

Practice Makes Perfect

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Practice Makes Perfect

by [AutumnFoxed](#)

Summary

Shane delivered the Russian greeting flawlessly. “*Zhenit'sya.*”

The music from a nearby speaker suddenly felt obnoxiously loud in the abrupt silence that followed.

“Hollander,” Tanner said slowly, “did you just... propose to Rozanov?”

Shane decides to learn Russian for completely normal reasons, such as pride, spite, and being deeply in love with his boyfriend. Ilya agrees to teach him as a joke.

This goes about as well as you'd expect.

Notes

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

Shane was patrolling the blue-lit halls for his charger when a sound stopped him in his tracks.

It was Ilya's voice, drifting from a cracked door.

Through the doorway, he saw Ilya draped over a massage table, phone to his ear. He was speaking Russian. Shane didn't understand a single word, but he understood the music of it.

Clearly to whatever poor soul was on the other end, Ilya groaned and switched to English for one clarifying second: "Oh my god, you're impossible." Then he was gone again, back into the melodic depths of Russian.

It struck Shane: *this* Ilya existed. He just only seemed to clock in for phone calls in his mother tongue. For Shane, he was always in English - a language that suddenly felt like a very high fence.

Shane abandoned his charger mission completely. In his kitchen, he plugged the phone in and opened his browser.

Russian for beginners, he typed.

He was greeted by the Cyrillic alphabet.

This is ridiculous, Shane told himself. He did not embark on heart-led quests to learn notoriously difficult languages just because his boyfriend had a nice laugh.

But what if you could understand it?

~

The next day in the locker room, Shane decided to approach the issue. "You ever think about teaching?"

Ilya's eyebrow did its usual ascent. "Teaching what? How to be too handsome for this league? I give masterclasses on Tuesdays."

"Russian," Shane said.

Ilya just laughed. "*You?* Would last two seconds in Moscow. Would say 'sorry' to a door that hit you."

"I could learn it," Shane insisted, feeling his competitive instincts stir from their nap.

Ilya's grin turned wicked. "Really? I give you one week. You will see alphabet and weep. Has letters that look like math. There is letter that is just a sound cat makes when it hacks up a hairball." He leaned in. "'Shhch'. See? Terrible."

That laugh lit a very familiar fuse in Shane's chest. Pride and spite, his oldest motivators, shook hands and got to work.

“Okay,” Shane said. “Teach me.”

Now Ilya actually blinked. “You are serious.”

“I learn systems,” Shane shrugged. “This is just a... noisy system.”

Ilya studied him. “Alright, Captain. But first, lesson one: Russian is not impressed by your wrist shot.” He poked Shane’s chest. “It does not care about your plus-minus rating.”

A determined smile tugged at Shane’s mouth. “Good thing I don’t quit.”

Ilya laughed again, shaking his head as if the whole idea was profoundly silly. *Vot eto da*, his expression seemed to say. *Well, would you look at that.*

~

Shane’s return to the hotel room felt less like a homecoming and more like a retreat into enemy territory. The door swung open and he was comprehensively assaulted by the sight of skin.

Ilya was on the floor, shirtless, performing push-ups. His muscles worked in a seamless rhythm that suggested this was no more difficult than breathing.

Shane jerked his gaze away. “You know most people use chairs. Or, I don’t know, the bed.”

Ilya didn’t pause. “Furniture is for the weak.”

“You’re doing push-ups on commercial-grade carpet.”

“Luxury adversity training,” Ilya corrected, finally pushing himself up to sit back on his heels. “Builds immunity to discomfort.”

Shane pivoted toward the kitchenette, only to be confronted by a new crisis. A pan sizzled merrily on the stove.

“Is that... are you cooking?” Shane asked, his voice tinged with disbelief.

“Da.”

“While doing shirtless push-ups.”

“Efficiency,” Ilya rose fluidly, walked to the stove, and casually flipped the contents of the pan. Without a care for spattering oil or for Shane’s crumbling sense of order.

Shane tried to build a soundproof wall in his mind against the sizzle of the pan, the off-key humming from Ilya, and the prickling feeling of being watched. Sure enough, when he glanced up, Ilya was leaning against the counter, watching him with a look of amusement.

They ate sitting on the bed.

Ilya watched him. “You know,” he said finally, “Thought you were making joke.”

“About what?”

