do not fear (for i am with you)

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by indigyus

Summary

“Bless me, Father,” Shane said, voice steady out of habit. “For I have sinned.”

Ilya Rozanov is an eighteen-year-old who was sent to a Catholic all-boys boarding school by his dad to straighten his messy behavior, where he meets the religious boy who knows nothing but to repent to his sins at least once or thrice a week.

Shane Hollander believed that praying every night and putting God first is what matters over everything, and boys who are like Ilya are resented by the nuns and the church.

In a place built to mold boys into men of God, some sins are harder to confess.

Notes

as a person who grew up at the church and attends sunday mass every weekend with *very* religious parents, writing this one hit me right to the core. the constant guilt i felt for hiding the fact that i wasn’t straight was something that was soo traumatizing growing up.

i wanted to explore the feeling i had while coming to terms with being gay, so with writing this, i wanted shane’s internal struggle of dealing with his sexuality mirror how things went for me, and how those fears disappeared as soon as i came out to my parents.

anyway, i hope you enjoy reading this 💐

See the end of the work for more notes

"Fuck, you're impatient," Ilya murmured, but his smirk gave him away, the same one that made Shane’s stomach twist with heat.

The prayer room was tiny, just enough space for a kneeling bench and flickering votive. The smell of incense and the sharp tang of sweat was pickling their noses as Shane crowded Ilya against the door, fingers already working to open his belt.

Shane nipped at his jaw. "Prayer rooms weren’t made for patience."

“Oh?” Ilya laughed, low and rough, before flipping them effortlessly, pressing Shane back against the cold wood. His hands were already under Shane’s shirt, calloused fingers dragging over ribs, down the taut line of his stomach.

"You first," Ilya growled against his mouth. "On your knees."

Shane didn’t hesitate.

The floor was hard beneath him, but the way Ilya carded a hand through his hair, gentle and possessive all at once, made everything else fade. "Beautiful," Ilya breathed, thumb tracing Shane’s lower lip before pushing in just enough to make him groan. "Always so fucking beautiful like this."

Above them, a stained-glass saint watched silently as Shane took Ilya’s cock with his mouth, slow, deliberate, and worshipping in his own blasphemous way. And when Ilya finally dragged him up to kiss him deep, tasting himself on Shane’s tongue? Well, he realized how some things were holier than prayer.

Shane pulled back just enough to press a kiss to the underside of Ilya's jaw, relishing in the shiver that ran through his body at the touch. "You taste good," he murmured, his lips brushing against the sensitive skin of Ilya's neck.

"And you talk too much," Ilya said, his voice a low, warning rumble. He tightened his grip on Shane's hair, tugging his head back to expose the column of his neck. "Now shut up and keep your pretty mouth busy."

Shane could only groan in response, his voice catching as he felt Ilya's teeth scrape against his pulse. He arched into the touch, his hips rocking forward, desperate for more friction and more contact.

Shane bit back a moan as Ilya's fingers tightened in his hair, his body arching instinctively toward the sharp pressure of teeth against his throat. The rough growl in Ilya's voice sent a shiver down his spine, commanding and *owning* in a way that made Shane's blood burn.

"Fuck," Shane gasped when Ilya finally came in his throat, only to shove him back onto the kneeler, wood creaking under the sudden force.

Ilya crowded behind him, one hand splayed across Shane's stomach to keep him arched, the other already working his jeans open. "Should've known you'd be like this," Ilya muttered

against the shell of his ear, with his hot breath and mocking tone, fingers dragging down Shane's spine.

Shane shuddered, bracing his forearms on the bench as Ilya’s fingers slipped lower, rough and impatient, just like everything else about him.

A candle flickered nearby, casting shadows that danced across the crucifix on the wall.

Sin and salvation were the things mentioned to him every biblical lecture they had, yet Shane didn't care which won right now, not when Ilya's teeth were at his shoulder, biting down hard enough to hurt as he finally—

The chapel bells began to chime.

Perfect fucking timing.

"Rozanov?”

Shane froze. Because that voice, Sister Gabriela’s voice, was right outside the door.

The doorknob rattled and Shane's breath hitched, his entire body going rigid beneath Ilya's hands. Ilya didn't move and didn't twitch, and his broad frame still pressed flush against Shane's back, his cock buried deep where they *absolutely shouldn't be* in a house of God.

"...empty,” her muffled voice carried through the wood. "Try the confessional, Sister."

The footsteps retreated.

Ilya exhaled in a hot rush against Shane's neck. "Fuck," he muttered in a laugh and a groan before rocking his hips forward deliberately. "Close call."

Shane choked on a gasp as Ilya moved just so. "You're insane," he managed, voice wrecked.

Ilya nipped at his earlobe. "You love it."

The chapel bells tolled again as Ilya set a ruthless pace, turning prayer into something far more primal. Shane’s eyes rolled back and his mouth gaped open, one hand trying to muffle the lustful sound about to come out of his lips.

“Bless me, Father,” Shane said, voice steady out of habit. “For I have sinned.”

The confessional smelled of old wood and incense, where Shane knelt with his hands folded so tightly that his knuckles ached. The screen slid shut between him and Father Mateo, leaving only his shadow and the soft rustle of robes.

“How long has it been since your last confession?” the priest asked.

How long has it been? The day Ilya transferred into the campus, he had been assigned to look after the boy and make sure that he was adjusting just fine. But his confessions hadn't been as frequent.

“A week,” Shane replied. The confession he had done last time was… for the same reason.

“And what burdens your conscience, my son?”

Shane swallowed. His throat still felt raw, like something had lodged there and refused to leave. Images pressed at the back of his mind, like the heat, their closeness, the echo of bells cutting through everything, but he forced them down.

“I have… let distraction pull me from prayer,” he said carefully. “I’ve had thoughts I shouldn’t have. Thoughts that don’t go away no matter how much I ask God to take them.”

The priest hummed softly, not unkind. “Temptation is not a sin, child. What matters is what we choose to do with it.”

Shane’s fingers tightened. “What if I don’t know how to choose anymore?”

Another pause. “Then you pray for clarity,” Father Mateo said. “And you remove yourself from whatever leads you astray.”

Shane nodded, even though the words felt like a lie in his mouth, because the problem wasn’t temptation… It was that, for the first time in his life, he didn’t want it taken away.

“For your penance,” the priest continued, “three Hail Marys, and reflection on obedience.”

“Yes, Father.”

The screen slid open. Shane stood on unsteady legs and stepped back into the chapel, candles flickering like they knew something he didn’t.

Father Mateo always said the same thing to him. It hadn't changed since the first time he confessed about something like this. But still, he felt too open after the confessional, every bench in rows a witness. Shane crossed himself and moved to the back, sinking into the nearest seat. His hands trembled when he tried to fold them again, but he gave up and let them rest in his lap instead.

He stared at the altar and tried to remember when obedience had ever felt this heavy, because obedience used to be simple for him. He knows that he needs to do whatever he’s told. He knows when to pray when he’s supposed to. He knows that he should want the right things, or at least pretend he doesn't want the wrong ones. God rewards *effort*, and discipline brings *peace*.

Shane understood these things completely. He was recognized as the top student for being such a responsible pupil, leading the daily morning prayer and being a helping hand to their professors, nuns, and priests.

But now, every rule felt like it had a face.

Ilya's freaking face.

Shane squeezed his eyes shut and forced the thought away. He began the Hail Mary under his breath, each word careful, as if that might save him.

Holy Mary, Mother of God…

His voice swayed anyway.

Because clarity hadn't come in the prayer room nor in the confessional. Not even now, kneeling where saints and sinners had knelt for centuries before him. All he knew was, whatever he was supposed to remove himself from, was already woven too tightly into him to be pulled free without tearing something important.

When the final prayer left his lips, Shane stayed where he was, head bowed.

"I can't be gay."

He muttered the same sentence over and over and over. His eyes stayed shut and his mouth remained zipped as the chaos started building up in his head. Shane pressed his forehead to his clasped hands.

I can't be gay.

The words felt more like a lie the more he repeated them, like they were losing sense each time he said them. Eventually, he stopped saying them altogether and instead, memory crept in.

It always did every time he prayed for forgiveness.

It started on a Tuesday.

He arrived late to morning prayer, boots echoing against stone. Shane had noticed him immediately, not because he wanted to, but because it was his job. He was leading prayer that week, standing at the front with a scripture tucked under his arm, posture straight, and voice steady like the nuns overseeing them.

Everyone else bowed their heads, except one.

He stood by the door, one shoulder braced against the stone, eyes roaming the chapel as if he were mapping exits instead of reading saints. Sunlight from the stained glass caught in his hair, his curls brushing his forehead in careless defiance of the school's strict grooming rules.

Then his gaze lifted. His eyes landed on Shane, and when he did, he never left.

Shane thought it was a mistake and that this boy was looking past him, at something else, or someone else… But the longer it held, the more explicit it became. The boy's eyes narrowed slightly, sharp with curiosity, like Shane was something unexpected placed in his path.

Interest, maybe, and that thought made Shane's breath hitch.

He had spoken these prayers a hundred times before because of how fluent he was in prayer and leading the entire students from the fifth year, but right now, his thoughts scattered uselessly, catching on the details he had no reason to notice. He noticed the soft curl touching the boy's brow, the relaxed set of his mouth, and the way his shirt clung just enough at the chest to draw Shane's gaze before he could stop himself.

Heat crept up his neck.

The other noticed.

The corner of his mouth tipped upward, as if he had seen something in Shane that Shane himself didn't yet understand.

Shane's eyes snapped back to the page, heart pounding so loudly he was certain the others could hear it. His next words came out uneven, unfamiliar in his own mouth. "T-this we pray in the name of Jesus," he said, voice betraying him. "Amen."

The response came from the benches except the boy standing at the side, who didn't respond but just kept looking. And Shane, for the first time in his life, felt seen in a way that felt dangerously close to being known.

Who was that boy?

After their prayer, it was time for lunch before the next class. Everyone began to leave the room, adjusting their uniforms before stepping out of the arch. Shane cleared his throat and left the paper on the podium, fixing his blazer right after. Sister Gabriela found him just as the chapel began to empty.

"Shane Hollander."

Her voice cut cleanly through the low murmur of students filing out. Shane straightened at once out of reflex, already bracing himself for whatever she might say. Every time he gets called out like this, it was either he forgot to do rounds of checking up on students or he didn't do the prayer right. He turned to look at her, hands folding neatly in front of him.

"Yes, Sister?"

She studied him for a moment in the way she always did, like she was weighing something invisible. Then she nodded once, decision made. "You're to report to the headmaster's office after lunch," she said. "Immediately."

A tinge of nervousness churned in his chest. "Is something wrong?"

Did he miss a prayer? Had he spoken out of turn? Did he forget a confession… or did Father betray him of his confession? His mind looked and scrambled for sins faster than reassurance ever could.

“No,” Sister Gabriela replied, which somehow made it worse. “We’ve received a transfer student this morning, and his circumstances were… sudden.”

“You’ll be assigned to him,” she continued. “You’re going to make sure he understands the rules, the schedule, and our expectations. You must make sure that he attends prayer and see that he’s adjusting properly,” her gaze sharpened. “This is important, Hollander.”

Shane nodded, spine straight. “Yes, Sister.”

She hesitated, just briefly, then added, “The boy’s name is Ilya Rozanov.”

Shane didn’t react, at least not outwardly, and years of discipline had taught him that much. Was it the same boy from earlier?

“You were chosen by us because you’re reliable,” Sister Gabriela said, voice going softer. “You lead by example, and the others respect you because of your responsibility.”

Shane swallowed. “I won’t disappoint you, Sister.”

“I know you won’t.”

She turned to leave, already dismissing him from her thoughts, while Shane remained where he was for a moment longer, the echo of her words settling uneasily in his chest.

Reliable, obedient, and good. He had built himself out of those things, and now, apparently, he was trusted to guide someone like Ilya Rozanov through the very structure Shane had never questioned.

By the time lunch ended and Shane stood outside the headmaster’s office, palms faintly damp, he already understood that he hadn’t been chosen by accident… he had been chosen because no one suspected him. Because no one knew of *his* truth.

And as he stood right there, one truth stood quietly at the back of his mind on how this wasn’t just responsibility and rather proximity... and proximity, he was about to learn, was the most dangerous thing of all.

Shane looked into the office and stopped. The room was smaller than the chapel, and it was lined with bookshelves and dark wood, and the light filtered through a tall window behind the headmaster’s desk, casting long shadows across the floor.

And seated to the left was Ilya.

He sat with his chair tilted back just enough to look careless, legs stretched just a little too far out, hands folded loosely in his lap, and his posture relaxed in a way that felt almost disrespectful in front of the headmaster. His tie was crooked and his blazer unbuttoned, but his gaze was lowered, fixed on a spot on the floor.

His gaze lifted the moment Shane entered. It was the same look from the chapel, and Shane felt it like a touch he hadn't given consent to.

“Hollander,” the headmaster said, folding his hands atop the desk. “Come in. Close the door.”

Their eyes met again, and Shane broke eye contact first.

He obeyed what the headmaster said, the soft click resounding too loudly in his ears. He took the empty chair across from the desk, carefully not looking left again, though he could feel Ilya’s presence there, undeniable as heat.

“Shane,” the headmaster said. “Thank you for coming so promptly.”

“Yes, Father,” Shane replied automatically, like he was programmed to do so.

“This,” the headmaster continued, turning slightly, “is Ilya Rozanov.”

“I know,” Shane said before he could stop himself.

The word hung there, and the headmaster raised a brow. Shane cleared his throat, cheeks warming. “I—he arrived during morning prayer.”

“I see,” the headmaster said mildly. He turned his attention back to Ilya. “Mr. Rozanov, this is Shane Hollander. He’s one of our senior students, and he has outstanding behavior. He’s reliable, and he's considered to be a leader among his peers.”

Ilya hummed softly at that, not quite amused, not quite dismissive. “Lucky me,” he murmured, and Shane’s fingers curled slightly against his knee.

“You will refrain from commentary,” the headmaster said firmly.

Ilya nodded once. “Yes, Sir.”

Silence settled again before the headmaster spoke again. “We’ve asked Hollander to be here because we believe that peer guidance will be beneficial,” the headmaster continued. “He will help you understand our routines and expectations. He’ll be there to ensure that you attend our daily morning prayer before classes. He will accompany you during your first week, or longer if needed.”

Shane felt the weight of the words settle onto him like a mantle.

“Shane. Did you hear?”

“Yes, Father,” he replied.

Ilya shifted beside him then, the wood of the chair creaking softly. Shane caught the slight roll of Ilya’s shoulders, the way he leaned back like he was bracing himself for something inevitable, in his peripheral vision.

“You have been given an opportunity, Mr. Rozanov,” the headmaster said. “This school values discipline, reflection, and growth.”

Ilya’s jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

“I understand,” he said.

Shane expected that it was over, given that the headmaster had already said the things that might have been needed to be told, but he was wrong. The headmaster did not dismiss them immediately.

Instead, he leaned back in his chair, fingers crossed, gaze settling on Ilya. His eyes didn't have to lie, because the way he looked at Ilya told them that he had already read every file, every note, and every warning about Rozanov.

“Mr. Rozanov,” he said calmly, “your transfer here was not a matter of convenience.”

Ilya lifted his eyes again, expression carefully blank. “I’ve been told.”

The headmaster did not rise the tone. “Your previous school documented repeated absences, altercations, and a disregard for authority.”

Shane’s stomach tightened. Beside him, Ilya remained still, jaw set, eyes forward.

“You have been given more chances than most,” the headmaster continued. “And yet, each time, you seem determined to test the limits of patience,” his voice wavered slightly, given that he was… old. His white hair was not to be overlooked, and Shane kept looking at it the longer he sat here.

“This institution will not indulge that behavior, especially your… confusions.”

Ilya’s fingers flexed once in his lap before stilling again. “Understood.”

The headmaster regarded him for a moment longer, then added, quieter but firmer, “You are here because your father believes structure will succeed where leniency has failed. Whether he is correct is entirely up to you.”

Shane dared a glance sideways, looking at the boy beside him. Ilya’s mouth had tightened, the trace of that earlier crooked confidence gone. He nodded once, sharp and controlled.

“Yes, Father.”

The headmaster turned then, gaze shifting to Shane, and the contrast was almost jarring that he could disappear from embarrassment.

“Hollander,” he said, voice softening, “you’ve been recommended specifically because you are steady. You understand our values and you lead without being asked.”

Shane straightened instinctively. “I’ll do my best, Father Lucien.”

“I know,” the headmaster replied. “Which is why I trust you’ll set the proper example,” he looked back at Ilya. “And you will follow it.”

Ilya’s eyes flicked to Shane for half a second, too quick to be obvious and too deliberate to be accidental.

“I can manage that,” he said.

The headmaster stood, signaling the end. “Good. Then we will begin with order,” he gestured toward the door. “You are both dismissed.”

The scrape of chairs against the floor sounded louder than it should have.

Shane rose first, and Ilya followed more slowly, rolling his shoulders once like he was shrugging off something unseen. As they moved toward the door, the silence between them was stretched thin by everything that had just been said and everything that hadn’t.

