

Chapter 17 -

Germany was treating the Toivonens as well as it could. Negotiations with the league and the players were on hold for a while, so Blake could focus on his son playing in Eurobasket with Finland. It was a welcomed change for the older reindeer, as he saw just how much responsibility Erik took on for the team and how he was able to deliver on many occasions. But the labour bared little fruit in the end.

Finland made it out of Group A in second place and faced France in the Quarterfinals. It was a hard fought match as Erik recorded 22 points and 12 rebounds, towering over the French forwards to score vital points in a 68-66 win for the Finnish, which sent them to the semis facing Spain.

It would prove to be very tough for Finland. Spain and Finland exchanged many fouls between each other, producing a very ugly game with little finesse. On several occasions, Erik was knocked over with no call made, making the reindeer and his team mates furious at the refereeing. Boos echoed through the 2,000-seat arena in suburban Frankfurt. Spain won the game 58-53 and moved on to the Final to face the winner of the Lithuania/Germany match.

Defeated, the Finnish team went to the locker room quietly after post-game awards. Erik sunk his head in agony. Blake watched from the stands in depression. He had not imagined a European game to be this ugly at a youth level. He just hoped the other semi final would be at least decent.

The older reindeer made his way down to the Finnish locker room, waiting at the door before he paused. There was shouting from several players, including Erik. He could make out that it was all about the refs, how they felt betrayed, how they could never be an international force because of where they're from. Blake knew the meaning of it perfectly well. He remembered coming into the EFBL as a second round pick to the London Jets. Fans were not happy with the decision to draft a Finnish player, thinking he may be bad since he was from a country where winter sports were dominant. Blake faced a long way through doubt and prejudice by the fans, but he would prove them wrong, winning two championships in the early 90s for the British team, even winning an MVP award after the first one.

Blake snapped out of his thoughts when the door opened and a tall, lean reindeer stepped out and threw his training jacket against the opposite wall.

"(We almost had them, if it wasn't for those stupid refs!)" Erik exclaimed, then jumped as he saw his father right nearby. "(Oh... hi dad.)"

"(Erik, listen.)" Blake sighed, not happy about seeing his son with such a distaste. "(I get it, there were a lot of dumb calls, made and not made. It was awful...)"

"(I just wanted to be in the Final. I needed this...)" Erik huffed as he picked up his jacket again. "(I wanted to show you that I can do this too...)"

"(Erik...)" Blake swallowed, standing up from his seat. "(Why are you putting yourself under so much pressure?)"

"(Because...)" Erik paused for a moment. He was the best player on the team and he just wanted to be noticed by the FBA, by the scouts of the world. His introverted personality caused him to bundle up all the emotions he had about himself and his passion, and now he needed to release the tension.

"(I just want to be recognized.)" he finally said.

"(But you are getting noticed.)" Blake explained to his son. "(Your coaches, your teammates, heck, the whole school is noticing just how much you're doing to get to the professional level. Have you read the school papers?)" he asked as he put his hands on Erik's shoulder, trying to reassure him.

"(Sometimes...)" the younger reindeer replied.

Blake took a deep breath and leaned in closer. "(What I mean to say is: You have a lot to look forward still. Just because you won't win a gold medal with this team doesn't mean you can't win something down the road. Don't pressure yourself to carry Bedrock through the FCAA. This is a team sport after all. You can get all the stats you want, but what matters is how you make a difference on a team. But you're perfectly aware of that, right?)"

Erik nodded, taking a deep breath as he listened to his father.

"(Good boy.)" Blake smirked. "(So just remember, elevate your team first and foremost. Scouts look at what you can do for a team rather than what you can do on your own. And from what they've told me already, they like what they're seeing. So just relax and keep doing what you're doing, ok?)"

Erik nodded again, as the message sunk into him quickly.

"(Good.)" the older reindeer smiled. "(Now get showered up and then I'll treat you to a good schnitzel or whatever you like.)" Blake patted his son on the shoulder who smirked.

"(Thanks dad.)" he said before giving his old man a small hug before returning to the locker room to rejoin his team. Blake, in the meantime, sat back down on his chair, and waited.

-

Bronze medal games felt like a waste of time. That was the word going around as the Finns prepared for their last game of the tournament against host Germany, who had their hearts broken on a last-second shot from Lithuania. The teams gathered onto the court to begin the game.

Blake watched on as the Finnish and German players got ready for the tip-off. The intensity wasn't as great. Both teams were slower and easy-going than usual. The older reindeer could notice that the agony of the previous defeat was still there.

With a sigh, Blake leaned back against his front row seat and went back to his phone, as Erik sat on the bench. Meanwhile, another figure took the seat to the reindeer's right. "Hello." Blake greeted him, without even looking.

"Mr. Toivonen?" the osprey in a plaid green shirt and jeans greeted the reindeer.

"Yes, that's me." Blake replied, blinking. He wasn't sure whether he knew an osprey in his life, but talking with strangers at a basketball game was nothing new to the middle-aged reindeer. "Do I know you?"

"Oh, how silly of me." the osprey said and reached out a hand. "Kyler Reeve, FBA scouting."

The reindeer nodded respectfully and grasped the bird's hand for a firm shake.

