

i will send a fully armed battalion (to remind you of my love)

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by [smashkeyboardsmash](#)

Summary

When King Shane Hollander, the newly crowned monarch of the kingdom of Neomenia breaks things off with his secret lover, King Ilya Rozanov II of Ortus Islands, Ilya has a hard time dealing with it. His frustration doesn't go unnoticed by the people around him, and the situation only gets worse when at a press conference Ilya makes a joke about the relations between the two nations.

It's just a joke. What could go wrong?

Notes

this is a rework of a fic i wrote years ago and posted through another account. i have now turned it hollanov to preserve it and also for fun

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

In the north Pacific ocean, between Micronesia and Hawaii, there are two island kingdoms that have managed to stay out of the public eye for the most part. Their history isn't too familiar to the rest of the world, as what they are known for is being fun tourist destinations, and nothing more.

The kingdoms were established after a pair of friends — a Russian and a Canadian sailor who had met and befriended each other by chance, frustrated with the systems in their countries, decided to sail east of Asia and explore in an attempt to migrate somewhere better. That's how they stumbled onto a group of islands, three big and many smaller ones. After months of exploration they realized the islands were uninhabited. It was only then that they decided to settle down there, building shelters, establishing farms and getting started on crops and food production before extending an invitation to family and friends back home by sending a pigeon.

The sailors chose to inhabit the smallest of the large islands, situated between the two biggest ones. They thought it would be enough to house their families and provide enough food for them to survive.

They built a simple residence on the highest hill on the island and named it Caelum, hoping that the new home would become for them exactly what the word means. Heaven. But things weren't going as smoothly as they first thought they would. Once the families arrived, the tension and problems started. So the sailors came to a decision. The Romanov family would move to the big island on the east, the one surrounded by many small islands. The Hollander family would move to the biggest island in the west, the one with the funny shape and many craters. And Caelum would remain a spot where they'd meet up every once in a while, a vacation spot of sorts. One where they'd have to play nice and leave their disagreements behind before arrival.

Before the islands became the tourist destination they are now, they were considered a haven for people seeking refuge from all over the world, predominantly Asia. They accepted everyone who was able to come to them. As the islands further developed both established a monarchy with overwhelming support from the population. Both royal families enjoyed said support, while the commoners enjoyed the peaceful and fair lives they led.

Life was calm in the kingdoms. Despite how they were established, and the fact that it all started because of a misunderstanding, the royals got on really well, getting together a few times a year in the residence on Isle of Caelum, mostly because of protocol and pleasantries.

Generation after generation, the friendliness remained for the sake of the kingdoms and for the sake of the memory of their ancestors. That being said, no one expected the latest generation to be as close as they are.

When King Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov, second of his name, met King Shane Hollander, first of his name, they were both prepubescent princes. It was a family visit to the Isle of Caelum for the royal barbecue, and Ilya was desperate to go home. But then he found out that there was someone else his age in the castle, and the day became fun.

He might've been just eight, but the moment he saw Shane it was like having an epiphany. The next time it was the same, the time after that too. Every time Ilya saw Shane he felt the same feeling, and he only realized what that epiphany was when he was nineteen, the light bulb moment hitting him as he was sitting on the rooftop terrace of the castle on Isle of Caelum. It was the last day of the Foundation Day celebrations, the best day in Ilya's opinion. Shane was sitting next to him, looking up at the night sky, and Ilya found himself staring at Shane's face, memorizing the lines so the image could hold him over until the next time they could sit like that.

"Do you see it, Rozy?" Shane asked, his eyes focused on the stars above. Ilya hummed a confirmation even though he forgot what he was supposed to be looking at. Shane's the only person he's ever allowed to call him by his real name, let alone by the cute nickname he gave him. Remembering that made the light bulb over his head shine brighter, "I wonder what it would be like if I was there and not here. If I wasn't who I am."

Shane didn't enjoy being a royal. He hated the protocols, the lack of freedom. Shane has always favored coming to Isle of Caelum because there's no one there. It's theirs, no members of the public are allowed, so it's where he's free. Ilya knew this because they had talked about it too many times, Shane no longer trying to keep his emotions about the subject in control, the venom in his words exposing the anger he had built up inside. Shane had mentioned more than once that he was considering rejecting his title. The last time they spoke before the accident was the day before, and after ending the phone call abruptly, he texted Ilya and let him know that he was going to do it when his family returned. Ilya was ready to invite Shane to come to his kingdom, to make arrangements for Shane so he could be safe, free and happy on one of the small isles in the Ortus Islands kingdom.

But Shane's family never returned.

The queen had died at childbirth, so Ilya was raised by nannies and butlers while his father, the king, dealt with the loss. His father never fully recovered, finding unhealthy ways to deal with his emotions, and because of that lack of family structure, Ilya had to make his own family. Sure, there were also his staff, but he didn't like to think of them that way.

The most important member of his chosen family always was and will be Shane.

When the king had died of a stroke a month before Ilya's 24th birthday, after which Ilya became the youngest king of the Kingdom of Ortus Islands, Shane was the person that was there for him and helped him deal with the change. He never would have managed to get through the entire thing without Shane's support. He didn't think twice whether or not he'd

be there for Shane in return.

Ilya had been a king for three years when the King of Neomenia died in a tragic plane crash along with his wife and two older sons. Ten minutes after the news hit, Ilya was in the helicopter, on his way to Shane.

Looking back at it, that gesture is the reason why they became so close. And it's why they kissed a month later. Why they started meeting up in secret on the Isle of Caelum.

Not once did Ilya think that it was going to end, though.

“I think we should end this, Rozy.”

Ilya keeps replaying it in his mind, hoping that if he remembers it once more, the memory will change. It doesn't. Remembering only makes Shane's voice sound louder in his head.

There are two weeks worth of unanswered texts and calls on his phone that he finds himself scrolling through before bed. The little 'seen' check marks make him feel even worse. Two weeks is the longest he's gone without being face to face with Shane ever since they started whatever they started. He's dealing with it horribly, which just so happens to be the exact way he thought he would be dealing with it.

Shane's suggestion came out of the blue. Everything about the day was ordinary. They met up at the usual time, had dinner, chatted, and went to bed. Ilya woke up at their usual time in the morning, only to find Shane already awake, which was the first oddity. The next one was Shane springing the news on him just a few minutes later. It made zero sense. He thought that Shane was happy with how things were, Ilya surely was. But Shane not only insisted that they break off their arrangement, he left Ilya without an explanation.

He did give him a letter that Ilya refuses to open and read because he knows it'll be a goodbye and he can't take it right now. Shane will have to give him an actual spoken explanation, he'll have to do it to his face. Ilya's not going to settle for something as impersonal as a letter.

Sadly for them both, their breakup of sorts doesn't mean they'll have to stop interacting. It only means they'll stop interacting privately.

As island nations that are situated so close and share history, they cannot avoid each other completely. Especially not with the upcoming Foundation Day celebration which the island kingdoms celebrate together. King Shane not being interested in sleeping with King Ilya

anymore is no reason to end the tradition. Not on a jubilee year.

The kings always attend the organization meetings. Small kingdoms, there's not much to do, honestly. There are already some events set that they have to have, because of tradition once again, and the rest is up to people whose jobs are to plan these things. The kings are mostly there because that is what their predecessors did, not because they're actually needed. Ilya suggested that he and Shane ditch the meetings and meet on Caelum a month ago. But now he's gonna sit in the late-night committee meeting, stare at the computer screen, because video conferences are a thing, curse you technology, and he's going to demand that Shane does the same.

He's going to take advantage of the situation to try and get Shane's attention again. He can't let this thing between them actually end. Ilya thought the next step was that they were going to get married, not get separated. He doesn't know what the next step is anymore.

"We were thinking of skipping the firework display, as now thanks to a change in leadership, both islands are becoming more focused on preserving the environment. We also felt bad because of all the flying back and forth you do. We were thinking of replacing the fireworks with paper lanterns, they're made of biodegradable materials, and the lanterns will be completely gone within a month." The one throwing out this idea is Hayden, one of the people on Shane's team. Ilya is barely registering though. He'll have Svetlana tell him what's good or not, that's why he keeps her around anyway. Shane seems to be much more concentrated than he is, and Ilya isn't sure what this observation is making him feel like. It's not pleasant, that's for sure. It makes Ilya wonder if he was the only one with feelings involved.

"I like that idea. What do you think, Rozy?" Shane asks, raising his eyes to the camera and somehow meeting Ilya's on the other end. He's on a completely different island, and somehow still manages to have an effect on Ilya. He always has, Ilya's always let him.

But Rozy? Right now? After he ended it two weeks ago? The fucking audacity.

"That's King Ilya Rovarov to you," he returns, annoyance peppered over each word. Svetlana gives him a look from across the desk, one screaming of curiosity and concern. He has a feeling that everyone is having a similar reaction, because everyone in this committee is friends with each other.

After Shane replaced his father as king, he made some major changes to the team running things in Neomenia with people he trusted, which somehow meant that he only employed people he was friends with. Shane's friends and acquaintances are also Ilya's friends and acquaintances, and vice versa. They're all comfortable here, only using honorifics and titles in front of people who aren't in the circle. The celebration organization committee is the tightest of circles, minus some people who are assigned roles abroad, so Ilya saying what he said doesn't go unnoticed. Hayden is stunned too, Ilya can see it on his face as well. Shane doesn't seem to be too surprised though.

