

thirty-seven roses

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by [hollanov_1410](#)

Summary

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Niko just glared at him, while Max snickered behind the pages of his book.

"Everyone has a mad voice," Ilya said wisely, reaching for a fresh bobby pin. He gathered up the loose strand that had slipped free and started over, completely unruffled by the looming deadline. "You get yours from your dad."

"I don't have a mad voice."

The statement came from the doorway. Shane stood there holding Mila's tiny pink cardigan—the one with the pearl buttons that perfectly matched her leotard—draped over one arm. He was fully dressed now, ready to go. White dress shirt tucked in, navy tie perfectly straight, the silver tie clip Ilya had given him years back catching the morning light streaming through the window.

Nobody responded.

They all knew better.

Or,

Ilya and Shane's daughter's first ballet recital happens to fall on International Women's Day. A holiday that Ilya takes very seriously.

Notes

general disclaimer: this follows the same Hollanov dads universe from my other fics in [Our House](#), where Ilya and Shane have 3 kids: niko (12), max (9), and mila (3). but they're all standalones so you definitely don't need to read any of them to read this one!

also, shoutout to @PrimeMerlinean1932 for lmk that in russian men take gifting flowers very seriously on international women's day

thanks for reading!

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

Back in the middle of their hockey days, Shane and Ilya did not think they would be getting ready for a toddler ballet recital. Let alone getting emotional over a toddler ballet recital.

But that was before they had a daughter who had them both completely wrapped around her little finger, and before they realized her first big recital was falling on a very specific date.

March 8th. International Women's Day.

International Women's Day was a major public holiday in Russia. And, Shane had learned pretty quickly that it was apparently a *very* big deal for Russians.

Or maybe just a really big deal for Ilya specifically.

The man who usually treated most rules as mere suggestions became a drill sergeant for floral arrangements and heartfelt tributes the moment the calendar turned over.

Shane still remembers the first International Women's Day after he and Ilya had officially become boyfriends—or the first time they officially became *lovers*, Ilya had teased, which earned him a firm punch in the arm from Shane.

Ilya had bought Yuna a bouquet of exactly thirteen yellow tulips. It was that day Shane learned there weren't just traditions around the holiday: there were actual rules. Odd numbers only. Even numbers were for funerals and mourning. Ilya had also shown up at Yuna and David's door that evening with a Russian honey cake, Medovik. He had tried to make it from scratch first, Shane had learned later. Spent an entire afternoon before finally admitting defeat and driving twenty minutes to one of the few Russian bakeries in Ottawa instead.

If Ilya's role as the Hollander's favorite son hadn't already been cemented at that point, that act had absolutely sealed the deal.

Now, with Mila in the picture, the holiday had morphed into something even more intense.

The morning had started early. Mila had been awake before six—which both Shane and Ilya had expected, honestly. She'd been talking about this recital for weeks, looking at the calendar in the kitchen every day and making Shane check off each day that passed, asking every night at dinner if tomorrow was finally the day.

And Ilya had been prepared. He'd woken up even earlier than Mila. By the time Shane had padded downstairs with Mila's small hand wrapped around two of his fingers, her fleece footie pajamas still on her eyes were already bright with barely-contained excitement, Ilya was already in the kitchen waiting for them.

Waiting for her on the table was a bouquet of thirteen lilies, held upright by the paws of a brand-new stuffed bunny he and Shane had picked out for today.

"Good morning, *malyshka*," Ilya had cooed when they came in. He had scooped her up immediately, lifting her high enough so she could see the flowers properly.

"For me?" she gasped.

Ilya had kissed her cheek, settling her on his hip. "Of course. Because what day is it today?"

She grinned. "Ballet day!"

"And?"

Her eyes had gone even wider. "Women's Day!"

"*Da!*" Ilya had kissed her again, on the other cheek this time, making her giggle. "My special girl on her special day."

She'd reached for the bunny immediately, pulling it free from the bouquet and hugging it tight to her chest while Ilya held her, the lilies left standing slightly crooked on the table.

On her plate in front of her seat at the dining table was a pink-frosted cupcake. Shane had gone out the day before to pick up cupcakes, Mila's current favorite dessert, though it seemed to change weekly, so it was risky. It was a custom order, with pink frosting, little ballet slippers piped intricately on top. They were supposed to be for after the performance, a celebration treat.

But Ilya had promised her the night before she'd have a special treat for breakfast.

"Is special day," he'd said when Shane raised an eyebrow at him from the doorway, watching as Ilya plopped Mila down in her seat and carefully peeled the wrapper off a cupcake.

