

hard to keep it all inside

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by [aurora_chiroptera](#)

Summary

Irina had always been scared that Grigori's violent anger would be passed down to their sons.

She'd hoped Ilya would be different. But things were more complicated than that.

Or, three times Irina was called to get her son because Ilya had punched someone. And one time when someone had his back instead...

Notes

first, this probably won't make sense as a stand alone, so i recommend reading the other two fics first if you're new!

second, i was unsure when to publish this because it's a slightly different format, a 3 +1 fic over a broader span of time (march 2003, october 2005, november 2006, and april 2007), whereas most of the other fics are going to continue to be chronological snapshots (besides possibly a social media fic if the stars align). i decided to post it 3rd, because it came together the quickest and technically begins before the next fic. so spoilers for incoming svetlana friendship! how that all starts will be the next instalment, which begins september 2003. also introducing OC steph, irina's long term love interest!

finally, this fic also deals heavily with the aftermath of instances of racism and homophobia (1 use of the f-slur), so i wanted to make it skippable. it's an interesting character and relationship study to me, but is not necessary to enjoy the rest of this series for any readers who need/want to skip. the focus is on irina and ilya's relationship, but also on what ilya does for the people he loves.

alright - onward!

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

Irina had always been scared that Grigori's violent anger would be passed down to their sons. She thought she could see it growing in Alexei, in how he pushed his friends and brother around. She should have tried to save him from it, but she hadn't. She'd have to live with that regret - but it was better to have lived.

Her Ilya continued to be her sunshine, the good that had come out of the darkest time of her life. He was too old now for her to call him sunshine to his face without protest, but she carried her love for her boy in her chest, bright and warm even in the freezing Canadian winters that sometimes reminded her too much of Moscow.

Irina hoped that Ilya had been spared the seed of that violence, that she had gotten him out in time. She watched for it anyway.

When Ilya was 12-years-old, it was his coach who called. "Irina, I'm sorry to do this while you're working, but we need you to come get Ilya."

"Did something happen?" All the worst scenarios ran through her head - he had been hurt, he was badly sick.

"You could say that," Coach Logan cleared his throat. "Ilya punched two of his teammates. Gloves on, no one was really hurt, but..."

It was like ice water being dumped over her head. "I'll be right over."

When she arrived, Ilya was sitting in the stands near the team entrance, looking furious. Most of his gear was off, scattered around him like he'd taken it off in frustration as he sat. Irina tried to see what changed in Ilya that could explain this behavior, but saw nothing new. It felt like the world should have shifted for this to have happened.

It was only then her logical brain clicked in to ask, what would make Ilya punch someone?

Taking a deep breath, Irina approached him. She knelt down on the cold cement in front of him, tipping his head up with a finger under his chin so that he would meet her eyes. He was taller than her from here. She spoke in Russian. "Ilyusha, this isn't like you."

Ilya's face flushed with anger. "I didn't do anything wrong!" he shouted, also in Russian.

Irina hushed him. "Why don't you tell me what happened?"

"Glen and Will were being mean to Shane," Ilya began, then his eyes darted away.

Irina followed his stare to where Shane was currently out on the ice. She then brought Ilya's face back to meet her gaze. "Being mean how?"

"They were saying stupid shit," Ilya said, continuing before she could scold his language. "They were asking like how can he see the puck because-" here he paused, lifting his hands to either side of his eyes, but he didn't complete the gesture, hands landing back in his lap "-which makes no sense! They said some other shit too, but it was so mean and stupid and not

fair.” Ilya stopped, breathing harder than normal. He seemed to calm himself with a shrug. “So I punched them both. They’re just jealous that Shane’s a million times better player than them. But that was not okay.”

“No, that’s not okay.” Irina could feel the anger rise in herself. She’d never thought to talk to Ilya about how to handle a situation like this, but he’d known when something was wrong. “And where are Glen and Will? Did their parents get called?”

Ilya rolled his eyes and shook his head. “No, they’re still in practice.”

Irina looked back, saw the way Shane was back at the bench but separated from the group of boys who should be his teammates. He saw her and gave a little wave.

“So you’re telling me your coach is letting their racism slide,” Irina switched back to English, raising her own voice. She stood. “Get your things together and see about preparing Shane’s too. I’ll ask if he wants to come with us.”

