

Handle With Royal Care

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Handle With Royal Care

by [TheSolitaryDreamer](#)

Summary

Yuna Hollander, for whatever reason, and David Hollander, for reasons even more unclear, decide that Prince Shane Hollander needs a security officer.

Enter Ilya Rozanov - 20 years old, dropped unceremoniously into the painfully boring town of McGill. Confused by the town's dullness, the weight of its royals, and the absurdity of the role, Ilya still gets one thing absolutely right. He keeps a close watch on the prince.

Notes

I come from the Young Royals fandom, so yes - there is going to be a prince. That part is non-negotiable.

I could have described both their beauty in great detail, but honestly, I was lazy. No beta reading. All mistakes are entirely mine.

If there are additions over the next few days, please ignore me as I spiral deeper into this HR-induced madness.

I wrote this entire thing on my office laptop, which kept blanking out words at the worst possible moments. I did briefly consider whether I wanted to be fired over writing a cute fanfic.

Probably not. Not in this economy.

Also, will check the Russian part again. Something seems very off.

It looked like many tiny stars sprinkled carefully.
It was beautiful like a whole group of tiny black stars.

What was group of stars called ?
Con.. Cons..Constipation of stars?
Consolid-ation? Hmmm--

All he knew was that he wanted to launch a rocket and settle forever on the freckles on the prince's face. Maybe... maybe *his* rocket. He smiled to himself for getting that joke in his head. Then he immediately checked -- had he said that out loud, or was it safely internal?

Ok, inside head. good good.

He quickly gauged the reactions of the three people in front of him, keeping his expression perfectly neutral, despite the complete crash-down of monologue happening inside his head.

Ilya's English-speaking side of the brain needed some vodka in him and him inside the prince.

Oh god! This was his first day!

Ilya didn't know much about royals or the palaces they stayed in, but this definitely wasn't it. It was too white, too plain, and too boring, like their prince who was seated in front of him in a plain grey suit. Ilya was dressed in a sleeveless shirt, a jacket over it, and track pants.

Jesus! He was going to be fired.

But he didn't want to be. He was trying to win Yuna Hollander, Her Majesty, over and hoping his puppy eyes were working. He was embarrassed because Russians didn't do this.

He had joined the security forces only two years ago and was skeptical about a 20 year old providing security for a prince. But when he passed through the town of McGill, with a single Burger King and one Starbucks - which probably had problems getting oat or goat milk, whatever the kids were drinking these days, delivered - he instantly knew why his director had nudged him and told him he was the best fit for the job.

What exactly is happening in this town?
New York newspapers being stolen?
Do they even know about the existence of this town?

The job description had said the prince needed protection during brand sponsor trips. It had also mentioned helping with branding.

Ilya looked at the prince from top to bottom again. One can only do so much branding. Not miracles.

He was provided a stay-in arrangement with the prince at his "cottage," and Ilya only hoped it was at least colourful and did not have huge windows like this mansion, which served

exactly the opposite purpose of security.

Shane Hollander, the plain prince of McGill, looked at him very curiously, his eyes all over Ilya more than necessary. It was doing something inexplicable to him.

Everything is going very well, Ilya thought. The puppy eyes were working.

Then a frown appeared on Shane's face.

"How old are you?"

Ilya had some answers ready in his head.

Old enough to drink.

Old enough to wreck both men and women.

Old enough to do indecent stuff to you.

But he didn't say any of them.

"As old as you," Ilya said.

"And you are my security?" Shane asked.

Ilya thought Shane should have asked better questions - Can we sleep in the same bed? Do you like dogs? Are you a bottom or a top?

Instead, the prince turned the frown toward his mother.

"What danger is there in this country for me?"

"Every prince needs security," Yuna said. "But beyond that, we also need him to organise and manage your brand endorsements."

I can keep you very safe, Ilya thought. Extremely safe. Maybe I will carry you in my pocket.

"I hardly have any brand endorsements! It is like--" Shane looked up and counted with his finger. He looked like a child, and Ilya wanted to pat him. "Like 5 or 6." Ilya didn't blame the brands.

"Come on, Shane," Yuna said. "You can say it's only for a few weeks. And if it's not convenient, we'll ask Ilya to leave."

Shane murmured his name very silently. And somehow, Ilya had never heard his own name sound so beautiful. He wanted to hear the full version.

"Ilya Rozanov," he said.

But Shane did not repeat it again, which made Ilya a bit sad.

"And you are not from here," Shane added.

“From Russia,” Ilya said.

The frown returned to Shane’s eyebrows immediately and turned to his mother again.

“You brought him all the way from Russia?”

Now Ilya frowned. “Is that a problem?”

He saw Shane’s cheeks turn red. The constellation of freckles disappeared completely under the blush.

Ilya was very intrigued.

“No. No. No,” Shane said, much louder than necessary. “I mean...you travelled very far just for me. Your family can’t be very happy about this idea.”

“No, it’s all fine,” Ilya said.

He watched Shane search his face for more answers. Ilya didn’t have anything to give.

“I’m sorry,” Shane said quickly. “That came out wrong. I just wanted to know that you’re okay. And happy to be here.”

Ilya gave him a small, crooked smile.

“More than happy,” he said.

And for absolutely no reason, Shane blushed again from cheeks to his ears. It was so cute.

He was going to murder Ilya.

Yuna gave Ilya a lot of instructions. A lot.

Ilya nodded at everything without listening and he watched David, the boring Highness, was also nodding.

Ilya had read a lot about Shane and his family. People in the town of McGill had great respect for the royals. The prince was their only son, and the town actually had nothing interesting to talk about. Everything about the town was boring.

Ilya did not want to do this. He wanted to be in some top offices, like his friend Cliff Marlow in Boston. But when he saw the photos in the file - Shane awkwardly smiling through them - he said yes immediately.

It felt a bit idiotic now, leaving ambitions of a bigger team for this pretty little prince. But when he saw him frown and take notes with a face full of concentration, he felt like it was all worth it.

Wait. Shouldn't *he* be the one taking notes?

He searched his track pants for paper and found only a receipt from a dinner he had with Svetlana, his closest friend - with benefits, if one can add - probably from track pants that had at least gone through the washing machine twice.

Shane had three pens of different colours and a pencil lying next to him. So Ilya picked up the pencil, sat next to Shane, who didn't give any reaction, and copied Shane's notes.

But God, they were illegible.

Why had the prince written *cock*?! Is the prince really that horny listening to his -- --Wait? Is that - oh my God - *Rolex*? Didn't someone teach the prince to move his pencil when he was kid. Oh, how did prince look when he was kid?

Ilya noticed Shane had scribbled over much more words while he was day dreaming. He abandoned copying the prince, hoping Shane knew what he had written, and continued nodding.

Clearly, Shane didn't need security. The town didn't need a prince. But fate very clearly needed Ilya to meet Shane.

Ilya needed to move away from his high, eccentric life of parties, partners, sex, cigarettes, mistakes and then some more mistakes to a town that had... nothing. Quiet. Calm. Possibly sheeps.

Did McGill have sheep?

After the lectures and a stack of papers were handed to him - with the illegible notes of Shane, which Ilya had no plans to read - they started heading to the cottage, which according to the prince was only ten minutes away, in a secluded region.