"*Double* special day. Double special days require cupcake for breakfast."

"It's six in the morning," Shane had pointed out.

"And she is ballerina," Ilya countered. He kissed the top of Mila's head. "Ballerinas need sugar for energy. Lots of spinning, lots of twirling."

Mila nodded very seriously, already reaching for the cupcake with both hands.

Shane just shook his head fondly and went to start the coffee.

The next few hours were a blur.

Mila was dressed in her pink leotard with the little tulle skirt, white tights that had taken three attempts to get on without twisting, and tiny pink ballet flats that made Shane's chest hurt just looking at them. She was perched cross-legged on the living room floor while Ilya sat behind her on the couch, a disaster zone of hair ties, water spray bottle, glitter gel, and about forty bobby pins scattered around him like he was preparing for surgical procedure.

Mila's hair was black like Shane's, same silky texture that slipped through fingers like water. But over the past few months, both Shane and Ilya had noticed it was developing a more of a wave to it—Ilya's genes finding a way to assert themselves even in hair structure.

And while it was adorable how her hair was becoming a little mix between them both, it was considerably more difficult to tame now. Trying to wrangle it into the required ballet bun, especially on a squirmy three-year-old with the attention span of a goldfish, was not a small task.

But Ilya was a man on a mission. And fortunately, he had reinforcements.

Max was sitting beside Mila on the floor, holding a tattered copy of her beloved *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* book, his little reading glasses on. Niko was kneeling on the floor directly in front of Mila, carefully painting her fingernails a shimmery pink that matched her leotard. He had her small hand cradled carefully in both of his, tongue poking out slightly in concentration. Of all three kids, Niko definitely favored Shane the most—same dark hair, same focused crease between the brows when he was concentrating. Right now, bent over Mila's tiny hand with a nail polish brush, the resemblance was almost distracting.

It wasn't his first time doing her nails. Or his fifteenth. This was practically a sibling ritual at this point. Both Niko and Max had figured out early on—through careful trial and error and a lot of failed attempts at keeping Mila still through other means—that a manicure bought everyone at least fifteen uninterrupted minutes of cooperation. Maybe twenty if you let her pick the color herself and made a whole production out of presenting the options.

It also helped that whichever brother offered to do it became her uncontested favorite for the foreseeable future. A title both boys took more seriously than either would ever admit out loud.

Today it was Niko's turn to hold the crown. He'd claimed it this morning by presenting her with three color options lined up on the coffee table like he was a salon professional. She'd picked the shimmery pink immediately, and that had been that.

Now he was regretting not negotiating terms beforehand. Because although a manicure normally bought him a solid fifteen minutes of cooperation, it was becoming abundantly clear that the usual rules did not apply to recital day. Or to days when Ilya let her eat a cupcake for breakfast. Niko wasn't sure which was the actual culprit here. Maybe it was both. They probably weren't mutually exclusive.

"Hold still, Mila," Niko said, not looking up from her hand. He had the brush poised over her pinky finger, waiting for her to stop moving.

"I am," Mila said.

"You're not. You keep wiggling."

"I'm *not* wiggling."

"Mila." Niko lifted the brush away and pointed at her hand with it. "I just painted your knuckle."

She looked down at her hand with great interest, then back up at him. "Is okay."

"It's not okay," Niko said, reaching for the nail polish remover for what felt like the fifteenth time already. "It looks like—"

"Niko," Ilya said mildly from above, not looking up from the section of hair he was attempting to wrangle. "Language."

"I didn't say anything."

"You were about to."

Niko pressed his lips together. He was starting to realize that arguing with Ilya about things Ilya had "predicted" he was going to say was a total losing battle. It was one of those annoying dad-reflexes he hadn't figured out how to bypass yet.

Mila held still for approximately ten seconds. Then she twisted to look up at Ilya, her entire body rotating with the movement. "Papa, is my bun gonna have sparkles?"

The bobby pin Ilya had been about to secure fell loose. He caught it before it could hit the floor. "Da, *solnyshko*, if you stop moving," he teased, pressing a gentle hand to the crown of her head to guide her back to center.

"I am, Papa."

"You are not. You are wobbling like little buoy."

"What's a boobie?"

Ilya's grin spread across his face immediately as he brushed back more of her hair. "*Buoy*. Not boobie. Buoy is thing that wobbles in water. Boobie is—" He paused, eyes twinkling with pure mischief. "Ask your daddy."

"Papa," Max groaned.

"What?" Ilya said innocently. "Is an anatomical question. Daddy is very knowledgeable about anatomy—"

"Stop"

"—well, not very knowledgeable about *this* anatomy, but even more reason for her to ask him —"

"Papa." Max whacked Ilya's knee with the book he was holding.