Just as Shane held the doorknob, the headmaster spoke once more. “Mr. Rozanov,” he said evenly. “Consider this your final opportunity.”

Ilya stopped and turned back.

“Yes, Father.”

They stepped into the hallway together, and the door closed behind them with a soft click.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Shane didn't know what to say and how to act in front of somebody he had just met, especially someone who doesn't know the setup of this… entire system.

Ilya exhaled, long and quiet, and said without looking at Shane, “Guess I’ve got a reputation.”

Shane folded his hands, unsure where to rest his eyes. “People can change,” he said carefully.

Ilya glanced at him then, “Yes,” he replied. “That’s what they keep saying.”

And as they started down the corridor side by side, Shane felt the weight of the assignment settle fully into place, not just as responsibility, but as something far more personal.

Because whatever Ilya’s past had been…was now walking beside him.

They walked in silence for a few steps, shoes echoing softly against the stone corridor. Students passed them in small clusters, voices low, glances curious. They were drawn, no doubt, to the unfamiliar face beside Shane. And the piercing on his right ear.

Ilya broke the quiet first.

“So,” he said, “what does ‘final opportunity’ mean around here?”

Shane hesitated. He chose his words the way he always did, carefully. “It means they expect you to follow the rules,” he said. “Attend prayer, be on time, keep your grades up, and no fighting. Also, no—” He stopped himself. “No trouble.”

Ilya huffed a quiet laugh. “That’s not very clear.”

“It’s supposed to be,” Shane replied. “It covers everything.”

They reached the end of the corridor and turned toward the dormitory wing. The noise softened here, footsteps muffled by old rugs worn thin.

Ilya glanced at him sideways. “And you?” he asked. “You always follow?”

“Yes,” Shane said automatically.

Ilya studied him for a moment longer than necessary. “You didn’t even think about it.”

Shane kept his gaze forward. “There’s nothing to think about.”

“That so?”

“Yes.”

Another pause.

“You lead prayers,” Ilya said. “They said that in there. Everyone listens to you.”

“It’s part of my responsibilities, yes.”

“You like it?”

The question caught Shane off guard. He slowed without meaning to. “I—” He searched for the right answer. The honest one. “It feels… right. It feels right knowing what’s expected, and doing it well.”

Ilya nodded, as if filing that away. “Must be nice.”

They stopped outside the dormitory doors. Shane reached for his keys, then hesitated. “So,” Shane began carefully, keeping his tone even, “what’s your room number?”

Ilya shrugged, hands shoved in his pockets, eyes scanning the ceiling tiles. “Number twelve,” he said finally, voice flat but with a trace of amusement.

Shane nodded. “I'm thirteen.” He kept his pace steady, though his stomach had decided otherwise. “So… right next door.”

Ilya’s lips quirked up. “Good,” he said. “Convenient.”

Shane tilted his head slightly, trying to mask the way his pulse sped at the thought. “I like convenient,” he said softly. “Means I can… make sure you’re adjusting okay.”

Ilya glanced at him briefly, just enough for Shane to catch the intensity in his dark eyes before he looked away again. “You planning to babysit me all the time, Hollander?” His tone was teasing, but it wasn’t entirely joking.

Shane shook his head. “Not all the time. Just until you settle in.”

Shane held the handle of the main entrance open, letting Ilya step in first. The familiar scent of wood polish and worn carpets hit Shane.

“So,” Shane said as they walked down the narrow hallway toward their rooms, “twelve is yours… thirteen’s mine. We’ll be neighbors.”

Ilya made a small hum, one corner of his mouth twitching. “Neighbors,” he echoed, voice softer now, like he was testing the word.

When they reached Ilya’s door, he stopped, turning the knob slowly. Shane hesitated outside, unsure whether to linger or leave immediately. “You gonna come in?” Ilya asked casually, but there was a subtle challenge in the tilt of his head.

Shane shook his head. “No. Just… making sure you get settled.”

Ilya’s smirk returned, quiet and mischievous. “Good. I wouldn't want my babysitter to bother with my independence.”

Shane’s hands clenched slightly at his sides. “Not,” he said carefully. “I’m just looking out for you.”

Ilya’s eyes lingered on him a moment longer, and Shane felt the weight of the gaze deep in his chest. Then, with a soft exhale, Ilya stepped inside, leaving Shane alone in the hallway with his thoughts and that smirk lingering like a warning.

Shane stayed there for a second longer, letting the silence settle, before he finally turned toward his own room, the proximity of number twelve and the boy inside already feeling like a quiet, constant presence he couldn’t ignore.

Shane stepped into his own dorm room, closing the door softly behind him.

The next day, the morning sun filtered through the small window. After his usual morning routine of prayers and morning classes, he went back to the dorms to get changed.

With a sigh, he moved toward his closet. Inside, his PE uniform was neatly folded: white shirt, blue shorts, and socks lined up like soldiers. Shane pulled off his blazer and tie, neatly folding and stacking them on the bed. His hands worked on their own, muscles used to routine, but his mind refused to settle.

He stepped into the shorts first, tugging the elastic up carefully. Next, he pulled on the white shirt, tucking it in with precise folds. His reflection in the small mirror caught his eye.

Has his hair been messy the entire time? He ran a hand through his hair, making an attempt to make himself look the least bit presentable, and sprayed five dots of his perfume onto his

shirt like dice.

He laced up his sneakers carefully, double-knotting the laces. The sound of the final pull echoed faintly in the quiet room. And Ilya… Ilya would be there, somewhere, probably stretching or leaning against the wall, watching and testing the boundaries Shane had always known how to maintain.

Shane stood fully dressed and he took a deep breath, steadying himself, straightening his shoulders. He picked up his PE bag and slung it over his shoulder.

When Shane stepped into the PE hall, the scent of polished wood and faint sweat greeted him. Students were scattered across the gym, stretching, tying laces while talking in low voices. And there, leaning casually against the far wall, was Ilya. Blue shorts and a loose white shirt, sleeves rolled up, hair falling in dark curls across his forehead. He wasn't stretching nor was he running drills.

Shane's chest tightened as he made the desperate attempt to keep his head down as he walked across the hall, careful to maintain his usual measured pace, but he could feel Ilya's gaze following him.

"Morning," Shane said, voice low but audible enough to acknowledge him.

Ilya tilted his head, smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "Morning, baby… sitter," he drawled, teasing, but there was something in his eyes that made Shane's stomach twist.

"God, what is this I'm feeling?"

Shane felt heat rise to his cheeks but refused to let his words betray him. "I'll be leading the warm-up today," he said, letting the words hang, careful, precise. "Follow instructions and pay attention."

Ilya pushed off the wall, stretching his arms lazily above his head before turning to face Shane fully. "Oh, don't worry," he said softly, almost mockingly. "I'm sure I'll manage."

Shane's hands itched to adjust his own shirt, to move, to do something to remind himself he was in control. But he remained still, aware of how close Ilya was, aware that every glimpse and every small movement felt like a test from God Himself.

"Forgive me."

They moved into position for warm-ups, and Shane kept one eye on Ilya without letting it show.

By the time they began jogging laps, Shane realized two things: the rules of PE had never felt more rigid, and his own control had never felt so fragile. And as Ilya's shadow fell alongside him on the polished floor, Shane knew that this week would not be the usual.

The sound of their sneakers squeaking against the polished floor echoed faintly in the hall as Shane kept his pace steady, eyes focused. But he could feel Ilya beside him, his presence just impossible to ignore.

“You always run like that?” Ilya asked casually, though Shane caught the deliberate drawl in his voice.

His accent whenever he spoke was starting to dizzy Shane, and he could feel a thousand apologies to be uttered creeping up in his head.

Shane glanced to the side, hesitating just a fraction too long. “Like what?” he asked, trying to keep his tone neutral.

“Like you’re racing against yourself,” Ilya said, voice low enough for only Shane to hear. “You do not have a hair out of place. Just pretty.”

Shane’s stomach tightened. He swallowed, forcing his eyes forward. “It’s called discipline,” he said evenly, trying to sound unaffected. “You’d do well if you try it sometime.”

Ilya’s lips curved into a slow, teasing smirk. “Maybe,” he said. “But sometimes… rules are meant to be ignored a little.”

Shane’s foot caught on the polished floor, just for a second, and he cursed under his breath. Ilya didn’t miss it.

“Good God, give me the strength.”

“You okay, Hollander?” Ilya asked. “Or am I distracting you?”

Shane’s jaw tightened. “Focus on yourself, Rozanov,” he muttered, cheeks heating.

Ilya laughed softly, low and teasing, the sound vibrating just enough to make Shane’s pulse skip. He matched Shane stride for stride, never too close, never too far, just enough to be felt, and Shane fucking felt it in every fiber of his being.

Shane’s focus was supposed to be on warm-ups, on running, on counting breaths… but all he could do was feel Ilya beside him, see the way he carried himself, and hear the subtle intonation in his voice.

“Hollander!”

Shane snapped his head forward, heart hammering, as the sharp call cut through the rhythmic thump of sneakers against polished wood. Mr. Donovan’s voice rang clear, authoritative, demanding.

“Yes, Sir?” Shane replied, forcing his tone even, trying to shake the pull of distraction.

“Your form! Your shoulders aren't position right. And keep your eyes forward, not wandering,” the professor barked. Shane straightened immediately, adjusting his posture, forcing his mind back to the laps, the drills, and the cadence of his own breathing.

Beside him, he felt the faint shift of Ilya matching his pace.

“Focus, Hollander. You’re setting an example,” Donovan continued, voice still sharp. “Lead the laps properly or else you’ll be leading them to detention.”

Shane swallowed hard, tension coiling through his chest. His pulse had been fast before, but now it felt like it was thrumming in time with every footfall. He stole a brief glance at Ilya.

Ilya’s expression was calm, but there was that glimmer of amusement in his dark eyes, the same one Shane had seen that morning in the chapel. The way he stood and the way he acted made him think that Ilya knew exactly what effect he had on him.

“What's wrong with me?”

Shane clenched his fists at his sides, jaw tight. He forced his focus back to the floor ahead, counting silently. But even as he tried so hard, the awareness of Ilya beside him refused to fade.

Every step and every breath, the boy was a sight Shane couldn’t decide whether he was supposed to fight or surrender. If this was a test set by the Lord, he is definitely failing.

By the final lap, Shane’s muscles burned, lungs ached, and sweat dripped into his eyes, but his mind wasn’t on exhaustion. It was in Ilya's voice, the way he leaned slightly closer as they ran, as if daring Shane to notice it, as if testing just how much control he really had.

When Donovan finally called them to a stop, Shane exhaled sharply, trying to regain composure. Ilya slowed beside him, hands on his knees, still catching his breath, but his eyes turned to Shane with that same teasing intensity he's had since he met him.

“You’re disciplined,” Ilya said. “I’ll give you that.”

Shane’s heart skipped. “I kinda have to be,” he muttered, forcing the words past the sudden tightness in his throat.

Ilya leaned back slightly, brushing a hand along his shoulder lazily. “Good to know,” he murmured, voice quiet enough for only Shane to hear. “Because I don’t plan on making this easy for you.”

The rest of the day passed with lectures, note-taking, and the noise from other students.

Shane moved through the corridors as he usually did, back straight, head held high, his personal Bible tucked under one arm. He was always alert to rules and schedules… and always aware of Ilya.

It was damning how almost impossible it was to ignore him because Ilya had a way of being everywhere Shane had to be. He sat beside him in religion class, leaning against the desk as the teacher droned on about scripture. His elbow would occasionally brush the edge of Shane’s notebook, his gaze lingering just a second too long when Shane scribbled notes.

Shane tried to maintain focus. He copied notes carefully, kept his penmanship neat, and repeated the teacher’s questions quietly to himself, but all he could feel was Ilya beside him.

Sometimes he caught a subtle smirk or a raised brow, a whisper of amusement at Shane's concentration.

In history, Ilya leaned back in his chair, legs stretched out, boots tapping lightly against the floor. Shane found himself unconsciously sitting straighter, adjusting his uniform, trying not to let the tiny tremor in his hands show.

"Do you always take notes like that?" Ilya murmured under his breath during a lecture.

Shane froze for a heartbeat, then lowered his voice just enough. "Yes. It's necessary."

Ilya's lips curved into a slow, smile, but he didn't reply. He just leaned back again, gaze flicking to the teacher, then back to Shane, like he was enjoying the little chaos he'd already planted.

By the afternoon, it was chemistry, then math, then literature, each class the same. Sitting side by side or across the room, Shane felt the tension between them stretch and compress in rhythms entirely unrelated to lessons.

In literature, Shane annotated his textbook while Ilya, sitting beside him, made small comments under his breath that were only audible to Shane.

"You enjoy this stuff?" Ilya whispered when the teacher wasn't looking.

Shane's pen paused mid-sentence. "I try to understand it," he replied calmly, though his chest tightened. The way Ilya's chest rose and fell each breath he took was a knife slicing through his skin, reminding him of his sin.

He needed to go into the confessional and ask for forgiveness, for what he had done and for what he might do. For what he thought of and for what he'll keep thinking.

"Why is Ilya so… so…"

Ilya hummed softly, as if noting the answer was less than adequate, then leaned slightly closer, enough for Shane to feel the warmth radiating from him without turning.

When the last bell rang, Shane felt drained from the constant awareness, the subtle push-and-pull of attention and restraint.

"Why is Ilya so close?"

They walked together toward the dorms in silence, side by side, steps matching naturally despite neither saying much. Occasionally, Ilya's elbow would nudge Shane's, a small brush meant only for him. Shane's stomach twisted every time, and he forced himself to keep walking straight, focus ahead, and pretend it was nothing.

The entire week of guiding Ilya had been the same, with Shane feeling exhausted from the way his heart hammered in his chest every time he saw the other.

A month had passed, and Shane didn't need to be there every second anymore.

Ilya made friends with other students, freeing Shane from the shackles of being attached to the hip with the boy. Shane also stuck with his friends, finally able to breathe freely without having to glance a second at the boy beside him.

Ilya was a temptation from the devil, Shane thought. He knew that he shouldn't entertain the thoughts coming to his head every time they head back to the dorms, and the strong urge he felt to open the door to Room 12 whenever he stood in front of it.

Every time they ate at the lunch hall, Shane would watch Ilya from across the room, seeing him lick the sauce off of his thumb, causing him to gulp so hard that his throat bobbed. Every time Ilya licked his lips, Shane would mirror the action, imagining it was their mouths touching.

And every time he does that, Shane runs off to confess and pray and ask for forgiveness.

During the weekend, Shane found himself in the student lobby, the place that was usually bustling with chatter and hurried footsteps now almost serene. He settled into one of the worn armchairs by the window, the light catching the crease of his clothes and the tidy stack of books beside him.

He had no duties today. Since it's Saturday, there were no classes, and he was free from expectations during times like these. Yet still, his hands moved to smoothing the edges of his notebooks, adjusting the angle of his chair.

A subtle sound made him glance up, light footsteps against the floor.

“God, please do not let it be the man of the sins I could commit.”

Ilya.

He appeared in front of him, leaning against the railing, one shoulder pressed casually to the wood. His bag hung loosely from his hand, and his gaze was scanning the room yet Shane felt it land somewhere near him.

“You sit here every weekend?” Ilya asked, voice carrying easily across the space, but without malice, Shane hopes.

Shane blinked, then shook his head. “Not every weekend,” he said. “Only when there’s nothing scheduled.” He tried to sound neutral, but the awareness of Ilya’s presence made him a little tighter than usual.

Ilya slid into the chair across from him without invitation, stretching his legs lazily. “Huh,” he said softly. “Quiet mornings suit you.”

Does he like to say things so casually when it could kill Shane?

Shane adjusted in his seat, careful not to lean too far forward, careful not to give away how much the proximity affected him. “I… like the quiet,” he admitted. “It’s easier to think.”

Ilya hummed, eyes narrowing slightly, like he was studying him, weighing the answer. “Think about what?”

Shane hesitated. His usual answers like prayer schedules, study plans, rules… It all fucking felt empty under Ilya’s gaze. Instead, he simply said, “Everything.”

Ilya leaned back, fingers drumming idly against the armrest. “Funny,” he said finally, “you look like someone who already has all the answers.”

Shane bit the inside of his cheek, not sure whether to feel offended or flattered. “I try to be prepared,” he said softly.

Ilya smiled faintly, the expression casual but teasing. “Yes, but even prepared people get distracted.”

Shane’s pulse quickened slightly. He looked down at his hands, trying to fold them neatly, trying to focus on the books beside him instead of the way Ilya’s eyes lingered.

All he could do was si and feel Ilya there across the small space of the table, waiting.

Ilya didn’t speak again. He just settled into the chair across from Shane, one leg crossed lazily over the other, head tilted slightly, and watched him.

Shane, for his part, pretended not to notice. He flipped through his books, adjusted his papers, and meticulously aligned the edges of his notes. His hands moved automatically, but his mind wandered. He couldn't focus.

Ilya’s presence was heavier than silence alone. There was an ease about him, a calm that contrasted sharply with Shane’s precise, controlled movements. Shane felt it like a current running just beneath the surface of the room, impossible to ignore.