If English served Ilya right, why did a secluded place need any security? Was the prince going to murder him?

Ilya flipped through the file quickly, searching for photos of Shane. For... professional reasons. Obviously. But he didn't find any. He had seen a picture of the baby prince on the way out, but stealing that would be a crime.

"Can we take a picture together?" Ilya asked.

Shane looked at him suspiciously. "Why?"

"Well, I'm your security," Ilya said seriously. "I need your photo. Just in case."

"Just in case of what?" Shane asked.

"Security purposes," Ilya replied.

Before Shane could argue, Ilya pulled out his phone, gently grabbed the back of Shane's neck, and clicked multiple photos very fast. Then his hand stayed there.

If Shane was angry, he didn't show it. He started walking briskly ahead, and Ilya chased after him.

Ilya said suddenly, "Do you know what a group of stars is called?"

"A constellation?" Shane said.

"Ah," Ilya smiled. "Your freckles look like a constellation. Very pretty."

Shane's freckles disappeared instantly under red.

Shane stood for a moment and let Ilya pass. Shane wanted to punch his face. Probably not. But he wanted to do many other things that were not on his list.

He watched Ilya trot down the stairs, almost jumping from step to step. He wore the tracksuits bit too low for his liking. The edge of the t shirt just touched the track suit. Little glimpses of his back was driving him crazy. Shane felt hot under his suit, which he had chosen very carefully when he heard he had a new male security. He had hoped for someone older, more discreet that what Ilya was doing with his eyes.

After few seconds, he felt that he could breathe.

Now, Ilya's ass was bouncing up and down.

Now, Shane could not breathe.

Ilya was a very, very beautiful man. Blue eyes. Curly hair that looked like Shane could get hopelessly tangled in it and never come out alive. He had put on a full performance for his mother, acting like he didn't need Ilya at all. This was a small town with a hideous idea of royalty. The royals did nothing. Even the so-called royal cottage was barely royal at all.

Shane was the perfect prince.

Perfect degree.

Perfect job.

Perfect at pretending to be useful by "managing" the town and mostly marketing the royal image.

The next step was supposed to be a perfect partner.

Instead, this Goldilocks angel with a crooked smile was about to ruin him in every possible way.

Shane suddenly wanted a cigarette, one that smelled like Ilya. And he didn't even smoke.

Ilya's fingers had stayed on Shane's neck a little longer than necessary earlier, and Shane had absolutely no complaints about that. The place still burned.

Ilya kept moving down the staircase, still trotting like this was the happiest job of his life, and Shane suddenly wanted - very badly - to slap his ass.

He grimaced at his thoughts and slapped himself mentally.

Can a prince be arrested by his own security for slapping said security's ass?
Is that technically possible?

Ilya could arrest him, of course.
He could even put handcuffs on him.
Punish him.

Shane frowned and grimaced again.

But he kept staring at Ilya's ass anyway.

It was probably the first time in the history of royalty that a prince was driving his own security detail.

The situation was absurd.

Ilya had shown up in an orange Porsche. Shane had stared at it for a full five seconds before flatly refusing to get in.

"What were you thinking?" Shane had asked.

Ilya, of course, thought it was perfectly reasonable.

Shane had suggested - very sensibly - that Ilya drive his car back to the cottage. But apparently, that wasn't "practical" enough for Ilya, whatever that meant.

In the end, Shane drove.

He didn't really mind. If he were honest, being in the passenger seat would have been worse. He wouldn't have known what to do with his hands, or his thoughts, or the fact that Ilya would be sitting far too close beside him. Driving gave him something to focus on.

Shane had removed his grey coat and folded it on the back seat. He had unbuttoned only the first two buttons of his white shirt. He felt very unprofessional.

But that sense of being unprofessional could be thrown out of the window, because Ilya's jacket was also tossed onto the back seat, and he was sitting there in a sleeveless T-shirt, his

muscles bulging through the fabric. Shane kept stealing side glances at him under the pretext of checking the mirror. There was nothing on the road. Not even a tumbleweed.

Ilya was very quiet.

Shane wasn't sure if that was just Ilya being Ilya - or if he was struggling with English. He made a mental note to get him a thesaurus.

Ilya seemed lost in thought, just as Shane was drifting into his own.

He wondered if Ilya's employer had told him that Shane was gay. It was a carefully guarded secret. There was nothing wrong with coming out - the town wouldn't have minded - but Shane avoided controversy when it came to brands.

He thought of his friend, Scott Hunter.

Scott had been a senior at the same university Shane attended and had come out of the closet fairly recently. Another royal. Openly gay. It hadn't caused outrage, exactly - but Scott had also stepped away from royal duties entirely and opened a gay pub instead. That had raised eyebrows.

Scott was an inspiration. Shane believed he would come out someday too.

Just not now. Right now, there was no reason to and he had no one to come out for.

Probably Ilya didn't know, Shane decided. Security had nothing to do with sexual orientation.

Then a quieter thought followed.

Is Ilya gay?

He dismissed it almost immediately.

Probably not. Probably straight.

"Are you hungry?" Ilya suddenly asked, and Shane saw him turn fully towards him.

"I could eat," Shane replied.

"Good," Ilya said, which confused Shane.

Ilya pointed at a roadside hot dog stand. "Shall we have a hot dog?"

"From the roadside?" Shane asked.

Ilya rolled his eyes. "Only for me. You eat in rich restaurants," he said.

"No, it's fine," Shane replied, parking the car next to the hot dog stand.

"Could you please --" Shane started, but Ilya had already jumped out of the car.

This was not any kind of security or brand endorsement. Maybe his mother wanted to arrange his marriage with a man. Maybe that's what this was. Shane was too alone, probably lonely, and his mother had sensed it. Probably Shane was finding someone for himself. It was true, though he would never admit it.

Shane, for God's sake, couldn't even fathom flirting with someone - let alone a man.

He let out a long sigh and walked towards the hot dog stand.

The hot dog seller looked at both of them, clearly confused about whether he was meeting a prince or not. It was the prince's car, but the prince was driving it, and the man not wearing anything remotely princely somehow looked more princely than him. The seller looked from Ilya to Shane, then back to Ilya again.

In the end, he decided there were no princes here at all and simply added every sauce Ilya wanted onto the hot dog. Ilya paid for both of them.

Was this their first lunch date?

How does an arranged marriage thing even go?

When he got back in, Ilya had a hot dog covered in more sauces than Shane had ever seen. Shane's hot dog was very plain.

"Do you not want sauce?" Ilya asked.

There was mayonnaise at the corner of Ilya's lips, and Shane wanted to lick it, but he averted his eyes.

"No. Sauces contain a lot of unhealthy fats and sugar," Shane said.

Ilya looked at him like he had just said McGill was Las Vegas.

"Once in a while is okay," Ilya said, licking the sauce again.

Shane felt even hotter in the car.

"Open your mouth," Ilya said.

"What?"

"Open. Ahhh," Ilya demonstrated, opening his own mouth.

Shane opened his mouth.

"More," Ilya said.

And to his shock, Shane obeyed.

Ilya pushed the hot dog into Shane's mouth. Shane took a slow bite while Ilya watched him.