Mila had nodded. "Okay." Then, apparently satisfied with this explanation, immediately twisted back around to report this urgent news to Niko. "I'm getting sparkles."

"So I heard." Niko grabbed her hand before she could smear the wet nail polish across her tulle skirt. "Mila, your *hand*."

"If I was doing her nails, I'd get it done quicker," Max said. "She'd be still for me. Locked in."

Niko shot him a flat look while trying to wrangle Mila's wiggling hand. "You'd be quicker because you'd be too lazy to clean up the polish when she moves."

"Do not call your brother lazy," Ilya said from the couch, not looking up from the section of hair he was securing.

"Yeah," Max said smugly.

Niko raised his eyebrows at him. "Okay, so do you want to finish her nails then? Get her all 'locked in'?"

Max immediately backpedaled. "I can't. I'm reading to her." He held up the book. "Right, Mila?"

"The mouse wants milk now," Mila reported very seriously, not looking away from her hand in Niko's grip. "After the cookie."

"Exactly," Max said. "Can't leave the mouse hanging."

Max went back to the book, settling into the performance. He was a natural at the character voices, pitching his tone high and squeaky for the mouse, then dropping it lower for the exhausted boy trying to keep up with the mouse's endless requests. He was a lot like Ilya that way, Shane would often notice. Fully committed to the bit.

"And then," Max whispered dramatically, leaning into Mila's space, "he'll probably ask for a pair of nail scissors!"

He lunged forward to tickle her ribs with his free hand just as he said it. Mila burst into a fit of high-pitched, breathless giggles, her whole body jerking with the surprise. She threw her hands up in a celebratory shimmy, her tulle skirt rustling like a bag of candy.

Her carefully painted hand jerked right out of Niko's steady grip. The smear was significant. Three fingers, clean across.

Niko stared at it. Holding the brush in mid-air, watching the wet polish settle into the creases of her soft skin. Then he tipped his head back toward the ceiling with a long, suffering exhale.

"Mila."

She looked down at her hand with wide eyes. Then she looked back up at him, her lip trembling. "Is it bad?"

"It's—" Niko looked at her hand again. Pressed his lips together. "Yeah. It's pretty bad."

"Papa!" she wailed, twisting around so fast that Ilya lost the entire section of hair he'd been working on. "Niko's mad at me."

"I'm not mad, I'm—" Niko stopped. Exhaled. Reached for the nail polish remover with the energy of a man twice his age. "Mila, I'm not mad, just—hold still—"

"He's using his *mad* voice—"

"That's just my voice—"

Ilya set down the spray bottle with a gentle click. He placed one large hand on top of Mila's head to stop the swiveling. Then he looked over her head at Niko with an expression of exaggerated gravity.

"Niko," he said solemnly. "Do not be mad at your sister on her big day."

Niko's rolled his eyes. "I'm not mad—"

"She says you are using the mad voice."

"I don't have a mad voice—"

"You are calling your sister liar?" he asked. "On her recital day? On International Women's Day?"

Niko just glared at him, while Max snickered behind the pages of his book.

"Everyone has a mad voice," Ilya said wisely, reaching for a fresh bobby pin. He gathered up the loose strand that had slipped free and started over, completely unruffled by the looming deadline. "You get yours from your dad."

"I don't have a mad voice."

The statement came from the doorway. Shane stood there holding Mila's tiny pink cardigan—the one with the pearl buttons that perfectly matched her leotard—draped over one arm. He was fully dressed now, ready to go. White dress shirt tucked in, navy tie perfectly straight, the silver tie clip Ilya had given him years back catching the morning light streaming through the window.

Nobody responded.

They all knew better.

But Mila's head jerked toward him at the sound of his voice, her whole face lighting up. She tried to twist around fully to see him, practically launching herself off the floor.

Ilya's hand shot out, catching her by the shoulder and physically restraining her from abandoning her post. "No, no—stay—"

"Daddy!" Mila called out, straining against Ilya's grip. "Daddy, what's a boobie?"

The room went completely still for half a second.

Then Niko and Max both burst out laughing—Max actually rolling onto his back on the carpet, shoulders shaking, while Niko tried to muffle his laughter behind his hand and failed spectacularly.

Shane froze in the kitchen doorway, the cardigan still dangling from his hand. The color started at his ears and hit his cheeks in a hot, rapid wave.

"What?" Shane managed, his voice strangled.

"Papa said I should ask you," Mila repeated very earnestly, twisting to look at him as much as Ilya's grip would allow.