“I’m not in trouble?” Ilya asked, still in Russian. For the first time, his voice was quiet, and he looked almost scared.

She returned to Russian as well. “No my love. You did the right thing. I want to tell you never to use violence again, but.” Here she shrugged. She had half a mind to find Glen and Will’s parents to slap them herself. And the coaching staff too. “Now get ready, I’ll be back in a moment.”

Irina approached where the head coach was standing to the side of the ice. “Coach Logan, can I talk to you for a moment?”

Coach Logan turned, offering a tight smile. “Thanks for coming down. I know that’s not a call a parent ever wants to get.”

Irina didn’t have time to return pleasantries. “Do you know why Ilya punched those boys?”

Coach Logan sighed. “He made some pretty serious accusations, which we can look into later.”

“Later.” Irina crossed her arms. “So that Shane has to put up with this bullying in the meantime? How is that fair?”

“Well, there weren’t any coaches who overheard what was said, so we don’t really know-”

“We know,” Irina said. “I trust my son. If you’re not going to pull Glen and Will out for the harm they caused, but you will for Ilya-”

Coach Logan interrupted her. “I don’t think we can compare some words to punches.”

“I can.” Irina said, keep her tone flat and unemotional. “And you can be sure I’ll let Yuna and David know about it, as well as the sport’s director. It sounds like the coaching on this team isn’t up on basic nondiscrimination standards.”

With that she turned, gathering false calm as she walked to the bench.

She spoke to Shane in Russian so as not to embarrass him. “Shane, sweetie, would you like to come home with Ilya and I? We can stop by the rental place and you can choose whatever movie you like. We can also get some ice cream.” She knew a movie and ice cream weren’t going to fix anything, but maybe they would help make sure Shane knew he had people in his corner.

Shane's lower lip trembled slightly, but he straightened his shoulders. Trying to be brave. “But I’m supposed to practice.”

“This team is not good for you. We’ll find something better, okay? Or maybe come back when there has been some change in coaches.” Irina wanted to scoop him up, though like Ilya he was getting too big for that now. “Or just, take a break for tonight, okay? We can plan some practice time this weekend, to make up for it.”

Shane looked over at his teammates. She didn’t know what Shane saw, but he then nodded. “Okay.”

“Ilya’s getting his things, how about you do too,” Irina said. “I’ll call your parents and sign you both out.”

It was a good thing she and the Hollanders had signed permission paperwork to pick up the boys. Irina found the assistant coach with the clipboard, signed both Shane and Ilya out, then went to find a phone she could use to call David’s office.

“Irina! Something happen? I’m still good to pick up Shane and Ilya,” David said after her greeting.

“Don’t worry about that,” Irina said. “There was an incident at practice which I’ll tell you and Yuna about later. But I’m grabbing them both early and we’re going to find a movie to watch at home.”

“Okay,” David said, concern coating his tone. “Incident? That sounds rather serious.”

“Some of their teammates were bullying Shane, and Ilya took matters into his own hands about it,” Irina said and internally scolded herself for being proud of Ilya.

“What type of bullying?” David’s tone changed further. It was heart breaking to hear and heart breaking to have to confirm.

“They were making fun of his eyes - that sounds like the biggest thing. And their coach was letting the little racists off without even a warning,” Irina confirmed. “So I’m going to spoil them both and then we can come up with a game plan.”

Irina got the sense that if David hadn’t been at work that he would have sworn. The soft spoken man on the other side of the phone let out a shaky breath. “Okay. Yuna or I will call your house so we can coordinate pick up later.”

Irina was fully intending to spoil them both, she watched as Ilya let Shane have final say on the movie choice. When they stopped to get ice cream and Shane couldn't choose between two flavors, Ilya got the other so that they could share both. Irina realized she should have known that Shane needed the extra attention, but Ilya had it covered. She left them cozy on the couch with their ice cream and movie and all the extra blankets and pillows she could find. Ilya and Shane stayed close to each other the whole time, sides pressed together and a shared blanket around their shoulders.

Irina went to the kitchen table and began to look up everyone she needed to call to make sure this never happened again. She wanted to have all the information ready to be able to make a game plan with Yuna and David.