“This.” Ilya waved a hand at the flashcards. “You looked at your calendar and wrote ‘Russian: 8 PM’.”

“Twenty focused minutes a day is proven to be effective for language acquisition.”

“*Bozhe moi*,” Ilya muttered, shaking his head.

Shane finished his meal, stacked his dishes with care, and squared up his flashcards. “So. When does the actual instruction begin?”

Ilya let a dangerous smile spread across his face. “Why wait? Lesson is now.”

Which is how, exactly ten minutes later, he found himself flat on his back on the bed with Ilya half on top of him, their legs tangled together in a way that seemed both accidental and inevitable.

“Comfortable?” Ilya asked.

“This is a lesson?” Shane managed.

“Da. First rule of Russian. You must... immerse.”

Ilya pressed his face into the crook of Shane’s shoulder with a contented sigh.

Shane cleared his throat, which felt oddly tight. “So. The lesson. Are we starting?”

“Mm,” Ilya said, his voice deliciously muffled by Shane’s shirt. “This is foundation.”

“Is it?”

“Russian is not just words in book. You must feel context.” He nuzzled a little. “Relaxation is first vocabulary word. *Rasslab'sya*.”

Shane was aware that Ilya did sometimes slip into Russian when he was overwhelmed, or tired, or... *intimate things*. Soft, rough-edged words Shane couldn’t decipher but whose meaning he could feel, like a physical touch.

“But. I also need the actual words. The grammar. The, you know, structure of the thing.”

Ilya lifted his head just enough to look at him with delight. “You do not trust your teacher? *Ya ochen' ranen*.”

“I trust you,” Shane said, too quickly. “I just - this is a complex language. I want to learn it. Properly.”

Ilya pushed himself up onto one elbow, hovering. “Alright. *Khorosho*. Captain Serious wants textbooks. We will do textbooks.” He patted Shane’s chest. “Sit up. Posture is important for pronunciation.”

They rearranged themselves into a semblance of a study session. Shane sat propped stiffly against the headboard, and Ilya settled cross-legged beside him, their knees touching.

“Teach me something useful,” Shane said, clasping his hands in his lap. “A good phrase.”

Ilya tapped his chin. “A useful phrase... da, da. I have the perfect one. A classic.”

He spoke slowly, enunciating each syllable with care. “*Tvoya mat' plokho razvodit koz.*”

Shane repeated it, his tongue tripping over the unfamiliar cluster of sounds. “*Tvoya... mat'... plokho...*” He tried again, slower, watching the shape of Ilya’s mouth, the way his lips formed the words. “*Tvoya mat' plokho razvodit koz.*”

Ilya’s smile was beatific. “*Ochen' khorosho!* Very good! You are natural.”

A flush of pride warmed Shane’s chest. “What does it mean?”

“Ah!” Ilya held up a finger. “The meaning is a reward. For tomorrow. If you remember it perfectly.” His smile was suspiciously sweet. “It is a... compliment. About someone’s skills.”

Satisfied, Shane finally let himself sink back into the pillow.

~

The next day, Shane found himself standing at the viewing glass overlooking the practice rink. He was only here because of Ilya.

On the ice, Ilya was a whirl of effortless motion, carving lazy circles and firing off chirps that made his teammates shake their heads.

And then it came back to him - the phrase.

Seized by a sudden, triumphant impulse, Shane called out, projecting the Russian phrase with what he knew was impeccable pronunciation.

“TVOYA MAT' PLOKHO RAZVODIT KOZ!”

From Ilya’s linemate, an explosive spray of water as he choked. “The hell did he just say?!”

Ilya, mid-stride, froze, his skates scraping to a halt. A soundless gasp escaping before the laughter hit - wheezing laughter that forced him to grab the boards for support.

“What?” Shane said, his voice suddenly small and cold in the vast arena. “What did I say?”

Ilya wiped his eyes with the back of his wrist. “You just told them that their mother... raises goats... very badly. Is a terrible insult. About farming. And motherhood.”

“I said that,” Shane repeated. “To the whole team.”

“Perfect pronunciation!” Ilya crowed, skating closer and pressing his grinning face near the glass. “I am so proud!”

Shane lifted his hands and pressed his palms flat against the cool glass, seriously considering whether he could will his entire body to phase through it and disappear into the Zamboni room forever.