He tried to focus on the books, on the neat columns of notes, but his awareness kept drifting. To the tilt of Ilya’s head, to the way his eyes followed each motion Shane made without blinking. To the faint curl of a smile that appeared whenever Shane adjusted a pen or smoothed a page.

Shane’s chest tightened. He reminded himself that it was just observatio and that he was just sitting there, nothing more. Shane exhaled slowly and looked down at his hands, pressing them together as though grounding himself in the familiar sensation.

Ilya leaned slightly forward then, which was enough for Shane to feel the movement across the small space between them, but not enough to speak.

“Good God.”

He couldn’t look up. Because if he met Ilya’s eyes, he would know the truth of how much that gaze observation frightened him and how much it made him aware of the tiny tremor of his own pulse, the heat rising in his chest.

How he made him question his sexuality.

And that in itself was a sin.

A grave sin.

So he stayed bent over his notes, while Ilya continued to watch.

“Do you like girls?”

Ilya asked all of a sudden, catching Shane off guard.

“What?”

“Girls. Do you like them?”

Shane cleared his throat, closing his notebook at once. “I– yeah, sure,” Shane felt his mouth run dry. “Of course.”

Ilya hummed, leaning back in his chair slightly, eyes still on Shane. “Yes, I like girls too,” he said casually, almost like it was nothing. “But I also like boys.”

Shane froze. The pen in his hand hovered over the cover of the notebook, useless. Heat pooled in his chest, spreading up to his throat, making it hard to swallow. His mind stuttered, scrambled, and yet somehow every nerve in his body screamed awareness.

He glanced toward the hallway outside the lobby, heart thudding. “I… I shouldn’t… talk about that,” he whispered, voice low and could barely be heard. “The nuns… they’ll hear…”

Ilya didn’t seem fazed. He leaned just slightly forward, the faintest tilt of his head, watching Shane’s reaction with a quiet, knowing smile. “Relax,” he murmured. “No one is around.”

Shane’s stomach twisted. He wanted to flee, to bury the thought, to pretend he hadn’t just heard the words. But Ilya’s eyes held him in place. “I… I shouldn’t even be thinking about it,” Shane whispered, his hands tightening around the pen, his nails digging into his palm. “It’s… it’s a sin.”

Ilya chuckled softly, shaking his head. “It only feels like sin if you let it scare you,” he said.

Shane’s chest tightened further. He wanted to argue, to assert control, to hide behind rules and prayers. But the weight of Ilya’s gaze, the calm certainty in his tone, made the carefully built walls around Shane’s thoughts wobble.

“I’m bisexual, Hollander. Do you know that word?”

“Shh,” Shane said finally, leaning slightly closer across the small space between them, voice barely above a breath. “Quiet, or… or someone will hear.”

Ilya leaned back again, still smiling faintly. And staring at him like this, Shane felt weak.

Flashes of picture suddenly came in his head, the imagination of being handled roughly, thrown and pressed into the mattress of his dorm, and—

“Heavenly Father, forgive me for I have sinned.”

But the thoughts never stopped.

He saw Ilya’s smirk, the way he leaned in, the subtle, daring brush of a hand, the imagined closeness that made Shane’s chest tighten. He pressed his palms together in his lap, trying to ground himself, trying to summon the discipline and order that had always been his anchor.

But it didn't help, because he can’t stop wondering what that would feel like.

Ilya’s presence across from him was a set up for failure. That faint curve of his lips, his eyes and the calm certainty he had, the way he seemed to know exactly what Shane was thinking without a word being said… it all pressed on Shane’s carefully maintained composure.

Shane’s fingers fidgeted. He felt heat rise in his cheeks, his breath catching more than once. The words of his prayers felt hollow now, as if they couldn’t reach far enough to pull him back from the thoughts Ilya had stirred.

“I… I shouldn’t,” Shane whispered, voice barely audible. “This… it’s wrong.”

He stands up abruptly.

“Hollander–”

“I’m going to the confessional. Do not follow me, Rozanov.” Shane moved quickly, not waiting for another word from Ilya.

Each step felt heavier than the last, like he was carrying the weight of every thought he hadn’t wanted to have and every feeling he shouldn’t be feeling.

He reached the confessional, sliding the wooden door open with deliberate care. The familiar smell of old wood and incense filled his senses, grounding him just enough to steady his shaking hands. He knelt, folding them tightly in his lap.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned,” Shane began, voice low and uneven, betraying the tension he usually held so tightly. “It has been… I… I’m having… unlawful thoughts. Lustful thoughts… thoughts I cannot control.”

The priest’s voice was calm, patient. “Temptation is not a sin, my son, but it is on how you act upon it that counts. What burdens your conscience?”

There he goes with the same line.

Shane swallowed hard, words caught in his throat. “I… I see someone, and I cannot stop thinking about… things I know are wrong. My prayers, my discipline… they do not help. I feel… I feel like I am failing. That I am failing God.”

The priest hummed softly, the pause deliberate, allowing Shane to pour out the weight he had been holding. “And do you act upon these thoughts?”

Shane shook his head quickly, voice trembling. “No, no. I… I would never… but the desire, Father… it is overwhelming. I am… confused, and I am afraid. Afraid that I cannot remain pure, that I… that I will sin.”

“Fear and guilt can be burdensome,” the priest said quietly. “But God knows the heart. You must not dwell in shame, only in reflection and restraint. Your awareness, your willingness to confess—this shows devotion, not failure.”

Shane exhaled shakily, trying to let the priest’s words sink in, but the heat of embarrassment and self-reproach stayed nestled in his chest. “I… I do not know how to stop thinking… about him.”

A long pause. The priest’s voice was gentle now. “Then you pray, you reflect, and you seek guidance through action. Discipline is your anchor, but mercy, your own and God’s, must also be allowed.”

Shane bowed his head, words failing him again. The confessional felt simultaneously like a sanctuary and a cage, the line between sin and salvation unbearably thin. He whispered, “I… I am afraid, Father. I'm afraid that I cannot be righteous.”

“Then continue to strive,” the priest said softly. “But remember, the heart is complex. Your path is not in perfection, but in intention and effort. Go, pray your penance, and seek clarity in your daily actions.”

“And read the book of Romans, Chapter 1, Verse 26-27. Remind yourself of it.”

Shane nodded, voice barely audible. “Yes… Father.”

He rose, palms pressed together, knuckles still white, and stepped back into the sunlight of the corridor. The world felt brighter, harsher, and heavier all at once.

Even with the confessional behind him, Shane knew one undeniable truth: the thoughts, the feelings, the turmoil… they would not leave him easily unless he stops seeing Ilya

Somewhere across the campus, Ilya waited, and that thought caused Shane to lock himself up all weekend.

Monday morning, the chapel bells rang for the start of classes. Shane moved through the corridors with his notes clutched to his chest. He slipped into the Theology classroom, already half-filled with students settling into their seats. His eyes scanned the room and… there. Ilya was leaning casually against the back wall, arms crossed, gaze sweeping over the classroom until it landed on Shane.

Are there no other seats available?

For a second, Shane froze with his cheeks warming. He hadn’t expected to see him so soon.

As the lesson began, Shane tried to focus, with his pen scratching across the page, voice echoing silently in his mind the scripture they were reviewing. But Ilya’s eyes followed every movement.

Eventually, Ilya leaned slightly toward Shane, voice low, careful not to carry to the teacher or the other students. “Hollander… you okay?”

Shane’s pen paused mid-sentence. He could feel his hands tremble slightly. “I’m fine,” he said softly, forcing the words out. “Why?”

“You’ve disappeared,” Ilya murmured. “Since you left the lobby, you haven’t been seen all weekend. Not at meals, not in the common rooms… not even for Sunday service.”

Shane’s throat tightened. He wanted to deflect, to assert that he was fine, that his absence was nothing. But Ilya’s calm, gentle concern made it impossible to lie completely. He swallowed, blinking quickly to steady himself. “I… I just needed time,” he admitted finally, voice quiet. “To think.”

Ilya tilted his head, eyes softening slightly. “About what?” he asked.

Shane’s hands clenched. “About…” he whispered. “About sin. About… myself.”

Ilya didn’t push further. He simply nodded, the faintest curve of a reassuring smile on his lips. “Okay,” he said quietly. “I was just worried.”

Shane’s heart thudded violently. He kept his gaze down on the notebook, pressing the pen harder into the paper as if the motion alone could anchor him.

Minutes had passed, and Shane was halfway through copying notes from the blackboard when he felt a sudden, light poke to his shoulder. He jumped slightly, pen skittering across the page.

“I–” he began, but stopped when he realized who it was.

Ilya was leaning casually in his chair, smirk tugging at the corner of his lips, eyes gleaming with that same certainty that always seemed to unnerve Shane. “Hey,” Ilya murmured, quiet enough that no one else could hear, “you busy tonight?”

Shane froze, heart hammering. He blinked rapidly, lowering his pen slightly. “I… I don’t think so,” he whispered, careful to keep his voice low. “Why?”

Ilya leaned back in his chair just enough to stretch lazily, letting the casual posture speak volumes. “I might knock,” he said, tilting his head and letting the words hang between them.

Later that night, Shane lay in his bed, staring at the ceiling, and every rational thought he had built over years with discipline, obedience, and prayer… all of it was already fraying at the edges.

He forced himself to sit up, blanket tightening around his shoulders like armor. The hallway outside was quiet, the only sound the faint hum of the dorm heating and the distant rustle of other students settling in for the night.

And yet, he couldn’t stop thinking. He stood up quickly and headed to his closet, looking for clothes to at least make himself look… presentable.

He tried on a shirt paired with jeans, and he fucking looked like a pastor who wasn't clocked in. He threw it off when he looked in the mirror, and immediately got changed into something else.

Coming back in front of the vanity, his suit and tie looked like he was going to attend a funeral. Groaning, he took it off again and came back to the closet.

Frustrated, he just put on his pajamas and hoped for the best. He wasn't going to tire himself out over this.

When a soft knock came at his door later, Shane's pulse leapt into his throat. He swung his feet off the bed, hands trembling slightly, and crossed the room.

"Rozanov?" he whispered as he opened the door just enough to peer out.

Ilya leaned casually in the doorway, one hand braced against the frame, eyes scanning Shane with that same calm certainty. "Hollander," he said again, voice low, teasing, impossible to resist. "Mind if I come in?"

Shane swallowed hard, words failing him. He simply stepped aside.

The door closed softly behind Ilya as he closed it with one hand, shutting out the quiet dorm around them. Shane felt a rush of heat, of anticipation, and of something else he wasn't sure he had a name for. Every instinct he had screamed for caution, every lesson he'd learned about sin and discipline warning him of the danger.

"I cannot sin."

And yet… he couldn't stop himself from thinking about the first, small moments that had brought them here.

This night would be the first in a long string of confessions, whispered prayers, and inner battles that Shane couldn't win with obedience alone. Every rule, every prayer, every careful step seemed to crumble in the presence of Ilya's quiet certainty, leaving Shane suspended between sin and salvation, between fear and desire.

And for the first time, he realized that perhaps he didn't want to be saved.

Shane's pulse pounded loud enough that he was certain Ilya could hear it, could feel it, in the little to no inches between them.

"I can't… I–" the word slipped from Shane's mouth before he could even stop it.

"Can't what?" Ilya inched closer, his gaze going from Shane's eyes down to his freckles. His thumb reached out, tracing over the freckles on his right for a second.

"I cannot sin, Rozanov," Shane said, his voice running out at the last word. "Sister Gabriela, Sister Agnes, my par– they'll get mad."

The dorm room air smelled faintly of industrial cleaner and the mint gum Ilya had chewed.

For a long moment, neither moved.

Then Ilya reached out and brushed his thumb along Shane's lower lip. "You're saying that…" he murmured, voice like gravel. "Cannot sin," his fingers drifted down to Shane's collar, tugging just enough to expose the rapid flutter of his pulse. "But your body says differently."

Shane's breath hitched.

Ilya stepped closer, backing Shane against the door with his hips. "Tell me to leave," he challenged, mouth hovering near Shane's ear. "Say the word, and I walk away."

Shane's fingers curled into fists at his sides. He had to fight the temptation burning just below his stomach and fight the way his entire body was begging to be touched. He knew he had to tell the other boy to leave, but when he opened his mouth, what came out was…

"Stay."

Ilya's grin was wolfish. "As you wish, Shane Hollander."

Ilya's hand gripped on Shane's jaw as he entwined their mouths together. The first kiss was all teeth, hot and claiming, before softening into something deeper, slower, devastating. Shane groaned into it, hands finally lifting to clutch at Ilya's shirt, dragging him impossibly closer.

Somewhere down the hall, a door slammed.

Neither of them pulled away.

The kiss deepened, turning messy and desperate. Ilya's hands found their way under Shane's shirt, nails dragging down his ribs with respectful want. Shane arched into the touch, his head knocking back against the door with a light thump. Ilya took this as his opportunity to trail open-mouthed kisses down his neck, leaving behind a sharp, stinging line that would surely leave behind marks tomorrow.

"You make me insane," Ilya muttered against his throat. His fingers tightened on Shane's hip, almost bruising. "The way you look at me every Goddamn day."

"Don't say His name."

Ilya chuckled lowly. "Sorry, Sir."

Ilya tugged at the hem of Shane's shirt, pushing it up and over his head in one smooth motion. It dropped to the floor with no sound, their sloppy kisses resounding around the room.

Ilya leaned back just enough to take in the view: Shane, flushed and undone. His chest was heaving, the rapid rise and fall betraying his racing pulse.

Ilya's dark eyes were heavy with want, his voice rough when he spoke. "You…"

Shane gasped as Ilya's teeth grazed his collarbone, the sharp sting of pain making his cock twitch in his jeans. "Rozanov-"

"Use your words, Hollander." Ilya's hand slid between them, palming Shane through his pants with deliberate pressure. "Tell me what you want."

The cross that hung across Shane's dorm stared at them in silent judgement as Shane's hips jerked forward. "Touch me," he panted, beyond caring about propriety. "Right now."

Ilya's laugh was dark as he unbuckled Shane's belt with practiced ease. "Such filthy words from my religious little boy." His fingers dipped below the waistband, calloused and sure.

If the look in Ilya's eyes was dangerous before, it was downright predatory now. He caught Shane's wrists and pinned them above his head with one hand. "Keep your hands there, you hear me?"

Shane groaned as his wrists were pinned by Ilya's strong grip, the realization of being immobilized making him ache all over. "Yes," he muttered, nodding fervently. His eyes flickered between Ilya's, seeking a lifeline in those dark pools of desire. "Please touch me."

Shane's breath came in short and ragged bursts as Ilya kept him pinned against the door, his wrists locked in that unyielding grip, the weight of Ilya's body holding him in place like an anchor. Every shift of muscle, every scrape of teeth against his throat sent sparks of heat coiling tighter in his gut.

"Say it again," Ilya demanded, voice rough with want. His free hand dragged down Shane's chest, fingers twisting sharply over a nipple just to watch Shane's hips jerk forward.

"Please–" Shane gasped, barely recognizing his own voice. It sounded broken and… needy. It sounded like it wasn't him. "Fuck, Ilya– please–"

Ilya's mouth crashed into his, swallowing the rest of the plea as he finally undid Shane's jeans with quick, impatient tugs.

The first touch of skin against his cock punched the air from Shane's lungs, and Ilya smirked against his mouth. "Thought you couldn't sin, Hollander."

Shane's answer was lost in a moan as Ilya's hand wrapped around him, stroking slow and torturous, just this side of *not enough.*

Somewhere beyond them, the chapel bells tolled midnight.

Neither cared.

And when Shane came apart in Ilya's hands, shaking, gasping, and wrecked, it didn't feel like damnation. It felt like a vindication.

The dorm was silent when they finally untangled themselves. Shane's pajamas lay forgotten on the floor. The bed creaked under their combined weight as they collapsed onto it, limbs tangled, breath mingling in the dark.

Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane’s sweat-damp temple.

No one had to know.

Ilya's hand skimmed down Shane's side, the touch leaving a trail of heat in its wake. "Can I touch you again?" he murmured, lips grazed against the soft skin of Shane's neck. "I wanna feel you."

The mattress dipped under Ilya’s weight as he crowded Shane back against the sheets slowly, giving their prayer leader every chance to say no. Shane didn’t.

Ilya’s palm smoothed up the plane of Shane’s stomach, callouses catching on bare skin. "Tell me to stop," he challenged, but his voice was softer now, almost hoping Shane wouldn’t.

Shane arched into the touch, a shivery exhale escaping him. "Don’t you dare."

Ilya’s laugh was dark velvet as his fingers found the waistband of Shane’s sleep pants. "Knew you had it in you.”

"Damn it-" Shane let his head fall back, his thoughts becoming hazy.

Ilya's touch was relentless, his tongue tracing the line of Shane's hip, leaving a shiver in its wake. "You sound so good like that, Hollander," he muttered, voice a low, dark rumble. "All desperate and wrecked."