"Fine. Your Majesty, King Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov the Second of the Kingdom of Ortus Islands," Shane sighs at him, "What do you think of biodegradable paper lanterns made of

recycled materials over fireworks that are bad for the environment since you and I are already doing a number on it?”

The attention is now back on Ilya. Even Hayden’s assistant who tends to mind his own business is waiting for Ilya to say something.

“Sounds cool.”

“Me and Hayden worked for three months with an engineering team to make sure that not one bit of the lanterns will endanger any part of nature, and all you have to say is ‘sounds cool’?” Svetlana snaps at him, all the while the rest of his team try to hold back their snickers. This is the exact reason why Ilya keeps Svetlana around him at all times. Svetlana is the biggest “no (wo)man” that Ilya has ever encountered, so she keeps him in check. Even at odd times like these.

“Excellent job guys. Thank you for going the extra mile, we appreciate it,” Shane offers the praise Svetlana is fishing for. Both Svetlana and Hayden nod their thanks, but Ilya has something else in mind.

“A bit conceited of you Sveta, don’t you think? It’s literally your job.”

“My literal job is to make sure you get up in the morning and get to meetings in time,” Svetlana talks back, the thing she does best of all, “What the actual fuck is going on with you? You’ve been a jerk lately.”

“I don’t know,” Ilya shrugs, pretending to be innocent, “Ask King Shane Hollander of the Kingdom of Neomenia.”

“Did you two get in a fight or something? A lover’s quarrel?” Hayden asks, testing the waters a bit before finishing off with a bang, “Did you two break up?” he adds, all the while teasing with his tone of voice.

It’s not a surprise that this group of people know about him and Shane, they’re the ones that help them sneak off to Caelum whenever they need it. The answer is a surprise because they answer at the same time but completely differently. Shane says no while Ilya says yes, confusing everyone with the answers. Ilya is also confused. What does Shane mean no? Did he not consider them as a thing? Is that why this isn’t a break up?

“Are we done here?” Ilya asks then.

“No, we’re not. We just started,” Svetlana informs him, smiling at him knowingly.

“But am I really needed?” he prompts again, getting exactly what he wants as an answer from a very angry Svetlana.

“You’re not. I’d rather only talk to Shane today,” she tells him. So Ilya stands up from his desk, gathers some of his things, and is ready to head out of the office, when a wonderful idea comes to him.

“Your Majesty, King Shane Hollander please answer your fucking texts from now on,” he says before he heads out.

He walks quite quickly, his assistant on his tail. But he’s not quick enough. He still hears Shane when he says, “Read the fucking letter, Rozy.”

Over his dead body.

“If you could be a grown up for five fucking minutes and not make my life hell during this month while we’re having daily meetings, it would be great.”

Ilya’s lying in his bed, trying to listen to his audiobook and having to pause every two seconds, while Svetlana paces around the room, giving him hell for what he did in the meeting. “I get you’re going through shit, but please stay professional.”

Ilya wonders for a moment if he can transfer the blame onto Shane. Maybe Svetlana will go away and bother Shane then instead, and Ilya can go back to listening about outsourcing.

“It’s Shane’s fault,” he says, then gives Svetlana a look.

“Shane ended it?” By the look on Svetlana’s face, she’s surprised. It makes as much sense to her as it does to Ilya. “That doesn’t make sense,” she says, stopping dead in her tracks. Ilya watches as Svetlana narrows her eyes and considers what she’s heard, curious about what she’s going to decide on. Svetlana shakes her head next, raising a finger at Ilya before she speaks again, “It doesn’t matter, though, cause Shane isn’t being a pain in my ass. You are!” Svetlana raises her voice, another thing that Ilya basically pays her to do, “Deal with it at your own time. I’m under enough stress with the organization already. Hayden and that assistant of his are new to this, and I have to basically guide them through it and teach them shit. Promise me you won’t make it difficult again.”

“I can’t,” Ilya sits up when he replies, catching Svetlana when she rolls her eyes at him, “He won’t talk to me, Sveta. He won’t tell me why.”

Svetlana’s attitude seems to soften a bit, now that Ilya’s shared his side, Svetlana seems to understand his frustration better. But it doesn’t last that long.

“What about that letter he mentioned?”

Okay then, forget all of it. Svetlana is obviously no longer on Ilya’s team. She might as well move to Neomenia. Shane would probably give her a job cause they’ve known each other for so long.

“The goodbye letter? I’m not putting myself through that.”

“What if it’s not a goodbye?”

What else could it fucking be?

“Well it’s not a fucking hello letter.”

“You don’t know what it is.”

Svetlana states the obvious, but Ilya is literally seconds away from revoking her citizenship.

“Fuck off Svetle.”

“Gladly, Your Majesty.”

An Eclipse Ahead? The Warm Waters Between Neomenia and Ortus Islands are Getting Colder as it’s Reported that the Kings Don’t Get Along - CNN

Ilya reads the headline a few times, wondering what else ‘journalists’ are going to make up in order to get clicks before he remembers that it’s not a lie. It’s actually kind of true.

What a funny coincidence. Right?

Ilya had a pretty busy week. He visited one of the orphanages in the city, had a conference call with Australia’s and New Zealand’s prime ministers, talked to a representative from the European Union about opening a new embassy, and ended the week by going to an animal shelter and adopting a few more dogs and cats, as he does whenever he’s distressed. All in between meetings with advisors, getting updates on how projects are going, and just overall running the country.

With all of that going on, Ilya still focused on one thing. That one thing just so happens to be the fact that it’s another week where Shane doesn’t answer his texts and calls. Ilya keeps trying. Ilya keeps texting good mornings and good nights, selfies, and demanding that Shane give him an explanation. He keeps getting left on read and getting more and more frustrated. Of course he’s going to start some form of trouble with the mood he’s in. But no one expects him to do exactly what he does.

The weekly press briefings had been a thing started by his grandfather. Before him, only spokespersons briefed the press, but now the kings do it once a week as well. They’re pretty boring for the most part, with the occasional interesting question. He doesn’t want to

complain too much, being too aware of the absolute privilege that he's in, but would it kill the reporters to ask something more fun?

The press conferences are mostly him talking about how good the economy is doing, which it is, he's a fucking genius putting his degree to work. Also talking about recent projects, about construction of new infrastructure, and new investments in renewable energy because they use their 200+ days of sunshine and windy coast to their advantage. Boring, all of it. So boring.

Which is why he acts out at the first question he gets about Shane.

"What's your comment on recent speculation that there's rising tension between Your Majesty and His Majesty King Shane Hollander?"

Right. Of course they're going to pick up on that as a subject. Ilya just announced that starting next year all of their electricity will come from renewable energy, making them the second nation in the world to achieve that after Neomenia. Shane's dad was a dick about the environment. He was smart about renewable energy. Can't they talk about that achievement even though it's so boring? No. Of course not. They have to try to get a scoop, like a gossip column, not a newspaper.

"Our nations' founders were friends before they discovered the islands. As is tradition, we will always be friends with the Kingdom of Neomenia. But sometimes friends have disagreements. Slight disagreements are very easy to work through," Ilya answers, doing his best to both answer and kind of not answer at the same time. He's satisfied with his response. But it seems as though the reporter isn't. She asks for further detail in a slightly condescending tone.

"And if you don't work through it?"

Ilya looks at her for a second, deciding on how to play it. He shouldn't scold anyone, but he really, really wants to do it. The only people allowed to patronize him like that are Shane and Svetlana.

He gets a bit bitter and decides to patronize the journalist in return.

"Well we can always declare a war, now can we," Ilya says, his words dripping in sarcasm, and seconds it with a smile. It's only then, as he watches the press room erupt, that he realizes he fucked up. These people don't get what sarcasm is, "I promise that it won't ever come to that though," he attempts to calm them down with a light tone of voice. But it's too late.

That's what the rest of the press briefing is. Questions about a tasteless joke Ilya made with him trying to reassure them that there won't be a war.

He can see Svetlana face-palming and getting fidgety in the corner of the room. He won't hear the end of this for at least a month, if not the rest of his life.

Remember that time you threatened war with Shane because you stopped sleeping together?

Svetlana's going to enjoy this so much.

The enjoyment for Svetlana begins as soon as the press is over and she shoves Ilya in the first empty office she finds. Ilya's assistant waits right outside of the door as Svetlana cracks her fingers in warm up and starts. Svetlana loves giving him stern talks, she loves when she's right and Ilya fucks up.

Basically, in his own crookedly sweet way, Ilya did this for him.

"You're an idiot." It's not brand new information, Ilya is well aware both that he is one and that Svetlana thinks of him that way when he fucks up. Still, the fact that Svetlana says it with such conviction makes it sting a bit.

"It was just a joke," he replies and Svetlana rolls her eyes at him. She's not having it today. Maybe she's right to not have it today.

"An absolute moron."

Sure, while we're at, let's go over all the greatest hits. Imbecile should be arriving next. Ilya purposefully gives Svetlana incentive to continue with his second attempt at defending himself.

"But I made it obvious that it was a joke."

