

Chapter 11 - First point

Game day for Bedrock. First game of the season and Western Michigan was coming to Minnesota. Erik was nervous. He didn't know what to expect. This was his first game on North American soil after all. The reindeer was nervous, but he knew he could make a great impact, as long as he kept his head in the game.

The reindeer wandered around the hallways of the university, watching as other students passed by him. He walked up to the entrance hall, taking a seat at a bench nearby. As he looked outside, he could see some snow falling, along with the flashing colours of the announcement sign, advertising the game tonight. The building was clearing quickly, as students were heading home by either bus or car, while some stayed behind to study. Erik's game was in three hours, and heading home before the game seemed rather silly.

"Erik! Hey!" a female voice entered Erik's ear, making him turn to see who it was coming from. Yvonne, the mule doe walked up to her big teammate, already wearing her blizzard blue jersey with the number 4. The reindeer adjusted his sweater as he stood up.

"Hello Yvonne, how are you?" the reindeer asked, seeing the joyful expression on the doe.

"Oh, I'm terrific. Can't wait for the first game of the season! It's gonna be awesome, don'tcha think?" Yvonne said, looking up to the reindeer who simply nodded. "I think so." he said lowly, a hint of uncertainty in his tone. The mule doe's smile vanished to a concerned expression.

"Is something wrong, Erik?" the mule doe asked her teammate. She signalled him to sit down on the bench they were at. The two sat down and Erik took a deep breath to collect his thoughts.

"It's just... well... it's my first game here. I don't know how different it is here, so I feel nervous."

Erik ranted as Yvonne looked on, nodding as she listened. Erik continued "I have only played in Europe so far and being here to play basketball is something I'm excited and nervous about..."

The mule doe nodded again "I can imagine. I mean, you just got here and now you're playing with our team on a national college level. You told me that you're an international player even and how you're always striving to be at your best. I would be nervous too about something I haven't done before."

Erik nodded, silent for a moment. Yvonne scooted closer to him and put a hand on his shoulder. Her touch signalled him to look towards her.

"But here's the thing, Erik. We may be the oddest bunch out there, but we have heart and we keep going, no matter what happens. And yes, we've had quite a few shitty years here, but

there is always new hope for every start of the season. Who knows? Maybe we'll go to the big tournament this time." she smiles, making Erik chuckle a bit. She giggles and playfully fist bumps his shoulder.

"There we go, laugh it all off, Erik. Make funny faces!" she giggled and stuck her tongue out and tilting her head sideways. Erik watched on and gave a light chuckle before returning with a silly face himself, sticking his tongue out to the side and crossing his eyes. A joyful laughter escaped from Yvonne as the two felt their nervous energy fade for at least this moment.

"Haha, oh Erik, you're quite good at making silly faces." the mule doe complimented the reindeer, who shrugged with a smile. "It's how I cheered up my younger cousins," he replied.

"Great to hear." Yvonne chuckled, rubbing her stomach as it growled. "I'm actually kinda hungry right now. Did you want to eat anything before we get warmed up?"

"Sure, uh, where do you want to eat?" Erik asked as the two got up, pulling their backpacks over their shoulders. Yvonne started walking towards the exit while Erik followed.

"There's a sandwich place a block away we can go to." the mule doe smiled, holding the door for the reindeer open. The two proceeded to acquire a pre-game meal.

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The seats of the gym were filling up slowly as the players warmed up on the court below. Bedrock's basketball program didn't give the fans much to cheer about the last few years, so it was to no surprise that only a few seats were taken as the warm-ups rolled around. Coach McDougald drew out his final line-up as the players took more shots, with drills lead by Mallee, the assistant to McDougald.

The buzzer sounded and the teams made their way back into the locker rooms. The Bedrock players sat down on their respective places, all wearing charcoal-coloured training outfits. Erik sat on the left side, between Yvonne and Omar Richards, a grizzly bear in his sophomore year, and one of Erik's competitors for the 5 position. The reindeer looked around the room to see his teammates, some loosening their leg muscles, while others were just emotionless, not wanting to be seen as nervous. Erik always had a hard time hiding his nervous energy, as he closed his eyes and lowered his head.

A moment later, the head coach came in through the door. The players looked up to him as he prepared his pre-game speech.

"Ok, folks, I know this is not new territory for some of you, but I know the lot of you can win this thing." he began as he looked sternly towards his players. Erik took a deep breath.

"It's Western Michigan, we know that much. But they're capable of being an offensive force, so we gotta be firm on defence. Only force necessary fouls and keep the three-point plays to a minimum. We don't need the dumb kind. Six of 'em and you're out. Should have that drilled in your heads by now." the groundhog kept his loud and firm speech going.