~

That evening, Shane opened the notebook to a fresh page. “Ground rules. *Real* vocabulary. Practical phrases. No obscure insults. And absolutely,” he added, finally turning to level a stern look at Ilya, “no farm animal commentary.”

Ilya just grinned. “*Nichego ne obeshchayu*. I promise nothing.”

“Ilya.”

“*Ladno, ladno*,” Ilya conceded, still smiling. “You are no fun, but fine.” He slid off the bed, leaning his hip against the desk.

“Okay,” he began, his tone shifting into something that almost resembled a teacher’s. “We start simple. A greeting. *Zhenit'sya*.”

Shane repeated it carefully. “Zhe... nit’sya.” He frowned. “Did I stress the second syllable wrong?”

“Again,” Ilya instructed. “Like you are reading tax form.”

Shane tried again, monotone.

“No, no,” Ilya cut in, waving a hand. “Now like you are bored.”

Shane sighed and attempted a weary rendition.

“Better! Now,” Ilya’s eyes sparkled, “say it angry. Like you have just found a wet sock.”

“That doesn’t seem like a standard greeting,” Shane argued.

“Trust the process,” Ilya insisted. “Emotional range is key.”

Shane delivered the word clipped and sharp, as if it were a command.

Ilya’s grin was a masterpiece of mischief. “Excellent. Now,” he said, his voice dropping as he leaned even closer, “say it... sexy.”

Shane’s entire thought process evaporated.

“Shane?” Ilya prompted.

“What,” Shane said too quickly, then winced. “Sorry. The word. It’s gone. Again. The neutral version.”

Ilya’s gaze was smug. “You are overheating, Captain. Should we take a break?”

“I’m fine,” Shane lied.

They finally settled on a pronunciation Ilya deemed “passably Canadian.”

“Translation,” Shane demanded, pointing at the word with his pen. “Immediately.”

Ilya waved a dismissive hand. “It is harmless! A friendly thing. You can use it anytime, with anyone.”

Shane spent the rest of their session repeating it under his breath.

~

The post-practice locker room was full of shouted chirp. Ilya was two stalls down, shirtless and animatedly debating something with a teammate.

Shane saw his moment. Heart steady, posture relaxed, he walked past.

He delivered the greeting flawlessly, with the exact neutral, versatile tone he’d perfected. “*Zhenit'sya.*”

The effect was not subtle.

The music from a nearby speaker suddenly felt obnoxiously loud in the ringing silence that followed.

“Hollander,” Tanner said slowly, “did you just... propose to him?”

Shane stopped dead. “I... what?”

“Technically,” Ilya clarified, “you said, ‘Let’s get married.’ But the sentiment is the same. I am flattered.”

Shane felt a mortified flush burn from his collar to his hairline. “You said it was a harmless greeting! You said it was versatile!”

“It is!” Ilya insisted. “It is a very versatile proposal! My *babushka* would weep with joy at your sincerity!”

“I am *never*,” Shane stated, each word carved from glacial ice, “trusting a single sound that comes out of your mouth again.”

Ilya just blew a kiss across the room - a gesture that needed no translation.

~

The next evening, something clicked. On the bed, Ilya was a long line of muttered grievance, scrolling through his phone. The grumbles were in Russian; a running commentary Shane wasn’t meant to follow.

Except, suddenly, he was.

A chunk of it - a complaint about a referee's call from last week - drifted across the room, and Shane's brain flagged an error.

"You used the dative case there," Shane said, his eyes still on his notes. "It should be instrumental."

Ilya's scrolling stopped. "*Chto?*"

Shane glanced up, then second-guessed himself. "I mean... you were talking about the ref. But you said '*s glupym sud'yoy*' and it should be... *s glupym sud'yey*? I think." He winced. "Maybe."

Ilya was staring at him with shock. "I did not."

"You did," Shane insisted. "At least, that's what it sounded like. I could be wrong. The audio on that clip was probably bad."

Ilya squinted, replaying his own words in his head. His expression shifted from denial to suspicion to begrudging recalculation. He clicked his tongue. "...*Ladno*. Fine. Maybe."

Shane blinked. "Maybe?"

"Do not let this go to your head," Ilya warned. "Russian sneezes and the grammar changes. This was fluke."

"But I was right," Shane said, the realization dawning.