The statement doesn't stick. Svetlana rolls her eyes again. She takes a deep breath, changes her tone of voice to a calmer one. Svetlana's fed up, it's obvious. She's just trying to make Ilya see the gravity of the situation.

"It was a joke to you. But the UN has already sent the ambassadors to smooth things over. Scott emailed me while you were still talking shit on live TV, he already has a plane ticket."

Hearing Svetlana say that they're sending Scott to figure out what's going on makes Ilya realize the exact amount of shit that he's into right now. Never, in over 400 years of history of both countries, have they had to have someone interfere with their relations with each other. And sure, Scott is his representative, but he's still not coming back on his own volition. This is an outside organization wanting to make sure that things don't escalate. He royally fucked up.

How does he even respond to this though? Because there actually isn't a problem that they need to solve. Why is Svetlana acting like it's so serious? Scott will come, Ilya will explain, they'll put out some bullshit statements, and everyone will be on their way.

"Good. I haven't seen Scott in months. I miss him."

His intentional aloofness makes Svetlana get back to her natural level of anger, then up a few notches.

“Really?”

“I miss Kip too. I hope he brings Kip with him,” Ilya says, continuing his innocent demeanor. This isn’t an issue. It’s fine.

“You’re acting like a fucking child. Do you know what UN ambassadors coming back means?” Svetlana snaps the words out, getting more mad with each syllable. She waits for Ilya to answer, but the only response he can come up with is seeing old friends because of a non-reason. She sees that Ilya is clueless, so Svetlana pauses. Her stance softens, and she looks at Ilya and smiles. “You know what, I’m not gonna tell you what it means. I’ll let Shane yell it to you tonight during the committee meeting. I’m gonna enjoy this more that way.”

Leave it to Svetlana to focus on enjoying himself.

He’s gonna let Shane tell him? Whatever does that even mean?

Shane does the exact thing Svetlana predicts. There are no hellos or any formalities. He starts the meeting reasonably angry and loud. The signal travels so well over that high-speed internet Ilya insisted the country have. He can’t get himself out of this one by pretending he can’t hear.

“Are you illiterate or what? How difficult is it to read a goddamn letter?”

My god! Enough. Let go of the fucking letter already. Why does he keep insisting on it?

“Are you dense? I’m not going to read it. Say whatever you have to say to my face, Shane,” he responds.

Ilya sees how uncomfortable the rest of the committee are. Well, half of them. The junior members of the teams would rather be anywhere else while Svetlana is smiling, and so is Hayden. The pricks love it when Ilya is in trouble, like they always have. He and Shane couldn’t find better people to grow up with and it’s a tragedy. If only they knew as kids what they know now.

He also sees the exact moment Shane gets cocky with him, and he has a feeling that he knows exactly what will follow.

“That’s King Shane Hollander to you.” There it is. It’s quite an enjoyable remark, actually, having his own words thrown in his face by the person he loves feels better than it should. Ilya loves it when things come full circle. “You would know everything, including why I

can't say it, if you read the fucking letter."

And we're back to hating the conversation.

"Stop with the damn letter. Grow some balls."

Shane pushes past it as if Ilya didn't say anything. He continues with his rant.

"Not only do you refuse to do that one thing I asked you to do, now you're making my life miserable because thanks to your little stunt at the press conference today, I have to deal with my ex for the foreseeable future. I sent Rose away for a reason, Your Majesty. For you, actually. And now she's coming back," Shane finishes at that, his eyes shooting daggers at Ilya even through a computer screen.

Rose is coming. Why is Rose coming back?

"What are you talking about?"

"Were you not informed that our UN ambassadors are on their way to fix shit?" He was. He just forgot that both islands' ambassadors will be back. But Rose? Shane's former model, first-love ex-girlfriend Rose? The 'I'm bored so I'm gonna do a double major at Oxford' Rose? The perfect specimen that Ilya spent years being jealous of?

Svetlana smirks at him as she watches Ilya process it. He's right, Ilya is an idiot. He's basically driving Shane into Rose's arms. He has to make all of it go away immediately so Rose won't have incentive to stay.

A curtain of jealousy overtakes his body, and he ends up saying the words before registering what he's about to say.

"Please don't sleep with Rose." The thought of it worries him so much that he starts tapping his foot, his entire body shaking as a result.

Shane narrows those pretty eyes of his as he looks at the screen, trying to figure Ilya out. Why is he like that? Why is he a mystery that Ilya can't find any clues to decipher? He wishes he knew what's going on in Shane's head.

"Why the fuck would I do that? Are you even hearing yourself?" Shane is calm when he asks the question, then just slightly annoyed when he adds, "You drive me insane."

Hayden and Svetlana both nod in agreement. Ilya sighs, wanting to say the same thing back. Just as he's about to do it, Hayden speaks up.

"You two do know that this is a meeting about the menus for the celebration dinners, right?" he asks, looking at Ilya through the screen, then turning towards Shane and his team.

"Hayden, I swear I'm at my wit's end. Can you fucking not?" Ilya asks back. He knows that pushback is going to follow, Svetlana has been helping Hayden out with his new role. Ilya is

grateful for that though, the world needs more people like Svetlana. Both he and Shane are lucky to have more people like Svetlana around them.

“When did this whole thing of you starting a diplomatic crisis become my problem? This isn’t in my job description, I have actual work to do here.” Not that Hayden isn’t right or that it doesn’t make sense. Ilya just needs to be here so he can spend time with Shane, no matter how not quality that time might be.

“Petition to conduct the next committee meeting without the kings,” Svetlana then suggests, further spoiling Ilya’s plan. He complains about it immediately.

“Sveta. Don’t do this to me.”

“If we don’t get this done, you’ll both be in bigger trouble because we won’t be ready with anything to put on a front with. We won’t be able to pretend that we’re fine. Let us work,” Hayden speaks up next.

They just have to be right and they have to do him like this? Ilya can’t believe it.

“I have nothing against it,” Shane agrees. He gets up and leaves just like Ilya did the previous time the committee had a meeting.

It’s deserved, Ilya figures. He fucked up. And what’s worse, because of him, Rose’s going to come back.

Ortus Island and Neomenia Soon at War? King Rozanov II Seemingly Jokes About War While Relations with King Hollander Worsen. - Associated Press

Okay. All of that is true, especially the part about their ‘relations’ worsening.

But how do they fucking know that bit?

Something’s not right.

Thanks to what he said during the press conference, and in his defence as a spur of the moment thing, Ilya gets to have a meeting with the crown’s PR representative first thing in the morning the next day. It’s nothing special, just a short hour-long refresher course on what not to say. Not that it matters now that he said it, but they want to make sure he doesn’t do it again in the future. Ilya makes no promises. Who knows what’s going to happen with him and Shane in the future. He needs to keep his options open.

What follows on his schedule is an interview for the national TV station where he has to once again talk about how he made a joke and they're not going to war with Neomenia. He also gets to talk about his 'friendship' with Shane, the host keeps pressing on the subject. He keeps to the same old story of being best friends and growing up together. Luckily for everyone he had PR training hours prior, so he refrains from making any more jokes. The interview seems to help, he gets notified by his assistant who has also been tasked with being his babysitter for the day, that the reactions online are positive. He's too lazy to check himself.

Svetlana assigns one of her own assistants full-time on the organization committee so she'll have one less thing to worry about while she focuses a bit more on cleaning up the mess Ilya made. Everyone in the castle is focusing on that, already preparing strategies for when Scott arrives from New York.

Ilya should be more bothered about everything, he knows that he should since everyone in the world and the kingdom is acting like it's such a big deal. He should think about what his people think about his joke, and his approval rating, and focus on how he can calm the tension in the kingdom. What he thinks about mostly, and gets excited about, is seeing Scott again. The person that treated Ilya like he was his younger brother, took his side, and took care of him throughout his life.

Ilya didn't want Scott to be the one going to NYC as the UN ambassador, but Scott was so excited to do it that Ilya didn't want to take the opportunity away from him just like that. It's not as fun as it was before Scott left because now he has Svetlana who just won't enable him or let him wild the way he used to with Scott around, and with his support, of course. He hopes he'll get a chance to do some shenanigans with Scott for old time's sake while he's here.

Ilya starts his day in an urgent meeting about the influence his joke has on relations with other countries, and issues they have over this, that lasts far too long. His minister of foreign affairs and her advisers go on and on about how it's impossible to explain to outsiders that there won't be an actual war and be taken seriously at the same time. It's up to Ilya to solve this issue, which serves him right since he was the one who created it, and he knows that only he can do it. Nothing in the meeting is new information. But it's still his duty to hear them out and address their concerns, it's his job.

The one person in the meeting who minds the length of it and how they keep going in circles is Svetlana. She'd usually be pretty calm, looking bored in the corner, while Ilya tries to deal with the ministers. But something is bothering her now. She seems restless, she keeps checking the clock, and at times looks as though she is moments away from telling everyone to shut up. She wants to leave.

Ilya looks towards her and when their eyes meet he mouths "Are you okay, Sveta?" all the

while one of the advisers talks about what France communicated to her. Ilya doesn't really expect an answer right away, but more so because he wants Svetlana to know that he noticed her behavior and he's worried. Svetlana does give him an answer though, when about a minute later, she hands him a note.

I got a text. Scott and Kip arrived hours ago, they're settled in. I'm excited to see them.