Shane's eyes cut to Ilya. "Did he."

Ilya was suddenly intensely focused on slicking back the rest of Mila's flyaways into her bun. He was biting his lower lip, but the corner of his mouth was twitching. He knew if he made eye contact with Shane for even a second, he was a goner. "She is liar."

"Oh, so now *you* can call her a liar on 'her recital day and International Women's Day'?" Niko said.

Shane just let out a breath. Reminded himself that he chose this. He had chosen the man, and chosen to build a family with said man where he didn't quite know what he was walking into half the time.

When he opened his eyes again, he leveled Ilya with a look that carried the weight of fourteen years of marriage behind it.

"Just get her hair done, Ilya. We have a show to get to."

Yuna and David had arrived a little while later, Yuna stepping into the house with her camera bag slung over her shoulder and a plan already in motion. She organized the family pictures with military precision, herding everyone into the living room for "the before" shots. It was her idea to get the staged photos out of the way now, while Mila's bun was still sleek and the boys hadn't yet reached the "hangry" phase of the afternoon. She knew the recital hall would be a mess of tulle and adrenaline; this was the golden hour before any tears or wardrobe malfunctions could strike.

When they all finally arrived at the recital hall, the energy was electric. Yuna and David peeled off with the boys to save seats in the front row. Ilya leaned close to Shane by the stage doors, his voice low. "I'm going to go pick up her bouquet now."

The lilies from the morning were just the "starter" bouquet. The real *tribute* was waiting next door.

Ilya had spotted the boutique florist during Mila's dress rehearsal the week before and had been plotting the logistics ever since. In Ilya's mind, flowers for International Women's Day—especially for his daughter's ballet debut—had to be breathing. They couldn't be from a grocery store bucket or something that had wilted in the back of a fridge overnight. They had to be pristine. Extravagant.

He'd called ahead that morning to confirm the pickup while Shane was wrestling Mila into her tights, wedging his phone between his shoulder and his ear while simultaneously fishing a missing ballet flat out from under the couch.

Shane nodded. Ilya crouched down in front of Mila, his hands resting on her small, tulle-covered knees.

"Mila, I am going to get your big surprise, okay?" he said, talking in that over-the-top flair he always does when he's trying to cheer her up. He caught her face in his hands, planting a loud kiss on her nose, then her forehead. "Daddy is going to take you to get ready backstage."

Mila's blue eyes widened, and she gave an excited nod.

Ilya grinned and stood, scooping her into a massive, rib-crushing hug, planting about ten more rapid-fire kisses across her cheeks until she was squirming and giggling, ballet shoes in the air.

Only once she was laughing too hard to breathe did he set her back on her feet. He leaned over to give Shane a quick kiss.

"Don't be late," Shane said, purely by habit. Out of *stressed* habit.

He knew there was zero chance Ilya would be late.

Ilya leaned back and smiled, reaching up to straighten Shane's suit jacket with careful hands. Because of course Shane was wearing a suit to their daughter's first recital. A full charcoal suit with a pressed white shirt and a tie that Shane had spent ten minutes selecting that morning, holding up options to Ilya until Ilya had finally just picked one for him. And naturally, Ilya had to wear one to match.

"You worry too much," Ilya murmured, smoothing the lapels one more time.

Shane smiled, leaning in for one more kiss. "That's my job."

When the door clicked shut behind Ilya, Shane looked down at Mila. She was still clutching her new bunny to her chest, her eyes bright and wide and so full of excitement it made Shane's throat tight.

He crouched down to her level and smiled. "You ready, big girl?"

She grinned up at him and bounced in place, the tulle of her tiny skirt puffing with each jump. "Yes!"

Shane squeezed her hand and led her through the heavy double doors into the chaotic swarm of the backstage area.

It was a sea of tulle and hairspray. Toddlers in varying shades of pink were vibrating with pre-show adrenaline, bouncing on their toes, spinning in circles, some already crying. Their teacher, Darya, looked like she was trying to herd a group of very sparkly, very uncoordinated kittens. Shane navigated the madness, keeping a firm grip on Mila's hand as they joined the cluster of parents waiting to hand their tiny dancers over to the wings.

Darya spotted them immediately, and her face lit up. She was a small, Russian woman in her forties with curly dark hair pulled back in a tight bun and the kind of boundless energy that came from spending twenty-something years wrangling toddlers into something resembling choreography. When Mila had first expressed the smallest inkling in dance, Ilya was determined to find the best Russian ballet class in the Ottawa region. And once he and Shane had met Darya, it had been an easy decision.