"It fits," Ilya said casually.

Fucker!

Ilya's first assignment as security - or brand endorsement duty for Shane, a role he didn't fully understand yet - was escorting him to the children's hospital. He wasn't entirely sure why his presence was necessary, but he didn't mind. He loved children and that alone was reason enough.

He had dressed a little better than usual, for reasons known only to him. Shane, on the other hand, wore business casual - his words, earlier. Ilya thought Shane couldn't possibly have looked any cuter.

The hospital belonged to Doctor Ryan Price - a shy, bulky man with an unexpectedly gentle presence. Ilya felt both curious and quietly amused when he met him. Shane and doctor had been friends for years, and today Shane was there to read to children who were dealing with long-term illnesses.

Ilya felt a sudden ache in his chest. He thought of his niece back in Russia.

Before they arrived, Shane had given Ilya one very specific instruction: *Stay near the reception desk. For 81 minutes.*

"81 minutes? 8 and 1?"

Was Shane, a serial killer?

Ilya said 24 minutes instead, purely to irritate him and Shane had agreed.

Definitely a serial killer!

The hospital was very small. Ilya lingered at the reception desk, attempting - unsuccessfully - to flirt with the women there. It wasn't working, and that annoyed him more than it should have.

Eventually, he gave up and moved to a nearby sofa stacked with magazines.

He picked one up and froze.

Shane's face stared back at him. Ilya smiled before he could stop himself. Then he noticed the receptionist watching him, eyebrow raised. He immediately straightened his face, pretending intense interest in the article.

It was a hospital newsletter.

What kind of marketing is this? Ilya thought. *Shane's friends are just like him. Tch. Tch.*

Clearly, he was doing an excellent job managing Shane's brand.

Actually - he wasn't.

This whole thing had been arranged directly between Shane and Ryan. Ilya had nothing to do with it. But he liked thinking he did. He liked that Shane cared enough to be here.

This town didn't have much. The hospital had barely fifty beds. Small. Unheard of. Probably forgotten on most maps.

But Shane cared.

He was the prince this town needed.

His prince.

Wait.

What?

Ilya frowned at himself. English wasn't his first language but, that definitely came out wrong.

Obviously.

At minute 24, restless and painfully aware of the receptionist's eyes on him, Ilya started to move to check on Shane. He needed to see what was going on.

He told himself it was professional curiosity. Shane was, after all, a prized client. Of course he needed to check on him. He also wanted to see the children - though he knew that part would make him sad.

He walked past small rooms filled with children and nurses. One kid waved at him enthusiastically, and Ilya waved back with an equally big smile.

If all the kids are here, he thought, then where is Shane?

Probably standing somewhere awkward, unsure of how to handle them. Shane didn't have Ilya there and clearly needed him for this.

Ilya quickened his pace.

Laughter spilled out of the last room - high-pitched, unfiltered, joyful. He slowed as he reached the doorway. The door was slightly open, and Ilya could see through the gap.

Shane was kneeling on the floor, gently tickling a child who squealed with delight. Two others clung to him, hugging him tightly.

Ilya's throat tightened suddenly.

Bad ventilation, he told himself firmly.

Shane had discarded his light blue coat and was down to a plain white T-shirt. The children were tugging at it, stretching it mercilessly. Ilya had the inappropriate thought that he would

very much like to do the same - for entirely adult reasons.

Shane looked completely at ease like he belonged there. He was in his element, and Ilya felt very proud.

Another child toddled over with a book full of tiny kittens - absurdly fitting, Ilya thought, because they looked a bit like Shane himself. Shane reached into his small satchel and pulled out a pair of glasses, slipping them on.

Ilya's heart burst into bubbles.

Shane settled in and began to read aloud. One child perched behind him, peering over his shoulder at the pages. Another sat comfortably on his lap. A third stood close, arms wrapped around Shane's waist.

Shane read slowly, carefully and with lot of patience.

So slowly that Ilya realised - very seriously - that he would probably understand all of English if Shane taught him like this every night.

Maybe I should suggest that.

He stood there a moment longer, watching, breathing through the lump in his throat - letting himself feel it, just this once.

Without thinking, he pulled out his phone and took a few photos - fully aware that photography wasn't allowed. As always, he justified it silently: *security purposes*.

A few minutes later, Shane glanced up and caught sight of Ilya.

Shane frowned. He glared actually. *You weren't supposed to be here yet.*

Ilya winced internally.

He was feeling giddy - from the children, from Shane, from the way he handled them so naturally. He took one last look at the photos on his phone, then quietly turned away.

Ilya felt like he could actually grow wings, and fly away. He should probably take Shane with him with his glasses on.

Ilya enjoyed the cold water on his body. The water was very, very cold, but for a Russian, it didn't matter.

Shane's cottage wasn't really a cottage. It was a full mansion, with far too many windows - most of them always open. The place looked like it was made entirely of glass.

And no, Shane wasn't going to murder him.

But if Ilya had to stay much longer in this place, with Shane, he might slowly grow branches out of his arms and turn into a tree instead. From there, he would be forced to watch Shane's daily routine on repeat: waking up at 6:30 am in the morning, doing yoga with his butt in the air in a downward dog pose, drinking black coffee-no creamer-clicking away on his laptop with his glasses on, reading, then sleeping.

Even as a tree in this cottage, Ilya would probably die sooner just from watching Shane.

Earlier that morning, he had passed Shane in the living room while Shane was reading through his internet schedule, wearing those adorable glasses again. The light had hit his freckles just right, and Ilya's towel had nearly slipped right then and there. Shane had noticed Ilya walking past and heading toward the lake.

Ilya knew Shane wouldn't go off his schedule for anything. Ilya always woke up late, but Shane wouldn't even have his coffee until Ilya was awake, which annoyed Ilya deeply. Was Shane trying to make him wake up earlier? Was that a hint he was supposed to catch on to?

He didn't know.

He had suddenly felt something next to him in the water, and for a brief moment he was sure the transformation had begun, that he was finally turning into a tree.

But no. It was Shane.

Shane was swimming, moving close to him in the lake. Well. Could that still count as a tree?

Ilya wasn't great with geography, or politics, or anything like that- but he knew this lake was much bigger than the royal prince who was now swimming right next to him.

"Where are your glasses?" Ilya asked.

Shane squinted at him.

Every cell in Ilya's body wanted to grab Shane and kiss him into complete oblivion. Push him onto the grass. Make him beg. Instead, Ilya felt himself getting hard and knew he needed to remove himself immediately.

"I'm going to my room," he said, climbing out of the water naked.

His ass was facing Shane. Then a strange sound echoed.

Ilya froze and turned his naked body toward Shane. "What the hell is that?"

"That's a loon," Shane said, laughing-then suddenly very aware of the very naked Ilya standing in front of him.

"A loon?" Ilya asked.

“Yes. A loon,” Shane said, his eyes very much not staying where they were supposed to. “It’s a bird. Like a duck.”

“Is *that* the loon?” Ilya asked.

“What?”

“My dear Highness,” Ilya said sweetly, “are you looking at the loon?”

Shane fought to tear his eyes away from Ilya.

“No--I mean--can you pass the towel?” Shane asked quickly.