Shane’s breath hitched sharply as Ilya’s teeth grazed the sensitive skin just below his navel, fingers tightening in the sheets. His entire body trembled, caught between the ingrained instinct to pull away and the overwhelming need to push closer.

“You—ah… you don’t play fair,” Shane gasped, voice cracking as Ilya’s hand slid lower, teasing but not quite giving him what he craved.

Ilya smirked against his thigh, breath hot. “Never said I did.”

The slow drag of Ilya’s fingers was maddening, deliberate in its torment. Shane’s hips jerked upward, seeking friction, but Ilya held him down with effortless strength, his grip firm on Shane’s waist.

“Fuck,” Shane choked out, thighs tensing. “Ilya—”

”What?” Ilya’s thumb swirled lazily over the head of Shane’s cock, watching with rapt fascination as Shane writhed beneath him. “Use your words.”

Shane’s nails dug into the mattress, his voice ragged. “Touch me properly—”

A chuckle. “Demanding.”

Ilya’s fist closed around him fully, stroking hard and right and Shane arched off the bed with a broken moan that he immediately had to muffle using his hand.

“There,” Ilya murmured, lips brushing Shane’s knee. “Are you okay?”

Shane couldn’t answer because he couldn’t think, not when Ilya’s other hand slipped beneath him, pressing insistently between his thighs. His whole body clenched, heat pooling low and urgent.

“You’re shaking,” Ilya noted, his voice thick with satisfaction. “Are you scared of me?”

“Not scared,” Shane panted.

Ilya’s fingers pressed deeper. “Liar.”

The slide of slick fingers inside him punched the air from Shane’s lungs. His thighs fell open wider, a silent surrender. “That’s it,” Ilya enticed, curling his fingers just so, wrenching a strangled cry from Shane’s throat. “See? You take my fingers so well.”

Shane’s vision blurred at the edges, his chest heaving. Every drag of Ilya’s fingers was calculated. Stretching, teasing, and *ruining*.

The sheets twisted beneath Shane’s clutching fingers as Ilya worked him open with precision. His breath came in rough gasps, each exhale punctuated by soft, punched-out moans that would’ve made him blush if he could think straight.

“Look at you,” Ilya murmured, pressing a kiss to Shane’s trembling thigh. “I didn't know you’d like it this much.”

Shane whimpered, hips canting up instinctively, chasing the pressure, chasing more.

Ilya rewarded him with another slow curl of his fingers, deliberate and deep. “You want it?” he asked, voice rough with want.

“Yes–!” Shane gasped, nodding frantically. “God, yes—”

Ilya’s free hand pressed firmly against Shane’s chest, holding him down. “Then say it properly.”

Shane swallowed hard, lips parted, eyes blown wide with need. His voice was wrecked when he finally spoke, “Fuck me, Ilya.”

The words hung between them, sinful and undeniable. Ilya’s smirk was pure wickedness as he leaned in, lips brushing Shane’s ear. “I can't say no to you.”

The room seemed to tilt as Ilya pulled his fingers free, leaving Shane feeling empty and desperate. His skin burned with the absence, the sudden lack of touch like a physical ache. He watched as Ilya shifted, muscles flexing, and then, Ilya's hands gripped Shane's hips, positioning him effortlessly, and the room seemed to spin.

"Look at me," Ilya's voice, rough and breathless, cut through Shane's thoughts.

Shane obeyed, his gaze finding Ilya's dark eyes, sweat-damp hair, parted lips.

"Hold onto me."

Shane's hands clutched at Ilya's shoulders, fingers digging into muscle as the air rushed out of him. His heart slammed against his ribcage, his mind teetering between panic and overwhelming want.

He'd have to think about how he would confess his sin to the priest tomorrow.

"Relax," he murmured, the word ghosting against Shane's cheek. Shane tried to obey, tried to will the tension from his limbs, but every nerve was alight, every muscle coiled tight.

"I've got you."

Ilya's words sliced through the haze. And in that moment, Shane's body obeyed before his mind could. His grip on Ilya's shoulders relaxed, just a fraction. "That's it."

Ilya's thumbs skimmed the sensitive skin at Shane's hipbones, tracing small circles that sent heat flaring in their wake. His next words were little more than a rough whisper.

"Keep your eyes on me, okay?"

Shane's lashes fluttered like wings against his cheeks as he fought to obey. His mind felt hazy, his thoughts scattering each time Ilya's touch skimmed another sensitive spot. His body was betraying him, arching into Ilya's touch in silent plea.

"Ilya—" he panted, the name slipping from his lips without thought. He hadn't meant to sound so desperate, but it was too late now.

Ilya's gaze darkened, a possessive gleam filling his eyes. "Say it again," he demanded.

Shane swallowed hard, his throat bobbing as he forced the word out on a shaky exhale, "Ilya."

It came out softer, and the way Ilya's breath hitched told Shane he'd noticed.

"Again."

Shane squeezed his eyes shut, embarrassment warring with the aching need coiled low in his stomach.

"Ilya—fuck…"

Ilya's chuckle was dark as he leaned down, pressing his lips to the frantic pulse in Shane's throat. "That's better."

Then his hips suddenly moved forward in one devastating thrust, and Shane *shattered*.

The groan that tore from his lips was raw, unfiltered, his nails scraping down Ilya's back as his body arched off the mattress. Every nerve burned, every thought dissolved into white-hot sensation. And Ilya didn't stop.

"Look at me," he growled, gripping Shane’s chin and forcing their gazes to lock.

Shane’s vision blurred, tears prickling at the corners of his eyes from pleasure, from overwhelm, from the sheer relief of finally *letting go.*

Ilya watched every tremor, every gasp, every broken plea Shane didn’t even realize he was voicing.

"Shane," Ilya breathed against his lips, hips rolling in a rhythm that had Shane seeing stars. It was an all-consuming storm that burned through them both. It was desperate and aching, rough and tender, and it was everything.

Shane was lost in the fire, his mind clouded by the heat and the overwhelming need for more. He found himself begging for what he wasn't even sure anymore. But Ilya? *God*, Ilya seemed to know.

It was in the way his rough hands gripped Shane's hips, guiding his every move, his every desperate rock. It was in the way he watched while Shane felt like he was being wrecked in a way he hasn't been before.

The mattress shifted as Ilya rolled them over in one smooth motion, Shane now straddling his hips. Moonlight painted the sweat-slick planes of Ilya's chest as Shane hovered above him, trembling.

"Take what you need," Ilya murmured, hands settling possessively on Shane's thighs. His thumbs pressed bruises into pale skin, gaze heavy with promise. "I won't break."

Shane exhaled sharply as he sank down slowly. The stretch burned beautifully, his body opening eagerly for the familiar intrusion. “Oh, fuck.”

When their hips finally met, Shane went still, trembling from the effort of holding himself upright.

Ilya's grip tightened. "Move."

A broken noise escaped Shane's throat as he obeyed, rocking forward with hesitant rolls of his hips. The drag was magnificent, slow friction building into something desperate. Shane bit his lip hard enough to taste blood, chasing the rhythm with clumsy urgency.

"Look at you," Ilya breathed, dragging a fingertip down the straining tendons of Shane's throat.

Shane's rhythm stuttered as pleasure coiled tight in his gut. His hands scrambled for purchase on Ilya's chest, nails leaving angry red crescents in their wake.

"Please–”

Ilya's grin was all teeth as he suddenly thrust up hard, punching the air from Shane's lungs. "Say it."

"Ilya—!"

"Louder."

The next snap of hips drew a ragged shout from Shane's throat, his back arching as pleasure crested violently. Ilya's hands anchored him through the storm, guiding his trembling body through every aftershock with possessive certainty.

When Shane finally collapsed forward, breathless and spent and twitching, Ilya rolled them again, pinning him to the sweat-damp sheets.

"Again," he demanded against Shane's throat, already moving.

And Shane? He obeyed.

“Do we have another recitation tomorrow?”

Ilya asked as he was lying on Shane’s bed, answering the book of word search that Shane had, trying to make the time pass quicker than it should.

“Yes,” Shane answered, his glasses slipping on the tip of his nose slightly as his attention was on the paper he was reading. “And you should be reading, too. Professor Williams might call on you.”

“Blah blah,” Ilya didn't listen and went back to doing the boring book that Shane had.

“I’m so bored,” Ilya groaned, putting the word search aside and rested his back against the mattress, throwing one pillow around using his foot. “What’s a boy to do when I have nothing?”

Shane closed his eyes and clicked his tongue, spinning his chair around to face Ilya. “What do you want?”

Ilya grinned, that lazy, unreadable smirk tugging at his lips. “I don’t know… maybe something fun. Something to break the boredom,” he says as he propped himself up on one elbow, letting his gaze linger on Shane. “You always have some boring solution, right, Hollander?”

Shane adjusted his glasses, pushing them up the bridge of his nose, trying to keep his voice even. “Depends on what you mean by ‘fun.’ Solving that word search isn’t exactly a thrill ride.”

Ilya laughed softly, a teasing sound that made Shane’s chest tighten. “Oh, come on. Surely someone like you has other ways to pass the time. You’re always so… so serious. I bet you can’t just sit still and do nothing.”

Shane tilted his head, pretending to consider the accusation. “I can sit still.” He gestured at the desk, neatly stacked books, and the word search still lying face-up. “I can do nothing, but it doesn’t usually feel like fun.”

“Boring, then,” Ilya said, flopping back onto the bed. “I think you need to teach me how to be serious like you. Or maybe you can teach me to be… disciplined.” He let the last word hang, low and teasing.

Shane felt heat rise to his cheeks. “I’m not… I’m not here to… teach you that,” he muttered, voice tighter than he intended.

Ilya’s grin widened, sensing the reaction he wanted. “Good. That would be boring too. I like it when you’re not in control.”

Shane groaned quietly, spinning his chair back around to hide his face. “You’re impossible.”

“And you’re boring,” Ilya said softly, leaning closer, just enough for Shane to feel it, but not enough to touch.

Shane’s fingers tightened on the edge of his desk. He couldn’t admit it—not aloud. Not when every instinct screamed at him to stay proper, controlled.

“I… I need to finish this,” he said finally, picking up his pen again.

Ilya tilted his head, still watching, still smirking. “Fine. But don’t think that my boredom’s over, Hollander. I’ll find ways to annoy you.”

Shane couldn’t help the small, reluctant smile that tugged at his lips, even as his pulse picked up. “I’m lucky you’re quiet for now.”

“Quiet is boring,” Ilya murmured, letting the words linger between them. “And boring is the last thing I want tonight.”

Shane's pen scratched methodically across the paper, the only sound in the room apart from Ilya's restless shifting on the bed. The tension between them was a living thing, thrumming beneath the surface of their mundane conversation.

Then… movement.

Shane barely had time to register Ilya slipping off the bed before warm hands settled on his knees, pushing them apart. His breath hitched, pen freezing mid-sentence as Ilya knelt between his legs, that infuriating smirk still playing at his lips.

Ilya’s head almost hit his study desk as he knelt in front of Shane.

"What—"

Ilya didn't answer. Instead, he leaned forward, nuzzling against the growing hardness in Shane's sweatpants with deliberate, maddening slowness.

Shane's grip on the pen turned white-knuckled. "Ilya! I have to finish this or else–"

A low chuckle vibrated through fabric before Ilya mouthed at him lazily, tongue pressing a hot stripe along the outline of Shane's cock. Shane's hips jerked involuntarily, his free hand flying to grip the edge of the desk.

"So finish it," Ilya murmured, lips brushing against strained cotton. His fingers hooked into Shane's waistband, tugging just enough to make Shane's breath stutter. "I'll be quiet."

The lie was palpable. Ilya had never been quiet.

“Tell me if you're not okay with me sucking you off.”

Shane looks at Ilya with blurry eyes, and he bit his lower lip slightly, not bothering to form an answer. Shane couldn't bring himself to care when clever fingers finally freed him from his pants, cool air kissing fevered skin before being replaced by the searing heat of Ilya's wet mouth.

His head fell back with a thud against the chair, his notes forgotten as Ilya took him deep in one smooth glide, hollowing his cheeks on the way up. A strangled moan tore from Shane's throat, half protest and half plea, his fingers tangling in Ilya's hair on instinct.

Above him, his forgotten paper stared back, ink bleeding into meaningless smudges where his pen had dragged. Ilya hummed around him, triumphant, and Shane knew that would be no more studying tonight.

Shane gasped, every muscle in his body tense with pleasure. The paper was quickly replaced with other thoughts. It was replaced with the feeling of Ilya's tongue, the way his eyes went dark with satisfaction when another soft moan escapes Shane's mouth. The pen clattered to the desk, Shane's hand trembling as he tried to regain control.

It was scaring him again, thinking about the possible look on the headmaster’s face or Sister Gabriela’s…

But he doesn't push Ilya away.

He can't.

Ilya was relentless, lips working him in slow, torturous motions. And all the while, his gaze remained locked on Shane's face—taking in every pant, every moan, every hitch of breath like it was a prayer. It was maddening.

It was maddening and perfect.

Shane's fingers twisted tighter in Ilya's hair, torn between wanting him to stop and wanting… needing… more. He'd never felt like this before until he met Ilya.

He'd never felt this desperate, this needy. It was as if Ilya had broken down every wall, every barrier he'd built over the years.

He'd thought he needed to be strong and to have perfect control. But right now, all he wanted, no, all he needed, was for Ilya to keep pushing, keep teasing, keep driving him over the edge.

"Oh, Roz–" he gasped, the word wrenched from him without his permission. "Please..."

Ilya pulled off slowly, his breath ghosting over heated skin. "Please what?" he murmured, his words barely above a whisper.

Shane swallowed hard, his body thrumming with tension. "Please—don't...don't stop."

Ilya's smirk was pure satisfaction, his eyes dark and heavy. "Wasn't planning on it." He returned to his task with a renewed fervor, fingers digging into Shane's thighs in a silent demand to stay still.

Shane's head fell back against the chair, his knuckles white as his hand clenched the edge of the desk. His thoughts were unraveling, replaced by a flood of sensations. He'd never felt so out of control, and it was the most terrifying and exhilarating feeling he'd ever experienced.

He wants no control over his body right now.

The fifth-year boys filed into the chapel, murmuring quietly to one another, settling into neat rows of benches. Shane took his place at the front, standing tall beneath the high arched ceiling, the flickering candlelight reflecting off the stained glass above.

“Let us begin with the Lord’s Prayer,” he said, voice steady, carrying through the chapel with the authority he had spent years perfecting.

The boys bowed their heads, hands clasped. Shane followed, memorized lines flowing naturally from his lips. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name…”

Shane focused on the sound of the collective voices, the unity of the moment, the rhythm of breath and word. It was discipline and order. It was the anchor he desperately needed.

By the time the prayer ended, he intoned the final “Amen” and the room was quiet again. Shane exhaled, fingers tightening around the Bible he held for just a moment before releasing it.

“Fucking hell.”

Ilya's grip on Shane's hips was tight that it could be bruising, maybe, but Shane didn't care, not when he was this desperate for more, closer to anything to ease the ache in his gut.

They were in the cramped bathroom of their dorm, the tiled walls cold beneath Shane's sweaty palms. It was past curfew, the entire dorm asleep, and they had to be quiet.

But with the way Ilya was taking him apart, Shane wasn't sure if he could.

He was trembling, and he couldn't stop. Every movement and every touch was just too much, too intense, and the fact that they could get *caught* only made him dizzier.

He'd never been this reckless. He'd never—

"Look at you," Ilya whispered, his breath hot against the back of Shane's neck. “Ty tak krasiva v etom vide…”

[You look so beautiful like this…]

Shane couldn't bring himself to care that he was moaning. "Please–”

Shane’s gasp bounced off the shower tiles as Ilya’s teeth grazed his shoulder blade. The steam curled around them, swallowing every broken sound Shane couldn’t choke back.

“Quiet,” Ilya murmured against his damp skin, fingers tightening where they gripped Shane’s waist. “Or do you *want* someone to hear?”

Shane bit down on his own forearm, the taste of sweat and desperation sharp on his tongue as Ilya thrust into him again, harder this time, perfectly angled to make Shane’s vision blur. His knees nearly buckled, but Ilya held him up effortlessly, pressing him flush against the slick wall.

A whimper escaped anyway.

Ilya chuckled, low and wicked, as his hand slid around to wrap around Shane’s cock, stroking in time with each punishing roll of his hips. “That’s it,” he breathed, lips brushing the shell of Shane’s ear. “Let me hear how much you love this.”

Shane’s nails scraped against ceramic, his entire body coiled tight, teetering—

Then the sink faucet next to them dripped.

The sound was deafening in the sudden stillness.

Both of them froze.

Somewhere down the hall, a door creaked open.

Ilya’s grip turned vise-like, his exhale ragged against Shane’s spine. “…Fuck.”

Shane’s pulse roared in his ears as footsteps padded closer.

Ilya didn’t pull away. Instead, he pressed deeper, his next words a barely-there vibration against Shane’s skin. “Don’t. Move.”

The footsteps came closer until they stood just outside the bathroom door.

Shane's heart hammered so loudly he was sure it could be heard across the country. Every muscle in his body was tensed, but Ilya's grip on him was like a sin.