The second time Irina got a call about Ilya was two years later. Ilya had shot up over the summer and he now matched Irina in height. He was still in a lot of ways a gangly teen, but the fact he played hockey as seriously as he did certainly filled out his broad shoulders. She had to feed him so much to keep on top of all that. It very much helped to now have someone to coparent him again, in the form of Steph, who had thrown herself enthusiastically into the role of parent as well as partner.

It was still Irina who got the calls from school about Ilya. Irina couldn't see that changing, even as she and Steph had begun to explore getting married. The fact that was a conversation that they could even have left Irina dizzy with joy.

Even the disappointed voice of the woman who worked the front office of Ilya's school couldn't completely dampen that. "Ms. Rozanov? Your son got into a confrontation with some of his classmates and needs to be picked up."

Irina didn't bother correcting her name, just sighed. It was almost lunch time, so she'd be able to leave for a bit without notice. "Okay, I will be there in ten minutes."

She called Steph before she left. "Is there any chance you'd be able to leave early from work today? Something happened at school and I think Ilya is going to need to come home."

"Of course!" Steph said, and Irina could hear noises like Steph had immediately begun to pack up. "I hope everything's okay. Do you need me to get him?"

"No, I'll bring him home, but I'll need to get back to work right after."

"I'll pick up some lunch for all of us, so you don't miss a meal," Steph said and Irina felt the light, bubbly feeling fill her again.

"Thank you," Irina pressed the phone closer, like that would bring Steph nearer too. "Love you."

"I love you too." Steph's voice was full of warmth. "Now go get our boy!"

When Irina got there, Ilya was sitting in the office and glaring at the woman who must have been the one to call Irina. Given everything that happened the last time she got a call like this, Irina sat in the seat beside Ilya and asked in Russian, “What happened?”

Ilya’s answer was to look around, checking to make sure there weren’t any classmates in sight, then throw himself at her in a hug. Irina caught him, letting out a small sound at the impact. She squeezed him tight, running a hand through his curls and pressing a quick kiss to Ilya’s forehead.

“Oh sweetheart.” Irina said.

Ilya pulled away, not looking at her. He wiped his eyes briskly with his sleeve before explaining. “We were working on a project about our families. A couple classmates had some thoughts about you and Steph. I... reacted badly, before Shane had gone to get the teacher.”

Irina’s heart sank. Irrational guilt that this was her fault built in her chest, before she shoved it away. She decided to focus on - “Reacted badly?”

“I tried to punch one of them,” Ilya said, eyes still on the floor. “Sveta caught my arm though and then Ms. Sato was there.”

“I heard my name.” The voice caught both Irina and Ilya’s attention as a handsome woman with short hair stepped out of an office, followed by a woman who Irina recognized as the principal. “I was just clearing up everything. Ilya didn’t do anything wrong and I’ve already written up the true offenders.”

Irina stood, holding out her hand. “Irina Rozanova.”

“Mai Sato.” Her smile was as warm and firm as her handshake. “Sorry you got called all the way down here. I don’t tolerate that sort of behavior in my classroom.”

“I’m relieved to hear it,” Irina said, feeling tension she’d been holding in her chest loosen. “I’ll speak with Ilya about more productive ways to handle something like that in the future.”

“He shouldn’t have any more issues.” Here Ms. Sato shot a look at the principal, who gave a more performative smile.

“Of course, we pride ourselves on supporting our students from all backgrounds,” the principal assured. “We’ll be looking into this incident thoroughly. Though... we’ll still have to ask him to go home early today.”

“But there won’t be anything submitted to his record,” Ms. Sato said firmly and the principal stopped a grimace and managed a nod instead.

“It’s okay, my partner, his...” Irina thought of what brought them here and decided to dig in, to make a claim of who she was “...stepmom is able to be with him.”

“I’m glad,” Ms. Sato said, and her smile was real. She turned to Ilya. “I need to go back to teach my next class. You know your homework?”

Ilya nodded. “And Shane promised to bring me anything I missed.”

“Good. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” Ms. Sato held out her fist

Ilya smiled at her and bumped his own against it. “Thank you, Ms. Sato.”

Ms. Sato shot a final look at Irina. “You have a good kid here.”