Ilya is too. So much so, that he barely listens for the rest of the meeting. He manages to reassure everyone that he will solve the issue, which was his initial goal, so he calls the meeting a success.

What follows is them speed walking out of the government building and to the car, excited to go back to the castle.

Scott and Kip are lounging around Ilya's living room when he and Svetlana arrive. He immediately smiles when he sees them. He missed them both so much.

"If it isn't the troublemakers," Scott smiles at them both, spreading his arms to greet them with a hug. Svetlana allows Ilya to go first, while she says hi to Kip. Then they switch places.

His hug with Kip doesn't linger nearly as long as his hug with Scott. The one thing about Kip that Ilya doesn't miss is Kip's hate for skinship from anyone other than Scott, the person he is practically married to.

"I might be a troublemaker, but if I wasn't you wouldn't be home right now," he returns with a smirk.

"New York is home too," Kip says with a shrug.

"Over my dead body," Ilya responds. He points an accusatory finger at Scott, then says, "You wanted to go and I let you. But I miss you so much, I might replace you with Svetlana just so I can see you more."

"Please do. Scott, make him send me to New York. I beg you," Svetlana fakes a plea while Kip gives him a smile.

Ilya tells everyone to sit down with a gesture, and he makes himself comfortable too. He does have to give his assistant a stern look for him to do the same, the youngest has a habit of standing so he can be ready just in case. It can be useful, but in situations like this one it's uncomfortable.

"So what's really going on," Scott asks then, his facial expression becoming slightly more serious. Now, that's a really difficult question to answer. Where should Ilya even begin?

“Shane dumped him and didn’t tell him why, so now he’s acting out,” Svetlana responds before Ilya can figure out what answer to give. He was taking slightly longer than he should’ve.

“Seriously?”

“You and Hollander, huh?” Scott offers a teasing smile, “Finally. Well deserved bud.”

“Thank you,” Ilya smiles back, hoping that the warmth in his cheeks doesn’t result in too strong of a blush.

“Of course you are encouraging this. You have no idea how big of a hustle this has been for us here,” Svetlana says to Scott, pointing between himself and the junior staff members.

“What hustle? They can’t meet here, or in Neo City, so I assume they fly off to Caelum and fly back. Hopefully Ilya does it with his own private vehicle, and without involving taxpayer’s money.”

Scott’s right about the entire thing from beginning to end. Ilya’s really glad that Scott figured it out so easily. To him that means that Scott, the smartest and bravest person he knows, would’ve done the same.

“But I had to lie to get him out of meetings,” Svetlana complains, making Ilya snort in disagreement.

“You’re making it sound like you did that a hundred times, Svetle, it was just twice.”

“That’s two times too many. Wake up earlier if you want morning sex,” Svetlana retorts.

“Don’t schedule meetings at 9 am for mornings when I don’t wake up on the island.”

“He makes a point,” Kip agrees with him, surprising everyone in the process. Kip never agrees with Ilya, about anything. He says it’s Scott’s job to enable him, not his. “So we’re here as couples councilors?”

Ilya confirms with “Yes,” at the same time as Svetlana says, “Maybe, we don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Ilya asks with bitterness in his voice.

What is there not to know? Shane doesn’t want him anymore. Couples counseling is the way to go here. With all the fighting they’ve been doing in the last month, it’s not going to be an easy task for Scott to perform. Cause let’s face it Scott will be the one helping here, he doubts Rose would be willing to help him get back together with Shane.

“Shane and Ilya, does it surprise you?” Svetlana asks, addressing Scott with the question. Ilya catches Kip shaking his head in response before Scott answers.

“No, they’ve been in love since we were teens. One is more obvious, the other hides it but

has it worse.”

Hearing it phrased like that makes Ilya do a double take. He knows that he’s the obvious one, but that would make Shane the one who has it worse, and that just doesn’t make sense.

If Shane has it worse, then why did Shane break it off.

“Exactly,” Svetlana smiles, satisfied that Scott gets exactly what he’s trying to say. Ilya seems to be the only one that didn’t know about Shane’s feelings. Even the junior staff members look like he knew all along.

“I’ll set a meeting for tomorrow if possible, and we’ll find out exactly what’s going on,” Scott promises. That’s the exact thing he’s here to do, help them settle things. Ilya knew this was coming.

He just wonders why he’s excited to see Shane again, while also dreading it at the same time.

Scott gives him an update about the schedule about an hour later, just as Ilya gets comfortable under his covers. The people in his cabinet just love interrupting him during his relaxation time. At least he hadn’t put his audiobook on yet. He was too busy checking his phone for any response and sending a check-in message to Shane.

“I talked to Ro and checked your schedule. It’s all set. Tomorrow at noon on Caelum. And we take your jet, cause it’s your faux-pas that got us in trouble and you have a caring ruler that doesn’t waste the nation’s money image to maintain.”

There isn’t a single question in Scott’s little speech. He has it all figured out, he’s here to clean up the mess, and that’s exactly what he’s going to do. He’s determined, and Ilya’s happy to hear it. He wants this to be over as soon as it possibly can be.

The other thing that sticks out to him is the nickname, and he just has to ask.

“Why do you call her Ro? Are you two friends or something?”

“Yeah. Best friends. She’s over at my and Kip’s apartment so much, we’re basically living together,” Scott explains. How did Ilya not know this before? He asked about their life in the states, didn’t he? He’s almost sure he did, and he’s most definitely certain that Rose wasn’t mentioned. Scott once again has a teasing smile across his lips when he asks, “Why? Are you jealous of our friendship?”

“No.”

“Then you’re jealous cause she and Shane...”

Ilya doesn't allow him to finish his sentence. Scott can be blunt with his words, and he doesn't want to be reminded of it in that manner. "Yes," he simply says.

"You really are an idiot. Shane will never. They're friends, barely, but friends," Scott promises. Ilya really hopes that he's right about this. The last thing he needs is a reason to be jealous, with having declared a war and all, that war might actually come true.

Ilya has a lot to think about and it takes away from his sleep. Everything Scott and Svetlana said today is the opposite of helpful, it goes against everything he thought he knew.

How can they be so certain that Shane reciprocates his feelings when he does this? How can he be sure that Shane feels the same way when he ended it? How can he be sure that his own feelings haven't changed when he hasn't seen him in so long?

Okay, that last part is a stupid question, Ilya admits it to himself the moment he thinks of it.

His feelings for Shane have never changed, and they're never going to change.

It's to no one's shock that Ilya asks for his best suit to be ready for the day. Svetlana anticipates it, maybe. Ilya can't tell for sure, but by her facial expression, she seems satisfied with the outcome, almost like she won a bet. Knowing his friends, Ilya decides it's a high possibility that there actually was one.

As the time for the meeting approaches, Ilya grows more and more nervous and wary. He wonders if Shane's going to say something, anything. If he's going to bring up that godforsaken letter again, or even explain why he wrote it instead of speaking to Ilya. They could've figured it out if they just talked about it like normal people, Ilya is certain of it. If they didn't figure it out, he could've at least had one last night together with Shane, some closure before he is forced to act like nothing happened between them.

"It'll be okay," Kip tells him as they're getting on the jet. It sounds like a promise that he shouldn't make, and it worries Ilya more. If he's so distressed that even Kip attempts to comfort him and reassure him, then what is Ilya going to do if today goes badly and it doesn't solve anything? He's been able to deal with so much in the past, yet Shane is the only thing he has a hard time getting over.

The flight to Caelum is as smooth as ever, but tension grows in Ilya, a knot forming in his stomach. It's the uncertainty of it all that makes him feel that way. The people around him feel his tension. He doesn't want to worry them as much as he does, it's not fair that they are burdened with his problems, he realizes it then.

This better end today, so Ilya can know where he stands and find a solution for himself.

Shane and his team have arrived before them, so when they get off the jet, they are greeted by Shane's bodyguard. He leads them straight to the meeting room, where everyone except Shane is already waiting. They say hi, Ilya even greets Rose, and acts civilized, all the while he's struggling not to ask the obvious question. Kip does it for him instead.

"Where's Shane?"

"He went to get something from his office," Hayden answers.

Everyone finds a seat around the conference table, waiting for Shane to arrive. It's not weird at all, even with Ilya's dislike of Rose for being Shane's ex. They all still know each other since they were young. They're all still friends, that party and drink together. Tease each other. When they start teasing each other, there's no end to it.

That reminds Ilya of something he wanted to know.

"Do you three ever get together, read news articles about the kingdoms and make fun of how Shane and I are doing?" he asks, pointing between Kip, Scott, and Rose. There's no pause between it and Rose's answer.

"Every Friday evening, it's a standing date. We take shots for every stupid thing we read," she tells him, then smiles.

Is she trying to get on Ilya's nerves? She looks and sounds so smug when she says it that Ilya can't let go of it. Maybe he's reading into it a bit. Nevertheless, he still says it.

"If you hurt Shane again, I'll have you murdered. Do you hear me, Rose?"

Rose appears to be completely unbothered by it while Scott pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Untwist your royal panties, Your Majesty. That's not why I'm here," she returns, a somewhat annoyed facial expression.

Again with the smugness. If they were regular people, or at least not on official business, Ilya wouldn't think twice and he'd start yelling. He'd lose the fight because Rose isn't one to hold back, and she isn't a stranger to fighting people either. It's literally her job. But at least he'd lose with pride cause he actually stood up to her, and not with his power and connections.