The seconds passed like hours, the faucet dripping every now and then like a goddamn countdown timer.

Crash.

Shane’s elbow knocked the soap dispenser off the ledge, sending it clattering against the tile floor too loud.

The footsteps outside froze.

Then, knuckles rapped against the door of the stall.

"Uh… someone in there?"

Shane’s entire body went rigid, his breath trapped in his lungs, but Ilya didn’t stop. If anything, he moved harder, hips thrusting forward in a brutal rhythm that punched another strangled noise from Shane’s throat. His palm slapped over Shane’s mouth just in time to smother the sound.

"Mm—!"

The knocking came again, sharper this time. “Hello…?"

Ilya’s laugh was a dark, breathless thing against Shane’s shoulder as he pressed in deeper, twisting his fingers into Shane’s hair to yank his head back. "Answer him," he murmured, lips brushing the shell of Shane’s ear. "Tell him you're busy."

Shane’s vision blurred from panic, from pleasure, from the sheer impossibility of this situation. His voice was wrecked when it finally came.

"Occupied,” he choked out.

"Oh. Uh. Sorry, man,” the voice, which sounded like Hayden’s, disappeared along with the retreating footsteps.

Ilya grinned, hunting and satisfied, before biting down on the tendon of Shane’s neck. "Now," he purred, "where were we?"

Shane didn’t get a chance to answer before Ilya was driving into him again, and the only thing louder than the pounding of Shane’s heart was the slick, filthy sound of skin against skin echoing off the bathroom walls.

It was too much, too fast, and Shane couldn't keep the sounds in. He was still biting back moans when Ilya's hand tightened around his nape.

"Shh," he said, his voice a low command. "Someone might hear."

“Ah, fuck…” Shane cried out, biting his thumb now.

God, the irony was almost too much.

Shane tried to bite back another moan, but it escaped anyway, with a sharp ah that bounced off the tile walls.

Ilya chuckled again, low and rumbling. "Can't control yourself?"

Another thrust, harder this time, and Shane's vision swam.

All he could feel was Ilya and his breath, his voice, his fingers. He was everywhere, taking over every nerve, every thought, and the worst part was Shane wanted him there.

The garden was never this quiet during the day.

At one in the morning, it felt like a secret the campus had forgotten it was keeping. Moonlight spilled over trimmed hedges and stone paths, silvering the leaves and turning the statues into pale silhouettes. Somewhere far off, a clock ticked toward another hour Shane wasn’t supposed to be awake for.

He sat on the edge of the fountain, hands folded in his lap, shoes nudged just shy of the water. His breath fogged faintly in the cold.

“You know,” Ilya said beside him, voice low, “if we get caught, you’re the one who’ll get it worse.”

Shane huffed a quiet breath. “I’m aware.”

“And yet,” Ilya added, leaning back on his palms, looking up at the sky, “here you are.”

Shane glanced at him. In the moonlight, Ilya looked softer somehow. Less sharp around the edges. The usual bravado was still there, but muted, like he’d turned the volume down just for this hour.

“I don’t do this,” Shane said after a moment. “Sneaking out or breaking curfew.”

Ilya smiled faintly. “I figured.”

They sat in silence for a while, listening to the water trickle, to the wind combing through the trees. It wasn't uncomfortable. That, more than anything, unsettled Shane.

"My parents would lose their minds," Shane said suddenly.

Ilya turned his head. "Really?"

"My mother thinks this place is… salvation," he continued, eyes fixed on the rippling water. "She says God led me here. That discipline and faith will make me a good man," his mouth twitched. "She still sends letters reminding me to pray for humility."

"And your dad?" Ilya asked.

Shane hesitated. "He agrees with her. Just… quieter about it." He paused, then added, almost too softly, "They're very proud of me."

There it was. The thing he didn't say.

Ilya didn't push. He just nodded, gaze drifting back to the sky. "That's good."

"I feel like I'm lying to them," Shane admitted. "All the time."

Ilya's jaw tightened slightly. "Yes," he said. "I know that feeling."

Shane looked at him again. "Your father?"

"He sent me here because he couldn't fix me himself," Ilya finished easily, though his fingers curled against the stone. "He thinks this place will fix me."

"That's—" Shane stopped himself.

Ilya shrugged. "He wasn't always like that. Or maybe he was and I just didn't notice until I stopped pretending." He glanced sideways at Shane. "My mother died when I was young, so she wasn't able to stick around long enough to have opinions."

"I'm sorry, Ilya… That must've been hard."

"It was quiet," Ilya corrected. "Which is worse, sometimes."

Another stretch of silence fell, heavier now. Shane felt it pressing into his chest. "Do you ever wish," Shane said slowly, "that you could be someone else? Someone simpler?"

Ilya considered him. "No."

Shane blinked. "No?"

"I wish the world was less cruel about it," Ilya said. "But I don't wish I was different," he then tilted his head. "Do you?"

Shane opened his mouth and closed it again. His throat felt tight.

“I don’t know who I am without all this,” he finally said. “Without rules or expectations.”

Ilya shifted closer, not really touching, but near enough that Shane could feel the warmth of him. “Then maybe you don’t need to know yet.”

Shane swallowed. “You make it sound easy.”

“It’s not,” Ilya said quietly. “But it’s honest.”

The garden held them there, suspended between night and morning, between who they were and who they were expected to be.

When the distant bell finally rang, they both startled. “We should go,” Shane said, already standing.

Ilya nodded. “Yeah.”

They walked back separately, careful, silent, not daring to be caught together.

The guilt was slowly eating him up. Every night, every touch, every pleasure… everything was slowly killing him.

It crept in quietly, not all at once, but in fragments between the moments of laughter, in the pauses before sleep, and in the silence after Ilya’s voice faded from the room. Shane would lie awake, staring at the dark ceiling, counting breaths like his prayers, hoping exhaustion would claim him before his thoughts did.

It never worked.

During the day, he functioned. He smiled when spoken to, still led prayers like he always did, copied notes neatly into the margins of his notebooks. From the outside, nothing about him had changed, but inside, something was constantly unraveling.

He started flinching at his own reflection.

The boy staring back at him still looked the same with tidy hair, pressed uniform, calm eyes, but Shane knew better. He knew what lived beneath the surface now. He knew how easily his resolve could fracture, how quickly discipline could give way to longing, and that terrified him more than any punishment ever could.

He prayed harder. *Longer*. Sometimes until his knees ached and his lips went numb… But the prayers didn’t bring peace anymore, because instead, they brought questions.

If God was watching, why did He stay silent? If this was wrong, why did it feel so achingly human? And if love, if that was the right word for it, was meant to be pure, why did it hurt so

much to deny it?

Shane began avoiding Ilya in small ways.

Sitting a seat farther away, leaving halls and lecture rooms a little earlier, pretending not to notice the familiar weight of Ilya's gaze. It wasn't cruelty, he told himself. It was survival.

But some nights, when the halls were quiet and the dorm breathed softly with sleep, Shane would press his palm to his chest and feel his heart racing, unruly and alive, and think—

This is what's killing me.

And still… I don't want it to stop.

Because guilt could hollow him out, could keep him awake, could drag him to his knees in whispered prayers, but it couldn't erase the truth he was slowly, painfully learning that wanting Ilya didn't make him weak… it made him honest. And that, more than anything else, was the sin he didn't know how to repent for.

He needed to do something about this, or else he would disappoint everyone around him. He would disappoint the headmaster, the nuns, the students that admire him, and his parents.

Shane started doing it quietly.

In theology class, he chose a seat closer to the aisle instead of beside Ilya. When Ilya arrived late, as he often did, there was no space left next to him anymore. Shane kept his eyes on the blackboard, spine straight, pen moving in careful lines, even when he felt the familiar weight of someone settling a row behind him.

At meals, Shane sat with the boys from choir instead of his usual place near the windows. He bowed his head before eating, lips moving in silent, and kept them moving even when he felt Ilya's gaze burning holes into the side of his face.

He talked only when spoken to, laughed only when expected.

Ilya noticed, because who wouldn't, especially if it was the boy you spent multiple sleepless nights with?

The first time he tried to catch Shane alone, it was after afternoon classes. The corridor was half-empty, footsteps echoing softly as students drifted back to the dorms. Shane heard his name being called before he felt a hand brush near his sleeve.

"Hollander."

Shane didn't stop.

He adjusted the strap of his bag on his shoulder and kept walking, pace steady, eyes forward, as if he hadn't heard a thing.

Ilya's steps quickened. "Hey," he said again, sharper now. "Shane."

Still nothing.

By the time Shane reached the stairs, his chest was tight, breath shallow. He gripped the railing and took the steps two at a time, heart hammering like he was running from something with teeth. He didn't look back. He couldn't.

He shouldn't.

At night, the dorm felt louder than usual. Every creak of a bedframe, every whisper of sheets made his muscles tense. He lay on his side, facing the wall, rosary wrapped around his fingers so tightly it left faint impressions in his skin. When the door down the hall opened and closed, he held his breath, waiting.

Some nights, someone knocked softly on his door.

Shane never answered.

In the mornings, Ilya started sitting closer during prayer, close enough that Shane could feel the heat of him, could sense movement beside him even without looking. Shane kept his gaze fixed on the altar, voice steady as he led the words he knew by heart.

"Hail Mary, full of grace—"

His voice never broke. His hands never shook.

But afterward, when the benches scraped and the students stood, Shane moved away immediately, slipping into the flow of bodies, disappearing before Ilya could say a word.

It wasn't anger that finally crossed Ilya's face, because it seemed more like he was hurt, And Shane saw it once by accident, reflected in the glass of a display case as he passed by. Ilya stood behind him, hands in his pockets, jaw tight, eyes dark and searching.

Shane's stomach twisted.

I'm doing this for a reason, he told himself. *This is discipline. This is faith.*

But some nights, when he was alone and the prayers ran dry, the silence pressed in too hard, and Shane wondered if ignoring Ilya hurt him more, or if it was hurting Shane worse.

Lunch was usually loud, chairs scraping, cutlery clinking, and voices layered over one another until the noise blurred into something harmless. Shane liked it that way because oise made it easier to disappear.

He sat near the end of one of the long tables, tray aligned neatly in front of him. He ate slowly, methodically, eyes down, and chewing each bite like it was part of a routine he couldn't afford to break. Around him, the boys from choir were mid-conversation about an upcoming recital, but Shane only nodded when required, offering small murmurs of agreement.

Across the hall, Ilya laughed, and the sound of his beautiful laugh cut through everything.

Shane's grip tightened on his fork before he could stop himself. He didn't look up, and he didn't need to. He knew exactly where Ilya would be, with his slouched back at his usual table with his friends, chair tipped on two legs, tie loose, grin easy and unearned.

He could picture it too clearly, and that was the problem.

Then the laughter stopped...

…and a chair scraped loudly against the floor.

Shane felt it more than he saw it—the shift in the room, the way attention subtly realigned. Footsteps approached him and he could feel his entire body going numb.

Ilya stopped beside Shane's table.

"Hey," he said, casual, like nothing was wrong. Like Shane hadn't spent days pretending he didn't exist.

Shane kept eating. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

Ilya waited. "You really gonna keep doing this?"

One of the boys across from Shane glanced between them, uncomfortable. Shane felt the weight of the moment pressing in, the wrongness of it all… of Ilya standing there, of his own silence, of the heat rising in his chest that had nothing to do with shame and everything to do with restraint.

"I just wanted to sit," Ilya added, quieter now. "That a crime?"

Shane set his fork down carefully and swallowed so hard he could feel himself choking just a bit.

Fuck.

The bench legs screeched against the floor as he pushed it back, the sound sharp enough to draw eyes. He didn't look at Ilya, not even for a second. He gathered his tray, nodded once to the table, and stepped away.

"Shane," Ilya said, his voice losing its edge. "Come on."

Shane walked faster.

He felt the shift behind him, the moment Ilya realized he wasn't going to follow. That this wasn't a misunderstanding or a bad mood.

This was intentional.

By the time Shane reached the trash bins, his hands were shaking as dumped his tray. He didn't look back as he left the hall, with his heart pounding like he'd just committed another sin.

Behind him, Ilya stood alone beside the table Shane had abandoned, jaw tight, hands clenched at his sides.

For the first time since arriving, he didn't look defiant like how he usually did.

He looked *shut out.*

And Shane hated himself for how much he felt it.

Shane didn't stop walking until the doors to the courtyard swung shut behind him. The air outside was cooler, sharp against his flushed skin. He drew in a breath that felt too thin, then another, as if he'd run instead of walked away.

He told himself he was doing the right thing.

He passed over the courtyard quickly, gravel crunching under his shoes, and ducked into the side corridor that led back toward the academic wing. The halls were quieter here, empty. Every sound felt magnified. Every second stretched.

He didn't make it far.

"Is this what you want?"

Ilya's voice came from behind him.

Shane stopped.

He stood there for a full heartbeat before turning, slow and deliberate, like if he moved too fast everything would fall apart. Ilya was a few steps away, breath slightly uneven, curls pushed back from his forehead as if he'd run after him despite himself.

"You don't talk to me," Ilya said. "You don't sit with me and you won't even look at me," his jaw tightened. "You think people don't notice? I don't?"

Shane folded his arms across his chest, a poor imitation of armor. "You shouldn't have followed me."

"Why?" Ilya asked. "Because is easier to pretend I'm not real if I'm not in front of you?"

"That's not—" Shane stopped and swallowed. "This isn't appropriate."

Ilya laughed once, sharp and humorless. "Now you care about appropriate?"

A door opened somewhere down the hall. Shane flinched instinctively, eyes darting toward the sound. When it shut again, the silence rushed back in.

"You're making this harder than it has to be," Ilya said, quieter now.

Shane shook his head. "No. I'm making it possible."

"For who?" Ilya asked. "For you? Or for everyone else?"

Shane didn’t answer.

Ilya stared at him, like he was trying to memorize something before it was taken away. “You don’t get to have me and then erase me,” he said softly. “That’s not fair.”

“I never asked you to stay,” Shane replied, and the lie tasted bitter the moment it left his mouth.

Ilya’s expression flickered, with hurt, then anger, then something resigned. He stepped back. “Fine.”

He turned away first this time.

Shane watched him go, the space between them widening with every step, his chest aching like he’d torn something open and left it there. When Ilya disappeared around the corner, Shane leaned his forehead briefly against the cool stone wall.

He whispered a prayer he didn’t finish. And when the bell rang for afternoon classes, Shane straightened, adjusted his uniform, and walked the opposite direction, carrying the weight of someone he was pretending not to need.

“Sister Gabriela,” Shane knocked on the door of the quarters of the nuns, waiting for her to come out.

“Who is it?” Her voice came through behind the door, footsteps sounding against the wooden floor. It was cold outside and the sun had already set, yet Shane was still up, about to seek help.

“It’s Shane Hollander, Sister,” he cleared his throat, putting both of his hands inside the pocket of his puffer jacket. “I’m here to ask for help, Sister.”

A few seconds of silence greeted him, before multiple clicks of locks came through the quiet, and the door opened with Sister Gabriela holding a mug in her right hand.

“Come in.”

Shane nodded once and entered right behind her, standing awkwardly at the corner of the room and waiting for the other to speak first. He didn't know what to say.

“What do you need help with? Do you find the schedule hectic? I can adjust the schedule for you, Hollander, if you find the morning prayers a bit too early,” she said immediately, and Shane only felt the guilt more.

“No, Sister. T-that’s not what I came here for,” Shane shook his head. “I actually came to ask for F-Father Mateo and his schedule.”

“What? Why?” She took a sip of her coffee and sat down on the small table near the kitchen, signaling for Shane to come and sit on the empty one across from her.

Shane followed, bowing first before sitting down. “I need to know w-when the other priests would come for the confessional.”

Sister Gabriela raises her right brow and pursed her lips. “Why so?”

“U-uh, I just…” Shane sniffles slightly and clears his throat. “I feel that I want to hear another perspective on… on a confession.”

Sister Gabriela studied him over the rim of her mug, the steam curling between them. She had known Shane for years. Since he came here when he was merely fourteen years old, she knew of his discipline, his devotion, and his reliability. Seeing him like this at eighteen, shoulders tight, eyes flicking downward instead of meeting hers, it unsettled her.

“A different perspective…” she repeated slowly. “You’ve never needed more than one before.”

Shane’s fingers twisted together in his lap. His pulse still hadn’t settled, his body remembering things his mind kept trying to reject. “I… I don’t feel at peace,” he admitted. “And I know confession isn’t meant to be… comparative. But I thought that m-maybe hearing the same thing or a different thing from someone else might help me understand what I’m supposed to do.”

Silence stretched between them, and Shane looked so awkward that it disturbed Sister Gabriela more.

With a sigh, she set the mug down. “Father Ignacio will be visiting on Thursday evening. He’ll hear confessions after vespers,” she paused, then added more gently, “But Shane… running from one priest to another will not change the truth of whatever is troubling you.”

Shane swallowed. “I know,” he whispered. “I just… need to be sure I’m not misunderstanding God’s will.”

Her gaze softened, though her voice remained firm. “God is not unclear, child, but we are, so sit with that discomfort before you decide it must be erased.”

