed string wrapped around itself like it's trying not to be seen. Her chest tightens. She remembers being his age, the way teachers stumbled over her name, the way classmates treated her lunch like a spectacle, the way she learned to smile so people wouldn't ask her to explain herself. She had promised herself she wouldn't pass that shrinking on.

“自分を忘れないで”, she says one evening. *Don't forget yourself*.

The words land heavier than she intends. Shane freezes, fork halfway to his mouth. He stares at the table, at the familiar grain of the wood, at the place where his father once nicked it

carrying in a new bookshelf. His brain cycles through possibilities the way it always does when he's overwhelmed, cataloguing, sorting, trying to locate the correct response.

Which *self*?

The one who moves fast enough to disappear on the ice?

The one who keeps his head down in the locker room?

The one who answers to Shane without flinching, even though *Ryuichi* still lives somewhere under his skin?

He knows what she means, but meaning has never been the same as clarity. To Shane, selves are situational, responsive. You wear the one that keeps things from escalating. You choose the version that costs the least. He doesn't feel like he's forgetting himself so much as distributing himself strategically, parceling out pieces where they'll be safest.

"I won't," he says finally, because it's the answer that ends the moment.

Yuna nods, but she doesn't look convinced. She reaches out and smooths his hair, fingers lingering at his temple the way they did when he was small, before the world started demanding translations. She wants to tell him that forgetting doesn't always look like erasure, that sometimes it looks like survival. That sometimes you don't notice what you've lost until you're old enough to grieve it properly.

Instead, she clears the dishes and switches the TV to a highlights replay, the volume low. Shane sits beside her, close enough to feel her warmth, listening to a language that still fits his mouth even if he's stopped trusting it with strangers. He doesn't know which self she's asking him to protect.

Shane doesn't know how to answer. He doesn't know which self she means anymore. It only gets worse as the comments keep coming. He thought it would get better when he began to accept that this is all "normal", that it's "part of the game", but all the ways his skin crawls each time it happens never gets any better. It is still there, even after he showers in the locker room and again when he gets home.

They *just keep happening*.

A parent calls him "that Asian kid" when he scores twice. Not his name. Not his number. Just the category. Shane feels the words lodge somewhere deep, sticky and hard to remove.

In the hotel room, his mother notices the way he shrugs out of his jersey like it weighs too much. She doesn't ask questions. She hands him an orange and sits beside him, their shoulders touching lightly. The pressure grounds him. He peels it carefully, methodically, the smell sharp and clean. It is his small reprieve until all eyes are back on him.

The cameras. Interviews. Close-ups.

Reporters asking where he's "really from," even though his accent matches theirs, even though his passport says the same thing. They ask about his mother like she's a novelty, like

she's the explanation rather than a person. As if she doesn't have two degrees from McGill, as if her brothers aren't season pass holders for the Metros. As if being *here* and being *part* of whatever counts as Canadian is inaccessible to *them*.

Shane answers politely. Carefully. Always aware of how his voice sounds.

“My mom's from Le Plateau-Mont-Royal, but her family is from Hokkaido. That's how my 80 year old grandma is better on the ice than my dad, and he's ” *This is the one thing he will give himself. 北海道, not just Japan. He will not erase the specifics even if they ultimately will not care, if all they hear and see is that it is somewhere not here.*

That night, alone, he calls his obaachan. He hasn't seen her in months. The visits get harder as schedules tighten, as distance stretches.

She tells him she watched the game online. That she cried.

“誇りに思ってるよ,” she says. *I'm proud of you.*

For the first time all season, Shane feels like he's done something right without having to prove it.

He becomes “marketable,” which means palatable. Charity appearances. Smiles on command. Learning how to soften his face for photos without looking weak. Girls sit close to the rink and whisper, “He's so cute, for an Asian guy.”

Shane learns that being desired and being dehumanized can look identical from a distance.

At home, he starts answering his mother in English even when she speaks Japanese. It isn't rejection. It's protection. If he keeps that part of himself small, maybe no one else can touch it

Someone suggests leaning into the “samurai work ethic” angle.

He refuses. Yuna fires the intern even if she can't really do that and has a long talk with Farah about why she hired him in the first place.

In his bag, the omamori is frayed now. Threadbare. Still there.

A reporter asks if his heritage influences his play style. Shane recites something about discipline and respect. He hates himself for how practiced it sounds

Later that night, he texts his mother in Japanese for the first time in years. The grammar is clumsy but she doesn't correct him. She just sends back a heart emoji and a text. It's short, simple and straight to the point.

いつでも戻ってきていい。 *You can always come back.*

Shane stares at the screen for a long time before he starts to feel sick. He closes his eyes and tosses his phone to the other side of the bed, hoping that the dread that pooled in the deepest

part of his stomach goes away by the time he wakes up.