“Into the water?” Ilya asked.

“Yes.”

“You know the water is clear,” Ilya said calmly.

“What?” Shane sputtered.

“I can see things from here,” Ilya said, pointing very deliberately at Shane - and then at his own cock.

Shane did something and Ilya thought he was drowning. Should Ilya go down and save Shane? When their cocks touch, will Shane have a heart attack, panic attack, and drown at the same time? Ilya evaluated his options while Shane was hitting the water so hard that ripples hit the lake bed.

Ilya thought Shane was the loon bird at the moment, in the way he flew from the water onto the lake shore, picked the towel, and flew into the door. Shane did his best. But he didn’t do it fast, because Ilya saw the pink cheeks, dimpled back, and a full erection.

Interesting.

Ilya had somehow crept into all of Shane’s routines, slowly and casually. Shane had started agreeing to things he normally wouldn’t, and that irritated him more than he wanted to admit.

Ilya called it *live a little, Shane*. Shane thought he already lived plenty and was very fun, thank you very much.

Movie nights were one of those invasions.

At first, it had been once a week. Then weekends. And now there was no routine at all-it depended entirely on mood. Shane claimed he didn’t like movies, but the truth was simpler.

He didn’t know many of them.

Shane liked familiarity. He watched the same movie ten times. He read spoilers before starting anything new, liked knowing exactly what was going to happen and when. Surprises were overrated.

Sometimes they watched *Pride and Prejudice* again. At least ten times.

As much as Shane was afraid of it, Ilya never once said it was too much. He never complained. He never suggested watching something else. He watched it every time with the same attention, sitting quietly beside Shane, as if it were the first time.

“You have bewitched me, body and soul, and I love- I love- I love you. I never wish to be parted from you from this day on.”

Ilya said the lines to all the plants in the cottage more loudly than necessary.

He made sure to repeat them whenever Shane was nearby, because Shane had once mentioned very casually, that talking to plants helped them grow faster and healthier. Shane made a deliberate decision not to read too much into that.

But tonight, Shane was angry for a much simpler reason. They could never agree on what to watch.

Romantic was too romantic. Thriller was too thrilling. Action was too much action. Everything Shane suggested was dismissed within minutes.

At one point, Shane briefly considered suggesting porn. Probably gay.

He immediately abandoned the idea because he knew Ilya would agree to it. And then what?

Eventually, Shane gave up.

He handed over the remote, surrendered his spot on the sofa, and retreated to the bedroom with a book. From there, he could still hear Ilya in the living room.

Channel after channel. Voices changing. Music switching. Nothing sticking.

Shane made a mental note: either move the TV into the bedroom or buy a second one. Possibly both.

Fifteen... maybe twenty minutes passed.

Then Shane noticed something strange.

The sound hadn't changed.

The same voices.

The same music.

How, exactly, had Ilya managed to settle on a single show without Shane?

Suspicious, Shane left the bedroom and walked back into the living room.

He stopped short.

Ilya was watching Mickey Mouse.

The cartoon.

Actual Mickey Mouse.

He was laughing, really laughing. Head thrown back, shoulders shaking, completely unguarded.

“You are a child,” Shane said flatly.

“This is so funny,” Ilya replied, without even looking at him.

“It’s a cartoon for children,” Shane said.

Ilya ignored him.

He reached into the packet, pulled out five gummy bears, popped them into his mouth, and laughed even harder.

Shane just stood there and stared.

This was the same man who looked stern and intimidating in public. The disciplined, controlled, serious who barely smiled in front of anyone else.

And here he was—feet tucked up on the sofa with mixed colour socks (one was sure Shane’s), gummy bears in hand, losing his mind over Mickey Mouse.

Shane felt his anger dissolve despite himself. He crossed his arms, still pretending to be annoyed. But inside, something softened.

It was too much. And somehow, impossibly, Shane realised he liked this part of Ilya. Shane settled next to Ilya and watched him smile and laugh.

Where was the remote control? Shane wondered, patting the cushions and looking around the sofa, turning his body in full circles.

Then he saw it, tucked into Ilya’s pants.

Was it over there?

Yes. It was definitely over there.

“What happened?” Ilya asked, glancing at him.

“Just wanted the remote,” Shane said, far too casually.

Ilya reached down, plucked the remote out of his pants, and handed it to him without a second thought.

Shane grabbed it much faster than necessary. Okay. Why did he even want the remote?

He stared at the screen, panicked, then increased the volume by exactly one point. Ilya raised an eyebrow at him, chewing gummy bears with his mouth full.

Shane placed the remote carefully on the small table and very deliberately did not look at Ilya.

When Ilya turned back to the television, Shane glanced down at his own palm. Slowly, he lifted his hand to his nose and tried to smell it.

“What are you doing?” Ilya asked, and Shane’s panic button hit maximum.

“Nothing,” Shane replied. He immediately scratched his nose, rubbed just under it, and then had no idea what to do with his hands. He watched the show intensely-Pluto and Mickey playing on the screen.

Get yourself together, you horny bastard.

Ilya was sitting at the kitchen table in the living room, actually working. There were strange biscuits on the side - the kind that didn’t look like food he usually ate. Shane had told him they had a lot of protein and were unsweetened. Ilya still couldn’t believe he was eating them. He was also eating a lot of healthier things in general. Yesterday, he had even downloaded an app to count his calories.

Damn. Ilya was becoming uncooler. Shit.

He had a lot of Shane’s notebooks spread out in front of him, all filled with straight lines and notes written in different coloured pens. Ilya had absolutely no idea what each colour meant, but it felt too late to ask now.

He was reorganising Shane’s appointment list- something Shane had already laid out neatly with timings and notes. The problem wasn’t the schedule. It wasn’t the people. It wasn’t even the workload.

It was Shane’s handwriting.

Ilya squinted at the notebook, trying to decipher whether Shane was meeting *Mars* or *Mrs.* something. At one point, he genuinely couldn’t tell if an appointment was with a brand manager or Shane’s parents. Who writes an appointment with parents in a book? Right? Right? Still, he tried. He adjusted timings, made sense of overlaps, and did his best to understand how Shane’s week worked.

Just as he was beginning to feel oddly proud of himself, he heard Shane's voice outside, near the cottage door.

French.

That alone told Ilya everything. Shane usually switched to French when he didn't want Ilya to understand the conversation.

Except this time, he had put it on loudspeaker.

Ilya stood up, notebook in hand, pretending to stretch and think, drifting casually closer to the door. Shane saw him but didn't react. If anything, Shane looked confident. He knew Ilya wouldn't understand a word.

Then a small feeling hit Ilya. Like a burn in his stomach. Must be the stupid protein biscuits.

What if Shane was talking to another guy? Someone rich. Another prince. Someone who spoke French fluently, had a lot of degrees, and fit perfectly into Shane's world.

Ilya pulled his chair closer to the glass door, sat down casually, and quietly opened the translator on his phone.

Ilya spoke to his own contacts in Russian all the time. He knew Shane might catch a word here and there, but come on, it was Russian. If Shane had ever been curious, he could have recorded Ilya and translated it. But Shane never did.