"Mila!" she called out, waving them over. "Oh, look at you! That bun is perfection."

Mila beamed, bouncing on her feet. "Papa did it!"

Shane smiled and absently brushed a tiny piece of lint from Mila's shoulder. "He spent an hour on it. And went through about two packets of bobby pins."

Darya laughed, pressing a hand to her chest. "Dedication! Well, she looks beautiful."

Mila let go of Shane's hand and darted forward to join a cluster of her classmates who were already squealing and spinning in circles near the stage entrance. She immediately began hopping around with them, showing them her new bunny in between fits of giggles.

Shane watched from a few feet away, his arms crossed loosely over his chest. He wasn't quite ready to go back to his seat yet, although he probably could at this point.

After a few more minutes, Darya began gathering the class together a few feet away, clapping her hands and doing a last-minute headcount. The noise level was rising. The energy was building.

And Shane was noticing Mila's energy was shifting.

The spinning slowed. The squealing quieted. Mila's hand drifted up to her ear, fingers rubbing at her earlobe as she glanced toward the heavy velvet curtain that separated them from the stage.

Shane's heart always squeezed a bit at the little mannerisms the kids had picked up that were almost identical to Ilya's. For Mila, it was the ear thing. She'd rub at her earlobe when she was thinking too hard about something. The same self-soothing gesture Shane had seen Ilya do countless times over the years.

She had drifted from the other girls and was closer to Shane now. Her hand not on her ear reached out, searching for Shane's. When she found it, her grip tightened around his fingers; tight enough that he could feel her pulse through her tiny palm.

Shane crouched down immediately, bringing himself back to her eye level. "Hey," he said quietly.

She looked at him with those wide, doe eyes. She dropped her hand from her ear.

"You're going to do so great," Shane murmured, running his hand gently over her slicked-back hair. Ilya had done an impressively clean job. Not a single strand out of place, every bobby pin secure, the sparkle gel catching the fluorescent lights and making tiny stars shimmer across her bun.

She looked back at the other kids forming their line. Darya was waving them all over now.

Shane cupped her face gently with both hands, turning her so she was looking at him again. His thumbs brushed across her soft, round cheeks. There was a faint shimmer of glitter dusting her temples. "Daddy's here, honey."

She blinked up at him, lashes sticking together from where she'd rubbed her eyes. Her mouth wobbled just a little.

"Are you feeling a little scared?" he murmured.

She looked at him for a long moment. Then shook her head, but the movement was small. Unconvincing.

Shane's heart squeezed. He smiled softly and shifted, sitting back on his heels and scooping her up onto his knee as he crouched there in the middle of the backstage corridor. She immediately buried her face in his neck, her little arms wrapping tight around him, her tutu crinkling against his chest.

"It's okay to feel scared," Shane whispered, rubbing slow circles on her back. "You're still going to do so good. And I'm still going to be so proud of you."

She mumbled something into his neck, her breath warm against his skin.

He pulled back slightly, ducking his head to try to catch her eyes. "What was that, baby?"

She rubbed her eye and mumbled it again. "Wan' you to come with me."

Shane felt his throat go tight. His hand stilled on her back for just a second before resuming its circles. His other hand came up to smooth over her hair, careful not to disturb Ilya's work.

"I'm going to stay with you all the way up until you perform," he said softly.

She shook her head, small and jerky, and rubbed her eyes harder. Both of them now, pressing the heels of her palms into her face hard enough that Shane gently caught her wrists and pulled them down. Her voice came out thick and wet. "I want you, Daddy."

Shane swallowed down the lump forming in his throat. He rocked her slightly, swaying where he crouched. He glanced up at Darya over Mila's head, holding up one finger. Darya nodded, understanding immediately, and turned her attention to the other dancers. Around them, other parents were crouching down too, giving last-minute pep talks and adjusting tutus and wiping tears.

"Hey," Shane whispered, pressing a kiss to her temple. "I'm going to be right there in the front row, watching you. You'll be able to see me the whole time. And you'll be having so much fun dancing with your friends. And who else is going to be there in the front row?"

She sniffled. "Papa..."

"That's right. Who else?"

"Niko...Max...Grandma...Grandpa..."

"Exactly," Shane said. "All of us. All watching you. All so proud of you."

Mila didn't say anything for a moment, her fingers twisting the soft fur of her new stuffed animal.

"Do you have a name for your bunny yet?" Distractions usually worked well for Mila; he had learned during her early meltdown days that shifting her focus was like flipping a switch.

She looked back down at the stuffed bunny in her hand, toying with its long, floppy ears. "Arnold."