Shane nodded, though the words didn’t bring relief. *Nothing* did. It was not prayer, not routine, and not obedience. He stood, bowed deeply, and thanked her before slipping back out into the cold corridor.

When he reached his room, he hesitated right outside, his hand just holding the knob. Beside his door, he looked at number 12 and saw that it was dark and quiet.

He should have been relieved, but instead, disappointment curled low in his chest.

“I’m sorry, Ilya…”

Shane exhaled, opened his door, and stepped inside. He knelt beside his bed out of habit, hands folded, head bowed. He was about to pray.

But the words wouldn’t come. And for the first time, Shane wondered if confession wasn’t about absolution at all, but about learning how to live with a truth he wasn’t ready to name.

It had been two months since Ilya Rozanov transferred here, and it had been a month since he first felt the touch of his lips, the roughness of Ilya’s hands as they gripped on him so tightly. It’s been a month since Shane committed his gravest sin.

And he couldn't confess to Father Mateo about it.

No, it wasn't because he felt afraid of admitting out loud that he was having sex with the same gender. It wasn't because he couldn't admit to him that he was, probably, might be, highly likely, gay.

It was more on the fact that Father Mateo had told him the same things over and over again, and he hasn't been of help to him and his problems. Father Mateo always told him to pray for his penance, three Hail Marys, and one Our Father. None of it had helped.

It wasn't helping.

It wasn't making his thoughts disappear.

Shane knelt on the floor of his room and prayed to God, for forgiveness, for compassion, and for mercy.

He disregarded the word of God in the first chapter from the book of Romans, where he knew that men who committed shameful acts with other men received themselves the due penalty for their error.

He had been warned… but he still committed a sin of lust, and had been lustful to a man of the same sex. Tears rolled down his cheeks as his hands gripped tighter together, pressing them against his forehead like he could hold his thoughts in place if he tried hard enough.

“Please,” Shane whispered, voice breaking in the quiet of the room. “Please, God… make it stop.”

But nothing stopped.

The dorm was hushed around him. There was no laughter in the halls, no footsteps passing his door. It was just him and his voice and his admittance of being a sinner in front of God. His breath came unevenly, hitching every time his mind betrayed him again, dragging Ilya’s presence back into focus… of his voice, his closeness, the way he looked at Shane like he wasn’t fragile or holy or something to be protected… but *cared for.*

That was the most terrifying part.

Shane had always known who he was supposed to be. The rules had given him shape, faith had given him language, and obedience had given him safety. Without them, he felt

unworthy, like a boy kneeling in the dark with no clear direction left to follow.

“I don’t want this,” he said, even as doubt coiled around the words. “I don’t want to disappoint *You*.”

His forehead pressed harder into his clasped hands. Scripture rose unbidden in his mind, of verses memorized since childhood, warnings etched deep into him. He *knew* them all. He had *lived* by them.

And yet… God was silent. He wasn't responding.

“Lord, why aren't you answering me?” Shane uttered out loud. “Why aren't you talking to me?! I need You!”

His voice cracked on the last word, the sound tearing itself free from his chest before he could stop it. Shane collapsed fully to the floor, knees giving way, palms flat against the floor as if that might shock him back into control.

“I’ve done everything right,” he sobbed. “I followed the rules. I prayed when I was told. I listened and I believed!” His breath hitched violently, each inhale a struggle. “So why does it still feel like this?”

The room offered no answer. The crucifix above his bed remained carved and silent, Christ frozen in a suffering Shane had been taught to understand, but not how to survive.

His tears blurred everything. He pressed his forehead to the floor, shoulders shaking, humiliation burning just as sharply as fear. He felt small in a way he hadn’t since childhood, stripped of certainty and stripped of language. Prayer had always been his refuge. His haven. But right now, it felt like shouting into a void.

“I’m scared,” he admitted, the words slipping out before he could stop them. “I don’t know who I am if I don’t want the things I’m *supposed* to want.”

Silence.

Minutes passed, or maybe seconds, and time lost its shape. Shane stayed there, crumpled and trembling, until the storm inside him dulled into something quieter. It didn't feel like peace, but exhaustion.

Slowly, he rolled onto his side, staring at the edge of his bed, the faint light from the hallway bleeding under the door. His breathing evened out, shallow but steady. His eyes burned, his throat raw.

God had not answered him.

But for the first time, Shane wondered if the silence wasn’t punishment…

But if it was permission. If the silence was permission to feel, to question, and to exist without immediate answer.

He didn’t stand up right away. He just laid there, listening to his own breathing, to the distant sounds of the dorm settling into sleep.

A soft knock broke through his thoughts, and Shane froze.

It wasn’t loud. It was just two gentle taps against the wooden door yet his pulse spiked instantly, dread and hope tangling so tightly he couldn’t tell them apart. He stayed there, breath held, eyes fixed on the door as if looking might make the truth undeniable.

Another knock followed, quieter still.

“Shane,” a voice murmured from the other side. “I know you’re awake.”

His chest tightened painfully.

He squeezed his eyes shut, swallowing hard. Every instinct screamed at him to stay where he was, to finish the prayer, to cling to what little certainty he had left. But another part of him, one he had been trying desperately to starve, ached at the sound of his name spoken like that.

“I shouldn’t,” Shane whispered to the empty room.

The door didn’t open, and Ilya didn’t push.

He just waited.

And in that stillness, Shane understood something with frightening clarity that this wasn’t about temptation anymore. It wasn’t even about sin.

But it was about choice. About whether faith meant denial or honesty. About whether obedience was meant to silence him or to teach him how to listen.

Slowly, Shane lowered his hands from his face and rose to his feet. And with one last glance at the bed where he had knelt in prayer, Shane took a step toward the door, knowing full well that whatever waited on the other side was the cause of his chaos.

When he opened the door slowly, Ilya stepped inside before Shane could think better of it.

The door shut hard behind him, wood slamming against frame with a sharp crack that made Shane flinch. The sound felt too loud for the quiet dorm, like it might echo down the hall and give them both away. Ilya didn’t lock it nor did he lean against it theatrically. He just stood there, chest rising and falling, jaw tight.

“What the hell was that?” Ilya said, voice low but edged. “You disappeared for days. You won’t look at me, won’t talk to me, and now you act like I don’t exist?”

Shane’s hands curled into fists at his sides. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“That’s it?” Ilya scoffed softly. “That’s all you got?”

“I told you not to follow me,” Shane snapped, surprising himself with the sharpness of his own voice. “I told you to leave me alone.”

“You told me nothing,” Ilya shot back. He took a step forward, invading Shane’s space without touching him. “You ran. Again! You keep doing that, Hollander, running, praying, pretending it’ll fix whatever’s eating you alive.”

Shane’s breath hitched. “You don’t understand.”

“Then explain it to me,” Ilya said. “Because right now it just looks like you’re punishing yourself for something you don’t even hate.”

“That’s not true,” Shane said quickly. “I hate it. I—” His voice faltered. He swallowed hard. “I hate what it does to me.”

Ilya went still. For a moment, the anger in his expression softened into frustration. Or hurt. “You think this is easy for me?” he asked quietly. “You think I don’t notice how you look at me like I’m a mistake you made?”

Shane’s eyes burned. “This place isn’t safe for this. For *us*. You don’t get what it’s like to grow up knowing every thought could damn you.”

Ilya exhaled sharply, dragging a hand through his hair. “No. I grew up knowing people would damn me no matter what I did,” he looked back at Shane then, gaze steady. “Difference is, I stopped letting them decide who I am.”

“That must be nice,” Shane said bitterly.

“It’s lonely,” Ilya replied. “But at least I’m honest.”

Silence fell between them, heavy and strained. The lamp on Shane’s desk hummed softly, casting long shadows across the room.

“I came here because I needed to change. I came here because I was trouble to my Papa,” Ilya said. “But when I saw you and your fucking freckles, I knew I was done for.”

Shane felt like he was standing at the edge of something, afraid to step forward and just as afraid to step back.

“When I asked to come to your dorm and kissed you, that was me *opening myself up to you.* I wanted you to know me, and I wanted to know you,” Ilya’s hand moved at the same time he talked. “But I didnt think we’d do it every single fucking day, that we even did in the chapel’s prayer room–”

“Ilya.”

“No,” he shook his head, unwilling to be cut off. “And now, after kissing me, fucking me, telling me you want to keep doing things with me— you stop? You act like I’m a ghost? I can be a bad person, Shane, but I get hurt, too.”

“You scare me,” Shane admitted finally, voice barely above a whisper.

“…Why?”

“Because when I’m with you,” Shane said, staring at the floor, “I don’t know where God ends and where I begin. And that terrifies me.”

Ilya didn’t move. He didn’t touch him. He just said, softly, “I never asked you to choose tonight.”

Shane looked up.

“I just didn’t want to be shut out,” Ilya continued. “Not without knowing why.”

Shane nodded slowly, chest tight. The fight drained out of him, leaving only exhaustion and something fragile underneath it that felt far more dangerous than anger.

“I didn’t want to shut you out,” he said, voice hoarse. “I just… I didn’t know how to let you stay without losing everything else.”

Ilya’s jaw flexed. “You think I don’t know what losing things feels like?”

“I know you do,” Shane said quickly. “That’s not– this isn’t about you not understanding. It’s about me not knowing how to exist like this.”

He finally lifted his eyes, and there was no accusation in them now, but fear. “I was raised to believe there is a right way to be. That there was a right way to love. But when I’m with you, all of that goes quiet. Not gone, just… quiet. And I don’t know what to do with the silence.”

Ilya absorbed that, shoulders lowering a fraction. He looked around the room, the neatly made bed, the stacked books, the crucifix above, like he was finally seeing the shape of Shane’s world for the first time, not just Shane as a person he cared about.

“I’m not asking you to burn it down,” he said softly. “I just don’t want to be treated like I am the fire burning you.”

Shane’s throat worked. “You’re not.”

“Then stop making me feel like I am.”

They stood there, the space between them no longer charged with fury, but with something heavier. Unfinished.

“I can’t promise you clarity,” Shane said. “I can’t promise courage. All I have right now is honesty, and even that scares me.”

Ilya nodded once. “That’s enough.”

He took a step back, then another, putting deliberate distance between them. At the door, he paused, hand on the handle. “For what it’s worth,” he added, not turning around, “I didn’t

come here to ruin you."

Shane swallowed. "I know."

Ilya's hand was already on the handle when Shane spoke to stop him.

"Don't."

The word came out raw, sharper than he intended. Shane crossed the room in two quick steps before he could lose his nerve, fingers closing around Ilya's wrist.

"Stay," Shane said, breath uneven. "Please."

Ilya turned slowly. Surprise flickered across his face first, then caution. "Shane," he said quietly, "don't say that if you don't mean it."

Shane didn't let go. "I do," he insisted, voice trembling but resolute. "I don't mean… I don't mean that." He swallowed, forcing himself to meet Ilya's eyes. "I just… if you leave now, I'll go back to pretending nothing is happening. And I can't keep doing that."

Silence stretched between them, thick and fragile.

"You don't have to punish yourself tonight because of me," Shane continued. "You don't have to touch me. You don't have to say anything. Just… stay."

Ilya searched his face, reading every crack in Shane's composure. "And tomorrow?" he asked softly.

Shane hesitated. Then, honestly, "Tomorrow I'll probably look for Father Mateo or Father Ignacio."

A faint, sad smile tugged at Ilya's mouth. "Figures."

He exhaled, long and slow, then let go of the door handle. Shane's grip loosened automatically, like he hadn't quite believed it would work.

"Alright," Ilya said. "I'll stay, but only if you stop looking at me like I'm something you need forgiveness for."

Shane took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay."

They stood there awkwardly for a moment, neither sure what to do next. Finally, Shane gestured weakly toward the bed. "You can… you can take the bed. I'll—"

"No," Ilya interrupted. "We're not kids." He paused, then added more gently, "And we're not doing anything you don't want to do anymore."

They lay there in the dark, shoulder to shoulder but not touching, the space between them charged with everything they weren't saying. Shane stared at the ceiling, listening to Ilya's breathing even out beside him.

“When did you… know?” He suddenly spoke, his voice quiet and careful. “That you were bisexual.”

Ilya didn’t answer right away. He shifted slightly onto his side, propping his head on his arm so he could look at Shane’s profile in the dim light.

“Early,” he said finally. “Not all at once, no. It wasn’t some big revelation.” A pause. “I just noticed I felt the same kind of pull toward boys as I did toward girls. It was confusing at first. Annoying, mostly.”

Shane let out a small, breathless sound. “Annoying?”

“Yeah,” Ilya said. “Because everyone wanted it to be one thing or the other. And I didn’t feel the want to pick just one,” he shrugged lightly. “So I didn’t.”

Shane’s fingers twisted together on his chest. “You never… tried to pray it away? Ask God for help

Ilya’s expression softened. “No. But when I was thirteen, I figured that if God didn’t want me like this, He would’ve made me different.” He glanced back at the ceiling. “People tried to shame it out of me instead. It didn't work.”

Shane swallowed hard. “I don’t know if I could do that,” he admitted. “Not choosing, o-or not fighting it.”

“I know,” Ilya said gently. “You were taught that fighting is the same as being good.”

Shane turned his head then, just enough to look at him. “And what were you taught?”

Ilya met his gaze. “That pretending gets you nowhere.”

The words settled between them.After a moment, Shane whispered, “Does it ever stop feeling… frightening?”

“It stops feeling like the end of the world,” he said. “That’s different.”

Shane nodded slowly. He didn’t say anything else, but his breathing eased. They lay there like that, two boys staring into the dark, not solved and not saved…just honest in a way Shane was only beginning to understand.

Ilya shifted slightly on the mattress, the movement careful, like he didn’t want to startle Shane. Their shoulders brushed, and Shane’s breath caught before he could stop it. Ilya noticed it, but he didn’t pull away.

“Can I ask you something?” Ilya said quietly.

Shane hesitated, then nodded. “Okay.”

“Do you think God hates you for it?” Ilya asked, and the question landed heavier than anything else had that night.

Shane stared up at the ceiling, the faint outline of cracks in the plaster blurring as his eyes stung. “I think… I was taught that He would,” he said slowly. “That loving the *wrong way* means turning your back on Him, and I’ve spent my whole life terrified of doing that.”

Ilya turned onto his back again, gaze fixed upward. “That sounds exhausting.”

“It is,” Shane admitted. “It feels like I’m always watching myself. Like I’m measuring every thought and feeling I have. Like if I slip, even just once, everything I’ve built will collapse.”

There was a long pause.

“I don’t think you’re broken,” Ilya said eventually. “I don’t think this makes you weak, either. If anything…” He exhaled softly. “I think you’re brave for even admitting it scares you.”

Shane turned his head, surprised. “Brave?”

“Yeah,” Ilya said. “Most people just hide. You’re at least trying to understand yourself, even if it hurts.”

Shane let that sit with him. No one had ever framed it that way before.

After a moment, he asked, “Were you scared at all? When you first knew?”

Ilya nodded once. “Yes. I was scared of other people finding out. Of being alone.” His voice softened. “But not of myself.”

Shane closed his eyes briefly. That was the difference, he realized. Ilya had never been taught to fear his own heart.

“I don’t know who I am without rules,” Shane said quietly. “I don't know who I would be if not for the responsibilities I have inside the church.”

Another stretch of silence followed. Shane’s breathing slowed, syncing unconsciously with Ilya’s.

After a while, Shane spoke again, almost shy. “Will you… stay until morning?”

Ilya didn’t hesitate. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Shane nodded, eyes closed now, the tension in his body finally easing. He didn’t pray this time. He didn’t confess or bargain or beg.

He just let himself rest.

And beside him, Ilya stayed awake a little longer, watching the ceiling, guarding the quiet, knowing that whatever tomorrow brought, tonight had already changed something important.

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

Shane’s voice carried over the chapel, steady, precise. The students followed suit, voices rising and falling in unison, a gentle wave of devotion that was at once grounding and suffocating. He kept his eyes on the page, willing the thoughts of Ilya to dissipate, willing his body to stop reacting, willing… everything.

But even as the words left his lips, the memory of last night’s heat, the brush of fingers and weight of presence, refused to fade. Shane closed his eyes for a fraction of a second, praying silently for the strength to keep leading the prayer without unraveling completely. He could feel the tension in his shoulders, the tremor in his hands, and the rapid thrum of his pulse, but he pressed on.

Every word became both armor and anchor, a delicate line between devotion and desire. And though the fifth-year boys repeated the lines dutifully behind him, Shane knew the truth he couldn’t confess aloud: the only presence that mattered, the only presence that had ever mattered in that moment, was Ilya Rozanov.

Shane’s voice faltered slightly as the final “Amen” echoed through the chapel.

He kept his eyes lowered, letting the flickering candlelight distract him from the lingering memory of Ilya. From the corner of his eye, he caught movement by the doorway.

Headmaster Lucien stood there, tall and imposing even in the soft candlelight, hands clasped behind his back and Shane’s stomach tightened. The man’s presence carried authority, but also that careful, observant edge that made it impossible to hide anything.