He's about to stand up and start yelling when the door of the conference room opens and Shane walks in. No hello or anything. If this was a meeting observed by anyone from the outside, they would be using titles and official terms, and they'd stand up in respect of Shane's position. But because they are who they are, none of it is necessary.

Shane walks with determined steps all the way to the seat at the other end of the table, across from Ilya, and places a surprisingly thick folder of documents in front of himself.

“I want only His Majesty and the ambassadors to stay for the meeting. Kip, Svetlana, and Hayden can stay too,” Shane orders, an astounding lack of interest in his voice. It makes Ilya’s heart sink. He had a tiny bit of hope that this would end with things in his favor before, but now that hope is gone.

Maybe a war will be the right answer here.

“Me and Svetlana, I get. But why Kip?” Hayden asks as he watches the rest of the teams exit the conference room.

“Kip can stay because Scott is physically unable to keep secrets from him,” Rose responds with a joke. Will she ever shut up or will Ilya have to make her? Why does she make him so... angry simply by existing.

“I’m not even going to bother acting like that’s not true. We’re a package deal,” Scott says with a laugh, and Ilya rolls his eyes. Their love can be so embarrassing sometimes.

Svetlana waits for everyone tasked with leaving to exit the room and close the door before she asks, “Now, will you now tell us what’s going on?”

“I’m not going to say anything. I want a piece of paper and a pen,” Shane says. Hayden is the fastest, having anticipated it, he hands Shane the paper and pen.

Ilya can’t even think about what’s going on in Shane’s mind, or what the situation is. All he can focus on right now is that Shane hasn’t spared him a single look since he came into the conference room.

Shane writes on the paper while everyone sits in silence, waiting for the big reveal. He then stands up, pushing the chair back with his legs. He walks around the table, places the piece of paper in front of Ilya and gestures with a finger over his mouth that he should be quiet while he reads it. He repeats the motion for everyone in the room. They all need to be quiet. Got it. Fucking drama queen.

Ilya picks it up and starts reading.

You and your team are being spied on. My intel says phones are being tapped and everyone in your close circle is monitored. I had all my castles and government buildings swept for bugs. My shit was clean, but we found bugs here in Caelum Castle. Had to fire and replace the groundskeepers and up the security. We keep checking to make sure it remains clean, nothing so far.

You’re not safe, someone is working against you. Leaking information and trying to abolish you.

Read the goddamn letter. What we suspect is in there. I brought the documents since you didn’t take them.

I’m trying to protect you.

He needs a few moments to process what he reads. Ilya passes the piece of paper to Scott. He leans over the table, putting his head in both hands and tries to think.

Of course there was something fishy about all those headlines. They were listening to him. They probably are listening to him right now.

Who can he even trust?

He leans back, then reaches into the inside of his jacket, pulling out the letter Shane gave him that night.

“You had that with you this entire time?” Shane asks him, slightly annoyed. He looks up and their eyes meet for the first time that day. Ilya no longer feels like a scolded puppy.

“Inside the jacket pocket, right over my heart.”

“What the fuck am I gonna do with you?”

“Wait. This isn’t just because you want to stop hooking up?” Scott blurts out the question.

“You two are doing what?” Rose asks immediately, a shock on his face. Finally a win for Ilya, learning that Shane hasn’t trusted her with that information makes him feel so happy. Insanely so. And even better, he knows exactly how to respond to Rose’s query.

“Untwist your diplomatic panties, Rose.”

“How did you expect this to end, though?” Rose challenges.

“Marriage,” Ilya says, only to earn groans and eye rolls from everyone in the room, while Shane gets startled, judging from his facial expression. Ilya has never seen him so terrified. Is he caught off guard by Ilya’s admission or is that something Ilya shouldn’t be saying out loud.

“Not with that thing in the constitution still in place,” Kip notes, and Shane immediately gestures for Kip to shut up. Okay?

“What thing in the constitution are you talking about?” Ilya asks as he’s completely clueless.

“Yeah, Kip. What thing?” Shane fakes confusion, while still gesturing for everyone to stay quiet. The thing in the constitution must be a clue to whatever’s going on. If it is what he thinks it is, then Ilya should’ve definitely written the marriage thing down then passed the note around. “Read the letter,” Shane insists again, this time mouthing the words in caution. The seriousness of the situation settles then, and Ilya finally opens the letter.

Rozy,

This is the last thing I want to do. Believe me when I tell you that I've tried it in all the other ways. This is the only way.

In 1907, when Nikolay came out to your family, your great-great-grandfather put in the constitution that the royals have to provide biological offspring and have to marry the opposite sex. I'm sure you remember that history lesson. Your father didn't exactly get rid of that bit, despite everything he promised.

They're trying to use this to remove you from power. I don't know exactly who 'they' are, but according to my people, 'they' are connected to the Intelligence Office. All the documents I received are in the safe in my office in Caelum Castle. I can't actually give them to you or tell you all this in case someone is listening or watching. They have to be, they were listening here. We removed mics and cameras last week, there's more detail in the files in the office. The code is our anniversary.

I wish I could tell you all of this instead of having to write it, but nowhere where we meet is safe. We're not exactly sure of their reach, or their identities. I need us to make it seem like nothing more is going on so we can investigate it better. If they know you know, then what we have is compromised.

I'm sorry I had to make this decision for us both. I'm sorry I chose this way.

Don't consider it a break up. That's not what this is. It's just me trying to protect you, not giving them incentive until you figure out what's going on over there.

I can't wait for this to be over so we can be together again. I already know I'm going to miss you like crazy.

I love you.

Please be safe.

Ilya sighs, both because he feels relieved that Shane reciprocates his feelings, and because he feels stressed out by the situation. If Shane's right, and he has no reason to doubt him, then he has so much to do to ensure his own safety. And he's also pissed off that he can't enjoy the admission of love because they're probably listening to him right now.

He has to pick the route that Shane went down on. He gets up and takes paper and a pen from Hayden.

I love you too.

Can I hug you at least? Please.

Ilya only gives Shane a hug after he receives permission in the form of a nod.

When he wakes up the next morning to a new headline, Ilya's no longer surprised.

Negotiations Going South? King Rozanov Allegedly Threatens to Murder the Mediators - RTS NEWS

He's not taken aback by it, he's just uncomfortable that they were listening to him there. In a meeting in a castle that was checked for bugs hours prior.

That must mean that the bug is on him.

It's not challenging at all to become a citizen of Ortus Islands or of Neomenia. They have always been open to accepting immigrants, they have jobs for everyone, anyone who wants to move for whatever reason is welcome to do so. There are some things they need to do, like secure a job, and find a place to stay, do it for a year before they are qualified for citizenship, but other than that, if they want to live there, they can.

Honorary citizenship isn't something they give out though, mostly because they don't need to, with the process being simple and all. The royals are the only honorary citizens, officially. The Hollanders are honorary citizens of Ortus Islands, the Rozanovs are citizens of Neomenia. That's what the public knows.

There is one honorary citizen of both kingdoms whose citizenship is secret. He's also an unofficial member of the friend group.

They met him when they were teens, in the middle of the summer, in Neo City. He showed certain talents that both kingdoms were in need of at the time, so Ilya and Shane insisted and lobbied their fathers, and he got that secret honorary citizenship by offering his services.

Nowadays, he's a bit of a mystery. He travels around the world, enjoying his life. There are rumors between the group about where he is because they don't really know. The last Ilya figured was that he was in Italy, because of his online feed being mostly pictures of pizzas and using Italian for his captions.

None of it matters though, because if Ilya asks him to come, he immediately will, no questions asked. That's the deal.

And that's what Ilya ordered last night, in the form of a note he wrote and passed to Svetlana.

He looks over the documents Shane gave him, full of information that leads in interesting directions that ends up being dead-ends. It's right, it makes sense, it all comes with proof. Ilya still feels like he has to decipher it, and the fact that he can't come to a conclusion, he can't point at someone and be certain about it, it makes him frustrated. Angry.

So he asks for the one person who can solve anything.

Text Carter tomorrow. Tell him to come ASAP.

Carter is a fixer.

He runs in secretive circles, and some of what he does is technically illegal, but Carter gets things done, he fixes whatever needs fixing. He can hack anywhere Shane and Ilya need him to, he can find a way for anything Shane and Ilya need him to.

Now Ilya needs him to track this group and find out all the details.

Carter shows up ten minutes after Svetlana sends him the text from the 'safe phone' he gave them the last time they saw him. It's a surprise that he shows up so fast. Ilya really expected Carter to still be somewhere in Europe.

The first thing that Carter does is take Ilya's devices and takes out actual small microphones from all of them. He does the same for everyone on Ilya's team.

He then kills the power in the castle, then brings some gadget with him, and starts going through all the rooms, pulling out wires, microphones and cameras. Ilya stands and watches in awe. All of that was going on right underneath his nose.

"Everything is clear now," Carter tells him after he cuts the last wire. They're in Ilya's home office, the room they left for last. Carter climbs down the ladder, places the little round device he found in the chandelier in a plastic bag. It's evidence, it needs to be treated carefully, "You can talk all you want. Tell me your secrets Rozanov."