Shane was really hoping he was keeping his face neutral, because that was about the last name he was expecting his daughter to say.

"Arnold," he repeated with a curt nod. "Well, I'm going to make sure Arnold sits with us in the front row. He's going to have the best seat in the house. You just focus on your dancing, okay?"

Mila nodded, pulling Arnold up closer to her face to give him a goodbye squeeze. She then handed him over to Shane, who took the stuffed animal with gentle care.

Shane kissed her cheek one last time, rubbing her back to settle the last of the jitters. "Can you show me a twirl?"

She climbed off his leg she was sitting on, and did a wobbly spin. Shane gasped and clapped. "There you go!" he exclaimed, reaching out to cup her cheek. "You're ready, Mila girl."

She was smiling big now, cheeks a little pink from the twirl. She reached out toward him, and he hugged her tight, kissed the side of her head, and stood. He led her back to the other girls, gave Darya a nod, and felt a weight off his chest when he saw Mila bouncing in place with her friends once again.

He took one more second to watch her, then turned to head back to the auditorium.

When Shane finally made his way back to the front row and dropped into his seat next to Niko, his hands were shaking slightly. He held onto Arnold, hoping the physical contact would stop the tremble, but he realized he was now just strangling the poor stuffed bunny. He sighed and loosened his hold, smoothing Arnold's fur back down, then checked his phone to make sure it was on silent even though he'd already checked it twice before they'd even left the house.

Niko glanced over at him. "Dad," he said flatly. "You need to chill."

"I am chill," Shane said, his eyes fixed on the closed curtain. His leg was bouncing.

"You're literally vibrating."

"I'm not vibrating."

"You're vibrating," Max confirmed from Niko's other side, leaning forward to look at Shane. He was already holding David's phone up, camera app open and ready. He had been given the noble duty of recording the performance. "It's just a bunch of toddlers falling over, Dad. But don't worry, I'll record it so you can cry about it later."

Shane let out a shaky, defensive breath. "I am not going to cry."

Yuna leaned over from where she was sitting next to Max, reaching across to pat Shane's knee. "Shane. Honey. Even if she forgets all the moves and just lies down on the floor, it'll still be the cutest thing we've ever seen. It's not the Olympics."

"I know that."

"Do you?" Yuna asked carefully. "Because you look like you're about to have a heart attack."

"I'm fine."

"You're sweating," Niko observed.

"It's warm in here."

"It's like fifteen degrees."

Shane didn't dignify that with a response. He just exhaled slowly and smoothed down his tie even though it was already perfectly straight. Adjusted his cuffs.

He wasn't even exactly sure why he was getting so worked up right now. Mila had been completely fine when he'd left her backstage. All giggles and twirls, not a trace of the nerves that had made her cling to him just minutes before.

He had felt this same churning anxiety during Niko's first hockey game. And Max's. And most of their games after that, if he was being honest. The sick twist in his stomach every time one of his kids was about to do something that mattered to them.

Maybe this feeling never really went away. Maybe this was just the permanent tax of being a parent—spending the rest of your life sitting in audiences and stands and bleachers, watching your kids try things and hoping they'd be okay. You just had to sit in the dark, hold a stuffed bunny named Arnold, and hope they felt the love you were projecting from the front row.

David leaned over and handed him a water bottle.

"Thanks," Shane muttered, taking it. His mouth did feel dry.

"Just think about how excited she's been," David said, settling back in his seat. "She's going to do great, Shane."

Before Shane could reply, a sudden rustle of plastic and the scent of a thousand greenhouses announced a new arrival. Ilya practically dropped into the seat beside Shane, breathless and slightly disheveled. He was holding the biggest bouquet of flowers Shane had ever seen.

When Shane turned to look at him, he actually stopped breathing for a second.

Ilya was holding the biggest bouquet of flowers Shane had ever seen. It wasn't just a bouquet; it was a floral wall of thirty-seven premium, long-stemmed pink roses, wrapped in thick cream paper and tied with a ribbon so wide it looked like it belonged on a prize-winning horse. Ilya's face was barely visible behind the blooms, his eyes wide and manic with triumph.

"Ilya," Shane said slowly, staring at the bouquet. "How many flowers did you get her?"

"Thirty-seven," Ilya said, like this was a completely reasonable number.

"Thirty-seven."

"Da."

"For our toddler."

"She is three, but could not do three *dozen*. That is thirty-six. Even number." Ilya said this very seriously, adjusting the bouquet in his lap. Because of course. Even numbers were for mourning. "So. Thirty-seven."