“Shane,” Headmaster Lucien said, his voice calm but carrying enough weight to make every student in the chapel sit a little straighter. “Stay after the others have left for a moment.”

Shane’s chest tightened further, but he nodded once, keeping his tone steady. “Yes, Father.”

As the students filed out quietly, murmuring prayers to themselves, the chapel emptied slowly until only Shane, the headmaster, and the flickering candlelight remained. Lucien’s sharp eyes softened slightly as he approached.

“How is Rozanov adjusting?” he asked, voice low enough for only Shane to hear. “It’s been several months since he transferred here, and I trust you’ve been keeping an eye on him.”

Shane swallowed, feeling the weight of the question. He had been aware of Ilya every single day. His moods, his habits, the small ways he pushed boundaries… but he hadn’t spoken of it aloud, not to anyone. “He’s adjusting,” Shane said carefully, glancing toward the empty doorway as if Ilya might appear out of nowhere. “Quiet, mostly, but he’s settling in just fine.”

Lucien paced slowly, hands behind his back. “Rozanov has a complicated past,” he said finally, voice low, almost thoughtful. “His father… could not accept who he is. He– he’s

homosexual, Shane. That's part of the reason he was sent here," he said the word like it was poison.

He said it like it disgusted him.

Shane blinked, the words settling like stones in his chest. He didn't respond immediately.

Lucien continued, his tone measured but firm. "His father expects him to change. To… straighten himself, as much as a boy like him can. That is why he is here. That is why I am telling you this."

Shane's fingers clenched around the hymnal, the weight of the responsibility pressing down on him. "I… I understand..?" he said slowly, unsure.

"You are his guide here, Hollander," Lucien said, voice even but sharp. "You will help him adjust not because you are his friend, or because it is convenient, but because it is expected. His father trusts the school to mold him, and I expect you to do your part."

Shane swallowed hard, the enormity of the charge settling in. "Yes, Father. I will."

Lucien's gaze softened for a brief moment. "Remember, guidance does not mean indulgence. Do your duty, Shane. Help him find the discipline and path his father demands, before he decides the responsibility was misplaced."

Shane's stomach twisted as the chapel doors creaked open again. He hadn't even realized someone was approaching until a familiar voice cut through the quiet.

"That's why he sent me here? To *straighten* me?"

Ilya's voice was low but venomous, carrying through the empty chapel with a force that made Shane flinch. He stood just inside the doorway, fists clenched at his sides, eyes blazing as they fixed on Headmaster Lucien. His jaw was tight, and there was a tremor in his voice that spoke of anger and hurt both.

Lucien straightened, calm but firm, as if he had expected this confrontation. "Rozanov…" he began, but Ilya cut him off.

"To change me? To make me someone I'm not? You're telling him to… to fix me?!" Ilya's voice rose slightly, sharp enough that it echoed off the stone walls. "Do you even understand me at all?"

Shane stayed frozen where he knelt, hands gripping the edge of the bench. His chest ached, torn between wanting to step in and the ingrained obedience that had always kept him silent.

"Ilya," Lucien said evenly, hands clasped behind his back. "This is not about punishment. It is about guidance and discipline. We are here to teach boys how to–"

"To be someone else?" Ilya interrupted, stepping closer, heat in his eyes. "Because that's all I hear! You don't want guidance, Sir. You want control. And you sent *him*, of all people, to enforce it?"

Shane's throat went dry. His pulse thundered in his ears. Ilya's gaze flicked to him briefly, and Shane could feel the weight of it.

Lucien's tone hardened slightly. "Rozanov, your father expects you to learn responsibility, to understand consequences, to—"

"I don't care what my old man expects!" Ilya snapped, his voice cracking slightly with fury. "And you know what? I don't care what you expect, too. Shane isn't my keeper, and I won't let him be your puppet in this."

Shane's heart pounded as Ilya's words cut through the air. All that remained was Ilya, standing like fire in the doorway, his anger and defiance radiating toward thefigure who had dared to dictate the terms of his life.

Lucien's expression remained calm, but his eyes sharpened. "Rozanov–"

"No," Ilya said, voice quiet now but unwavering. "I'm done listening. If anyone's teaching me anything, it's him," he gestured toward Shane with a flick of his hand. "Not you."

Shane's chest tightened. He didn't know if relief, fear, or disbelief came first. Ilya had taken the words he could never speak for himself and turned them into a shield, not just for Shane, but for himself.

Lucien paused, then inclined his head slightly, as if weighing his options, before finally speaking in a tone that was calm, clipped, and final. "Very well, Rozanov. But know this… you will still be held accountable for your actions while under our roof."

Ilya didn't respond. He just stood there, chest heaving, eyes blazing, while Shane remained standing, heart hammering, realizing just how fiercely Ilya could protect not only himself, but him.

The dorm hallways were quieter than usual later that night. Shane's mind was still spun from the confrontation in the chapel and he found himself wandering almost unconsciously toward the student lobby.

The lobby was dimly lit, a few scattered lamps casting pools of soft golden light across the polished floor. The usual quiet made it feel almost empty, except for the faint hum of the heater and the soft creak of the leather armchairs. Shane slipped inside, moving toward the far corner, hoping the shadows might give him some cover.

There, he saw the person he knew would be there.

"Ilya?" His voice was low, tentative.

A faint chuckle responded. "Took you long enough to show up."

Shane blinked as he saw Ilya leaning against the railing near the fireplace, hands stuffed in the pockets of his jacket and eyes glinting in the lamp light. He looked every bit as dangerous and defiant as he had in the chapel, but now he just seemed tired.

Shane approached slowly, unsure how to navigate the mix of anger, protectiveness, and unspoken tension that lingered between them. “I… I didn’t mean for things to…” his voice trailed off.

Ilya shook his head, pushing off the railing and walking toward him. “Forget the chapel. Let’s just sit, hm?” He gestured to one of the empty armchairs. Shane nodded and sank into it, the leather cold against his palms.

They sat in silence for a moment, neither moving, both aware of the unspoken words lingering between them. The only sounds were the occasional creak of the building settling and the faint crackle of the fireplace.

“I hate him,” Ilya muttered finally, voice low. “Your headmaster. My father. All of them. Thinking they can dictate who we are, what we want, what we… whatever.” His jaw tightened, and he let out a short, frustrated sigh.

Shane’s chest ached, but he couldn’t find words strong enough. “I… I know,” he said quietly. “I just… I’m scared. That they’ll…” He stopped, swallowing hard. “…that they’ll decide for me too.”

Ilya sat down across from him, close enough that Shane could see the flicker of firelight across his features. “Then don’t let them,” he said simply, eyes locking onto Shane’s. “Don’t let anyone. Not your parents, not Lucien, not me… if you don’t want to.”

Shane’s hands tightened in his lap, heat rushing to his cheeks. “It’s hard.”

“I know,” Ilya replied softly, leaning back but still watching him. “But that’s why I’m here. I’m not leaving, you know. You won’t have to deal with it alone, because I know how that feels.”

Shane’s breath hitched slightly at Ilya’s words. “You… you really mean that?” he whispered, voice barely audible.

Ilya’s lips curved into a small, almost gentle smile, the sharpness from earlier softened but not gone. “Of course I do. I’ve been there, Shane. Feeling like the world is stacked against you, like every desire is wrong. But it doesn’t have to be that way.”

Shane’s hands unclenched slightly, resting lightly on his thighs, though the warmth in his cheeks didn’t fade. “I don’t know how to… how to not feel guilty all the time,” he admitted, voice trembling. “Every time I think about anything… Ilya, I feel like I’m failing.”

“You’re not failing,” Ilya said firmly, leaning a little closer, enough for Shane to catch the faint scent of him, the mix of soap and something sharper he could never place. “You’re human. And you might not be… like the others, and that's not weakness, Shane. That’s who you are. And no one, no priest, no headmaster, no one—gets to decide that for you.”

Shane swallowed, heart thudding faster, and for the first time, let himself believe it. “I… I just wish it was easier.”

Ilya shrugged, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. “Life’s never easy, Hollander, but it’s better with someone watching your back.” His eyes softened, unwavering. “And I’ll watch yours.”

Shane’s voice was small, hesitant, almost fragile as he leaned forward, hands resting lightly on his knees. “What do we do? Ilya… I don’t know what to do…”

Ilya tilted his head, studying him for a long moment, lips pressed together thoughtfully. “When’s our graduation?” he asked finally, voice low.

Shane blinked. “I-in March.”

Ilya leaned back against the armchair, stretching his legs lazily, though his eyes never left Shane. “So… we have four months?”

Shane’s brow furrowed, uncertainty clouding his features. “Yeah… four months.”

“Four months of what?” Ilya asked, a faint teasing edge in his tone, though his eyes held seriousness. “Are we just surviving until then? Or are we figuring this out?”

Shane swallowed hard, cheeks warming. “I… I don’t even know if I can… figure it out. I’m scared, Ilya. Scared of w-what we feel, what we’ve done, what we’re doing… and what everyone expects of us.”

Ilya leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, his gaze steady, unflinching. “Then we take it one day at a time. Four months is all we’ve got. And maybe it’s enough to figure out how to—” he paused, a faint smirk tugging at his lips, “—survive each other, and maybe even be honest about it.”

Shane bit his lip, heart hammering at the careful balance of teasing and sincerity in Ilya’s words. “…And if we can’t?”

Ilya shrugged, leaning back again, smirk softening into something warmer. “Then at least we tried. But I don’t think that’ll happen.” His tone was confident, almost daring Shane to disagree.

Shane glanced at him, pulse still rapid, and felt a strange mix of fear and comfort. Four months. Four months of living under the same roof, in the same school, with the same temptations, the same closeness. Four months of figuring out whether desire could coexist with guilt—or whether it would consume him entirely.

“…Okay,” Shane whispered finally. “…Four months.”

The four months passed the way candle wax did in the chapel. Winter tightened its grip on the campus, and mornings grew sharper, frost clinging to the stone paths, breath turning visible during early prayer.

Shane still led devotion for the fifth years, voice steady, posture perfect. From the outside, nothing changed. He was still exemplary, still obedient, and still the boy his parents trusted and priests praised.

But beneath it all, everything shifted.

Ilya stopped provoking the teachers outright. He still bent rules, still carried himself with that quiet defiance, but he showed up to class, to meals, to prayer. He sat where he was supposed to sit, stood when expected, and spoke when called on. When the nuns watched him closely, he met their eyes without flinching. When they looked away, he rolled his shoulders like he'd just survived something unpleasant.

They learned the art of distance.

In public, they were careful. A chair left empty between them, with glances that lasted half a second too long and then vanished, and conversations trimmed of anything that could sound intimate. If Shane passed Ilya in the halls, it was with a nod and nothing more. If their fingers brushed while exchanging papers, they both pretended not to notice.

At night, they met.

They talked about everything they had never been allowed to say out loud.

Shane spoke of expectations, of how love always felt conditional, how goodness had become a performance he didn't know how to step out of. Ilya listened without interrupting, without teasing, his usual sharpness softened into something steady and grounding.

Ilya spoke of anger and how it followed him everywhere, how it had once kept him alive and now only left him tired. He talked about his father in fragments, never lingering too long, like touching something still hot. Shane listened, hands folded, heart aching with the knowledge that care didn't have to come with correction.

They would fuck after.

Kiss like there was no tomorrow.

Then cry because they felt like they finally found home after running away from it.

There were nights when guilt won.

Shane would pull away, bury himself in prayer, confess the same thoughts again and again, searching for relief that never came. Ilya never mocked him for it. Never pushed. He waited. Always waited.

And there were nights when guilt lost.

Those nights were quiet too despite the rush of pleasure burning their bodies. Foreheads pressed together. Breathing shared. The kind of intimacy that felt like stepping into warmth after standing in the cold too long. Shane learned that not everything that felt right had to be punished.

Spring crept in almost unnoticed.

Snow melted into slush and the gardens bloomed again. Students talked about exams, about graduation, about life beyond the gates of the school. March appeared on calendars in red ink, circled and underlined like a promise.

One afternoon, Shane realized he was laughing outright.

Ilya had said something under his breath during study hall, something dry and ridiculous, and Shane laughed before he could stop himself. Their eyes met and Ilya grinned. Shane didn't look away.

That night, Ilya's dorm room smelled faintly of laundry soap and old books, the window cracked just enough to let the cool evening air drift in. The courtyard outside buzzed with distant voices of boys laughing too loudly, too aware that freedom was close.

Graduation posters had started appearing in the halls, dates circled, futures whispered about like secrets.

One week.

Shane sat on the edge of Ilya's bed, hands folded in his lap out of habit. He'd loosened his tie but hadn't taken it off, like part of him still needed the structure even now. Ilya leaned against the desk, arms crossed, watching him with a familiarity that no longer felt dangerous and just intimate.

"One week," Ilya said, breaking the quiet. "You nervous?"

Shane huffed a soft breath. "I'm terrified."

Ilya smiled faintly. "Figures."

Shane glanced up. "You're not?"

"I am," Ilya admitted easily. He pushed off the desk and sat beside Shane. "I don't know what happens after this. I've never been good with after."

Shane nodded. "Me neither," he hesitated, then added, "My parents are coming early. They want to meet the headmaster again. Talk about… plans."

Ilya's jaw tightened, just slightly. "And what are your plans, Hollander?"

Shane stared at the floor for a moment. "That's the problem. I don't know if I'm allowed to have my own."

Ilya leaned back on his hands, exhaling slowly. "You don't need permission."

"That's easy for you to say," Shane murmured.

Ilya turned to him. “No. It wasn’t.” His voice softened. “It took me a long time to realize that choosing myself wasn’t selfish. It just felt that way because everyone else benefited from me staying small.”

Shane swallowed. “What about your father?”

Ilya shrugged, but there was weight behind it. “He sent a letter last week. About how this place was supposed to ‘fix’ me.” He let out a quiet laugh. “Hasn’t written since.”

“I’m sorry,” Shane said.

“I’m not,” Ilya replied, then paused. “Okay. Maybe a little, but I’m done waiting for him to understand.”

Silence settled between them again, comfortable and heavy all at once.

“What happens to us?” Shane asked suddenly, the words spilling out before he could stop them.

Ilya looked at him, really looked at him. “What do you want to happen?”

Shane’s hands twisted together. “I want to wake up and not feel like I’m doing something wrong just by wanting someone. I want to stop apologizing for who I am before anyone even asks me to.” His voice shook. “And I want… you. But I don’t know how to want all of that without feeling like I’m betraying everything I was taught.”

Ilya didn’t interrupt. When Shane finished, he reached out, resting his hand over Shane’s knuckles.

“Then we don’t decide everything right now,” Ilya said gently. “We take it slow. After graduation and after this damned place.” He smiled, soft and certain. “You don’t have to be brave all at once.”

Shane let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. “You’d really… wait?”

“I already have,” Ilya said quietly.

Their eyes met. The room felt smaller, warmer, like it was holding its breath with them.

Outside, someone shouted, laughter echoing down the hall. Time kept moving. Graduation crept closer.

But for that moment, in Ilya’s dorm room, Shane allowed himself to stay—one week from the end, and maybe, the beginning.

“Can you kiss me, Rozanov?”

Ilya didn't hesitate.

He leaned in, fingers brushing the curve of Shane's jaw before tilting his chin up gently. The kiss was soft and nothing like their usual stolen, fevered ones in darkened hallways or empty bathrooms. This was slow and felt like a promise more than a demand.

Shane exhaled against his lips, tension seeping out of his shoulders as Ilya's thumb traced his cheekbone. When they finally pulled apart, Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's, their breaths mingling in the scant space between them.

"One week," Ilya murmured.

Shane nodded, eyes still closed. "One week."

Ilya pressed another kiss to the corner of Shane's mouth. "Then we start over."

Shane smiled. They had planned that a month after graduation, they will open up to Shane’s parents and see if they react violently. Because it they did, Ilya had planned to use all of his inheritance to buy an apartment far from the city and live somewhere distant from all the people that made Shane feel trapped.

It sounded stupid coming from an eighteen year old like Ilya, but they had never felt more sure.

Ilya moved swiftly, pushing Shane back until he was flat against the mattress, their lips still locked in a hungry kiss. His hips settled between Shane's parted thighs, pinning him in place with a familiar heat.

Shane arched into the touch with a soft gasp, fingers digging into Ilya's shoulders. The kiss was now all tongue and teeth. It was deep, desperate, demanding. Ilya swallowed down every sound Shane made, his body a solid, possessive weight against him. In the dim light, his eyes were dark, pupils blown.

As Ilya pulled back for breath, his gaze skimmed over Shane like a physical touch, taking in the flush across his cheeks, the way his chest heaved. "God," he murmured, fingers tracing the line of Shane's throat. "You drive me insane."

Shane let out an unsteady laugh, his breath hitching as Ilya's hand glided down his chest, splaying out over his hip.

"Feeling's mutual," he said, voice a low, rough thing. "You're like a drug, Rozanov. You ruin me."

"And yet, you keep coming back for more." Ilya's thumb pressed against the sharp jut of Shane's hip bone, his touch both teasing and proprietary. Each brush of skin against skin sent shocks of heat through Shane, leaving him needy and on edge.