Irina met her eyes and said with a smile of her own, “I know.”

Steph was home when they got there, and Ilya hugged her in the same way he had Irina. Steph held him close, questions in her eyes as she looked over his shoulder at Irina. Irina shook her head and mouthed “later.” It felt like Ms. Sato had taken away the need to be angry by resolving the issue and fighting for Ilya. What Irina was left with was the grief but also the affection for Ilya. He might still be figuring out how to do good, but in his heart he was so good. She didn’t know how she wanted to say all that yet, to Steph or to Ilya.

Steph seemed to know what was needed. She pulled back a little from Ilya so she could say, “I got us our favorite sandwiches from your favorite shop.”

Ilya let her go, his face lighting up, “A bagel breakfast sandwich supreme?”

“Of course! You better eat it before it goes cold,” Steph ruffled his hair and he hurried into the kitchen, dropping his backpack along the way. Steph then picked up the paper bag she set aside when Ilya had thrown himself at her. She brought that to Irina, pressing a kiss to her cheek and the bag into her hand.

Irina took it, turning her head to catch Steph’s lips. Her free hand settled on her waist. Irina let herself have this extra moment, to take comfort in the easy love and support. When they pulled apart, Irina murmured against Steph’s lips, “I can’t wait to be your wife.”

This earned her another, deeper kiss. “How am I supposed to let you go now?” Steph asked, her voice rough.

“Only for a few hours,” Irina promised. “And he’ll need the attention.”

Steph nodded, stepping back and putting on what Irina had started to think of as her “mom face.” “Want to tell me what happened?”

Irina did, briefly, watching the pain cross Steph’s face but soothing it with what Ms. Sato had said. “We’ll probably all want to talk more later. But...”

Steph nodded, seeming to understand. “I’m thinking after lunch... a Super Smash Brother tournament,” Steph said, glancing back to the kitchen. She’d spoken the last part loud enough for Ilya to hear; there was a distant cheer.

Irina laughed. “Well, I’ll leave you to your important work. Thank you again.”

Steph shook her head. “No need. We’re partners, right? In everything.”

Irina nodded and blinked quickly. "I'll see you tonight."

"We'll be here," Steph said, a promise of home and safety.

Irina turned it all over in her head as she drove back. It felt like a mess of emotions tangling in her, but shining through was the feeling of being loved. It wasn't fair that Ilya had felt he needed to defend her and Steph, that he was put in that situation at all. But she now knew she had at least one ally among his teachers, and believed that it wouldn't happen again, at least not like this.

The third time Irina was called happened about a year later. The call came before Irina had even been able to sit down at her desk. Sighing, she quickly switched her meetings around and hurried to the school. She didn't bother to ask for details until she could talk to Ilya himself - she didn't know when she'd decided that was how she'd handle these moments. She needed to know in Ilya's own words what happened before she did anything.

The high school building was different, bigger, taking her a moment to navigate. When Irina approached Ilya where he sat in a chair in the hall, she didn't even have to prompt him to speak.

"Some fucker on the bus touched Sveta's hair and wouldn't stop, even when Sveta was yelling at him too," Ilya said, glaring sideways at the floor. "She was going to get in trouble if she did anything, so I punched the guy instead."

Irina sat in the chair beside him, put her face in her hands and breathed for a moment. "We should probably find a better way for you to stand up to racists and homophobes," she said as she took her hands away and looked at her son. He was getting so grown up now.

Ilya shrugged, defiant, and it reminded her so much of when she'd been called the first time. Though now he was holding his bruised knuckles in the other hand. She'd need to get ice on them soon. "They need to stop fucking with my friends then."

Irina blew out a sigh. "They really do. But I think maybe talking with Sveta the way you have with Shane might be helpful in knowing what she'd like best if something like that happens again."

Ilya finally glanced up at her, looking more sheepish. "Yeah. She already told me she didn't need a white knight to save her. But she also gave me a big hug, so mixed messages."

Irina couldn't help but reach out and ruffle his hair, which he tried to duck away from. "Ilyusha, I love you. When I go in there, is the principal going to tell me you've been expelled?"

"No. Just... suspended for a few days," Ilya said. "But not in any way that would mess up hockey."