"Ok, starting line-up! On one, Roxy!" As the coach announced the names, the team clapped once. Erik was a bit thrown off, but then got ready for the next name to be called.

"On two, Zack!" the team clapped twice. "On three, Olivia!" the black bear grinned as her name was called. "On four, Emmanuel! And on five, Omar! You five all get the crowd into this. They need a damn awakening, now let's go!" the groundhog exclaimed and the players got up, clapping and chanting. Erik felt disappointed that his name wasn't called, but with a sigh, he shrugged it off. This was his first game after all. Maybe his coach was just letting him observe the game for a while before he got out there and got used to what it's like to play in America. The reindeer followed the others out and back onto the court as the announcer got ready to call the starting line-ups.

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The buzzer sounded as the first quarter came to an end. Western Michigan was pulling ahead and finished the quarter with a 21-13 lead over Bedrock. Omar Richards really seemed off his game at center, much to the concern of the coaches and even Erik. His opposite, a 7'4" tall polar bear, is giving him a hard time in the crease and pretty much dominated him all quarter. With a sunken head, the grizzly returned to the bench to a grouchy coach.

"Omar, you're getting nailed out there, gotta keep your composure." the groundhog tries to encourage his grizzly center, but with a sigh, he just shrugs it off. "It's the same damn thing every year. Getting rocked in the first game," Omar huffs.

The groundhog shook his head and took a deep breath, thinking long and hard. Meanwhile, Erik was sitting on the bench, observing everything around him. The bleachers were half-filled, but no one seemed to want to cheer on a team that was in need of a boost, and the players were experiencing deja-vu all over again with the way this game has gone so far, and there seemed to be no sign of his father watching.

With a sigh, the reindeer took a drink, when suddenly, his coach spoke to him. "You're in, Erik."

Erik's ears perked. "I'm in?" he double-checked. "Yes, you're in, now get your suit off," McDougald snarled a little, unable to hold some of the tension that was building inside him. With a quick jump off his seat, the reindeer took off his jacket and pants, then re-tied his shoes, before standing up in his blizzard blue uniform, the number 81 flashing on his back below his name. The reindeer joined the others, seeing Yvonne standing with the other three, replacing Zack.

After a few quick instructions by the coach, the players made their way back onto the court. Erik jogged over to inside the arch as Yvonne got ready to pass the ball into play. With a quick throw over to Roxy, the second quarter began. Erik began to move around as instructed, trying to shake off his polar bear opponent. Roxy passed over to Yvonne, then over to Olivia, the black bear. She saw Erik on the near side of the arc and passed it to the reindeer. First ball contact for him.

Erik took a deep breath before dribbling around, the polar bear with the number 4 right in front of him, arms spread wide. The reindeer dribbled the ball around, then watched Yvonne sprint up to the basket. Erik reacted quickly and bounced the ball underneath the bear's arms into the mule doe's hands, who took it up to the basket with a quick lay-up. No good. Western Michigan took the ball back.

With a snort, Erik sprinted back to his own end, awaiting his defensive opponent. He saw the polar bear quickly getting the ball with his big paws and dribbling up to Bedrock's basket. But Erik wasn't having any of it. The polar bear jumped to dunk the ball, but in a risky effort, Erik reached, using his vertical leap to stop the ball in its tracks and bounce it right into Roxy's paws. The small crowd inside the arena became loud, having witnessed a rare block from a player of their school.

Immediately following, Roxy takes the ball in herself before handing it over to Emmanuel, who completes the score and Western Michigan's lead was trimmed by two points.

As soon as Erik was substituted in, it became a wild affair. Both teams exchanged scores in a tense game that saw both teams foul out one player each. The crowd enjoyed this game greatly, seeing how and with Roxy leading the charge and Erik giving it his best shot, Bedrock was close to winning their first game of the season in nearly 5 years.

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With 20 seconds left in the fourth, it was 76-75 for Western Michigan, but Bedrock had the ball and had the chance to gain the lead back. On the court for Bedrock were Roxy, Zack, Olivia, Emmanuel and Erik. As Olivia handed the ball to Roxy, the clock started ticking again, shot clock turned off.

The bobcat handled the ball, looking for space to go through. She handed it off to Zack, who dribbled it to the far left side, handing it over to Olivia. 15 seconds left. The black bear looked for an open man to pass to, and finds Erik inside the arc. The reindeer reached for the ball, grabbing it with two hands, before dribbling it. A bighorn forward was guarding him, as the reindeer had his back to him. With a sudden jab step, followed up by a drive, Erik caught the bighorn off guard. 8 seconds left.