"Funny," Blake replied. "You're the first scout I actually met face-to-face."

"Did the others just call you? How ridiculous." Kyler replied, shaking his head.

"Well, I did make it clear that I didn't want Erik to enter the draft this year." Blake replied. "I'm sure that's been going around the office."

"That it has." Kyler nodded. "But many of us think he will be ready next year. He has shown tremendous progress in the FCAA, I think." the osprey leans over to the reindeer. "He could be a superstar almost immediately, don't you think?"

Blake paused as he watched Erik get put into the game and score on his first chance. "Yeah, but he has much to learn still."

"Of course." Kyler replied. "Any idea where he could end up?"

The reindeer shook his head. That's a question he never thought about answer. He could end up as far as Hawaii or as near as Montana or Winnipeg. But the fact was, no matter where Erik would end up, he'd be sure his son felt as well as he should.

"Do you have any other children, Blake?" Kyler asked. Blake snapped out his deep thought. "Oh, uhm, no. Erik is my only child."

"Ah, so you must be quite attached to him." the osprey nodded. The talk was interrupted as Erik slammed the ball through the rim to give Finland the lead midway through the second quarter, as the stands erupted in cheers. The reindeer clapped loudly, before retaining his composure and sitting back down.

"No need to answer." Kyler chuckled.

The last minute of the game fell upon, and Finland had a two-point lead. But Germany had the ball. It was now or never to make a critical defensive play. The spectators were all standing, cheering for their home country wearing black. It got loud as the ball was free and the Germans prepared the attack.

The Rottweiler guard called the offense, waiting for his teammates until he got the screen and darted off into the crease to get a lay-up, but passed to his hawk teammate, who went for the lay-up. No good. The ball bounces off the rim and the Finns try all they can to grab the ball back, but to no avail. The Germans got the offensive rebound and get a refreshed shot clock. 36 seconds left.

The chants got louder from the Germans, but the Finns tried their best to remain steady as the German team prepared an alternate attack. The ball was passed around the arch until the Rottweiler went for it and passed into the crease towards the hawk again, who then went for a lay-up again. Erik was right in front of him and read the play well. With a great effort, he swatted the ball away from the hoop and grabbed it, holding it away from the hawk to kill the clock. But the hawk would not give up and reached for the ball, pushing at Erik, who remained steady. The ref blew the whistle on the hawk with 4 seconds left. Finland's ball.

Blake clapped enthusiastically at Erik's defensive awareness. Kyler sat beside him with an impressed look on his beak. The Finns passed the ball back into play, as the bench was on their feet. One last pass and the buzzer sounded. Finland had just won the bronze against the host country. The Finnish team swarmed the court and hugged every team member still on the court. The arena was now much quieter. The Germans failed to tie the game, which was greeted with shock and disappointment by the fans. But the Finns didn't care. Blake made his way down and hugged his son, who was high-fiving and hugging his entire team. This was indeed a great way to end a European trip.

Blake's vehicle stopped in front a familiar place. With a sigh of relief, the reindeer stepped out of his vehicle and walked towards the door. The street was lit well, and only a few windows were still bright. In front of him was a small townhouse, showing its age just a little bit, from the porch to the chipping paint. The reindeer stepped to the front of the door.

Inside, Koray was snoozing on his couch, a book spread across his chest. Life without Blake was boring for the cross fox, despite having shelves of books to read. The past few weeks have been filled with just books and preparation for school. There wasn't much else to do for him other than wait for a certain someone to come home.

The door bell rang, rattling the fox awake, as he clenched onto his book, frozen. It rang again. Koray jumped up from his couch and headed to the door where a tall and broad figure with antlers stood. It was Blake!

"Oh hey, Koray, I..." before Blake could react, Koray immediately embraced the reindeer, pressing up against him as if he hadn't seen him in years. Blake was frozen as he was

hugged tightly by his boyfriend, although the concept was still sinking in for him. He patted Koray on the back gently before Koray let go and nervously chuckled.

"Sorry, Blake... I should not have done that, but, I just... I really missed you, that's all." Koray admitted with a blush, rubbing his elbow through his shirt. Blake smirked and shrugged towards the smaller fox.

"It's alright, Koray. I... I missed you too." Blake grinned. "While I love to be with Erik, it's just not the same without a special someone."

Koray lit up a little, as Blake's words were genuine and kind, and just what he wanted to hear. "Well, Mr. Toivonen, I hope you have quite a story to tell, because I want to hear it." he smiled. "Why don't you come in and have some tea? I promise I won't hold you hostage for long." the cross fox teased.

Blake was a bit unsure. Erik was asleep already, but at least he didn't know about all this, so it gave him an excuse. "Sure, I'll stay for a bit. But I need to head home after this."

"Of course, of course." Koray nodded and shut the door behind him after the reindeer entered and made himself at home. The two would share their experiences with European things, from literature to movies to cuisine, like they did on their first date. But as Blake told about Erik and the tournament, Koray lit up a little bit from pride. He was happy that the young reindeer was doing so well in his sport and that his dream was closer to reality thanks to what he has done for his team. Blake noticed just how invested Koray was for his son, making him glad that he knew he had a great teacher in Mr. Demir.

All in all, Blake felt good to be home once more.