Ilya spoke to Svetlana sometimes and occasionally tried to make Shane jealous by talking loudly. Sometimes he said something in Russian and immediately translated it into English out of nowhere. Sometimes he picked up random calls, laughed, told someone to get on their knees, then ran into the room and waited to see if Shane followed.

He never did. Shane was decent. Trusting. Almost naïve.
Also very, very stupid.

Ilya, however, was neither ashamed nor naïve.
And very, very intelligent.

So he hid his phone and started recording.

The translation came through on the screen- clumsy, broken, but understandable enough.

Brands.Food.Small talk. How are you?How are things?

Then it clicked.

Shane wasn't speaking to another man. He was speaking to his mother.

Ilya felt the burn in his stomach disappear.

The translation lagged and stumbled, but he caught enough. Mrs. Yuna Hollander asking about him. Asking how Ilya was doing. Asking something like - whether Ilya's stay could be extended beyond the agreed weeks.

Ilya held his breath.

Shane replied without hesitation.

Yes. It could be extended.

Ilya could stay as long as he wanted.

Yes. Ilya was doing a fantastic job.

Ilya almost laughed out loud.

He was doing a terrible job. He wasn't really security. He definitely wasn't promoting Shane's brand. If anything, he was eating Shane's food and disrupting his routines.

And yet--

His chest fluttered.

Because Shane wanted him to stay.

The conversation wrapped up, and Ilya caught the last line clearly, even through the messy translation.

"I love you."

Ilya memorised it carefully. It was for the plants.

Shane stared at Ilya, who was snoring softly on the bed by the river.

Was this a security breach?

Was this man even fit to be security?

He ate cereal in the morning – not one bowl, but two. He drank cola most of the time. He sneaked around to smoke cigarettes because Shane didn't approve of them. And now here he was, snoring peacefully on a bed by the lake, while Shane, the actual prince who supposedly needed protection had gone out to buy groceries.

And, for absolutely no one's business, Shane had bought all of Ilya's favourites.

Shane sighed. He liked what the sun did to Ilya's body.

Despite the ridiculous diet and questionable food choices, Ilya was very fit. His muscles were cut in all the right places. He was also wearing Shane's shirt. Ilya had admitted very casually

that he hadn't brought many clothes because he didn't know the timeline. Shane had offered to buy him new ones. Ilya had asked him not to waste money and instead lend him his clothes.

Wow. What a great sustainable plan.

Ilya had been given a room on the upper floor, but Shane had never actually seen him use it. He hovered near Shane all day and slept on the couch right outside Shane's room most nights. Once, he had slept on the floor in Shane's room.

Blame the Russian vodka. It tasted horrible.

Shane sighed again and went inside to restock the groceries in the fridge.

Every once in a while, he and Ilya went back to his parents' house to discuss political matters and statues. Ilya had absolutely no interest in politics or taxes. He was there for the small-town gossip, the Russian vodka Shane's father kept in the fridge, and the chicken parm his dad always cooked for him.

Ilya was one of them.

Maybe that wasn't so bad.

Ilya dreamed of many things.

Shane as a devil.

As an angel with wings.

With his back turned to him.

Kissing him.

Doing things Ilya absolutely should not be dreaming about.

Then suddenly, he dreamed of burning.

What the hell?

He woke up with a start and realized the burning was very real.

Shane was outside, barbecuing patties for burgers.

Ilya groaned, got up restlessly, and went to check on the prince. Shane was sweating slightly in the heat, and Ilya very deliberately did not think about how much he wanted to lick it.

He noticed Shane was making eight burgers.

"Why are you making eight burgers?" Ilya asked. "There are only three of us. You, me, and Hayden."

“The recipe said eight,” Shane replied.

Ilya stared at him.

The prince, despite all his education, could not do math.

“Can’t you do math?” Ilya asked.

“Leave me alone,” Shane said.

But Ilya had no intention of leaving Shane alone. He studied him - his eyes, his nose, his freckles, his lips, his neck - something he had been doing for many days now.

“When is he coming?” Ilya asked.

As soon as the words left his mouth, the front door rang. Ilya opened the door and found a tiny man standing there.

He decided immediately that he hated him.

Best friend of Shane? Not a worthy one, Ilya concluded. This man had baby puke on his shirt.

“So you’re Ilya?” Hayden asked.

Ilya didn’t answer. He just stared at Hayden, hoping intense eye contact might make him disappear. He very much wanted Hayden to disappear. Preferably immediately.

“Hi, Hayden! Come in,” Shane called from inside.

Ilya sighed and stepped aside.

Inside, Shane had arranged the table very carefully. Everything was perfectly straight. Perfectly aligned. Ilya found it extremely endearing. Naturally, he had to tease.

“That plate on the left isn’t aligned diagonally with the one next to it,” Ilya said, pointing.

“Hey, don’t be harsh on him,” Hayden said, immediately rubbing Shane’s arm.

Okay. No. This was not going well. This man needed to be out of the house as soon as possible.

Shane rolled his eyes, acted unbothered, and went to grab drinks- ginger ale for himself, beer for Hayden, and cola for Ilya.

When Ilya returned with napkins, Shane quietly adjusted the plate.

Ilya noticed.

And to his absolute fury, Hayden sat right next to Shane.

Once they were seated, Hayden started talking. About the town. About family. About things that were stupid. Just like Hayden.

Ilya briefly wondered if Hayden was actually the son of the minister of this town at all, judging by his face.

Then he noticed Hayden inching closer to Shane.

Too close.

Shane politely asked about Hayden's wife. His children. Hayden seemed to have many of them, like he was preparing for battle.

And then-again-Hayden shifted his body and moved even closer to Shane.

Okay. This was officially out of hand.

"Okay," Ilya said sharply. "Keep some distance."

Hayden glared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Move further," Ilya said calmly. "I'm security. It's my responsibility to make sure unnecessary people don't get too close to Shane."

"What the fuck do you mean unnecessary?" Hayden snapped, looking between Ilya and Shane.

"Ilya," Shane said firmly. "Stop."

"I am responsible for your safety," Ilya replied.

"I'm a threat now?" Hayden laughed. "What the fuck are you on about?"

Then Hayden did something unforgivable. He pulled his chair even closer to Shane.

"Now what are you going to do about it?" he said. Then he looked at Shane. "Looks like this guy is in love with you."

Ilya looked at Shane.

Then at Hayden.

Then back at Shane.

Without saying a word, he stood up, dragged his chair across the floor, awkwardly climbed over it and sat extremely close to Shane.

Hayden stared, shocked and furious.

"This is bullshit," Hayden muttered.

Ilya narrowed his eyes and smiled a devil's smile.

Then he stood up.

And sat directly on Shane's lap.

He turned his head slowly toward Hayden, whose eyes were wide and mouth hanging open.

Shane squirmed beneath him.

Perfect.

Shane had his hands on the bar table, sitting at the counter and watching Scott Hunter move around his new gay bar like it already belonged to him completely.

He felt like he was branding himself as a cool guy, which was probably why he had worn a Mickey Mouse T-shirt to the bar's first anniversary.

The shirt had been a gift from Ilya on no occasion. It was ridiculous. Black fabric, a large Mickey Mouse printed across the front, completely covered in glitter. Shane decided that the glitter was what qualified as him following the dress code.