“Thank god for hockey,” Irina sighed, shaking her head. But it was true that hockey had given Ilya some of the best things in his life. She knew well why he loved it.

Ilya was correct - he was suspended for the rest of the week. She decided she'd take him with her into the office. As they were leaving, Shane and Svetlana appeared during a break between classes. Svetlana hugged Ilya again, all while scolding him loudly in Russian, Shane looking on with an equal mix of amusement and concern.

“We'll make sure to get you the assignments in your classes,” Shane said, hovering near Ilya. Just a year ago, he would've also pulled Ilya into a hug, but he'd been shrinking back more.

Ilya had no such qualms and tossed an arm over Shane's shoulder. They were about equal in height with each other, and with Svetlana. The trio almost always seemed to be close to each other, and Irina adored seeing her son surrounded by that steady trust in love.

It made sense that, if he didn't see another way in time, Ilya would fight for them.

Svetlana and Shane had to hurry off again, so Irina bundled a grinning Ilya into her car. He'd seen the nurse while she was speaking with his principal, and held an icepack to his hand.

Having Ilya in the office with her at this point was a huge help. As she now took the role of interpreter, Ilya would happily occupy children who had to come in with their parents. He'd talk with them in Russian, teach them some English words if they were old enough, but mostly just be there to play or listen or read stories. Even though he was plenty old enough to stay home while he was suspended, Irina didn't have to. If there were no children to entertain, he'd sit quietly in the break room and keep up on his school work.

Sometimes other interpreters or immigration support staff would borrow him. Even if they couldn't speak the same language, Ilya knew how to get the kids they were working with laughing or calm them down. Shane had taught him that so many years ago now and Irina watched Ilya pay it forward with an easy grin.

Every evening after work and school, Svetlana and Shane would come over, and the three of them would take over the living room. David appeared one night with dinner, and Moana did the next, making sure that Irina wasn't taking on the challenge (and cost) of feeding three teenagers.

Sometimes, even though she knew she shouldn't, Irina would listen to the three of them. She hoped that, wherever they ended up in life, they'd still have each other to lean on. Steph would catch her at her "accidental" eavesdropping, tugging her away to let Ilya manage things. When had he gotten old enough to do that for himself?

+1

When Irina pulled up to the pick up area at the high school, she was surprised to see just her son waiting. Something about him seemed dimmed, his posture more hunched with one of his

hands deep in his pockets. He was leaning against the wall, headphones in and attention focused on his iPod. She had to wait a moment for him to see her.

“Where are Shane and Sveta?” Irina asked, as Ilya closed the passenger door and buckled, iPod and headphones tucked away.

“Detention.” Ilya seemed to sink into his chair.

“Shane Hollander and Svetlana Vetrova are in detention?” Irina might have better believed it if Ilya had said his friends were on the moon.

“Yeah, so you don’t need to wait for them. I think Yuna is picking them up later,” Ilya shrugged, as if it didn’t matter.

Irina felt a little sorry on Shane and Sveta’s behalf for what was sure to be a lecture of a lifetime. She began to pull away from the school. “Ilya, why are Shane and Sveta in detention?” And why aren’t you with them, she definitely would not ask, but it felt so wrong to see him without them.

“They got into a fight.” Ilya’s hands were now both stuffed in his pockets.

“With another student, I assume?” Irina asked. “Or a teacher?” Irina could believe either arguing with someone, but not that such an argument would escalate to the type of fight that led to detention.

“A few students, yes,” Ilya mumbled.

Irina could feel her own irritation growing as Ilya dodged giving a full explanation. She swallowed it down, not wanting Ilya to know. “Ilyusha, please tell me what happened. No more guessing games.”

Ilya was quiet for several minutes and Irina focused on driving and calming herself.

“Some assholes in our grade started shit,” Ilya said, voice so uncharacteristically quiet that Irina could barely catch it over the sounds of the car and traffic. “Shit with me, specifically. Called me a faggot, got really nasty with it. I did what we talked about and didn’t rise to the bait, just tried to ignore them. But it turned out they trashed my locker, so Shane and Sveta saw that and heard what they were saying and...” Irina caught a twitch of a smile, before Ilya’s expression grew distant again. “Shane punched one of them and Sveta kicked another. The third had run off to tattle I guess.” Ilya took a deep breath. “And now Shane and Sveta have detention.”