~

The flukes kept happening. They multiplied. It started in their room, then leaked out into the world. Shane began to catch the echoes of Ilya's inner monologue. The serrated tone of frustration after a missed shot. The icy irritation when a practice drill dragged on too long. The sighed-out phrases he'd murmur when exhausted, like touching a bruise.

That night, Ilya sat on the edge of his bed, looking at the floor. Shane stood by the now-closed notebook, his hands at his sides.

"You did not do that to show off," Ilya said finally.

"No," Shane answered softly.

"It wasn't a... a competition thing. To one-up me."

"No," Shane said, feeling the last of his own defenses settle. "I just want to understand the parts you don't translate. The you that comes out when you're too tired to filter, or too angry to care. Or when you're scared."

Something in Ilya's posture softened.

“English is...” Shane struggled, gesturing vaguely. “It’s like you’re choosing which doors to open. Russian is the whole house. I want... I want to be allowed in. All of it.”

Ilya closed the distance in three quiet steps, stopping so close that Shane could feel the warmth radiating from him, could see the tired lines at the corners of his eyes.

“*Ty opasen teper’*,” Ilya murmured, the Russian words almost reverent. “You are dangerous now.”

~

They ended up outside because Ilya declared that the sky was being wasted on the city, and Shane, despite the bite in the air that turned their breath into ghostly plumes, didn't put up a fight. Above, the stars were a vast dominance that made Shane feel peacefully insignificant.

“See that one?” Ilya pointed. “The so-called ‘Big Bear’. Is lie.”

Shane squinted at the familiar cluster. “It’s Ursa Major. It’s been a bear for, like, a thousand years.”

“A thousand years of error,” Ilya said gravely. “It is a clearly cooking pot.”

Shane’s laugh puffed into the dark. “So the entire field of astronomy is built on a mistaken kitchen utensil?”

“Yes. Finally, someone understands.”

They drifted into an easy back-and-forth, inventing their own sky. Shane connected a faint spray of stars and called it a broken hockey stick. Ilya traced a lopsided box and declared it the constellation of a man who has just been told the buffet is closed.

Slowly, the laughter faded.

“I had a nickname,” Ilya said finally. “When I was very small.”

Shane turned his head. “Yeah?”

Ilya nodded. “It’s... childish.”

“I won’t laugh,” Shane promised.

Ilya looked at him then, a searching glance in the starlight. Seemingly finding what he needed, he said it: “*Golosok*.”

“What does it mean?”

A shrug, shoulder nudging Shane’s. “Little voice. Impossible to shut up.” A smile touched his lips. “My mother used it. Usually when I was asking ‘why’ for the hundredth time.”

Warmth spread through Shane’s chest.

“There is a word,” Ilya started again, his eyes returning to the stars as if reading from their scattered dots. “We have it. English doesn’t.” He was quiet for a moment, then offered it up. “*Toska*... but not quite. It is... the ache for something while you are still holding it. Knowing it is temporary but loving it too much to pretend otherwise.”

Shane didn’t try to translate it.

“I cannot say it right in English,” Ilya admitted.

“You don’t have to,” Shane said. “I hear it.”

“One more,” Ilya whispered. “A phrase.”

He said it looking straight up, his voice so quiet it was almost stolen by the vastness.

“*Solnyshko moyo, ya zdes’*.”

“My mother,” Ilya added, even softer. “When I had bad dreams. Or when the world felt... too big.”

“What does it mean?” Shane asked.

Ilya turned his head. Their eyes met. “It means, ‘My little sun, I am right here.’ It means you are not alone. Even when the dark makes you feel like you are.”

For a long moment, they just existed under the wheeling map of their own making, the universe indifferent and magnificent above them.

“Thank you,” Shane said, the words inadequate and completely true.

Ilya’s smile was small. “*Pozhaluysta*.”

Shane leaned in and closed the last inch of cold night air. When they parted, they rested forehead to forehead.

Above them, the constellations shone on. Below them, Shane knew the names for everything that mattered.

End Notes

If you enjoyed this, a kudos or comment would be so lovely!

Also, while I have done my best with research, any and all Russian used in this fic comes with a 100% Money-Back Guarantee* that there are probably errors hiding in the grammatical shadows.

*Guarantee not valid anywhere, especially not in Moscow.

If you are a Russian speaker and spot something wildly inaccurate, please do feel free to kindly let me know!

► Russian used in the fic:

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