The bar was in a nearby town, just outside McGill. Shane liked it here. Someday, he thought, he would like to open one in McGill too. Someday.

Scott leaned over and kissed his boyfriend, Kip. He looked happy - satisfied, relieved - but Shane thought his life was still complicated.

Then the complication arrived and took the empty seat beside Shane.

The complication had blue eyes, curly hair, and glittery Mickey Mouse ears perched confidently on his head.

"He's too old for you," Ilya said casually. "He must be at least 10,000 years old."

Shane rolled his eyes and turned slightly toward the bar. "He's three years older than us."

"He's old like fuel," Ilya said.

"That's fossil," Shane corrected.

"Yes, fossil," Ilya nodded, pleased with himself.

Shane glanced down at the drink in front of him. "And why is there a ginger ale here for me?"

Ilya just grinned. "You don't take alcohol well."

Shane glared at him. This was deeply humiliating. They were at one of his best bars - owned by his closest friend - and he was being served ginger ale.

Shane leaned in. "Can you please get me a beer? What is wrong with you? You're embarrassing me in front of my friends."

Ilya didn't even hesitate. "Because when you were eighteen, you already embarrassed yourself with a beer."

Shane stiffened.

The memory hit him all at once.

Berlin. His eighteenth birthday in a small bar. A young bartender had accidentally swapped his non alcoholic drink for beer - and Shane had never had alcohol before. He remembered almost nothing after that, except being wildly drunk after a single beer, dancing with another guy in the bar, and Hayden, dragging him into the bathroom to lecture him while everyone stared.

The bartender's face came back into focus.

Blue eyes.

Curly hair.

Shane turned slowly.

He stared at Ilya.

Horrificed.

"... It was you," Shane said. "It was you in that bar in Berlin."

Ilya just looked at him. Then he gave him that crooked, infuriating smile and calmly pushed the ginger ale back into Shane's hand.

"No, it was *you*!" Shane said. "Ilya!"

Wait.

We met when we were eighteen.

"Relax, I didn't know you were a prince," Ilya explained. "I didn't know English."

"You didn't know English enough for beer and ginger ale?" Shane mocked.

"Sorry! But, I have chosen a song to celebrate that occasion," Ilya said.

"To celebrate something from when we were eighteen?" Shane asked.

"Yes," Ilya said solemnly. "Very special song."

“Oh - uh - this is Scott,” Scott appeared behind them, stretching out his hand. “Shane’s told me a lot about you.”

“Oh, Ilya Rozanov” Ilya said, a little surprised by the attention. “Hopefully all good things.”

Scott didn’t answer.

“I requested a special song for Shane,” Ilya told Scott.

“Have you?” Scott asked. “What is it?”

“You will hear it soon. It is on the playlist. It goes one, two, three - mine is the seventh song.”

Then there was an awkward silence.

“Your boyfriend is very pretty,” Ilya said to Scott.

Shane groaned. What a way to break the silence.

“You are also pretty,” Ilya told Shane, “but 10,000 years old.”

Then, wagging his eyebrows at Scott, he added, “Don’t do serious activity. Your body cannot take it.”

Scott smirked. “Fuck yourself.”

Ilya grinned. “Actually, you should join me.”

Shane blushed on Scott’s behalf while Ilya grinned proudly beneath his Mickey Mouse ears.

Scott looked at the ears, then at Ilya, and stepped closer.

Then closer.

Ilya, for all his confidence, shifted slightly back.

“Sure,” Scott said evenly. “Is this close enough, Rozanov? Or would you like to tell me what else I should do for you?”

Ilya’s mouth fell open.

“I am going to smoke... cigarette,” he said quickly.

Then he jumped off the bar stool and bolted for the exit.

Shane laughed along with Scott as they watched Ilya rush out.

“Your guy is a case,” Scott said.

“My what?” Shane asked.

Scott didn't answer, so Shane started, "We are nothing, we are - "

The person handling the music suddenly shouted to the crowd, "Next song is a special request and was asked to be played loudly by Ilya! Let's begin with the chorus!"

Then the speakers blasted:

I have loved you since we were eighteen.

Shane froze, eyes widening.

Ilya, you fucking idiot!

Long before we both thought the same thing. The song continued, filling the bar.

Scott burst out laughing, loud and unapologetic. "What taste," he said, shaking his head. "Mickey Mouse ears. One Direction." He looked directly at Shane.

To be loved and to be in love.

That was it.

Shane jumped off the seat and ran for the exit.

Ilya was bored.

Shane had been in the meeting for twenty minutes. Too long for a perfume pitch. Rose Landry, CEO of Kidnap Perfumes, had called exclusively for Shane to help promote her unisex fragrances.

Ilya found it entirely unnecessary. Shane didn't need to do perfume commercials. Shane already smelled good. Green apple shampoo. Mint body wash. Both of which Ilya had been stealing.

Except Ilya never smelled like Shane.

No matter how much he tried.

Whatever the case, this was taking too long.

There was a pull in his chest- one of those feelings he couldn't explain but had learned not to ignore. Shane spoke too highly of Rose and she was his ex. Maybe it wasn't either of those things. Maybe Ilya just had an internal security system that reacted badly to bad ideas.

And Rose was definitely one.

He couldn't control it anymore.

Ilya walked out, found Rose's floor, and headed down the corridor. The feeling got worse with every step. He tried to steady himself.

Right until he saw Rose cupping Shane's cheeks.

She is just a friend, Ilya.

Fuck you, Shane.

Ilya quickened his pace, knocked once, and opened the door before either of them could answer.

"Ilya - " Shane started.

Ilya didn't look at him, but, looked straight at Rose.

"Emergency," he said flatly. "Family issue."

He took Shane's hand and pulled him toward the door. Shane's hand was warm. Soft. Ilya had the ridiculous thought that he wanted to keep it forever-take it on holidays, up mountains, into marriage.

What?

This evil witch was putting impossible thoughts.

"Is everything okay?" Rose asked, hurrying after them. Ilya had to admit she was very pretty. Probably nice too. His brain didn't register any of that. Everyone in the office was staring at him dragging their prince away.

"Family emergency," Ilya said again, louder this time.

Some of the employees looked unconvinced, but nodded anyway.

"Ilya, is everything okay?" Shane asked.

"Yes," Ilya said. Then corrected himself. "No."

He pressed the elevator button. Once. Twice. Too many times. The doors slid shut with Rose still standing outside.

"Shane, will you be okay?" she called. "Do you need help?"

"He'll be fine," Ilya said without turning around. "I'm here."

The doors closed.

Ilya didn't let go of Shane's hand. He didn't want to. Ever.

"Ilya?" Shane asked softly.

When the elevator opened, Ilya led him straight to the car, still holding on. Only once they reached it did he finally let go. Shane didn't ask any questions. He just got into the passenger

seat.

“Are you jealous?” Shane asked, smiling now.

“No,” Ilya said.

“Ilya... I’m gay.”

“Okay.”

They sat in silence.

Then Shane exhaled. “Hey. We’re nothing.”

“Okay,” Ilya said.

“I promise. We’re nothing.”

Ilya turned and looked at him. Shane frowned, confused.

Ilya held out his little finger. “Pinky promise?”