Ilya doubts that he has any secrets from Carter, even if there's something he hasn't told him, Carter has ways of finding things out. Instead of saying anything, Ilya asks a question.

"How did you come here so fast?"

Carter smiles at him warmly, "I've been on the island for two weeks now. Shane called and told me to come here because you'll need me, and that you're taking too long to realize it" he explains, his tone of voice light.

"He called you? You told me to only text you."

Ilya is concerned about what's going on, of course he is. The bugs are removed, but there's still so much to be done. He's going with this conversation because he doesn't want to only focus on that right now. It'll stress him out even more. He needs a break from it. He's grateful that Carter isn't pushing the subject further, they can go back to talking about it in a few minutes. For now, this calm and normal conversation is really nice.

"I didn't tell you that. What I said to you, I also said to Shane and he calls me twice a week," Carter tells him, smiling. Carter has a calm and supportive energy to him, it's exactly what Ilya needs right now. He sighs, it's not exactly a thought that prompts it, it's a feeling inside his chest. A weight that promises to be gone if he just exhales it away. It doesn't exactly work, but he still tries it. Carter reads through him, so he reminds him of something more positive, "Svetlana should be here with the new phones soon. You can then go back to texting Shane. He'll respond now."

Ilya smiles. A safe phone most definitely means that Shane's going to respond. It has to. Because they love each other, they said that yesterday.

It's reassuring. All of Ilya's problems aren't solved with that one sentence, but he feels slightly easier.

"If you and Hollander talk twice a week, then I don't need to tell you any of my secrets, you already know them," he jokes. Carter smiles back at him.

"That can't be all of it. What's one thing you haven't told anyone?"

Ilya has one thing he didn't tell anyone and it happened in the last 24 hours.

"I almost committed a crime and decked Rose yesterday. It was very misogynistic of me."

Carter fakes a pout so he can hide his smile. "Aw, jealous baby."

"I'm not jealous. She's a smug asshole that never lets me forget she was with Shane first," Ilya attempts, earning a look from Carter that tells him he's not buying it. The truth will have to do, then. "Fine, I was jealous," he says and exhales. This feels like the right moment for him to come back to the most important subject of the day. "What's the next step here?"

"What do you mean?"

"We need to find out who did this."

Carter stares at him blankly for a moment and Ilya wonders if there's something that he's missing.

"I already did. I gave the information to the police."

"You already did," Ilya repeats in disbelief.

"Shane didn't say anything. He kind of insinuated something was wrong though, so I took

matters in my own hands.”

“Walk me through your steps. But the usual way. You know, like I’m an illiterate child.”

“I figured if something was wrong you would know. I jumped on the signal off your phone and realized someone else was on it. They were surveying you both ways. I tracked it down to the Intelligence Office building, then tracked down the exact computer thanks to their... sorry, illiterate child,” Carter lists his procedure, taking a pause for either dramatic effect, or to catch his breath, Ilya isn’t sure. “I hacked into the cameras to see who uses the computer and who they communicate with and surveyed them for the last ten days. I also hacked into some emails, to figure out who was the leader. You’re going to need a new director for the agency by the way. And you might want to stop interacting with your cousins all together.” Ilya’s going to force himself to forget that Carter hacked into his phone, and a whole bunch of other places, and the invasion of privacy that it is. He trusts that Carter won’t say anything to anyone about all the texts he sent to Shane. He’s never done anything of the sort in the past. What matters more than his own privacy is that Carter got it all done. He has his back. And Ilya will have his in exchange. “The dude from the police said he’s going to try to get warrants by this afternoon. You should turn on the news, probably.”

Ilya sits still for about a minute, in awe of how easy and convenient this was. People have his back. The right people in his life, the family he chose. They are the only ones he can trust. People that will go out of their way to make sure he’s okay.

Carter allows him to process, but he has to snap back to reality when Svetlana enters the office.

“New phone,” Svetlana says, handing Ilya an unopened box. Ilya can know for sure that it’s safe that way. “And I just heard they just got the warrants for arrest. Between Shane’s documents and what Carter dug up, they have everything they need.”

It hasn’t settled in though.

“I still can’t believe that it was actually this easy.”

Svetlana rolls his eyes at him.

“When has anything been difficult with Carter? Especially when he has a head start? He fixes things.”

Carter smiles proudly in response to Svetlana’s remark.

He indeed fixes things.

They’re watching a news coverage of the arrests in the one living room in the central castle,

the one that Ilya uses most. To him it still feels like the entire situation is foreign, like he's detached from it. The thing that proves to him that this is an actual thing that's happening in front of him and not some weird fever dream is that his friends are there. They're witnessing the same thing he is, they're commenting on it.

That and Svetlana pinching him every few minutes per his requests.

"Can I blame my mess on you?" he asks Scott, looking at him with puppy eyes and pouting slightly. Scott smiles at him in response.

"Go ahead," Scott says, moving in his seat so that he's closer to Ilya in anticipation.

"You left me alone with Svetlana for a year, and this happened."

Scott narrows his eyes then replies, "That's blaming it on Svetlana."

"I'm fine with that," Ilya shrugs.

"I'm not," Svetlana retorts. She's sitting on the other end of the couch with a laptop on her lap, keeping up to date with emails and messages from the police.

The charge that is brought up against the group is treason. It's a heavy word. Ilya's going to have to address this later, and Svetlana and her assistants are getting all the information he needs so he won't fuck up at the press conference.

Director of Intelligence Office Arrested flashes on the screen as a huge reminder that Ilya's work has just begun. The director that's getting arrested was put in position by his father. Ilya didn't replace him in his father's honor, they were close friends. He now sees that keeping him was a mistake. He also sees that there's only one man that can replace him.

"Would you and Kip be willing to move back? I want you to run the Intelligence Office."

"It's up to Kip," Scott says to him. They both turn towards him, expecting his answer. Kip considers it for what feels like hours, but it's actually just a minute.

"I want to move back. New York was fun, but everyone I care about is here. I want to go back to work and..." Kip takes a moment to figure out the best way to say it, "settle down," he concludes.

Scott smiles at him, "We're in," he confirms it to Ilya.

Okay. One thing ticked off. Onto the next one. Someone needs to take over for Scott.

"Sveta?" he calls, "Were you serious about going to New York?"

Svetlana looks up from the laptop she's working on.

"For a visit? Sure. To take over for Scott? I could never. But I do know who you can send,"

he says.

Ilya is intrigued, but it's something he'll need to think about some more. The only thing he's certain about is that he needs Scott to clear house in the Intelligence Office.

Once the group is arrested, but before any information can be released to the public, Ilya is brought into a meeting where the interior minister brings him up to date on the entire operation. He already knows the things that were in the documents he got from Shane. He had barely any idea what Carter discovered, and some of it is simply shocking. The scope of it is larger than he initially thought. Shane really wasn't kidding about his cousins. All three of them together in the mix. He's not sponsoring any of them once they leave jail.

What he finds out is that they had been listening since the beginning of the year. That's a lot longer than he thought. The group is smaller than expected, but they're all in influential positions, which brings us to the second charge the minister is bringing up. Abuse of power.

The scariest thing that Ilya finds out during the meeting has to do with the recordings and the potential of them being released to the public if they have to be brought up during the trial. He has nothing to hide when it comes to how the kingdom's running. People also know that he works with his close friends, so it won't be a surprise if they hear their banter.

What he's afraid of is that the public will hear him in his most intimate moments. He always has his phone by his side.

They will hear him and Shane on Caelum. They will hear their conversations.

He can't let that happen, and he tells the minister that. If Shane's on the recording, the recording will not be used. Scott seconds his statement by reminding everyone in the room that the kingdom has a two-party consent law when it comes to recording anything, and technically, Shane could sue them.

That shuts everyone up and makes Ilya feel lighter. No one needs Shane to also threaten a war.

There's a plan in place that Ilya needs to follow for the press conference. There are some points he needs to make, things he needs to declare.

None of them war.

"Don't be too wild, and please don't embarrass me like you did last time," Svetlana tells him

instead of good luck right before Ilya walks into the press center. It's going to be a shitstorm, and Svetlana doesn't allow him to forget that.

The press room is filled to the brim. There's double the amount of journalists than usual, if not triple. With everything going on, with what he has to address, none of it a surprise. It makes it so difficult too. Ilya normally isn't normally nervous about press conferences. They're not exciting enough for him to be nervous about them.

This one is different. Because the journalists have decided not to cooperate.

"Reports say that there is no progress in the peace talks with Neomenia. In olden days this type of crisis would usually be solved by marriage between the royals of the two kingdoms."

That's not even a question, it's an observation. Observation that hits really close to home.

They want him to address the plans for solving the nonexistent crisis, apparently.

"There isn't a crisis to be solved here," Ilya says. He looks at the dissatisfaction on the journalist's face and he decides to start shit. Might as well, while he's here, "But that also doesn't mean it won't end in marriage."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Who knows what the future holds," he responds. He points to a different journalist, expecting them to ask about something else, but it turns out to be more of the same. Yes strangers, let's talk about my boyfriend and the inevitable nuptials.

"Our constitution forbids the rulers from entering same-sex marriages. Still to this day. Your father never attempted to change it." Once again an observation. My father was a dick who knew I was gay and wanted me to suffer, Ilya wants to say. He holds his tongue on this though. His father's death is still fresh in the nation's eyes, so he can't badmouth the man yet. In a few years though he'll be all over it. Free real estate.