Quiet settled over the car as Irina tried to process all of this. It felt like there was a fire in her throat and ice was running down her spine. She had half a mind to turn around, demand to know exactly who those assholes were, and pick a fight with teenagers. But under all that was knowing exactly how it must have felt for her boy - the slurs, the hate.

She couldn’t do this while driving, so she pulled off the road, parked the car, and turned in her seat. “This is... new, right?” Irina said. “This harassment?” Surely he would have told her

if it had happened before.

Ilya nodded, pulling his hands out of his pockets. He held them up, showing his nails. They were painted a deep, sparkling blue. "Sveta did them last night, after Shane did hers. I guess some assholes took offense."

Ilya and Shane had slept over at Svetlana's the previous night, under the excuse of helping each other finish the chemistry papers they all had due. Irina has assumed the three of them would get up to some silly, sleepover fun in addition to study. She never worried about them getting into any sort of trouble - Ilya might have in another life, but Shane wouldn't and Sveta never would on a school night.

In this life though, apparently Ilya decided to have his nails painted. Not as a prank or a dare, but simply because he'd wanted to and Sveta had offered. It made her ache that she couldn't shield Ilya from all of it - that the world still had such cruelty.

"It's a really lovely color," Irina said, taking one of his hands to examine it. "She did a really good job too."

Ilya smiled, a small one but welcome. "You should see how well Shane did Sveta's. And he'd never done it before!"

Irina chuckled. "He has to be good at everything."

"Which would be annoying, if he wasn't already good at everything." Ilya then grinned a little wickedly. "Except maybe chemistry homework."

"Now when you punched a classmate, you got suspended." Irina was too curious not to ask. "How did Shane and Sveta get away with detention?"

Ilya huffed the type of dramatic sigh only a teenager could. "Because the assholes didn't want to admit what happened! That a girl and the quiet Asian guy could demolish them in one hit each." Ilya made a punching motion that seemed aimed at an imaginary stomach, and then lifted his knee so that Irina was pretty sure he was miming kicking someone in the crotch. "So the principal knows something happened but has no witnesses willing to come forward."

"Were they some other jocks?" To try to bully Ilya and face down Shane, they'd have to be.

"One was, yes," Ilya rolled his eyes. "Long left hockey, does football instead now. The other two are just idiots."

Irina hummed. "I'm sorry, Ilyusha."

Ilya shrugged. "I'm okay."

Irina ran a hand through his curls and he let her. "I know you are strong. But I also know it hurts."

"I'll survive," Ilya said, like a promise.

“We both will.” Irina could only promise back, running a knuckle over his cheek. They sit for a moment, looking at each other and it has been a while since Irina felt so close to her son. “Would pizza for dinner help this?”

Ilya’s smile was back and he pulled away from her. “I can call so I can get all the best toppings.”

Irina starts the car moving again. “How about you get two pizzas so your nasty choices don’t touch my and Steph’s beautiful garden pizza.”

Ilya was laughing again, digging out the cellphone that Irina keeps in her purse. His melancholy shed so quickly. “Okay, Mama. You just can’t see my vision.”

Irina can’t help but laugh as well. “Oh, Ilyusha, I love you. And I’m very glad you’ve got some friends who love you too.” Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a blush on Ilya’s cheeks.

“Me too.”

A few years later, when Irina watched Ilya drop his gloves for the first time as an NHL player, she sighed. A mix of annoyance and fondness filled her chest.

She texted him later: what did he say?

Ilya’s response was prompt: nothing i’d repeat to my mother

Steph leaned over in bed to read this over her shoulder, before huffing a laugh.

Irina shook her head. That was their Ilya. She got to the important part next: also very fancy goals. the one in the second period was especially good. proud of you ❤️

Ilya: thank you, mama

Irina looked up the name of the player Ilya fought, and any he fought after, keeping a list. She shared it with Yuna, who she knew would use it to warn Shane and as part of her own hockey tracking. Irina had long learned to not just trust her son, but trust his anger. It was there but it didn’t rule him. And sometimes anger, leveraged right, could make the world a bit better.

End Notes

my tumblr is bisexuallegolas - i'll try to update on fic progress there when needed!

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