Shane laughed-too loudly, with crinkles at the eyes and that stupid cute nose scrunch.

“Pinky promise,” he said, hooking his finger around Ilya’s.

Ilya smiled. “You can go tomorrow.”

“No,” Shane said. “I can’t even smell her perfumes anyway.”

“Because you have a small nose,” Ilya replied.

They both laughed.

And Ilya wondered if Shane would keep his promise.

It had nothing to do with Rose.

Shane woke with a start and found something was... wet? sticky?

Why was his face wet, his heart racing ?

Why was he hard ? And why was that not the main problem right now?

Before he could fully process it, something warm and slobbery pressed against his cheek again.

Shane’s eyes flew open.

“ --AH!”

He jumped out of bed, tangled in the sheets and his heart heavily pounding. He squinted at the object that was vibrating in front of his eyes and blinked many times to focus.

A tiny puppy stared back at him. It wagged its tail enthusiastically and immediately lunged forward.

“Ilya!” Shane yelled out to nowhere in particular.

Footsteps thundered down the hall, and Ilya burst into the bedroom, breathless.

“Pluuuutooooo! My baby!! There you are!”

Shane blinked. “Pluto?”

“Yes,” Ilya said proudly. “You know Harris - the one who runs the media account for you? the royals? He asked me to take care of him.”

He scooped the puppy up, and Pluto immediately began licking Ilya’s face instead, tail wagging. It was so adorable. SHane wished it could see this scene that was unfolding before his eyes for a long long time. A very long time--

“Is this a *permanent* thing?” Shane asked, still clutching on to his bedsheet.

“I wish,” Ilya said dreamily. “But no. Just two days. I want him permanent.”

Shane frowned. “We can’t have a puppy unless we have a plan. And commitment.”

“I can take care of him,” Ilya said immediately. “Pluto is very well-behaved. Cute. Perfect.”

Shane doubted this deeply. Ilya could barely take care of *himself* during a zombie apocalypse, let alone a puppy.

“And Pluto?” Shane asked. “As in Pluto like Mickey Mouse’s dog?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, eyes shining. “Obviously.”

He looked... different. Younger, happier and completely unguarded.

Shane didn’t understand why that did something to him. Why seeing Ilya like this - smiling freely, talking in ridiculous baby voices to the puppy - made his chest feel warm and tight at the same time.

Ilya sat on Shane’s bed. And it felt very intimate. Had Ilya ever been on his bed?

Ilya bent over the puppy, kissing it, and the T-shirt rode up at the back.

And Shane was hard on hard, if that was possible.

“Oh no,” Ilya cooed to Pluto. “Don’t get used to us. You’re only here for two days. Don’t get used to the prince and me. And definitely don’t get used to this home.”

The prince and me. And home.

Shane felt his face heat up.

His mind latched onto the phrase even though he didn't want it to. It sounded - dangerously - like *us*. Like a couple. Like something that shouldn't be forming in his chest right now.

Ilya carried Pluto out of the room, still talking to him softly. And suddenly, that warm, comfortable feeling in Shane's stomach went with them.

This can't happen.

Ilya was temporary. He probably didn't look at Shane that way. He was probably in love with someone else - someone back in Russia. He'd mentioned women, friend and lives elsewhere.

Shane sat back on the bed, pressing his palms into the mattress, trying to ground himself. The brain always won over the heart. It had to.

Maybe one day he'd confront these feelings properly - examine them, dismantle them, push them away.

But not today.

Today, he felt all of it.

And every single feeling pointed back to Ilya.

They were at Shane's parents' house - specifically in the kitchen. And Ilya was having one of those days where his head was not in the right place. He was helping with some strange salad that involved too many ingredients and far too much chopping. The Highness had always insisted on cooking without chefs whenever possible. She said it made the family feel like a family.

The fact that Ilya was allowed in the kitchen at all meant something. It meant he was being treated like family.

That alone made him feel guilty.

He hadn't really helped Shane with much lately - not with security, not with his public image, not with anything concrete that justified his presence. And yet here he was, standing beside Shane's parents, slicing vegetables, being included.

They welcomed him easily. They talked to him, gave him small tasks, laughed with him. They treated him like a second son.

Shane's parents were everything to Shane. And that made the guilt sharper.

If Ilya had listed his feelings from one to one hundred, guilt would probably rank second.

The first was something else entirely. Something he refused to name.

He knew what it was. He wasn't stupid. He just wasn't brave enough to acknowledge it - wasn't ready to open the door of his heart and admit that it was *love*.

Love for the prince.

For God's sake, the son of the woman he was currently helping make salad.

Ilya didn't come from a family like this. He didn't have this closeness, this warmth, this sense of belonging. His world had been smaller, harder and Shane's world felt safe - and Ilya felt full inside it.

But he was still a visitor. He couldn't stay long. He knew that.

McGill might be a small town, but Shane's life wasn't. Shane kept his sexuality carefully guarded, because being a prince still meant something. Duty still mattered. Appearances still mattered.

And Ilya couldn't interfere with that.

He also didn't know how Shane felt about him.

He had been careless - about work, about boundaries, about his heart. Everything in him seemed to orbit Shane without permission. Yuna casually mentioned that her husband had made chicken parm *just* for Ilya.

That made the guilt worse.

He wondered if he had overstayed everything - his welcome at the mansion, at the cottage, in the kitchen, in their lives.

He told himself this would end soon. And hated himself for not wanting it to.

Shane had always loved Christmas.

Not just the day itself, but everything around it - the feeling, the food (even though he never ate much), the old songs, the quiet happiness that came with full stomachs and shared laughter. The snow too, that always came to McGill. Christmas had meant warmth when he was a child, and he'd held onto that for as long as he could.

Now, at 20, he told himself it was childish.

Responsibilities replaced excitement. Duty replaced wonder. The idea of dragging festivity into his own home felt unnecessary - almost indulgent. He was too old for it, he thought. Too aware of what was expected of him.

But there was one thing he refused to give up.

The Christmas tree.

There was a magnificent tree at his mother's house every year, standing proudly in the center of the home, decorated by everyone - helpers, cooks, family. As a child, that tree had felt like magic.

This year, something inside him needed that magic again. But in his cottage, and not at his mother's place.

He wanted to share it with Ilya too.

And sometimes Pluto-who Ilya kept bringing over far too often, padding through the house and somehow making it feel warmer.

So Shane went out and bought a Christmas tree. Not grand like his mother's, not towering or ornate - but perfect. It fit neatly in the corner behind the sofa.

Late November was early. Too early.

But Shane didn't believe in "too early" for Christmas.

"What are you doing?", he heard Ilya shuffle behind him.

Shane smiled slightly as he hung a tinsel strand. "Decorating the Christmas tree."

"So early?" Ilya asked. "Do you believe in Christmas?"

Shane thought for a moment. "I love Christmas. I like decorating and seeing the spirit come alive. It's usually at my mother's house, but this year I wanted one for myself."

Ilya picked one of the decorations curiously. "Did you buy them? It looks very different".

"No," Shane said. "These are personal."

Ilya tilted his head. "You're hanging hockey sticks."

"I love hockey."

"You're slow," Ilya said immediately. "And your backhand is terrible."