Shane groaned, his head falling back against the pillows as Ilya's mouth moved along his jaw, nipping and sucking at sensitive spots like he had a goddamn map tattooed on Shane's body.

"Not my fault you're hard to resist," he panted, fingers gripping Ilya's shoulders tighter.

Ilya chuckled, his breath hot against Shane's skin. "Careful, Hollander," he warned, fingers slipping beneath the edge of Shane's shirt. "Don't start something you can't finish."

Shane let out a breathless laugh, arching into Ilya's touch as his hands roamed across his bare stomach, rough and purposeful. "Never had any problem finishing before," he said, his words catching as Ilya's thumb brushed against his nipple.

Ilya hummed, the sound low and approving. His fingers traced idle circles across Shane's chest, a maddening tease that sent heat pooling in Shane's gut.

"Cocky, aren't you?" he murmured, his lips tracing a path down the line of Shane's throat. The sharp graze of Ilya's teeth made Shane's hips press up involuntarily, desperate for friction.

Shane's fingers dug into Ilya's hair, holding on for dear life. "Only because I can back it up," he managed, biting back a moan as Ilya's hands moved lower.

Ilya's mouth curved into a smirk, his smile all teeth as he nipped at Shane's earlobe. "We'll see about that."

He shifted suddenly, rolling his weight on top of Shane and pinning him beneath him. The change in position made Shane shiver, his breaths coming out in sharp pants. The look in Ilya's eyes was dark, almost feral, as he rucked up Shane's shirt, exposing his bare chest.

"You look good like this," he murmured, his fingers skimming over the hard planes of muscle. "Spread out under me."

Ilya didn't wait for a reply from Shane. His mouth descended on Shane's chest, tongue flicking over a peaked nipple before sucking hard enough to make Shane's back arch off the mattress. A ragged moan tore from Shane's throat as Ilya's hands made quick work of his belt, the leather sliding free with a sharp hiss.

"Still talking big?" Ilya taunted, his breath hot against Shane's stomach as he worked open the button of his slacks. Shane could only gasp when clever fingers dipped beneath the waistband of his briefs, tracing the length of him through the fabric.

"I thought—ah!—you said actions spoke louder," Shane managed between gritted teeth, hips lifting instinctively into the touch.

Ilya's answering grin was wicked as he peeled Shane's clothes down his thighs in one smooth motion. "Glad you're paying attention."

The first stroke of Ilya's hand had Shane seeing stars, his fingers twisting in the sheets. But it was the sight of Ilya lowering his head that made his breath stutter—the sinful pink of his tongue darting out to taste, the way his lashes fluttered as he took Shane deep in one smooth motion.

"Fuck—!" The curse ripped from Shane's throat as wet heat enveloped him completely. Ilya hummed in approval, the vibration shooting straight to Shane's core as he set a relentless

pace.

Shane's thighs trembled with the effort to stay still, every muscle coiled tight as pleasure built rapidly. Just when he thought he couldn't take anymore, Ilya pulled off with an obscene pop, his lips slick and swollen.

"Look at you," he murmured, thumb swiping over the head of Shane's cock, spreading the beads of precum. "So fucking pretty when you're desperate."

Shane's hips jerked helplessly. "Ilya—please—"

The smirk Ilya gave him was pure sin. "Please what? Use your words, Hollander."

Shane's answering groan was half frustration, half need. "You know what I want."

"I do," Ilya agreed, leaning down to bite at Shane's hipbone. "But I like hearing you beg."

Ilya took his time, savoring every noise that fell from Shane's lips with smug satisfaction. He seemed to relish the power he held over Shane in this moment, the way he could reduce him to a trembling, pleading mess.

At some point, Shane's hands found their way back to Ilya's hair, fingers threading through the dark, messy strands. It took every shred of willpower left in him not to buck up into that perfect, wet heat. Instead, he squeezed his eyes shut, desperately trying to cling to what little control he had left.

Just as Shane was nearing the edge, Ilya pulled off again, his lips moving to Shane's inner thigh instead.

Shane's head fell back against the pillows with a frustrated howl, his body arching desperately into nothing. “Oh, fuck you—" he panted, his voice ragged.

Ilya chuckled, the sound rough and ragged. "Not yet, lyubimy moy,” he dragged his teeth over the sensitive skin, leaving a trail of marks on Shane's flesh. "I'm not done with you yet."

Shane's eyes flickered open, taking in the sight of Ilya hovering over him all flushed, disheveled, and utterly unapologetic. He was a vision that sent heat flaring through Shane's veins, and he knew he was a complete wreck.

"You're a goddamn tease," he ground out, shifting restlessly beneath Ilya.

Ilya's smile was unrepentant. "But you like it," he countered, his hand sliding up Shane's thigh, nails scraping against flushed skin.

"I hate you," Shane muttered, his voice hoarse.

Ilya clicked his tongue, his gaze roaming over Shane's body hungrily. "You don't look like you hate me."

Shane couldn't deny that even if he wanted to. He was a needy, trembling mess, flushed and aching with want. He was desperate, and they both knew it. "Shut up and touch me," he demanded.

Ilya hummed, his fingers ghosting over Shane's hipbone. "So impatient."

The teasing note in Ilya's voice was infuriating, but it was nothing compared to the infuriating lack of contact. Shane shifted against the sheets, his hips arching off the mattress, looking for something to ease the ache.

Ilya clicked his tongue again, his tone both chiding and amused. "I'm going to draw this out as long as I want. You'll take what I give you."

Shane groaned, frustration and desire warring in his gut. "You're being sadistic."

"You love it." Ilya's hands were everywhere, everywhere *but* where Shane wanted them most. He was deliberately driving him insane.

Shane's fingers fisted in the sheets, his body taut as a bowstring. "You bastard," he panted, hips rocking involuntarily.

"I'm just giving you what you need."

Shane bit back a curse as Ilya's hands skimmed over his inner thighs, his touch so close yet so far. "What I need—" his voice caught as Ilya's fingers brushed against him, "is to not die from blue balls, you asshole."

Ilya smirked, clearly enjoying the fact that he was turning Shane into a desperate, aching mess. "Patience is a virtue, you know."

Shane groaned again, his head tossing back against the pillows. "You and your *virtues*," he grumbled, the words catching in his throat as Ilya's hands traveled along his torso, fingertips tracing an excruciatingly light path along his stomach and ribs.

"I'm trying to teach you the importance of delayed gratification," Ilya replied, his tone smug.

He sounded so delighted by Shane's torment. Shane would have kicked him if he could muster the energy. "You're enjoying this too much."

Ilya finally took mercy on him, his hand wrapping around Shane's cock with deliberate slowness. Shane arched off the bed with a choked gasp, his hips jerking into the touch.

"There," Ilya murmured, stroking him with agonizing precision. "Better?"

Shane could only nod, his breath coming in ragged bursts as pleasure coiled tight in his gut. But Ilya wasn't done teasing. His thumb swiped over the head, spreading slickness in slow circles that had Shane's thighs trembling.

"You're so fucking responsive," Ilya breathed, watching Shane unravel beneath him. "Every little touch—" He tightened his grip just shy of rough. "Every sound you make—"

Shane's moan cut him off as Ilya leaned down, capturing his lips in a filthy kiss while his hand worked him relentlessly. The dual sensations were overwhelming, Ilya's mouth hot and demanding, his touch perfectly ruthless.

When Shane finally came, it was with Ilya's name on his lips and his fingers tangled in dark hair, holding on like it was the only thing keeping him grounded.

Ilya kissed him through it, swallowing every ragged gasp until Shane collapsed back against the sheets, spent and shuddering.

"Still think I'm a tease?" Ilya asked, his voice rough with satisfaction.

Shane flung an arm over his eyes, his chest still heaving. "Yes."

Ilya's laughter was low and warm as he stretched out beside him. "Good."

Ilya shifted first, the sharp edge of hunger finally gone from him. He reached for the blanket at the foot of the bed and pulled it up over Shane with care, tucking it around his shoulders like he was afraid the night air might bite.

“Hey,” he murmured, brushing damp hair away from Shane’s forehead. “Stay with me.”

Shane let out a shaky breath, the kind that came after everything else had burned itself out. His body felt heavy, pleasantly numb, like the world had slowed down just enough for him to catch up. “I’m here,” he said, voice hoarse but steady.

Ilya slid closer, pressing a gentle kiss to Shane’s temple. He reached for the glass of water on his desk and held it to Shane’s lips. “Drink. Slowly.”

Shane obeyed, hands trembling slightly as he took it. Some of the tension finally eased from his shoulders when he swallowed. He leaned instinctively into Ilya’s chest, forehead resting just below his collarbone.

Ilya wrapped an arm around him, firm and grounding. His thumb traced slow, absent-minded circles against Shane’s arm, a steady rhythm meant to anchor rather than excite. “You okay?” he asked quietly.

Shane nodded after a moment. “Yeah. I think… yeah.” He hesitated, then added softly, “I love you.”

Shane closed his eyes, exhaustion finally winning. For once, there was no panic clawing at his chest, no voice telling him to pull away, but just someone holding him like he mattered.

Ilya smiled, planting a kiss on Shane’s temple as he whispered against his skin, “Ya tebya lyublyu.”

For almost half an hour, they were silent, with Ilya running his fingers through Shane’s hair.

Shane shifted slightly under the blanket, his fingers curling into the soft fabric as he hesitated, then spoke in a small, tentative voice.

“I… I was thinking,” he murmured, eyes fixed on the floor of Ilya’s dorm room, “in a few days, after graduation… we should… I mean, we should talk to my parents.”

Ilya’s head lifted slightly, curiosity sparking in his dark eyes. “You mean… tell them?” His tone was cautious, but there was that familiar teasing edge lurking just beneath.

Shane swallowed hard, the words tasting heavy on his tongue. “Yeah. I can’t… keep hiding. Not after everything. And… I want you there.” His voice wavered, fragile but determined. “I want them to know… us… together.”

Ilya let out a low, thoughtful hum, sliding an arm around Shane’s shoulders and pulling him closer. “You’re serious,” he said softly. “You actually want to do this?”

Shane nodded, heart hammering. “I… I think we should. I can’t keep lying… not to them. And… I don’t want to hide from you either.”

Ilya’s smirk softened into something gentler, almost tender. “Then we’ll do it,” he murmured, brushing Shane’s hair back from his forehead. “Right after graduation, not a month.”

Shane exhaled, letting the tension drain from his body just a little. “Together,” he said, a small, shaky smile tugging at his lips.

Ilya pressed a brief kiss to the crown of Shane’s head. “Don’t worry,” he whispered. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

Shane let out a quiet laugh, the first real one since the evening began. “Okay.”

They settled back against each other, silence stretching comfortably as the hum of the dorm faded into the night.

The morning light filtered weakly through the tall windows of the chapel, painting long, gold-flecked streaks across the polished floor. Shane adjusted his uniform for the third time, hands trembling slightly despite the practiced calm he’d worn all week. Today was graduation which simply meant the day they were to admit what they… were.

Ilya appeared in the doorway, tie now fixed, hair tousled just enough to make him look careless yet infuriatingly perfect. His eyes found Shane instantly, and that familiar smirk tugged at the corner of his lips.

“You ready?” Ilya asked softly, stepping closer, brushing a hand against Shane’s shoulder.

Shane swallowed hard, nodding. “As ready as I’ll ever be.” He let out a shaky breath. “You… you’ll be with me, right?”

“Of course,” Ilya said, leaning down briefly to press a reassuring kiss to Shane’s temple. “And after this…” His voice trailed, but Shane understood. After this, things could finally begin on *their* terms.

The chapel was packed. Parents, siblings, teachers, and students filled the wooden pews. Shane felt the weight of their eyes, expectations and judgment bundled together into a physical pressure on his chest.

He spotted his parents first. His mother’s hands were folded neatly in her lap, eyes wide and expectant, while his father’s jaw was tight, a subtle frown carved into his face. Shane’s stomach twisted, nerves coiling into a tight knot.

Ilya’s hand found his again, squeezing lightly. “Just breathe,” he whispered. “We’re in this together.”

The headmaster, Lucien, stepped forward to call the ceremony to order. Shane tried to focus on the speeches, the ritual of it all, but his mind kept flicking to the weight in his hand, the steady warmth of Ilya’s fingers, the truth he had been keeping inside.

Finally, the moment came. Names were called, diplomas handed over, applause echoing through the stone hall. Shane’s name was the last, given that he was the student head. His pulse roared in his ears as he walked forward, Ilya at his side, the heat of the room pressing against his nerves.

He took the diploma, shaking hands with Lucien briefly.

“We will miss having you here, Hollander.”

“Thank you, Father,” he said. *“I definitely won't miss this place.”*

When the students were dismissed for the last time, his parents were waiting near the exit. His father’s expression was unreadable, calm that made Shane’s stomach tighten just a bit, while his mother’s face was warm, flushed with excitement.

“Shane,” his father said as he fell into step beside him, “where is your dorm now? I want to see where you’ve been staying all these months.”

Shane blinked, heart racing, trying to steady his voice. “It’s… it’s on number 13,” he managed, forcing a calmness he didn’t feel.

His mother, smiling softly, leaned down slightly, placing her hands on his shoulders. “And all your boxes,” she said, nodding toward the small stack he’d packed, “let me carry them home for you. You’ve worked hard enough, you shouldn’t have to carry all of this yourself.”

“Thank you, Mom,” Shane said, voice soft, almost reverent. He felt heat rise in his cheeks at the unexpected tenderness, at the way his parents were treating him like he belonged here, not just as a student, but as their son.

Shane’s dorm room felt impossibly empty without Ilya sprawled across the bed, tossing items into his suitcase with that calm, teasing efficiency Shane had long since learned to anticipate.

The walls seemed to close in a little, the silence stretching, punctuated only by the soft thud of boxes being set down and the rustle of packing paper.

His parents moved around him, helping tidy his things, folding his shirts, checking that he hadn't forgotten anything. Shane's hands hovered over his own belongings, anxious, restless.

"Mom… Dad…" he started, voice tight, hesitant. "There's… something I need to tell you."

His mother paused, folding a sweater, her brow slightly furrowed. "Yes, sweetheart?" she asked gently.

Shane swallowed, the words catching in his throat. "I… I'm… I'm not…" he began awkwardly. "I mean—I like… I'm not straight."

For a moment, the room froze. His father looked away briefly, tightening his jaw, while his mother's hands stilled on the clothing in front of her.

"I tried, Mom, Dad… I tried not to–" Shane choked. "I really wanted to change, but I-I'm sorry. I'm–"

His mom reached out, brushing a lock of hair from Shane's forehead. "Oh, Shane," she murmured softly. "Thank you for telling us. That doesn't change anything, never has. You're our son, and we love you."

"I'm sorry if I made you feel like you couldn't tell me," she caressed his cheek. "Yes, I made you go here because I wanted you to grow and be on the right path, but being gay isn't something to be afraid of just because the church says so."

Shane blinked, unsure if he'd imagined the warmth in her tone. "I… I was scared," he admitted, voice low. "I didn't know… how you'd react. I didn't want to disappoint anyone."

His father finally looked at him. "You won't disappoint me, Shane. Just… be honest with yourself, and live your life with kindness."

Before Shane could respond, the door swung open, and a familiar voice broke through the moment.

"Hope I'm not interrupting," Ilya said, leaning casually in the doorway, a small smirk tugging at his lips. "I've got my suitcase mostly packed, but I figured I'd come say hello."

Shane's chest tightened, relief and nerves colliding. "Ilya…" he said, a little breathless, unsure whether to smile or turn away.

Ilya stepped fully inside, eyes flicking from Shane to his parents, and he held out his hand smoothly. "I'm Ilya Rozanov. You must be Shane's parents. It's… nice to finally meet you."

Shane's mother smiled warmly, stepping forward to shake his hand. "Nice to meet you too, Ilya."

Ilya’s gaze flicked to Shane for a moment, sharp and teasing, but there was a softness beneath it. “All good things, I hope,” he said, voice low enough that only Shane could hear.

Shane felt heat rise in his cheeks. “Mostly,” he whispered back, and for the first time, he felt like this moment—like all of this—was something he could finally breathe into.

“Mom, Dad, this is Ilya,” Shane suddenly turned to introduce them properly. “He’s my classmate, he transferred in his last year and I was assigned to guide him during his first weeks here. He’s my, uh—”

What were they?

It wasn't ever brought up despite the nights they spent together and the months they had for half a year. What was he supposed to call him? A friend he fucks? Definitely not. A person he loved dearly, more than he loved himself? Maybe.

“Boyfriend. I’m Shane’s boyfriend.”

Oh.

End Notes

the book of Romans 1:26-27 is the verse that's constantly brought up during our church's religious discourse on homosexuality, and hearing this verse triggers my fight or flight so bad lmao

anyway, this idea came to me when the cottage episode aired, and it took me a lot of time contemplating whether or not to post this because it might be triggering for some, or others wouldn't like the idea of bringing up the church on a sexually explicit fic. but, deep breaths, i still wanted to let this out because i had fun writing it and the idea was thrilling.

i hope you had fun reading. see you on the next one:)

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