Erik turned and sprinted into the paint towards the bucket. The polar bear jumped straight up, paw up as Erik jumped high and over the polar bear, reaching over the big white bear and slamming the ball into the basket. A whistle blew. Erik landed back on his feet, wondering if he had fouled.

The badger referee called the foul on the polar bear. The score was good. With 2.1 seconds left, the reindeer had a chance for a three-point play. The crowd got loud once more.

Teammates high-fived and congratulated Erik with great enthusiasm. They couldn't believe they were just about to win their opening game. Erik returned the high fives with a smile, standing at the free throw line to complete the play. The referee bounced the ball towards the reindeer, who wound up for the shot. The ball bounced off the glass and into the bucket, giving Bedrock a 78-76 lead.

Western Michigan resumed the play quickly after. Bedrock was on high alert, defending on a full-court press. The ball was passed into play, seconds ticking away. With a last-second effort, the bighorn throws the ball at the basket from his own half. It bounces off the glass and back to the hardwood. The buzzer sounded.

The Bedrock bench jumped for joy as they flooded the floor to hug their new darling. Erik pumped his fist victoriously before he was swarmed by his teammates. The reindeer had just given them a victory and they were celebrating rightfully so. Soon, the group hug was broken up and the team lined up for post-game handshakes. Erik saw a few displeased faces from the opponent, but the reindeer remained neutral and shook their hands firmly.

The teams then made their way back to the locker rooms, clearing up the court. Erik just followed behind them. As the reindeer entered the locker room, a round of applause erupted from his teammates. With a chuckle, he waved back at them to take a seat and a drink. Coach McDougald soon entered with his assistant, holding a clipboard. He then began to address the team.

"Nice job out there, folks. We got that win just like we should," he said with a grin. "Though one thing is clear. This would not have been possible, if for that Finnish son of a gun, who made that three-point play near the buzzer," he scanned his clipboard as some players clapped and shouted for Erik, who tried his best to stay humble. "16 points! 11 rebounds! 2 assists! 3 blocks! Player of the game!" the groundhog clapped as the cheering got louder for the reindeer.

"Thank you, thank you," Erik raised a hand as he got up and tried to address his teammates, who kept cheering for a moment before stopping. "But I do want to say that you all did a great job as well. We have many things we need to get better at, but this is a good start. Let's keep this up, ok?" he concluded his speech as more cheers echoed the locker room.

"Couldn't have said it better," McDougald grinned. "Now grab a drink then go back out there to cool down. Then hit the showers, alright?"

The team responded and the commotion resumed. Erik took off his shoes and just walked out of the locker room and back onto the court with socks on. He soon began to jog when he looked around the arena. It was nearly empty, as parents and friends stuck around to wait for their sons and daughters to get ready to head home. With a sigh, Erik just kept going onwards, wondering where his father could be.

"Erik!" a very familiar male voice rung in Erik's ears and as he looked up, a smile came across his face. His father stood at the courtside, wearing a trench coat with dark jeans, spreading his arms to embrace his son. The younger reindeer jogged right into his father and the two exchanged a firm hug.

"Hyvä peli, poikani!" (Great game, my son!) Blake exclaimed, padding his son on the shoulder proudly.

"Hehe, kiitos," Erik grinned as he watched his teammates pass by him, then turned back to his dad. "(Where were you though? I didn't see you anywhere during the game.)"

"(I'm sorry, Erik, but one of my clients' phone calls took longer than expected, so I got here as soon as the second quarter started. I didn't mean to be late for your first game.)" the older reindeer sighed, feeling guilty for not having seen the entire game. "(Forgive me.)"

"(No worries, dad. I didn't play until the second so you got to see my whole performance.)" Erik grinned, giving Blake a reason to chuckle.

"(Well, then I saw what you did out there, Erik. You were terrific. Way to give that polar bear a hard time,)" Blake smiled, watching Erik respond with a chuckle.

"(Yeah, but he was big, so he was a challenge.)" Erik replied.

"(Well, you did a great job guarding him and going up against him,)" Blake responded.

"(Anyway, I better let you cool down. I'll be at the door waiting, then you can tell me more about the game.)"

Erik nodded and felt Blake pad his shoulder once more. "(Ok, see you soon, dad.)" the young reindeer went on to continue his light job around the court.

"(See you.)" Blake responded, watching his son take off once more. Blake's job has gotten really stressful the last few months and seeing how Christmas was approaching, things were not slowing down for the Toivonens. The older reindeer made his way up the stairs, turning once more at the top, watching as Erik was congratulated by his teammates, hugged and

padded on the shoulder. Blake could only approve of what he was seeing. Erik was going to be a huge impact for Bedrock's basketball team and that's great news all around.