Shane scowled. "I'm very good at hockey." Ilya was very good too.

"What else?" Ilya asked, studying the tree more closely.

"Things from work," Shane said. "Gifts from children at the hospital. Things from friends."

“Rose?” Ilya asked sharply.

“Oh my God, Rose and I are nothing,” Shane groaned.

“What about Scott?” Ilya pressed. “Hayden gave you something? Because I’m throwing it out.”

Shane refrained from answering, and Ilya kept watching him decorate the tree.

“Is there something of yours you’d want to put on the tree?” he asked. “Anything you want to share?”

“I don’t have personal belongings,” Ilya said flatly.

The tone told Shane everything. He knew about Ilya’s mother. The small cross he wore.

“If you ever find something,” Shane said gently, “you can put it up. Anytime.”

Ilya looked at him. “You’re willing to share a Christmas tree with me?”

Shane didn’t think before answering. “You’re already in my family.”

Ilya went still.

“... Okay,” he said softly.

The rest of the evening was calm. Almost too calm.

Later that night, Shane woke to a sound in the hallway. Worried, he stepped out of bed and turned on the light.

Ilya wasn’t there.

But the Christmas tree was different.

Shane frowned, annoyed at first - cards instead of something meaningful? - until he stepped closer.

They weren’t cards.

They were photos.

Photos of *him*.

Shane laughing.

Shane scrunching his nose.

Shane with his parents.

Shane playing hockey.

Shane with the children at the hospital.

Shane during brand events.

Shane angry at Ilya.
Shane tipsy with a beer.

Moments Shane didn't even know had been captured.

It hit him all at once.

These were Ilya's most precious things.

Shane couldn't move anymore. He stood in front of the tree, wrapped in light and emotion, heart heavy with questions.

What did Ilya want from him? Was this love? Was this friendship? Was this protection - or something more?

When dawn broke, snow fell softly outside. The first snow of November. It felt like it was falling inside him too.

Ilya didn't come out of his room until late afternoon. He avoided Shane's eyes. They barely spoke. They sat in opposite corners, tension thick and unspoken.

The magic was still there. But magic needed a spark.

And Shane stood there wondering - who would light the fire first.

They sat at opposite ends of the couch, their toes touching - almost touching.

Ilya felt it the entire time- electricity sitting there, unspoken. The air was heavy, thick enough to choke on, but neither of them broke the silence. They breathed into it instead, slow and careful. If anyone had listened closely, they would have realised breathing was the only sound in the room.

Ilya stared at his phone.

He wasn't looking at anything. He knew Shane wasn't either.

They were both pretending like their lives in general. Pretending was their new thing.

"You know I'm Russian," Ilya said suddenly.

Why did he say that? He didn't know. His mouth moved before his brain could stop it. The silence had been pressing on him too long. Something had to break.

Shane didn't interrupt. He said nothing.

"So," Ilya continued, still scrolling, forcing his voice to sound casual, "I was thinking about getting Canadian citizenship."

He hoped to see a reaction from Shane, but his face very neutral.

“My friend Svetlana,” he went on. “She’s Russian too. But she has a Canadian passport. I think... I could marry her.”

The silence deepened.

It wasn’t quiet anymore - it rang. Ilya felt it hit Shane like a physical blow, even without looking at him. He waited for the storm, but none came.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Shane said.

Flat. Cold.

Wrong. This was wrong. This was very wrong. He felt his heart fall on to the floor.

Ilya finally looked at him. “You do?”

“Yes,” Shane said quickly. “Of course.”

Liar.

Ilya could see it. He could *feel* it. Shane didn’t know what Ilya wanted him to say - but neither did Ilya. He only knew that something inside him was burning and he didn’t know how to put it out.

He muttered under his breath, in Russian:

«Ты, бь, идиот.»**
(*You are a fucking idiot.*)

Then Shane spoke again - quiet, deliberate.

In Russian.

«Думаю, я мог бы жениться на Роуз.»
(*I think I could marry Rose.*)

Anger surged through Ilya instantly - hot, sharp, uncontrollable. It ran down his spine, into his legs. His foot curled away from Shane’s, breaking that almost-touch.

“Oh,” Ilya said, also in Russian, before he could stop himself.

«А, значит, теперь ты не гей?»
(*Oh. So now you’re not gay?*)

Shane stiffened. He stood abruptly, shoving his phone onto the table, answering in Russian - too controlled, too composed.

«Роуз добрая. Она умная. Она самая милая, счастливая и красивая женщина, которую я знаю.»

(Rose is kind. She's brilliant. She's the nicest, happiest, most beautiful woman I know.)

He turned to leave.

Ilya reacted without thinking. His hand shot out and grabbed Shane's wrist.

Wait.

Something registered.

Shane spoke Russian.

That thought hit like lightning.

Oh.

That was... sexy. Uffff!

No. No. Focus. Mission. Emotional kitten fight. Stay sharp.

He blurted out, in Russian:

Подожди. Ты говоришь по-русски?

(Wait. You speak Russian?)

Shane snapped back immediately, also in Russian:

Я ПРИНЦ! Я говорю на многих языках.

(I am a PRINCE! I speak many languages.)

Ilya stared at him, stunned, then muttered:

«Тогда почему мы всё это время говорили по-английски?»

(Then why were we talking in English all this while?)

Shane definitely wanted him to look stupid.

Or maybe he was stupid.

“Where are we going with this?” Shane burst out in English. “What is this impossible communication between us?”

Ilya's brain completely short-circuited.

Fuck. Fuck!

Where were the subtitles?

Shane kept talking. English kept pouring out. Ilya could feel heat crawling up his neck, burning his ears. His brain was absolutely on fire.

Shane looked angry.

And somehow--

Cute.

Punchable.

Kissable.

Why is my brain like this?

Ilya moved before he could think. He crossed the space between them and crashed his lips against Shane's. It was fast. Reckless. Just a sharp peck.

He pulled back instantly, searching Shane's face.

The heat didn't go away.

If anything, there was smoke now.

"Ilya," Shane murmured--

--and then Shane kissed him.

Not careful.

Not gentle.

Urgent. Desperate. Unrestrained. Everything Shane had been holding back slammed into Ilya all at once.

Ilya felt it everywhere. The rush. The relief. His knees weakened. His hands came up on instinct, gripping Shane just to stay upright.

Time collapsed.

When Shane finally pulled back, breathless, their foreheads still touching, he whispered, "I want you."

"I love you," Ilya said.

The words came out without fear.

They stayed there, kissing on the couch in dim light, snow falling silently outside the window.

Then Shane kissed him again - deeper, surer, pouring all that love and eagerness into it. Ilya kissed him back with the same hunger.

But beneath it all, the soldier in Ilya stirred.

He was Russian.

He was unbreakable.

A man of man.
A man of men?
Man of men's?

What the fuck.

Shane pulled back again, searching his face. "Will you say something?" he asked softly.

Ilya straightened.

Of course he would. He had been with plenty of men. Women too. He'd done this a million times. He was strong. Grounded. He could pull himself together, find the words and tell Shane exactly how he felt.

He opened his mouth.

"Krrr."

That's all that came out.

Ilya felt like he was swimming in--
Constipation?
Consolidation?

--of stars.

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