"It's time that I do, then. The royal family members have been forced to deny their own sexuality for too long. The constitution allows all our citizens to love who they love and marry who they want. I don't understand why the royals are different. I'm not going to do that to the future generations of the royal bloodline," he states, his voice filled with conviction. Svetlana gave him the green light for what follows. It's now or never, "Or to myself."

And with that, he's out to the public.

"Are you saying you're gay?"

"Yes. I am. Bisexual, if I have to be precise," he responds.

Is he supposed to feel different after saying it? Is it weird that he feels the same?

The following journalist pushes him a bit closer to the edge. The look Svetlana is giving him from the corner reminds him to stay civil. Pick his words.

“The rule is there in order to protect the royal bloodline.” Again with the observations.

Ilya might not be able to talk shit about his dad yet, but he can talk shit about the family members that ruled before him.

“The rule is there because my great-great-grandfather was homophobic and he used it in order to hurt his own child. I am not my great-great-grandfather, or my father. It’s time for our country to move on from the miscalculations in our past in a more positive direction.” He almost went too far with the answer, and he did take a dig at his dad, but he caught himself in time. Calling his great-great-grandfather homophobic is far from news, so no one focuses on that. “It’s my job to worry about the royal bloodline, it’s not yours,” he adds. With his palm Svetlana gestures to him that he’s on shaky grounds with that comment.

“What will you do then to assure that you have someone that will take over for you and run the country when the day comes?” Finally a question. But did it really have to be that question?

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“That’s not an answer, Your Majesty.”

“Maybe I’ll have a child with a surrogate, maybe I’ll adopt. Maybe we won’t be a kingdom anymore. I can’t give you a straight answer at the moment. It’s something I should discuss with my husband first.” Svetlana nods approval even though Ilya himself isn’t sure of that answer.

“His Majesty King Shane Hollander?”

“Maybe.” Most definitely. “I’ll say it again. Who knows what the future holds?”

Ilya does. Shane should know it by now too. It’s either him, or Ilya’s going to remain single for the rest of his life.

“Your Majesty, do you have any comment or information to share about the arrests that were carried out in the Intelligence Office this afternoon? Among the arrested agents was the director of the agency.”

This answer is a rehearsed one, it’s the official story they agreed on. Ilya takes a deep breath before he answers.

“Up until a few hours ago there was a small faction within the Intelligence Office that had taken it upon itself to remove me from power. Me and my team were apparently surveyed since the beginning of this year,” Ilya announces, allowing the information to be absorbed by the press before he continues, “The Intelligence Agency of Neomenia had noticed that certain information about our kingdom was being spread before official statements were released,

and because of that they investigated. They shared their information with me and my team and helped us figure out exactly what was going on,” he says, “The rumors about the relations between our kingdom and Neomenia were started by this group in an attempt to cast doubt on my character and potentially discredit me. That is all the information I have at the moment. Our interior minister will address the rest of your concerns as soon as the investigation allows him to.”

“Why did you declare war then? And is it true that you threatened to murder our ambassador Scott Hunter, and Rose Landry, Neomenia’s ambassador?”

“I never declared a war.” It was a fucking joke, lady. “I didn’t threaten murder either. Not seriously. It’s an ongoing joke between me and Scott Hunter, who is a childhood friend of mine.” It’s true, but it hurts to admit. Him and Rose being friends, on the other hand... Disgusting. “And that was part of a conversation which me and everyone around me thought was private up until I spoke to King Shane and he shared their findings with me.”

The journalists change again. Ilya notices that Svetlana starts to slowly approach the podium and he relaxes a bit. Svetlana approaching must mean the end is near and she’s going to get him out of here.

“What else is going on behind the scenes that the public does not know about, Your Majesty?” the journalist asks him. Ilya thinks about it for a moment before he gives him an answer.

“There won’t be fireworks for the Foundation Day celebrations this year. They’re bad for the environment, so we’re replacing them with paper lanterns that are a hundred percent biodegradable.”

Who knew that out of everything he said, the paper lanterns would cause the most commotion.

Shane texts him that he’s proud of him and that he loves him just as Ilya gets back to the castle after the press conference. He has a smile on his face for about an hour after he receives the text.

He and Shane are back on their bullshit. That’s how Svetlana phrases it at least.

They text, and talk on the phone, and it’s almost like they didn’t ‘break up’. The only thing that they have left to do before Ilya can say that they’re acting like they normally do is to meet up in secret over the weekend on Caelum.

Ilya realizes that they're much closer to that coming true than he initially thought when he gets woken up by his phone going off at five in the morning and it's Shane calling. If it was anybody else calling, even if the building was on fire, he'd hang up and go back to sleep. But it's Shane and this is a somewhat normal occurrence. He's always had nightmares, however, ever since the plane crash they changed and got much worse. When Ilya found out by a complete accident the first night they spent together on Caelum, he insisted that Shane tell him exactly what he dreamed about. He also insisted that Shane call him to talk it out the next time he had a nightmare. It's what Shane's been doing ever since.

Ilya kind of missed it during their break, not because he likes hearing that Shane's having a hard time, that he was struggling with getting rest out of all things, but because he knows Shane didn't tell anyone else about the nightmares. Shane went through it alone, without anyone to talk to so he can calm down. He did that to protect Ilya.

"Hey," Shane greets him. The note of distress in his voice makes Ilya's heart stop for a moment.

"Hey."

"Sorry, it's the middle of the night, and I shouldn't..."

Shane always does that, he always apologizes for calling in the middle of the night, as if Ilya didn't specifically ask him to do it.

"It's fine," he interrupts him, "Are you okay?"

"Yep, yeah. It's just..."

"Tell me," he insists.

"I had a nightmare. I really needed to hear your voice."

"I'm here. And you're okay," he says, purposely keeping his voice calm, "Was it the same dream again?"

"Yes. You were on the plane this time too, and I know it's ridiculous, but I got scared. I had to talk to you," Shane explains, "I'm sorry. I woke you up."

"Don't apologize. I'm always happy to talk to you. You need me and I'm here. That's what we do."

Shane hums in response and Ilya can tell that he wishes he didn't have to do this. Shane never wants to bother anyone. That is one of the reasons he always stated when they talked about why he was uncomfortable having a title. Giving out orders equals bothering someone in his books.

"Are you on your balcony right now?" he asks. He knows Shane usually likes to get some

fresh air after waking up from his bad dreams. It helps him calm down a bit. Ilya's banking on it now.

"I am, yes," Shane confirms, and Ilya can hear him breathing in deeply.

"Look at the sky, then. Pick a star," Ilya says, "Do you remember that game we played when we were younger? What would you do and what would you be if you were there right now?"

"I remember."

"You always picked something calm. Never in the spotlight."

"You always chose selfless things," Shane returns. There's a smile in his voice, Ilya can't help but note.

"There are so many stars and planets out there. So many suns and moons. We're so small and insignificant compared to them," he says. He's partially thinking out loud when he adds, "Puts things in perspective. However big the issue feels, it's not bigger than all of that out there. We can solve whatever it is."

There's barely a moment between him making the promise and Shane asking, "Did you mean what you said?" It takes Ilya off guard. The determined tone of voice is somewhat of a rarity.

"I say a lot of things."

"At the press conference a few days ago, and during the meeting too. The thing about marriage."

"I did. Am I wrong? Am I not supposed to?"

"You are not wrong," Shane responds urgently. His voice softens for the next bit. "Ask me."

"Over the phone?"

"Yes."

Ilya smiles to himself. He takes a deep breath and just does it. Why the hell not? He needs to know for sure one of these days anyway.

"Will you marry me, Shane?"

Shane doesn't allow a second to pass before he answers, showing Ilya how determined he is with the action.

"Yes, Rozy, I will marry you."

"I love you."

“I love you too.”

“I wish I could be there with you right now.” Ilya’s confession prompts Shane to suggest a genius idea.

“Can we meet? Saturday afternoon on Caelum?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

Saturday is both too near and too far away.

Saturday afternoon Ilya flies off to Caelum by himself with a change of clothes and a family heirloom in a jewelry box in his pocket. He didn’t have the time during his hectic week to go shopping for something new, with it being so impromptu and all, so he went for his mother’s wedding band.

He didn’t tell anyone about it. Ilya wants to keep it a secret for a bit, so they can enjoy it before the formal protocols are put in place. Shane said the exact same thing, so Ilya didn’t tell anyone. Not even to Svetlana and Scott who were teasing him for being annoyingly happy the morning after, despite everything that’s going on.

Once they go public with the engagement Ilya will commission a local jeweler to make something pretty that will be suitable for Shane. His mother’s wedding band will be the placeholder in the meantime.

Ilya finds Shane in the kitchen.

The first time they sneaked off to Caelum, Ilya woke up to breakfast and Shane in the kitchen like this, all smiley, and really focused at the same time. Ilya was pretty sure he was in love with Shane before they spent the night talking and had their first kiss. He knew for sure when he woke up that morning. Then he saw Shane intensely concentrating on frying eggs, and it was cemented.

The scene reminds him of that morning, of how tense the night was. In the kitchen that morning, after two hours of sleep, Ilya saw Shane smile for the first time since the accident. Ilya can’t help but think about how far they’ve come.