-

It's the first time they see each other again after Vegas, after the hallway carpet and the cheap lighting and the way Shane hadn't realized he was being overheard until it was already too late. He'd been slightly turned away, phone warm against his ear and speaking Japanese the way he always does with his family, softened consonants and a voice slipping into a register that exists before performance. The voice you use when there's nothing to prove. The voice you don't armor.

He hadn't noticed Ilya at first. Or maybe he had and his brain had decided, incorrectly, that Ilya was safe enough to fade into the background.

That mistake sits in Shane's chest now, heavy and vibrating.

English has always been neutral ground between them. A shared surface. French is professional: angles, interviews, crowd-facing. He uses it like equipment, fitted and intentional. Japanese, though, is private. It isn't a skill. It isn't a flex. It isn't something he has *ever* offered up for consumption. With most people, the moment it appears, it becomes spectacle. A party trick. A gateway to invasive questions and lazy metaphors. Exotic. Say something funny, Hollander. *Do it again. Do this trick for us, because we can't.*

But with Ilya, none of that happens.

Ilya doesn't grin or nudge him or ask him to say something again, slower this time so that he could mimic the sounds and laugh. He doesn't make a joke or respond with sarcasm. He doesn't widen his eyes like he's discovered something *collectible*. Ilya files it away the same way he files away everything else about Shane: seriously and without entitlement.

Later, when they're alone enough that the moment can't be hijacked by noise and cameras, Ilya asks, blunt and unadorned, "You always talk like that with them?"

The question hits Shane like a shove between the shoulders.

His body reacts before his brain can intervene. Spine straightening. Jaw setting. That old reflex, honed in locker rooms and press scrums and childhood classrooms, where curiosity has always been a prelude to something else. He runs the calculations automatically: *how much does Ilya know, what does he want, how dangerous is honesty right now*. He's already visible in ways he can't control, *the Asian kid who's too good, too fast, too strong for comfort. The one they watch harder because they're waiting for the flaw. The one who gets framed as novelty even when he's breaking records (and he is breaking apart. He cannot even tell which parts he has lost, or how to get them back).*

He's already marked.

"Yeah," he says, carefully neutral. "Why?"

Ilya shrugs, easy. "Just didn't know. It's cool."

That's it.

No follow-up. No grin. No hunger.

Shane's brain stalls on the absence. He's spent years learning how to manage reactions, how to steer people away from the parts of him that invite misunderstanding. He knows what it costs to let anything slip. And he's spent almost as much time learning all of this with Ilya as well, to make sure nothing crosses the physical boundary that would destroy everything they've ever worked for and protected if it was exposed.

He knows how quickly difference turns into narrative. He knows that being Asian in this sport already means he's skating on a knife's edge admired but not embraced, praised but never allowed to be messy. He knows the unspoken rule: you get to be one kind of deviation, not two.

Not Asian. Not queer. Pick one, or be crushed by the weight of both.

The panic arrives late and sharp. Because if *this* is seen, if the wrong person catches not just the language but the softness of it, the *intimacy*, the way it lives in his mouth without effort (*just like how saying Ilya in the small spaces where they are the only eyes watching them feels just as natural as yelling Rozanov in public*), then the rest follows too easily. Questions about why he never talks about girls. Why he flinches from certain jokes. Why he and Ilya occupy each other's space like it's instinctive. The league already watches him with a mix of awe and appetite, already packages him as marketable, palatable, exceptional despite being different. There is no room in that narrative for queerness that can't be spun into something safely abstract.

And yet.

With Ilya, none of this feels like disclosure. It feels like gravity.

Being with him doesn't require translation, which is ironic because Ilya's English isn't perfect and Shane can only get so much practice with Russian when he does Duolingo secretly. Ilya doesn't need Shane to preemptively flatten himself, doesn't need him to sand down the edges or explain why something matters before it's allowed to matter. The same way Japanese isn't a performance with his family, being with Ilya isn't a role. It's a state. Something that happens when the vigilance drops, when the mask loosens just enough to breathe.

That's what terrifies him.

Not the risk of being seen, but the ease of it.

Shane has survived by treating authenticity like a limited resource, something to ration carefully. He knows how to be excellent, how to be unobjectionable, how to be desired without being known. He knows how to keep his most sacred things folded inward, safe from interpretation.

Ilya doesn't try to unfold them. He just leaves space. And Shane, standing in that space, realizes the danger isn't that Ilya might make this into something. It's that he won't.

-

Rose doesn't ask right away. She never does. She waits until they're parallel instead of face-to-face, shoes kicked off at the entrance, legs stretched out on the couch like they've always belonged there. Shane's phone is on the coffee table, screen dark, but Rose knows who he's thinking about anyway. She's known him long enough to read the quiet as something specific.