Shane just looked at him, but he couldn't help but smile. "Ilya. She's doesn't even know how to count to thirty-seven."

"She will learn when she counts her flowers," Ilya said simply. He smoothed the ribbon carefully. "It is her first recital *and* a holiday. Is important."

Shane's chest did that thing again where it felt too full.

Ever since he'd first watched Ilya interact with kids at that All-Star game all those years ago, Shane had known. He remembered Ilya pretending to drown in the pool just to let the kids win the race, hamming it up and making them laugh until they couldn't breathe. There was no self-consciousness with Ilya, no hesitation. He met children exactly where they were—on the

floor with toy trucks, in blanket forts, or having full, serious conversations with stuffed animals like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Seeing Ilya with kids had always been one of the few times Shane felt like he was catching a glimpse of the boy Ilya used to be. Or maybe at the boy Ilya was trying to heal. It was the part of him that had been buried under way too much grief far too young. But with kids, and especially now with their kids, that version of him finally got to breathe.

"Did she seem ready?" Ilya asked, breaking into Shane's thoughts. "She was not crying?"

Shane looked at the roses, then at Ilya's ridiculous, beautiful, over-the-top face. He felt the last of his own nerves settle into something warmer.

"Yeah," Shane murmured, reaching over to squeeze Ilya's hand, lacing their fingers together over the armrest. "She's ready."

A few more moments passed before the house lights dimmed. The curtain began to rise.

Ilya clutched the bouquet tighter.

Mila saw them immediately. Her eyes scanned the front row and landed on Ilya, and her whole face lit up like someone had flipped a switch. Then she saw the bouquet.

The moment her eyes landed on the massive, pink explosion of thirty-seven flowers in the front row, her Hollander focus shifted entirely. She stopped dancing mid-twirl. Just froze. Her eyes went wide as saucers.

"Flowers!" she said out loud, pointing directly at Ilya.

Her voice carried over the music.

There was laughter rippling through the audience now. Shane felt the blood drain from his face. Niko made a strangled sound beside him.

"Oh no," Shane whispered.

Mila took a step toward them. Then another. She was walking off her mark, drifting toward the edge of the stage, her eyes locked on those roses like they were the only thing in the world that mattered.

The other little girls kept dancing around her, doing their choreography. Darya was making some subtle gestures in an attempt to reel Mila back in, which Mila ignored completely.

"Mila," Shane hissed under his breath, leaning forward and gesturing desperately for her to go back to her spot. "Keep dancing, baby."

She didn't hear him. Or if she did, she didn't care. She took another step closer to the edge of the stage, craning her tiny neck to get a better look at the bouquet Ilya was clutching.

Beside Shane, Ilya was a mess of conflicting instincts. He was beaming with pride that she loved the flowers, but he was also horrified by the broken choreography. He started gesturing dramatically, his hands shooing her back toward the center of the stage.

"Back, *solnyshko*! Go back!" Ilya mouthed, his face a mask of exaggerated stage-direction.

Niko and Max joined in, both boys leaning over in their seats and pointing frantically at the other girls. Mila just stood there, a tiny, glittery statue at the edge of the abyss, looking from the flowers to her fathers with a bright, triumphant grin.

A few other kids were straying, too. Darya came up to Mila, hand on her little back and crouching to whisper something in her ear. Mila made a whiny little sound, and resisted as Darya tried gently leading her back to her spot on stage.

"Flowers!" Mila insisted again, her voice projecting with terrifying clarity through the quiet theater.

Max was stifling laughs now behind the phone as he recorded.

Then Ilya stood up.

"Ilya—" Shane started, reaching for the hem of Ilya's suit jacket to pull him back down.

But Ilya was already moving. He placed the bouquet onto his empty seat and speed-walked to the very edge of the stage. He bent so he was at Mila's eye level.

"*Malyshka*," he whispered, his voice pitched low but still audible in the quiet. "You will get your big flowers. But Papa wants to see your big dance first, yes? Can you show us?"

Mila looked conflicted, her eyes darting toward the roses on the seat and back to Ilya.

Ilya didn't hesitate. He took a deep breath and dramatically tried to follow the pose of the other girls on stage, curving his arms over his head in what could generously be called a ballet position. His suit jacket pulled tight across his shoulders. "Come on, *solnyshko*," he whispered, his eyes locked on hers with fierce encouragement. "Show Papa. Show everyone. You know the dance."

Mila looked at him. Then at the flowers in his seat. Then back at him.

"After," Ilya promised, holding up one finger very seriously. "Dance first, then flowers. This is the deal, yes?"