“You came,” Shane smiles when he notices him.

“I came. And you’re cooking?”

“It’s just us,” Shane tells him, “The staff has the weekend off. I thought we could use some privacy.”

Ilya nods, then drops his bag next to his feet and closes the space between himself and Shane as quickly as he can. He kisses him for the first time in what feels like years. So much changed in the last week alone, no wonder Ilya feels like so much time has passed.

He ends the kiss, takes a small step back but keeps a hand on Shane’s waist, and he smiles at him. He smiles at his fiancé.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” Shane whispers back, mimicking his tone of voice.

“Do you need any help?”

“No. I have it under control.” Ilya smiles again and nods.

“Can we eat on the roof balcony?” he then asks. Shane’s smile widens before he responds.

“Yes. That sounds really nice.”

That’s the answer Ilya was going for.

“I’ll set the table then.”

Ilya might have had servants and butlers fetching things for him growing up, but once he befriended Shane that changed. Shane made him humble. Shane also made him go into every room in the castle during a particularly boring week about a year after they met, so he is familiar with the layout. He knows where he can find things too.

There’s a storage room on the third floor where the staff puts the china and utensils in case decisions like this one happen. They’re kept there because the former kings were a bit impulsive with the decisions, so the staff was always ready. Ilya isn’t being impulsive right now. He started planning this a few days ago, after when he proposed, this is why he brought his mother’s ring. He’s going to officially ask Shane to marry him in the same spot where he realized his love seven years ago.

He rearranges the balcony furniture so it’s placed the same way he remembers it being back then, he makes it slightly romantic with whatever he finds in the storage closet. There’s always candles in there, at least. Then he heads back downstairs to help Shane bring the dinner up.

Shane’s impressed with the set up, he wows and beams a smile at him. Ilya pulls a chair for

him so they're sitting just like they were that night. He becomes nervous suddenly. As if he doesn't have an answer already.

"It's perfect," he tells him.

"I'm glad you like it," he responds, taking a deep breath to steady himself before continuing, "I wanted to make it special cause I have something I want to give you."

Shane chuckles at him.

"I have something to give you."

Of course he does. Ilya expected that Shane would think of it too.

Ilya came to the island with a Rozanov family heirloom. He leaves it with one from the Hollanders, a hundred new kisses and a handful of 'I love yous' that can hold him over until next week.

"Am I wrong to expect you to behave?" Svetlana asks him.

It's late, way past dinner time, but it's the final meeting before the plans for the Foundation Day are finalized, and it's actually mandatory for him and Shane to be there. The itinerary needs to be run by them both and they need to sign off on it. Without their signatures the plan can't be put in motion.

Ilya's sitting in the office, practically slouching in his chair as he, Svetlana and her assistant are waiting for the video call from Neomenia. They're apparently running a little late.

"Why wouldn't I behave?"

Svetlana sighs. "I don't know where you and Shane stand, is all."

"We're okay," Ilya tells him and shrugs, putting on an innocent act. They're still keeping it under wraps from their friends. Granted, it's just been a week.

They decided to keep it to themselves until Foundation Day. They'll tell their friends after it. Everyone else will have to wait longer to find out.

"Are you sure?"

"Where do you and Carter stand, Sveta?"

To say that Svetlana blushes would be an understatement. Her entire face turns red, her ears too. Ilya can't help but laugh at her. Her assistant snickers too.

“Shut up,” Svetlana snaps, directing it at Ilya only.

“Right back at you,” Ilya returns.

He gets to be proud of the exchange for only a moment as Shane and his team join the meeting.

“Howdy Ortusians,” Hayden greets them with his usual vigor, “Sorry we’re late.”

“Is everything okay?” Ilya asks, expecting Shane to answer.

Hayden answers instead, smirking.

“Everything’s fine. But Svetlana, do me a favor,” he says, “Check if there’s anything new on Ilya’s hands.”

Oh. That’s what happened.

Svetlana looks down at Ilya’s hands and he sees it immediately.

“There is,” she responds towards the camera. She turns to Ilya then, “Did you two get engaged?”

“Yes.”

“And neither of you was going to say anything?” Hayden asks. “You weren’t going to let us be happy for you?”

“We still haven’t confirmed that you’re dating and you’re already engaged. Do you know what kind of PR disaster this is going to be?” Svetlana turns to him, outrage evident in her voice.

“Bigger PR disaster than when he declared a war?” Shane defends him. Ilya thanks him with a smile.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Svetlana leads the climax of the interrogation.

“It’s still new to us,” Shane says, “We selfishly wanted to enjoy it by ourselves first. Apologies.”

“When do you plan on going public?” Hayden asks.

“We’ll let you know in advance,” Shane says.

If this keeps going they’re going to stay here for hours.

“Can we finish the meeting before you scold us more?” Ilya tries to change the subject.

“Is that a request or an order?” Svetlana challenges him.

“I don’t want it to be an order, but I’m not afraid to make it.”

“Fine,” Svetlana exhales, “I’m reading the itinerary now. Let us know about any questions as we go.”

He and Shane don’t change in any way. Their friends know, even though they didn’t want them to, which sends the odd joke their way, but it’s heartfelt, so they don’t complain. Being engaged doesn’t make them feel any different. Ilya’s sure that marriage won’t make any difference either. The only change is that they’ll live together.

Once Ilya moves to make the changes to the constitution, the house of representatives of Ortus Islands calls for an emergency referendum. The polls show that almost eighty percent of the population is in support of the change, so Ilya isn’t too worried. At first, at least.

His cousins make bail somehow, and aid the campaign against. It makes a small difference. Too small.

“It’s hilarious that they’re even trying. I’m putting them in jail anyway,” Scott says, seconding it with laughter. To him it’s hilarious, to Ilya it’s aggravating. He was really nice to them for years, and for what. Backstabbers, the entire Rozanov line. Ilya can’t wait to get some of the Hollander bloodline in his family. Shane’s the best of it too.

Scott settles in his new role really well. He gets to know the agency very well and makes a plan of changes that he needs to make. Ilya trusts him and supports him along the way.

Carter decides to hang around. It most definitely has something to do with Svetlana and whatever they have going on. Ilya’s happy for them. He’s also happy that he has another friend around in this trying time.

The vote is a week before the Foundation Day celebrations begin. After it, they have more to celebrate.

The Foundation Day celebrations are extremely tiring. It's a three day event that starts on Ortus Island, moves to Neomenia on the second day, then ends on Caelum with a private party for just the royals and their closest friends. They address the nations in the mornings on the last day, then they relax. This year is set out to be especially fun because the entire friend group is there. Carter and smug Rose Landry included.

Ilya is on autopilot for the most part. They follow scripts, wary of the cameras around them, and follow protocols that can be a bit frustrating. The schedule is tight, but then again it always is during Foundation Day celebrations.

"Just think of tomorrow and how fun it'll be," Shane tells him. They're landing in Neo City, the morning of the second day, and Shane can tell that Ilya's already tired. Shane's tired too, he's just enthusiastic about it. It's his first Foundation Day as ruler. Without his enthusiasm about it, Ilya would've given into the exhaustion hours ago.

It's fun. Shane's right. When the duties are done, everyone just crashes, talks shit and it feels normal. It feels fun.

Svetlana and Carter are obviously flirting. Kip and Scott are disgustingly in love. Hayden is in his own world, talking about something incredibly serious with Rose, hitting it off beautifully. Everyone's having fun.

But it's also overwhelming. Caelum is quiet and peaceful when it's just the two of them, with or without staff there. With so many people it feels less private. All he's seen in the last three days is people.

Ilya needs a break. That's how he ends up at Shane's favorite spot. The terrace on the roof.

The nights are slightly chiller this time of year, Ilya always forgets it. Still, he sits down, takes a breath of fresh air and looks up at the stars. It's funny how he's never been able to do that without thinking of Shane. He hangs there for a few minutes, before he starts to feel guilty for leaving Shane on his own downstairs.

"I figured you were here," he hears Shane's voice. He turns around to see him approaching with something in his hand. It's too dark for Ilya to determine what it is from that far away.

"I needed a moment," he explains briefly.

"I understand," Shane says to him. He's standing next to him now, and he hands him what Ilya couldn't make up in the darkness. A sweater, "Here. I know you get cold." He knows?

"How do you know?"

“We always come here when the celebrations are done and you start shivering a few minutes in.”

Ilya smiles back at him. Shane couldn't be more right. He's just amazed that he noticed.

“Do you know what today is?” he asks Shane, knowing full well that Shane won't even attempt to answer, “Today marks the eight year anniversary since I realized I'm in love with you.”

“Eight?”

“Yeah.”

“You took your sweet time to act on it,” Shane jokes.

“I wasn't in a rush. I knew I could never lose you.”

Shane nods, accepting it.

“This day, two years from now. That's enough time I think,” Shane tells him, confusing Ilya with his statement.

“What happens then?”

“Our wedding,” he states. No warning or anything. Ilya can't believe it. But it doesn't end there. “And I want kids. And pets. Many cats.”

“I love you so much.”

“I love you too.”

Ilya can feel Shane smiling when he kisses him. It makes him smile too.

End Notes

happy 2026. may everything go your way this year.

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