"You look tired," she says, which is her way of asking everything else.

Shane exhales. Not a sigh, but a release. "I'm not," he says automatically, then pauses. "I mean. I am. Just not like *that*."

Rose hums. She tucks her feet under herself, gives him the kind of sideways look that says *try again, Hollander*.

"It's not about Rozanov," Shane says, and then winces. "Okay, it's a *little* about Ilya."

She smiles, soft and unsurprised. "Go on."

He leans back, stares at the ceiling. The words come slowly, like he's checking each one for structural integrity before letting it stand. "I keep thinking about how... visible I already am. Like, there's no version of me that gets to blend in. *Ever*. And now this—" He gestures vaguely, uselessly. "This feels like another thing people could turn into a *story*."

Rose doesn't interrupt. Usually, she's the one that talks the most between the two of them. But after they broke up and the truth had surfaced, their friendship had deepened and Shane's trust in Rose has made her the one person besides Ilya where he can truly speak without spending minutes poring over which words he'll use.

"I've spent my whole life being managed," he continues. "By coaches. By media. By fans who think they're being nice when they're just... curious in a way that wants *something* from me. I already get asked...What I *mean*. What I'm *proof of*." His jaw tightens. "Being Asian in this sport already comes with footnotes. I don't know if I can carry another one."

There it is. Shane finishes his grievance with a scoff, as if it was a simple rant.

Rose's expression doesn't change, but something in her eyes sharpens into something that is not anger or pity, but recognition.

"So you're worried," she says carefully, "that being gay becomes..."

"Burden," Shane says immediately, like the word's been waiting. He isn't ashamed of who he is. After all, breathing became so much easier that night he and Rose broke things off, that he finally had a word to explain everything he felt for Ilya that never existed for Rose. But Shane was a bad liar, and being a bad liar meant that he had to face the truth of what being

comfortable also brought. “Another layer people get to analyze. Another thing I have to answer for.”

He swallows. “I don’t want to be *inspirational*. Or brave. Or a *fucking headline*.”

Rose reaches over and bumps her knee against his. “You don’t owe anyone a narrative,” she says. “You never did.”

“I know,” he says. “Like, logically I *know* that. But that doesn’t stop them from making one.”

She nods. “True.”

They sit with that for a moment. Rose lets silence do its work.

“And,” she adds gently, “you’re also scared that if you don’t let it exist, it eats you alive.”

Shane’s laugh is short and humorless. “God, I hate how well you know me.”

She grins. “Occupational hazard. I *dated* you.”

That loosens something. He turns to look at her properly now. “You still don’t... feel weird about it? About him?”

“Shane,” she says, incredulous but kind. “I feel relieved.”

“Relieved?”

“Yes. Because I’ve never seen you look less like you’re bracing for impact.” She tilts her head. “With me, you were always... careful. Loving, but careful. Like you were rationing yourself.”

He doesn’t argue. He can’t.

“With him,” she continues, “you look like you forgot you had all these fucking walls up.”

That lands harder than he expects.

“I don’t want this to become a *thing*,” he admits. “I don’t want it to cost me what I’ve already fought so hard to keep.”

Rose’s voice softens. “Then don’t make it a thing. Make it a *truth*.”

He frowns. “What’s the difference?” He wasn’t sure if it was because Rose was a woman, or if it’s because she’s in the creative world, but sometimes Shane doesn’t catch onto some of the things she says.

“People turn narratives into currency, right?” she explains, trying to find words that might make sense to him. “Truths just... exist. You don’t have to perform them. You don’t have to explain them. And you don’t have to offer them up for them to consume. You’re just... You. You’re just Shane, who really hates that I don’t fix my shoes when I come over to hang out.”

She reaches for his hand, squeezes once. “You already know how to protect yourself. You’ve been doing it your whole life. This doesn’t have to be another burden unless you let it be one.”

Shane looks down at their joined hands. At how steady he feels.

“I don’t want to disappear into *it*,” he says quietly.

“You won’t,” Rose says immediately. “You’re too much *you* for that.”

He smiles then, small but real.

“And,” she adds, smirking, “for what it’s worth? Anyone who thinks loving Ilya Rozanov makes you less of *anything* is an idiot with a very poor understanding of risk assessment.”

He laughs, finally and fully.

-

The house is never quiet, but it is never loud in only one way.

There is English drifting through the halls in the shape of schedules and grocery lists and half-finished arguments about where the scissors have gone. There is Russian, warm and rhythmic, rising and falling like weather, usually from the kitchen, usually accompanied by the clatter of dishes and Ilya’s laughter when one of the girls gets a word wrong on purpose just to see if he’ll react. There is Japanese too. Soft, steady, threaded through bedtime routines and reminders to wash hands properly, through small endearments that don’t need translation.