She chewed on her bottom lip, her little face scrunched up as she weighed her options. Finally, she nodded.

Relief washed over Ilya's face. "That's my girl. Go, go—show them!"

As she began to backtrack toward the center of the stage, rejoining the other girls who had somehow kept going through the entire negotiation, Ilya didn't sit down. He stayed in his crouch at the very edge of the stage, one hand braced on the floor for balance.

When the music hit the next refrain, he prompted her—lifting his own arms into what was supposed to be a rounded fifth position, his movements exaggerated and deliberate so she could see them clearly from the stage. When she needed to shuffle to the left, Ilya tilted his whole body in that direction and gestured with his hands, guiding her back to her mark like he was coaching from the bench during a championship game.

Every time she nailed a step or remembered to point her toe, Ilya gave her a sharp, encouraging nod, his eyes never leaving hers.

Shane was mesmerized as he watched, his cheeks hurting from how much he was smiling. Mila was grinning at Ilya for most of it, copying his little gestures and giggling when he'd do an extra dramatic one to get her to finish a movement. It was a private conversation happening in front of a hundred people.

When the music finally faded and the last tinkling piano chord hung in the air, the little dancers struck their final pose—Mila slightly off-center, her tutu askew, but her chin held high with absolute conviction.

Shane and Ilya shot to their feet. They applauded with so much intensity their hands stung from the force of it. Mila's face split into the widest, most luminous grin they had ever seen, her eyes finding them instantly in the front row. She bounced once, twice, on her toes, and then—with a sudden, surprising grace—she performed a deep, shaky curtsy. It was the one move Shane was certain she had forgotten, yet there she was.

Then, the "ballerina" vanished. The toddler returned.

Mila didn't wait for the formal exit. She launched herself toward the edge of the stage, scrambling down the three small steps and sprinting directly into Ilya's waiting arms. He caught her mid-leap, his powerful arms snatching her out of the air and hoisting her toward the ceiling. He spun her in a dizzying circle, pressing a rapid-fire succession of kisses to her forehead, her cheeks, her nose, while she shrieked with delight.

"You did it! You were perfect," he roared over the noise of the crowd.

"Can I have my flowers now?" she asked breathlessly.

Ilya laughed. "Of course, of course." He set her down just long enough to reach for the massive bouquet resting on his seat. He presented the roses to her with both hands, bowing slightly.

Mila's eyes went impossibly wide. She reached out to take the bouquet; or tried to, at least. The sheer volume of the roses was nearly as big as she was, the fragrant blooms tilting dangerously and threatening to topple her over.

Shane was there in a heartbeat, crouching down to catch her elbow and steady the weight. "Easy, sweetheart. These are huge. You're going to disappear back there."

"They're for me!" she announced to anyone within earshot, her voice full of pride. She buried her face in the blossoms, then looked up at them, glowing. "I love them."

"We're so glad," Shane cooed. "We're so proud."

Ilya lifted her, flowers and all, and bounced her slightly in his arms. "I have never seen such a perfect ballerina."

Niko holding Arnold out from beside them. "Don't forget your bunny. He was cheering very loud. He needs a nap now."

Mila took Arnold with one hand, the other still clutching the bouquet stems. She was now holding approximately forty pounds of flowers and stuffed animal combined, and looked absolutely delighted about the whole thing.

"Celebratory cupcakes at home?" Ilya asked, glancing at Shane over Mila's head.

Shane smiled, reaching out to straighten Ilya's tie even though it was already perfectly straight. "Celebratory cupcakes at home."

"Can I have two?" Mila asked immediately.

"You already had one for breakfast, remember?" Shane said.

"That was breakfast cupcake, Daddy," Mila said, like this was obvious. "This is celebration cupcake. Different."

Ilya nodded seriously. "She makes good point."

Shane looked at his husband. Then at his daughter. They were wearing the exact same expression: wide eyes, slight tilt of the head, the barest hint of a pout on their lips. He'd seen it a thousand times over the years, and he'd never gotten better at resisting it.

His resolve was crumbling in real time.

"Fine," Shane sighed. "Two cupcakes."

End Notes

thank you for reading! :)

just want to also thank those who have been following along in this series and leaving the sweetest comments! when i posted the first fic i truly didn't think it would reach that many people, but i'm so glad to hear that others love seeing hollanov as dads!!

i've also had a few people put requests in the comments, and just wanted to let say that know although i'm not formally taking any requests, you can always feel free to comment ideas! i can't promise i'll incorporate all of them (mostly bc i'm new to fic writing and just don't want to get overwhelmed!) but they sure are fun to read!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!