Shane notices it one evening while standing in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen, one child on his hip, the other at Ilya’s feet, tugging insistently at his pant leg. The girls are arguing about a stuffed animal. The older one switches languages mid-sentence without thinking, like it’s the most natural thing in the world. The younger copies her, pronunciation off but confidence unshaken.

No one corrects them. Not yet.

The realization hits Shane not like a revelation, but like recognition.

They never decided this out loud.

There was no conversation where they sat down and agreed: *We will learn each other’s languages. We will make room. We will not ask whose culture gets priority.* It simply *happened*, the way love often does when it isn’t busy justifying itself. Ilya learned Japanese the way David once did, earnestly and with the humility of someone who understands that fluency is not ownership. Shane learned Russian because it was the language of Ilya’s childhood, because it held his jokes differently, because it was the shape of his grief and his joy and the way he swore under his breath when he stubbed his toe.

It was *never* framed as sacrifice.

Shane thinks, suddenly, of his parents. Of Yuna at the table, switching seamlessly between languages without announcing the shift. Of David with his flashcards, his accent imperfect but his commitment exacting. Of how no one ever asked Shane to choose, only to remember.

The girls tumble past him, one laughing, one on the verge of tears, and Shane scoops them both up with practiced ease. He murmurs comfort in Japanese, then English, then Russian when that's the word that comes first. They settle against him, trusting his arms more than the language itself.

Later, after the house has quieted into something like rest, Shane and Ilya sit at the kitchen table with mugs that have long since gone cold. The remnants of the day linger everywhere: crayons on the counter, a sock abandoned like a flag of surrender in the hallway. This is not the life either of them were told to expect. It is better. Messier. Fuller.

"You ever think about how *normal* this feels?" Ilya asks, staring into his cup.

Shane smiles. "All the time."

"I mean," Ilya continues, thoughtful. "If you told me when I was younger that my kids don't care their parents have eight Cup rings—"

"*Ilya.*"

"Or that my Japanese maybe as good as English, or I live too close to evil Canadian wolf bird, in Ottawa cottage with my *husband*," He snorts softly. "I would tell you it was fantasy. Or lie."

Shane reaches for his hand. "Or something that belonged to someone else."

"Yeah," Ilya says. "Exactly."

They sit with that. With the weight of the worlds they came from. With the quiet miracle of the one they've built.

Shane thinks about hockey sometimes, still. About the way it demanded everything from him, about how it tried to define him before he had the language to define himself. About the vigilance, the carefulness, the way he learned to survive by becoming excellent. He thinks about how long it took to understand that survival is not the same thing as living.

Here, in this house, there is room for softness without explanation.

The girls know where they come from. Not in a museum way. Not as trivia. They know it in the way children know things that matter: through repetition, through affection, through being spoken to in the languages that carried their parents when they were small. They know that names have meanings. That accents are not mistakes. That belonging is not singular.

Shane watches Ilya kneel to explain, patiently and seriously, why one of their daughters' middle names matters, why it is spelled the way it is, why it should be said correctly even if others stumble. There is no irony in it. No performative reverence. Just care.

It strikes Shane, then, with a quiet certainty that *this* is the inheritance his parents talked about.

Not the sport. Not the accolades. Not even the resilience, though that matters too. But *this*...the insistence that who you are is not something you minimize to make the world more comfortable. That love looks like learning. That culture is not a burden, but a foundation.

Later, when one of the girls asks, sleep-heavy and earnest, why Papa sometimes uses different words for the same thing, Shane answers without hesitation.

“Because we come from many places,” he says. “And all of them are ours.”

She nods, satisfied, and turns back into her pillow.

Shane stays there a moment longer, listening to the steady rhythm of his family breathing, the quiet hum of a home built with intention. He thinks of Yuna’s voice, years ago, saying Don’t forget yourself. He thinks of how long it took to understand that remembering doesn’t always mean holding on tightly. Sometimes it means passing something forward, open-handed, trusting it will be loved well.

In the other room, Ilya calls his name, soft and familiar.

Ryuichi goes to him.

Ryuichi, who learned early how to split himself to survive. Ryuichi, whose first language was love before it was anything else. Ryuichi, who carries his mother’s careful insistence and his father’s quiet steadiness, who knows now that neither of those things were ever meant to harden him.

He moves through the doorway and into Ilya’s orbit, where there is no need to clarify which parts are allowed. Ilya looks up, smiles the way he always does when he sees him, like this is the most ordinary miracle in the world. There is no question in his eyes. No curiosity to manage. No translation required.

End Notes

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